

Nursing home chaplains find ways to minister during pandemic

May 13, 2020

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)—One of the most difficult things for Cathy Tisher, a chaplain to three nursing homes in the Oklahoma City area, is seeing the face of a particular nursing home resident as she conducts regular video calls.

Tisher knows something the resident does not. Roughly three weeks after visitors were prohibited from entering the facility due to the coronavirus pandemic, this resident's wife died.

"The situation is breaking my heart," Tisher said. "In March, his wife was no longer able to go in, and she had been one of the most faithful to come and see him. She would come every day."

The family wrestled with the decision of whether or not to tell him. They want to share with him in person, but in order to do so, they would have to go in, relay the news and afterward leave almost immediately.

"They haven't told him because they don't want him to have to be alone after receiving that news," Tisher said. They worry it will be too much for him to bear.

Challenges ministering to at-risk

population

Across North America, chaplains are walking through heart-wrenching ministry situations like this with nursing home residents, their families and the staff. The susceptibility of the elderly to COVID-19 has affected those who seek to serve the nursing home population.



Residents of a nursing home where Baptist Chaplain Cather Tisher serves have only been able to see their friends and family through closed glass doors and windows. This visitor holds up a dry erase board with the message, “not yet, but soon.”

USA TODAY reported at least 2,300 long-term care facilities in 37 states have reported positive cases of COVID-19, and at least 3,000 residents have died.

“In Oklahoma, they have told us that 40 percent of the COVID-19 deaths that we have are in nursing homes,” said Tisher, a member of Southern Hills Baptist Church in Oklahoma City.

Nationwide, according to numbers compiled by The Associated Press, residents and staff of nursing homes or other long-term care facilities accounted for about one-third of the total death toll of approximately 80,000.

While Tisher currently isn’t allowed inside the facilities she serves, she has been conducting Bible studies each week via Skype. Staff members set up laptops either in activity rooms or in individual rooms. She is able to teach through a video chat, though she cannot interact as she would like.

“It has been really tough. It’s been hard to be at a distance like this,” Tisher said. “I’m being told it will be at least July and maybe even August before they open back up to the public.”

Accessibility limited

The facilities have allowed “drive-bys,” where family can stop by to see residents briefly and interact from the outside of the building through closed windows. Residents also participated in a “parade,” where they made their way through the parking lot as friends and family cheered them on from a distance.

Accessibility to nursing facilities varies by region. In Missouri, Mike Crowell, a chaplain and chaplain ambassador with the North American Mission Board, has been able to enter The Gardens Assisted Living and Memory Care in Kansas City, where he continues to conduct weekly worship services and Bible studies.



Mike Crowell, a Southern Baptist chaplain, regularly visited residents of The Gardens Assisted Living and Memory Care in Kansas City before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Crowell has still been able to visit the facility, following precautions such as having his temperature taken before entering, wearing a mask and actively social distancing. (Photo from Facebook)

“Each time I come in, they do a temperature check and ask me how I’m doing,” said Crowell, a member of Pleasant Valley Baptist Church in Liberty, Mo. “I also wear a mask when I come in and lead services. It is different. It gives you an appreciation for those who do that all the time.”

He maintains proper social distancing and does not interact physically with residents. In one instance, his temperature was slightly above normal. Out of respect for the staff and residents, Crowell did not go in that day.

While family members cannot, in most instances, do anything besides walk up to the windows from the outside of the building, one exception provided a moment of encouragement to Crowell.

The daughter of one of the memory care patients at his facility was able to be with her father as he died. Earlier, she had shared with Crowell that her father had been struggling with certainty over his spiritual condition.

Crowell shared a covenant statement with her about committing to follow Christ, and her father, who was 98 or 99 years of age, initialed the statements of commitment, and he displayed them in a place where he could look and remember them any time he wavered.

“He died the day after Resurrection Sunday,” Crowell said. “His daughter was given special permission to come in and visit while her dad was dying.”

Ministry difficult but not impossible

As these examples illustrate, the COVID-19 pandemic has made ministry difficult but not impossible. Chaplains encourage Christians and churches to find ways to minister to the elderly during this time.

“It has always been my prayer that churches would adopt a facility in their neighborhood even under normal circumstances,” Tisher said.

Philip Peavey, a chaplain at University Medical Center in New Orleans, served nursing home residents and staff 30 years as both a pastor and a chaplain before becoming a chaplain at the medical center.

“The key was going to the activities director in the nursing homes, and that was my point of entry for getting into nursing homes,” said Peavey, now a member at First Baptist Church in New Orleans. “When I did that ministry, I would check on the staff and do visitation with the patients.”

Social distancing requires that most communication take place via text messages, phone calls and email, but communicating with the facilities in the community may reveal specific needs that residents or staff may have.

“Begin by talking to the director and saying, ‘We are interested.’” Crowell said. “Ask, ‘How may we serve you?’ and ‘How may we serve the residents?’ Then be ready to have some suggestions in case the director doesn’t have any ideas or asks what you can offer.”

Provide resources, meals, thank you cards or gift cards to the staff to let them know they are appreciated. Ask members of your congregation who have family in assisted living homes if they have ideas they can share.

“Any way a church can reach out, I would say do it,” Tisher said.