



# Dementia Friendly Faith Community

People who have dementia, particularly those raised in faith-based households, can be uplifted by worship services and clergy visits. Their family members also have spiritual needs. Faith communities play a vital role in offering supportive and welcoming environments for people touched by dementia.



## Understanding Common Practices of People with Dementia

Some people with dementia may stop attending regular worship services to avoid social situations they fear or no longer understand. Others will find peace and comfort in a place of worship. Caring for a loved one who has dementia can span many years, leaving family caregivers weary, isolated, frustrated and depressed. Some may feel embarrassed or reluctant to ask for help from their place of worship.

## What is Dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a loss of memory and other thinking abilities that is serious enough to interfere with activities of daily life. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer's and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

## Warning Signs of Alzheimer's Disease

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

## Interacting with People with Dementia

- Speak clearly and be patient
- Listen closely
- Smile warmly and make eye contact
- Respond to a look of distress
- Help when confusion is present
- Watch for signs of change and offer help accordingly – every day can be different

## Spiritually Engaging People with Dementia

- Keep services short and simple. Services of 30 minutes or less can help someone with dementia feel more engaged and better able to concentrate.
- Use traditional songs. People with memory loss can often remember things from earlier in their life. They may relate better to traditional music or old hymns than to modern spiritual music.
- Get the person involved in activities that match his or her changing abilities and involve interaction with others, such as attending choir concerts, participating in intergenerational programs, and doing repetitive tasks.
- Use Old Testament (or the Hebrew) scriptures or translations and encourage interaction; the person may not relate to newer, international versions.
- Provide worship services at the family's home or provide an audio or video recording when attending a service in person becomes difficult.
- Plan short, frequent home visits rather than lengthy ones. Create a spiritual connection with a familiar prayer or scripture or recount a special event at the place of worship. Offer short devotions or inspirational stories lasting no longer than five minutes.

## Supporting the Families of People with Dementia

- Don't wait for family members to ask; offer some support possibilities.
- Ask family members how they are and how their loved one is doing.
- Encourage family caregivers to express feelings of loss, frustration, joy, and love.
- Form a caregiver support group.
- Suggest ways to take a break from daily caregiving responsibilities, such as having congregation members make home visits or using a formal community service like adult day care.
- Offer to help the family get their loved one ready for worship services or help arrange transportation.

## Being a Welcoming Faith Community

- Always be respectful toward the person with Alzheimer's.
- Wear a name tag and greet the person warmly, using a calm voice.
- Be patient and accepting of the person's behavior and appearance.
- Respond in supportive ways.
- Help unite the person with family members if he or she appears disoriented or lost.
- Send "thinking of you" notes and cards; include worship bulletins and newsletters to help the family stay connected.
- Provide ongoing prayer support for the person with Alzheimer's and family members.
- Host a Dementia Friends Information Session for the congregation.

## Creating a Dementia Friendly Physical Space

- **Make sure buildings are well lit.** We all make better sense of situations and are less confused when we can easily see what is happening. Well-lit areas may also help prevent falls or other accidents for people with dementia.
- **Have a comfortable environment.** Keep the building at an appropriate temperature and provide comfortable seating to create a relaxed environment.
- **Have enough open space to walk around.** In the worship area and other rooms, make sure there is enough space for people to get up and walk around if they become restless.
- **Use information/notice boards.** On notice boards, include visual information and text about the building and church community. You could also post photographs of your faith community's worship leaders and staff.
- **Use clear signage.** Use simple images or color-coded signs to indicate different spaces so a person with dementia can find their way through the building. Contrasting colors can be helpful.
- **Have a unisex facility.** A family/unisex restroom will allow someone to be assisted without causing embarrassment to them or another user.

## Resources in Your Community

### Alzheimer's Association Minnesota North Dakota

The 24/7 Helpline serves people with memory loss, care partners, health care professionals, the general public, diverse populations, and concerned friends and family. The Helpline offers referrals to local community programs and services, dementia-related education, crisis assistance and emotional support. Call 1-800-272-3900 or visit [www.alz.org/mnnd](http://www.alz.org/mnnd)

### Senior LinkAge Line®

This resource provides information, assistance and connections to various services and resources in your community. Call 1-800-333-2433 or visit [www.MinnesotaHelp.info](http://www.MinnesotaHelp.info)®

## References

### Know the 10 Warning Signs

[www.alz.org/alzheimers\\_disease\\_know\\_the\\_10\\_signs.asp](http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_know_the_10_signs.asp)



### Take Action

Learn more about dementia friendly faith communities and become a Dementia Friend

[www.actonalz.org/faith-communities](http://www.actonalz.org/faith-communities)  
[www.actonalz.org/dementia-friends](http://www.actonalz.org/dementia-friends)

**ACT on Alzheimer's: Minnesotans working together to transform Alzheimer's through social change and community engagement.**