

# A Church's Guide to Elder Care Ministry

A practical handbook for loving and serving our aging community

*By the Rev. Lauri Diamond*

# Welcome to This Journey

*If you're reading this guide, you've likely noticed something: Your congregation is aging, or perhaps you're watching families struggle to care for elderly parents. Maybe you've felt that tug in your heart that says, "We should be doing something." You're right. And you're not alone.*

*This manual will help you turn that feeling into action—step by step, without overwhelming yourself or your church.*

## Part One: Understanding the Need

### The Numbers Tell a Story

Here's where we are: More than 46 million adults aged 65 or older live in the United States today. By 2050, that number will nearly double to 90 million. Since 2017 alone, concerns about caring for aging parents have jumped by 50 percent.

These aren't just statistics—they're our parents, church members, neighbors.

### What I've Learned on the Front Lines

As Senior Living Manager for Denton Village in Denton, Texas, I see the needs every day. Our elders face challenges that often go unnoticed: getting to the doctor, buying groceries, dealing with the grief of losing friends and spouses, and wrestling with spiritual questions as they near the end of their earthly journey.

And their families? They're stretched thin, often living far away or juggling their own responsibilities.

This is where the church can step in and make a real difference.

At my home church—Fresh Expressions Abby, Trinity Lakeside in Double Oak, Texas—we've taken a simple but powerful approach. We treat my workplace as our mission field. The Rev. Markene Meyer leads our members in praying over residents, blessing Communion elements and simply being present. It's the Church in action, and it's changing lives.

# A Biblical Foundation

Jesus gave us a beautiful example. Even while dying on the cross, he made sure his mother would be cared for (John 19:26-27). And throughout Scripture, we're called to care for the vulnerable:

"Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." (Isaiah 1:17)

When we serve the elderly, we're also teaching the next generation about mercy and compassion. We're all going to need elder care eventually, for ourselves or our loved ones.

## Getting Started: Essential Resources

Before diving in, let's get familiar with some helpful terms and tools:

### Understanding the Language

Elder care has its own vocabulary: levels of care, models of care, facility types. The [Pioneer Network](#) has compiled these definitions into one easy-to-use resource page. Bookmark it.

### Finding Quality Care Facilities

Don't just Google "nursing homes near me." Instead:

- Check your state's official ratings at sites like [Texas Health and Human Services](#) (search for your state's equivalent).
- Use the federal government's 5-star rating system to compare facilities.
- Look for abuse reports and care issues. These are publicly available.

# Understanding "Person-Centered Care"

You'll hear this term a lot, and it matters. Traditional elder care focused on the medical model of efficiency, schedules and systems. Person-centered care flips this around. It's about:

## **Giving residents choices**

Empowering individuals to make decisions about their daily lives and care

## **Respecting dignity and self-determination**

Honoring each person's autonomy and personal preferences

## **Building real relationships**

Creating meaningful connections between caregivers and residents

## **Creating a home, not an institution**

Fostering warm, homelike environments rather than clinical settings

This shift is sometimes called "Culture Change," and it's transforming how we care for our elders. When visiting facilities or planning your ministry, look for these values in action.

# Part Two: Serving Elders in Your Own Congregation

Let's start where you are—with the people already in your pews (or watching online).

## Making Sunday Mornings Accessible

### Ask the Right Questions

When new members or visitors arrive, simply ask: "How may we best serve you?" You'd be amazed at what you'll learn.

### Transportation

This is huge. Many elderly folks stop coming to church simply because they can't get there. Consider:

- Organizing volunteer drivers
- Hiring a van service
- Investing in a wheelchair-accessible van

Remember: Elders also need rides to doctor appointments and grocery stores. Your Sunday driver might become a Tuesday blessing too.

## Make Everything Readable

Larger print isn't just nice. It's necessary. This applies to:

- Bulletins and worship materials
- Overhead projections (test the font size from the back row)
- Newsletters and announcements

## Audio Support

Church buildings are notoriously hard to hear in. All those high ceilings create a "boomy" sound that makes hearing loss worse. Check out [Assistive Listening HQ](#) for devices specifically designed for worship settings.

## Wheelchair Accessibility

Don't wait until someone shows up in a wheelchair to figure out where they'll sit. Remove chairs in advance along aisles to create dedicated spaces. Marking them as "reserved" prevents the awkward shuffle when someone arrives.

## Create an Elder Care Ministry Team

Have a few volunteers ready each Sunday to:

- Escort wheelchair users to their seats
- Hand out assistive listening devices
- Provide large-print materials
- Just be available to help

# Beyond Sunday: Fresh Ministry Ideas

Here are some practical ways to connect with elderly members during the week:

1

## Hymn Sings with Intention

Host a monthly hymn sing designed for elders. Use YouTube tracks specifically arranged for people with Alzheimer's and dementia—they're slower, shorter, and in lower keys. Bonus: Everyone else finds them easier to sing too!

2

## The Ministry of Presence

Visit people in their homes or care facilities. Isolation is epidemic among the elderly, and many don't have the tools or ability to "connect online" like we assume. They need human touch and presence.

3

## Listening Well

This is a ministry in itself. Don't rush in with solutions. Instead, ask questions that invite them to share:

- "How is this different from what you used to experience?"
- "How do you feel about this?"
- Show curiosity and openness.
- Let silence be okay.

You're companionshiping them through the process of aging. That's sacred work.

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## Encourage Storytelling

Use conversation prompts to help elders share their stories. Resources like **Story Point Group** provide excellent frameworks. These stories are treasures for them, for you, and for future generations.

# Beyond Sunday: Fresh Ministry Ideas

## Identify Real Needs

You don't have to meet every need yourself, but you can connect people with resources. Form an Elder Care Team that knows what's available locally. Common needs include:

- Transportation (church, doctors, outings)
- Household chores and repairs (one church I knew had the "Relatively Rapid Responders"—love that name!)
- Lawn care
- Shopping (with them or for them)
- Pet care (walking, vet visits, grooming)

## Partner with Local Facilities

Call your nearest nursing home, assisted living facility, or senior care center. Ask what they need. Then organize regular visits to:

- Lead Bible studies.
- Read aloud.
- Play games.
- Do arts and crafts.
- Host sing-alongs.
- Simply visit rooms and chat.

Trust me—facility staff will be thrilled to have you.

# Part Three: Helping Families Navigate Care Decisions

This is where many families feel lost. You can be their guide.

## The "Aging in Place" Conversation

According to the National Institute on Aging, most people want to stay in their own homes as long as possible. This is called "aging in place," and it's a valid choice—until it's not safe anymore.

Help families think through:

- Is the home safe? (fall risks, stairs, bathroom access)
- Can they manage daily needs? (cooking, cleaning, bathing)
- Can they handle the basics? (paying bills, getting groceries, taking medication)

### A Personal Example

My parents faced this decision head-on. They chose to move to a graduated care facility before they physically needed to, rather than wait until my sisters and I had to make the choice for them. They're now in a lovely, homelike setting with a continuum of care available as needs change.

That's wisdom, but not everyone makes this choice early.

# When It's Time for a Facility

Sometimes aging in place isn't possible. Here's how to help families find good care:

## Use Official Rating Systems

- Every state rates facilities on a 5-star system.
- These ratings are monitored federally.
- Abuse reports and care issues are flagged.
- Don't rely on Google reviews alone.

## Start with Highly Rated Facilities

When helping families find placement for their loved ones, recommend the best-rated facilities you can find.

## Plan to Minister at Lower-Rated Ones

Here's the thing: Residents in struggling facilities often need help the most. This is where your church's presence could be transformative.

## Visit and Assess

- Get local guides to elder care facilities.
- Make appointments with managers (most are open to ministry).
- If there's a chaplain, meet with them for insights.
- Ask about residents with limited or no family support.

## Simple Ministry Ideas for Facility Visits

- Bring a snack.
- Watch a ball game together.
- Take a walk (learn basic wheelchair operation—it's easy).
- Read a book.
- Ask about childhood memories.

# Part Four: Walking with the Dying

Let's talk about what many avoid: death. This is where ministry matters most.

## Understanding End-of-Life Terms

### Actively Dying

The hours or days before death when the body's functions are shutting down.

### End-of-Life

In medical terms, this is the period before natural death from a process unlikely to be stopped by medical care. For insurance purposes, it's defined as the last six months of life.

### Terminal Care

Care for someone diagnosed with a terminal illness, expected to die within 12 months. It focuses on relieving suffering—physical, emotional, spiritual and social.

# Having the Conversation

End-of-life discussions aren't questionnaires—they're conversations. Dr. Atul Gawande's book *Being Mortal* is an excellent resource for learning how to companion the dying with both practicality and care.

## Ministry to the Dying and Their Families Start with an Open Question

"How may we help?" Then be ready with specific offers based on what you can actually do: meals, laundry, lawn care, delivering Communion, prayers.

### Prayer is Powerful

- Psalm 23 (try inserting their name—it's beautiful and comforting)
- The Lord's Prayer
- Spontaneous prayers based on your conversation

# Practical Ways to Minister to the Dying

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## Visit Consistently, but Keep It Short

Frequent short visits are better than rare long ones. Dying people tire easily.

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## Touch Matters

- Hold a hand.
- Massage lotion on hands or feet.
- Compassionate touch shows they're not forgotten.
- When words fail, touch communicates love.

Jesus touched people. We can too.

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## Bring Simple Gifts

- Read a short story (*Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, devotionals, *Jesus Calling*).
- Bring ice cream or a treat (check with care staff first).
- Bring a therapy pet if caregivers approve.

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## Use the Book of Common Prayer (BCP, 2019)

- Page 236: "Concerning Ministry to the Dying" has a full bedside liturgy you can copy for families to recite together.
- The Song of Simeon is particularly beautiful for the dying.
- The Psalms offer comfort in every situation.

# Memorial Services

Page 246 of the 2019 BCP provides "Regarding Christian Death and Burial"—a complete liturgical memorial service.

## When Planning a Service:

1. Meet with the family and the dying person if possible.
2. Write down their wishes—don't trust memory.
3. Gather personal stories.
4. Ask if anyone wants to speak.
5. Let the family guide all choices.
6. Offer patience and prayer as they decide.

## Working with Funeral Homes

You might be asked to handle just the religious aspects while the funeral home manages logistics. Be open to their professional guidance while supporting the family's spiritual needs.

# Part Five: Is Your Church Called to This Ministry?

Maybe you're wondering: "Is this for us?" Let's explore that question together.

## Look for Natural Connections

### Who's Already Involved?

- Does anyone in your congregation work in elder care professionally?
- Are they willing to share what they see and what's needed?

### Who Has the Passion?

- Look for someone naturally drawn to serving vulnerable people—an elderly person on Medicaid in a nursing home is about as vulnerable as it gets.
- Passion is more important than expertise at the start.

## Address the Elephant in the Room

Let's be honest: Aging makes us uncomfortable. Being around the elderly reminds us we'll age too. We'll need care. We'll face loss and limitation. That's normal—but don't let it stop you.

# Test the Waters

You don't have to launch a full program tomorrow. Try small steps:

## Short-Term Mission

Organize a one-time visit to an elder care facility. See how it feels. See what's needed.

## Create Simple Helps

Develop a few elder care resources for your congregation. Ask people to test them and give feedback.

## Holiday Projects

Skip the busy seasons (Christmas, Easter), and try something creative:

- Veterans Day celebration
- Valentine's Day cards and cookies
- St. Patrick's Day party
- Educational presentations

## Bible Study on Aging

Create a series exploring questions like:

- What are biblical examples of elder care? (God caring for elders, people caring for elders)
- What are Scripture's instructions about this?
- What does it mean to age faithfully?

## Culture Study

Examine current elder care issues:

- What's happening nationally and internationally?
- What are good and bad examples in your community?
- Explore difficult topics: healthcare shortages, euthanasia debates, Medicaid challenges

## Compare Scripture to Culture

Host discussions that wrestle with how biblical values speak to modern elder care challenges. This builds theological depth while addressing real-world issues.

The U.S. is facing what researchers call a "healthcare paradox"—an aging population with increasing needs on one side, and a strained healthcare system with workforce shortages on the other. Your church can't solve everything, but you can make a difference right where you are.

# Your Next Step

You don't have to do everything in this manual. Pick one thing. Maybe it's putting large-print bulletins by the door, organizing a visit to a local nursing home, or simply asking an elderly member, "How can I help?"

Start there.

The elderly in your community are waiting. They're lonely, overlooked and often forgotten. But they're also full of stories, wisdom and worth as God's beloved image bearers.

When you serve them, you're serving Christ himself.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

# Additional Resources

- Pioneer Network: Definitions and elder care terminology - [pioneernetwork.net](http://pioneernetwork.net)
- Your State's Aging Services: Search "[Your State] aging services" for facility ratings and resources
- Story Point Group: Storytelling resources - [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org)
- Assistive Listening HQ: Church audio solutions
- *Being Mortal* by Dr. Atul Gawande: Companioning the dying
- *Aging Faithfully* by Alice Fryling: Theological reflection on aging
- *51 Older Adult Ministry Ideas* by Richard Gentzler: Practical programming ideas
- *Book of Common Prayer 2019*: Pages 236 and 246 for end-of-life liturgies

May God bless your ministry to the elderly, and may you find Christ in every wrinkled face and trembling hand you serve.



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