

Friends at Home

During a question and answer period following a presentation on disability etiquette and language, the following question was asked: “What do we call the members of our congregation who are known as shut-ins? The word “shut-in” is so impersonal.” This question leads to even more questions about the church providing ministries to members who, for whatever reason, aren’t able to attend worship. Many chronic illnesses are like riding a rollercoaster. Some days may be good and allow a person to be active, and yet the very next Sunday may be so difficult that all activities are restricted. This reality of chronic illnesses is hard for most people to understand and when it is misunderstood and judged, it only creates further pain and alienation.

When we talk about all the ministries of the church becoming inclusive, a renewed attention needs to be paid to church members who aren’t able to participate in anyplace other than their home, a personal care home, or a nursing home. One of the first places we can start is with the name we give our brothers and sisters. Shut-in isn’t a positive label; it creates the image of a person being in jail! “Friends at home” is a more affirming name that gives value and dignity to people who aren’t able to physically attend worship.

When we speak about friends at home, it makes it more difficult for church members to succumb to the “out of sight out of mind” syndrome that so often accompanies a chronic illness or the aging process. In a recent conversation with a friend at home in my congregation, she shared this painful statement: “I get so frustrated when people refer to me as a former member or as a member who used to be active. This is my church and I am a still member.” When the church listens to the voices of long-time members who aren’t able to attend worship or other events, we can learn several things. They want to remain a part of their church’s ministry. It may take some creative thinking and the careful development of new understandings of our stewardship of gifts. For example, a person who cannot attend can still offer more than just monetary gifts in an envelope. The gifts of telephone calls, prayer, envelope stuffing, newsletter mailings, all can be done from places other than the church building. Many nursing homes have separate rooms where friends and families can visit privately. These rooms can be a place where a Sunday School class could meet periodically, where a committee could meet and include the person who cannot leave the home. With the clear understanding that no refreshments or preparations would be required of the friend at home, committees and classes could also arrange to meet at their home. With creative thinking, planning, and adaptations to what is usually done, friends at home can be included in the full life and work of the mission and ministry of the church.

Many churches do send the bulletin, video or audio cassettes of the worship service to friends at home. Many churches bring communion and other religious rites. Such practices are helpful and necessary, yet more can be done. Those who visit need to be more than just the pastor or church staff. Some older members may not have the relationship and long-term memories with the staff as they do the members of their church. One young man said, “I wish someone who was going shopping would give me a call and see if there was anything I need. It would be a tremendous help for me to have someone pick up things at the store.” People who don’t get out of their homes long to have someone stop by and talk with them, share their lives and their stories. Television and books are no substitute for human contact and friendships. Also, people have said, although they cannot physically participate in a mission trip, they would enjoy seeing pictures, talking to those who went, and even give money or other donations—all they need is to be asked. Another avenue of inclusion is for people of the church to contact various friends at

home and ask for their thoughts and recommendations about the church. This is particularly important when the congregation is entering a building or stewardship program, seeking a new pastor, seeking nominations for officers, and planning and preparing for church anniversaries or other celebrations.

When a friend at home is referred to as a former member or “used to be active member,” it is a painful reminder of how our culture equates ability and personal mobility with personal value. Friends at home don’t want to be treated with pity, charity, or as some say, a “project” of the Sunday School or mission circle. Being a project is different than being a brother or sister in Christ’s church. Being a project isn’t an affirming experience!! Friends at home are people whose lives are continuing in spite of chronic illness, aging, or disability. It is important for a congregation to be intentional about ministries to the friends at home. Planning by the pastor, the deacons, the elders, the members of the church is necessary. Planning makes the church aware of one another. Intentional planning for ministry to people who aren’t able to participate in worship is something new to many congregations. It is the only way to cure the out of sight, out of mind syndrome that lessens the quality of any church’s ministry.

It’s also important to realize there can be many medical conditions that require members of congregations to become friends at home. Chemical and synthetic fragrance allergies, food allergies, contribute to the number of people who cannot participate in congregational worship or fellowship activities. The church cannot forget members who may be experiencing forms of mental illness that are difficult enough by themselves without the added pain of being excluded from their church family. One of the greatest gifts a church can give each of her members is the full affirmation of their gifts and abilities. Every church member, especially a friend at home, is a vital part of Christ’s ministry. The good news is the church can be creative and develop new ways of doing ministry that includes and affirms everyone.

From what begins as a change of name for “shut-ins” is a whole new ministry of the church that is exciting and lifts up the joy of being friends, brothers and sisters in Christ.

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