

Dementia and Religion: Inside a church's Alzheimer's Caregiver Support Group

Excerpts

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Dementia is the overall term for memory loss and cognitive impairment that results from diseases such as Alzheimer's. It progresses as damage to the brain disrupts normal communication between brain cells and, in turn, affects behavior and thinking. This story is part of a Religion News Service series on dementia and religion. The rest of the series can be found [here](#).

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (RNS) — They sat in a circle in a room usually used by high schoolers and talked about the people they loved who no longer recognized them or who had died forgetting the names of family caregivers in their last days.

The Alzheimer's caregiver support group on a campus of Southeast Christian Church started with a devotional lesson referring to Charlie Brown pal Linus' lack of fear as he told the story of the birth of Jesus.

"It's only through our relationship with Christ that we can have the inner peace that can help us just get through the day," said a facilitator before the group of 10 bowed their heads for an opening prayer.....

Between prayers, they gave one another advice, such as turning on child locks in their cars and putting away bills before loved ones move them and can't remember where they are.

One person recalled a breakfast outing when a loved one with Alzheimer's started piling napkins high and moving other items off the table. Someone had a suggestion — passing around a card that reads, "Please Be Patient ... The person with me is challenged with Alzheimer's. Thank you for understanding."

Debbie Buckler, who helps lead a caregiver support group on another Southeast Church campus, lost her husband, Frank, to dementia in 2004. She also lost her mother to dementia on Jan. 2.

"For people that are going through this, especially a spouse, there is what I call a first widowhood, where I had to realize I had lost my husband," she said in an interview. "And that first widowhood was worse than the second."

She said she tries to help people cope with the challenges of being a caregiver, from being up in the middle of the night on watch for a loved one wandering around the house to being a “prisoner in your own home” who is exhausted and has little social life.

“Every day is a heartbreak,” said Buckler, whose husband had to retire early as a machine shop teacher at a vocational school as his symptoms became evident. She left her work as a physician recruiter to care for him.

Nevertheless, Buckler said she tried to note “small miracles” and celebrate them.

“The most disturbing thing was that my husband also had Parkinson's and they lose the ability to smile and I remember praying that — to God — I could really deal with this better if only he could still smile,” she recalled. “And I went home that day and he was smiling. Now, he was able to smile up to about two weeks before his death.”

The final prayer sought divine intervention for the next times each of them might be with a relative with some form of dementia.

“Lord, I just pray that you would give them sweet moments,” said the prayer leader. “And they can see, just by looking in their eyes that they can see their mom, and they can see their wife, they can see their spouse and, Lord, that they will have a connection, even if it's just a little glimpse of a moment.”