

Due West United Methodist Church

Ministering to Families Facing Alzheimer's and Related Dementias

October 12, 2017

Dear Ministers, Clergy, Church and Community Leaders,

Each of you in attendance today is to be commended for your desire to better understand the needs of families affected by dementia. I'm very thankful for what you are already doing to help these families.

Dementia creates incredible stress in families that are affected by it. The stigma that is present with Dementia often keeps individuals from going to the doctor for a cognitive evaluation. Stigma often produces fear.

Some of the emotional challenges that might take place with the diagnosis are:

- others finding out that I have dementia
- others thinking less of me
- feeling as if I no longer have anything to offer
- social isolation,
- feelings of emptiness
- and many others

These challenges can propel people into a downward spiral. Three out of five families dealing with dementia break up as a result of the stress. However, living with dementia isn't a hopeless endeavor. Individuals in the early to moderate stages can still do so much. They still have value. They need others to better understand their condition.

In June 2012, I was diagnosed with Lewy body dementia (LBD) at age 64. This was preceded by eighteen months of "hell on earth" experiences. The day that I sold my pharmacy, I felt that my life was over. I no longer had my pharmacy patients to love, care for, educate, encourage and give hope to.

Within weeks, I was seeing a counselor. A few months later, a second antidepressant was added to my medications, causing me to become catatonic on the 11th day of treatment. Soon after, I began to pass out upon standing. My blood pressure was dropping to 60/40, my speech was slurred, and I was sleeping 16-18 hours per day. No one was putting the puzzle pieces together until I saw a Cognitive Neurologist at Emory. That day, he diagnosed me with LBD, which combines the physical elements of Parkinson's Disease with the cognitive elements of Dementia.

The day of my diagnosis, I told my wife, "It is what it is and everything will be okay". My faith enabled me to do this. However, three months later, I felt like a convicted murderer. The physician entered the charges, the jury found me guilty, and the judge issued a death sentence without appeal.

After a grueling 12 months of dealing with this devastating diagnosis, I woke up at 1 AM one night and went into my office. I asked God to take me home. No longer could I deal with what my wife and children were going through. However, over the next four-hours, God created a miracle in my life.

The Holy Spirit descended upon me, telling me that God had given me a mission field larger than my 38-year outreach to my patients. Tears of joy flooded my soul. No longer was I in bondage to Dementia. I was free to continue fulfilling the purpose that God had given me, caring for people.

This experience with God directed me to a path forward. Unfortunately and most often, the diagnosing physician and others never help a person find a path forward after diagnosis. This provides churches a ripe and fertile mission field that is ready for harvest

Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

There are many things that Ministers, Clergy, Church and Community leaders can do that will lead to a better quality of life for these families. Let me share some that come to mind:

- When you talk with me, you have come into my world. Accept me where I am. I still have physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs.
- Talk to me with dignity and respect.
- Do not tell me that I don't look like I have Dementia. I will always ask what someone with Dementia looks like.
- Do not tell me that I don't act like I have Dementia. I will always ask how someone with Dementia acts.
- Do not stop me from doing the things you don't think I can do unless my safety is at stake. I can handle failure.
- If needed, take me to the grocery store so I can have food to eat. Or take me for a ride to get out of the house.
- Help me find ways to have opportunities for social activity.
- Encourage me and give me hope
- Hold my hand and pray with me. Knowing that someone is caring and praying for me lifts my spirits.

All of these things and others can help people to prepare for a path forward while living with Dementia. After all, I'm living with a disease that has no cure. Are you willing to be part of changing the culture of Dementia?

My prayer is that you are, and that you are ready to start today. Many families are counting on you. The quality of life for families will be greatly enriched by churches being part of a Dementia culture change. The church not only needs to be involved, but the church can set the example for others to follow. There is a place for all of us to collectively honor God by how we treat those living with Dementia and their families.

May God richly bless each of you in your ministries,

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