



Memory Loss and Alzheimer's

With more than 100,000 people diagnosed with Alzheimers and memory loss in the state of Minnesota, it is certain that some members of our congregation are dealing with this devastating disease. How are we as a congregation treating these friends and fellow worshipers? Are we continuing to be welcoming? Or are we turning away because of lack of knowledge, discomfort at their situation, not knowing how to engage them in conversation? For many people with memory loss and their families the church may be the last social contact that is available to them. How can we continue to develop and maintain our relationships with those afflicted when we see them here at church?

As church members we can learn to be more inviting and welcoming by:

- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of memory loss. "In the absence of understanding there is fear and uncertainty". Arming ourselves with knowledge of this disease will help us understand what is happening with our friend: the daily challenges and frustrations they are facing, the reactions of those around them, the social isolation they may already be experiencing.
- Learning to expect that there will be memory glitches, restlessness, and perhaps embarrassment when you are together. Don't let people feel dumb or "put on the spot" when they are unable to come up with an answer. Allow adequate time for responses and find ways to show your appreciation of them.
- Making eye contact and using their name when engaging them in conversation. Let them know your name, speak slowly and in warm tones and try to keep your time together relaxing.
- "Know the disease the person has-but also take the time to know and appreciate the unique person the disease has. Acknowledge the person's contributions, talents, and gifts-both past and present."

We can assist families to stay connected with the church by:

- Acknowledging the changing status of their lives as the disease progresses with their loved one.
- Providing volunteer opportunities for the caregiver/ person with memory loss (as able) to maintain their connection and sense of involvement.
- Offering transportation and respite care for the caregiver who needs a break from caring for their loved one.
- Offering to make a friendly visit at home when going out into the community becomes more difficult.
- Encouraging acceptance of help from outside agencies earlier rather than later so caregivers have the time to tend to their own needs and avoid burn out.
- Maintaining your normal friendship, this will add balance and normalcy to their lives.

Let's continue to be a loving, welcoming church community to those persons and families struggling with memory loss by following through on some of the suggested ideas. It will benefit all of us.

Julia Nordling, Parish Nurse

Resources: Alzheimer's and Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin, Alzheimer's Association of MN and ND.