



## Dementia-Friendly Faith Communities

Faith can play an important role in the lives of people with dementia and their family caregivers. Attending a service may be one of the few outings people with dementia and their family caregivers make throughout the week. Maintaining a connection to faith-based activities can prevent isolation and improve quality of life. It is likely that a faith community has members who care for someone with dementia or have dementia themselves. Becoming dementia-friendly will allow a more open and welcoming environment to better serve all within the community.

### WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is a term used to describe the symptoms of more than 100 conditions that are characterized by a decline in memory or other thinking skills that affect a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

### SIGNS OF DEMENTIA

Many dementias are progressive, with signs and symptoms starting out slowly and gradually getting worse. While symptoms of dementia can vary greatly, at least two of the following core mental functions must be significantly impaired to be considered dementia:

- Judgment
- Perception
- Reasoning
- Organizational abilities
- Memory
- Abstract thinking
- Communication and language
- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Orientation to time and place
- Awareness of socially appropriate norms
- Ability to filter emotional responses

### WHAT IS A DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATION?

Dementia-friendly organizations recognize the challenges that accompany dementia and help enable people with dementia to have a good quality of life. Their personnel are able to recognize the signs of dementia, communicate with people with dementia, and locate resources and assistance for themselves and for the people they serve.

### DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY FAITH ORGANIZATION GUIDELINES

- Train all personnel in leadership roles and at least 50 percent of employees and volunteers.
- Designate a team leader to speak on behalf of the organization.
- Be open to discussions regarding environment changes (lighting, signage, etc.).
- Share training materials with new hires, volunteers, and anyone not available to train in-person.
- Encourage all new staff and volunteers to take the free, 20-minute online training found at [www.uwosh.edu/dementia](http://www.uwosh.edu/dementia), listed under "Additional Courses" in the left navigation.



## DEMENTIA IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

Attending a religious service can be challenging for people with dementia and their caregivers. Challenges for people with dementia may include finding selected pieces within larger texts, reading signs that contain references to each piece, following along with the service, and finding transportation to and from services. Members with dementia may say or do things that are not appropriate during a service, such as talking loudly during times of quiet. This behavior can be embarrassing for family and friends, and may prompt them to stop attending services.

Recognizing when someone stops attending services and asking why is the first step to helping people with dementia maintain a connection to their faith. Activities can include educating members, reviewing navigability of the environment, and holding a “dementia day” service of worship. When members of faith communities are educated on dementia, behaviors of those with dementia can be more readily accepted, resulting in less stigmatization for people with dementia and their families.

Dementia-friendly worship is inclusive and engaging for people with dementia. Services are short and simple, and have a structure with a clear beginning and end. It is helpful when written materials are provided in large print with black letters on white paper and are not overwhelming in content.

Volunteers can assist members who may have difficulty following the service or finding the proper passages in books. If someone is struggling, simply sitting near them and offering to let them follow along can be very helpful. To address transportation issues for people with dementia, identify volunteers who are willing to provide rides, or use a van or bus, if available.

Providing opportunities for members with dementia to actively engage within the faith community can bring joy and well-being to their lives. A special chorus consisting of people with dementia and their caregivers or friends is one way to do this. Starting a memory café is another way to provide opportunities for joy. Memory cafés provide a safe place where people with dementia and their caregivers can socialize without fear of embarrassment. They should include someone knowledgeable about dementia to provide assistance and answer questions.

## RESOURCES

For more information on dementia and how to become dementia-friendly, visit:

- Livability: Dementia Friendly Churches  
[www.livability.org.uk/church/dementia-friendly-churches/](http://www.livability.org.uk/church/dementia-friendly-churches/)
- Is It Dementia: A Resource for Recognizing the Signs of Dementia  
<http://isitdementia.com.au>
- A Toolkit for Building Dementia-Friendly Communities  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p01000.pdf>
- Dementia Care Specialist  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/dementia-care-specialist-program.htm>
- Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC)  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/consumer/index.htm>
- Alzheimer’s Association  
[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)
- Alzheimer’s and Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin  
[www.alzwisc.org](http://www.alzwisc.org)

