

A Practical Guide to Nursing Home Ministry

By Coach Tom Dowling



My team and I have the privilege of leading a weekly worship service for residents of a local nursing home for several years. Through that worship service, we seek to reach out to all residents to share Christ's love. Our sixteen member team includes twelve senior adults and four high school football players. Here are suggested team responsibilities and

Team Responsibilities:

1. Arrive thirty minutes before the service to assist with transporting residents.
2. During the service, sit with the residents and serve as "hymn-page turners".
3. After the service, assist residents as they return to their rooms.
4. Visit residents who are unable to attend the service.

Strategies and Lessons Learned:

1. **Speak the Language of the Residents** - We learned that residents called our service "going to church" while we called it "devotion." As soon as their terminology was applied to our vocabulary, we noticed a marked improvement in attendance. Taking "church" to them fills a void and reestablishes one of life's valued experiences.
2. **Lead the Service Seated** - Most residents use wheel chairs, walkers, a cane, or other type of assisted mobility, which requires them to sit or lie while at "church." It is difficult for them to communicate or relate to a person who is standing. Sitting improves eye contact and promotes a feeling of personal involvement.
3. **Speak Loudly** - Speaking to the elderly is a challenge. A powerful voice is vital. Amplifying devices are not as desirable as the natural voice as they tend to depersonalize the speaker and limit animation. Comments such as, "what did he say," wandering attention, or sleeping are indications that your personal volume as well as animation should be increased.
4. **Involve Residents** - Conduct your message as dialogue rather than sermon. Ask questions. When you begin the message with a question, it gets residents involved. Humorous questions are best and you can expect several answers. When answers are not to the point, use them anyway because you have them involved. Simply redirect the message. Residents like to laugh and see the speaker in humorous situations. Check your ego at the door and entertain as you bring the message.
5. **Lead Familiar Music and Use Familiar Bible Passages** - The choice of music and scripture passages are very important in your nursing home service. Older hymns and familiar Bible passages are best (many residents will know them by memory). What a thrill to see an Alzheimer patient singing, or quoting a passage stored in their memory and never forgotten.
6. **Be Creative with Special Occasions and Holidays** - On special occasions and holidays our team distributes simple and inexpensive gifts (We ask nursing home staff to clear the gifts to ensure dietary and safety compliance). A Christmas favorite among residents is having their picture taken in front of the tree with members of our team. Copies of the pictures, given to residents, become prized possessions, prominently displayed in their rooms.

Nursing home ministry continues to reward the members of our team. Over the years, we have seen residents saved, comforted by prayer in their final hours, and generally uplifted by our efforts to provide some joy and "Son" shine in their lives.

Tom Dowling is retired from a 34 year football coaching career, including head coaching positions at three Baptist Colleges and seven years as a Conference Commissioner. Tom currently serves his church as a Deacon and Sunday School Teacher for Senior Adults.