

Commentary: Ministering to Alzheimer's caregivers in your congregation

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When Carolyn Park's husband, Lane, a chaplain with Marketplace Ministries, developed Alzheimer's disease, she cared for him in her Texas home. But after five years, when full-time care became overwhelming, she placed him in a memory care facility.



Denise George

At that time, she prayed, telling God she still wanted to be used by him in ministry. He answered her request. For the past six years, she has had numerous opportunities to minister to people in the facility who care for her husband.

"Our six years at the facility have become a ministry for me as I relate to residents, staff, directors and families," she said. "For the first two to three years there, Lane dressed each morning in shirt and tie, put on his chaplain's badge and spent each day helping where he was needed. The disease has developed to where he can't do that anymore, but he

ministered as long as he was able.”

She is a member of First Baptist Church in Plano and attends the senior adult Bible study class taught by Jerry Allen and Bill Sylvester. Her class members pray for her daily, contact her by phone each week and send her weekly emails sharing congregational prayer needs and praises that keep her in touch with the church.

“Caring for a spouse with Alzheimer’s is difficult beyond description,” Allen noted. “Caregivers need all the support they can get from every possible source. When we pray for the sick, we also pray for their caregivers.”

Caregivers in Texas today

Lane Park is one of more than 350,000 Texans age 65 and over who are victims of Alzheimer’s disease. Experts predict in Texas by 2025, that number will exceed 490,000. In 2013, 5,293 Texans died from Alzheimer’s disease, making it the sixth leading cause of death in the state.

Most often, a caregiver must attend to the physical, emotional, mental and health care of the loved one, often without much outside help. Care giving can be a difficult, stressful and lonely job.

“Alzheimer’s can leave caregivers in isolation,” Allen noted. “We have to find ways to let them know they have not been abandoned or forgotten. Telephone calls, notes, emails and cards can go a long way in keeping connected.”

Many caregivers also must manage legal, medical, financial and end-of-life issues for memory-impaired loved ones. They may have little knowledge or experience handling these complicated and confusing responsibilities.

While it is important that pastors, Bible study leaders and church members pray for their caregivers, as well as visit them and show loving concern, it

is equally essential they offer help and advice regarding the necessary business matters caregivers must put into place.

Ways your church can help

1. Help caregivers organize their loved one's medical and legal information and documents for effective care giving, including:

- The patient's list of doctors, including names, specialties, phone numbers and addresses for each.
- The patient's list of prescriptions, including name of drug, dosage and prescribing doctor.
- A list of known allergies, including reactions to various drugs.
- A list of pharmacies, including phone number, address and business hours.
- A living will directive to physicians and family.
- Power of attorney for medical decisions if the patient is unable to make decisions.
- Information to carry out the loved one's last wishes, including funeral or memorial service; final resting place; information for obituary; body/organ/tissue donation, etc.

2. When Alzheimer's disease progresses and the caregiver no longer can care for the loved one at home, organize a support team of professionals to help locate an appropriate long-term care facility. Accompany the caregiver to meet with the facility's administrators to discuss the placement needs of her loved one.

3. Encourage church members and leadership to help provide financial

support for caregivers in need. On average, caregiving in the home costs caregivers \$5,000 per year. Care facilities can cost up to \$5,000 or more each month.

4. Let the caregiver know she or he is loved, prayed for and never alone in the decision-making that impacts the loved one and family. Be available to talk about the heavy load of important issues the caregiver will need to understand and implement.

What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's is a degenerative disorder that attacks the brain's nerve cells, resulting in loss of memory, decline in thinking and language skills, and behavioral changes.

This progressive, incurable, chronic disease causes brain cells to degenerate and die. It is the most common cause of dementia among people aged 65 or older.

Caregivers in Texas

A caregiver is a person, unpaid or paid, who helps an impaired individual with activities of daily living. The term usually addresses disabilities related to old age, disease and mental disorders.

More than 1.3 million Texans are caregivers for family members with Alzheimer's. In 2015, they gave 1.5 billion unpaid hours in care giving, valued at more than \$18.9 billion.

Helpful resources

- To locate Alzheimer's care in Texas, compare costs/services, and receive information on choosing a facility, call (844) 335-2322.
- Contact [Alzheimer's Texas](#) for free information, assistance and support

for Alzheimer's/dementia patients, family members and caregivers. To speak with trained staff members about care giving, call (512) 241-0420 or (800) 367-2132.

- For information on advanced care planning, legal and financial resources, [click here](#).
- To find Alzheimer's organizations, end-of-life resources, hospice and palliative care, support groups, legal advocacy, agencies on aging and cities in Texas offering care, [click here](#) or call (888) 971-0285.
- Contact [SeniorHelp.org](#) or call (866) 333-5183 for informative resources and local Alzheimer's care reviews about living facilities and in-home care agencies.

Denise George is the author of 31 books and co-author of a new book, The Lost Eleven: The Forgotten Story of Black American Soldiers Brutally Massacred in World War II. She is married to Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University. Her website is www.denisegeorge.org.