

The Joy of Working with Older Saints in Your Church

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[Editor's NOTE: *Desri Gilmore personally visits homebound members of our church six days of each week. Desri led a workshop at her first time at a POAMN Conference. Desri spoke from her heart about visiting homebound members of our church.*]

I will only take a few minutes of your time. I am not any sort of expert on the subject of aging adults. I only know what has worked well for me. I am a committed Deacon called to serve in the capacity of Pastoral Care. It has become very important to me as I have watched folk who have served the church all of their lives reach the stage where they can no longer care for themselves. The folk that I am serving have been my precious friends for decades. The process is predictable: Independent Living, followed by Assisted Living, then Extended Care, and sometimes, finally to Memory Care. The family members that make the decisions to put their family in a facility seldom seek any input from the Church family.



Desri Gilmore – Leading a Workshop at the POAMN National Conference

The graphic example of this was an amazing woman whom I will call “Jane”. Jane had served the church faithfully all her life in numerous capacities – Sunday school teacher, Deacon, Elder, and even as Chairman of the Stewardship Committee. When Jane became home-bound, her son asked that she receive visits from the church. This was of course already happening. He asked for help on a regular basis to care for her. All we could really do was sit with her and take her little treats. Mostly she liked the flowers that we brought; she always had flowers by her deceased husband’s photograph. Eventually it became necessary for her to go into an assisted living residence. The son asked would we help with the estate sale of her residence. This we did. However he did not ask much input from her church family in the decision making about moving her. Those of us that knew her and cherished her knew that certain things were precious to her. When we went to visit her in the care facility there were very few of her cherished items around her. Missing were the flowers by her husband’s picture.

Several months previously we had given Jane a prayer shawl that had been knitted by a member of the Prayer Shawl ministry. When Jane received it she was thrilled and asked "Is this mine to keep?" So, here I am helping set up the estate sale and I look down on the table and there is Jane's prayer shawl. The shawl was marked - FOR SALE!

When we first went to visit Jane, she repeatedly asked, "How did you find me?", "How did you find me?" Please understand that Jane's family are wonderful folk, and it is not my intention to make them feel guilty. In fact part of the pastoral care roll is to give our support to the families and alleviate any guilt they feel at these tough decisions. They really want the best for Jane.

My point is those of us who have been in Bible Study, Prayer Vigils, Circle, and many other ministries knew her so personally. We know Jane's favorite colors, her favorite ice cream and what things are important to her. When I enter Jane's room I would never say, "Do you remember who I am?" Instead I say something like, "Hi Jane, I remember all the good times we had back in Bible study." I just want Jane to know that I am here for her.

When in a lucid moment Jane laments, "Why am I still here? I am no good to anyone." I tell her, "You are here to continue teaching us to serve the way you served us so many years; we cherish our time with you."

If it appears that Jane is open to wanting to be touched (Jane's generation, and folk in this situation almost always do) then I will ask her permission to hold her hand gently. I make good eye contact and tell her what a joy it is for me to spend time with her. And again discuss the things that I know bring her joy.

Before I leave I pray with her; Jane's prayer requests are almost always for others. I ask, "What do you want your Church family to know?" The reply is almost always that Jane misses them terribly and is thankful for the calls and cards. Often, Jane will wistfully say, "I wish I was back in Church." And I say, "Until that happens we will bring church to you."

A frequent and very frustrating comment I often get from very nice and well-meaning folk is; "Desri, why do you bother? Jane doesn't know what's going on." This is a rude bodacious comment. My answer is, "We have no way of knowing what Jane knows or understands. Just because Jane doesn't respond in what we may perceive as an appropriate way does not mean she doesn't understand. Personally, I picture Jane's brain as being like a deck of cards. Those 52 cards are jumbled up, and Jane can't find the right one to express what she wants to communicate.

Well-meaning folk often say to me, "Isn't it very depressing?" I reply, "No! What I do find depressing is that few people are willing to visit these wonderful saints that have been faithful to us."

When people ask what motivates me, I reply, "I want to serve those who have served".

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