



How to Develop a Dementia-Friendly Worship Service for your Faith Community

Nurturing the spiritual health of someone with dementia is an act of Christian love that preserves their dignity and affirms their personhood. As churches, we have a unique opportunity – indeed, a calling – to respond to this need by finding ways to make worship accessible to people experiencing cognitive change. In this Quicksheet, you will learn how to create a modified worship service, either in-person or pre-recorded, for your faith community.

A "dementia-friendly" worship service refers to a traditional worship service that has been simplified so that someone with cognitive impairment may be able to participate comfortably, receive a Christian message that is easier to process, and feel God's unconditional love. It respects their adulthood and honors their traditions. It preserves lifelong personal belief systems and values even when the individual can no longer articulate them. It prepares the soul for end-of-life by keeping the flame of Christian hope alive within them.

For the purpose of this Quicksheet, the term "dementia-friendly" will be used, but other terms can be used to describe this type of unique worship service. In 2023, Point Loma Community Presbyterian Church in San Diego, CA developed four pre-recorded services and termed them "memory care worship services." Each service is approximately 12 minutes long and consists of a traditional hymn, inspirational message from a retired pastor, The Lord's Prayer, and calming visual imagery. The services may be watched one a time or as a complete playlist and are accessible on YouTube using [this link](#) or <http://tinyurl.com/tvd5tv8m>

Below is a summary of what was learned and instructions on how you can develop a memory care worship service for people in your faith community.

What we know about people experiencing dementia/cognitive change:

- Communication must be simplified for them to understand.
- Their attention span is typically shorter.
- Visual cues help them recognize familiar things/places.
- Although they may not recognize a person or a place, they will still be able to receive the feeling (emotional effect) of the encounter, and this is more important than the content they retain.

- Maintaining their routine and activities that they once enjoyed and valued, in some form, is beneficial.
- Familiar music is one of the memories they retain the longest.
- Spiritual well-being is important throughout life.

In-person or pre-recorded?

When deciding whether to develop a memory care worship service for your community, consider a few factors which will help you determine whether it should take place in-person or be video-recorded:

In-person		Pre-recorded	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows person to come to their home church and experience all the familiar elements in a calm, peaceful atmosphere • Provides an opportunity for socialization and fellowship • Can be offered on a day other than Sunday • Can take place weekly, monthly, or occasionally • Can benefit the care partner who may also have been unable to attend church recently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires staff availability • Requires available space • Attendees must travel to get there • The service is brief, so a fellowship time may also need to be offered to make it worth their travel time to attend • Need new sermon topics for each service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be shown in-person or made available online • Viewers can watch a single service or several, or even play on a continuous loop • Can be shared with memory care facilities for in-house use • Can be viewed anytime and repeatedly • Viewers can set up a "chancel-like" place in their home to view the service and replicate a worship environment (Bible/hymn book in hand, flameless candle nearby) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires skill and equipment to record and edit • Pastor/choir must feel comfortable being video recorded • Need technical knowledge to be able to share the services online

Elements of a dementia friendly worship service:

A Presbyterian worship service typically contains the following elements: Welcome, prelude, call to worship, hymn of praise, call to confession, assurance/response, scripture, sermon, hymn, affirmation, thanksgiving, Lord's prayer & benediction. Including all of these parts would be too confusing and lengthy for a dementia-friendly service. *Simplify your service* by selecting just a few and stick with those for all of your dementia services.

- Use familiar visual elements that clearly indicate a place of worship: (i.e., cross, stained glass, communion table with a cloth, pastor in a robe, candles, etc.)
- Uncluttered chancel/worship space - remove any unnecessary items, such as unused microphone or music stands, etc.
- Think about the best person to convey the message. This may be a retired pastor or a ministry leader that is especially sensitive to the needs of people with dementia and their families. They will need to have good eye contact, speak clearly and slowly, and be able to express patience and warmth through body language and words. They also must be comfortable being video recorded if the service is going to be made for online usage.
- Select familiar, traditional hymns for your context. Select those with simple language and a clear, uplifting message; use only the most common verses. See examples below.
- The Lord's Prayer or Doxology - many people have memorized these and can recall them throughout their lives.
- A scripture passage that has a clear, simple and positive message. Suggestions below.
- Visual imagery that is soothing and comforting.
- Sensitivity to the duration of the service (not too long!). Our services are 12-15 minutes long. Over 30 minutes would be too long.
- Consider partnering with a local dementia agency to get feedback about your worship service as you develop it. They can advise on best practices regarding communication methods, etc.

How to promote your dementia-friendly service:

When your worship service is ready to share with others, there are several ways you can announce and promote it to your community and beyond. Some outreach ideas include:

- Announce to your own congregation, and personally invite those who are at home and can no longer come to church. If the service is pre-recorded, you may even bring a computer or tablet to their home and show them how to access it online.
- Other churches in your community
- Local assisted living centers, especially those with memory care units.
- Local hospitals (they often have an in-house tv faith channel, and they may want to stream yours)
- Your local agency on aging.
- Alzheimer's/dementia agencies. They often have excellent resources for families but lack a spiritual component and this can fill a great need for their clients.
- Adult day care centers

- Inform your local newspaper, many of them feature resources for dementia, age-related issues. They may want to include yours!

Themes/passages/stories that are suitable for this type of service:

Jesus and the Blind Man
 The Good Shepherd
 Jesus and Zaccheus
 Jesus and the Samaritan Woman
 The Beatitudes (or just one Beatitude)
 Jesus Calms the Storm
 Jesus Walks on Water
 The Apostles Choosing to Follow Jesus
 Five Loaves and Two Fish
 The Lost Sheep
 Prodigal Son
 The Good Samaritan
 The Last Supper
 Wait on the Lord
 Forgiveness

Some suggested hymns:

Amazing Grace
 How Great Thou Art
 Holy, Holy, Holy
 Great Is Thy Faithfulness
 O God Our Help in Ages Past
 Just as I am, Without One Plea
 Be Thou My Vision
 Rock of Ages
 Praise to the Lord the Almighty
 A Mighty Fortress
 He's Got the Whole World
 This is the Day
 When the Saints go Marching In
 Old Rugged Cross

Links and References:

Point Loma Memory Care Worship Article

<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/religion/story/2023-11-19/point-loma-church-crafts-online-worship-experiences-designed-for-parishioners-with-memory-loss>

Alzheimer's San Diego

<https://www.alzsd.org/>

Alter Dementia - Empowering Churches

<https://alterdementia.com/>

Faith Village Research

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MezFc4mhew>

Writer: Elaine F. Burrell, MSW, Director of Senior Adult Ministry & Congregational Care
 Point Loma Community Presbyterian Church, San Deigo CA

POAMN: www.poamn.org Office of Christian Formation: www.pcusa.org/formation

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