

Visiting *the* Elderly

A Guide for Ministers of Care

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Contents



| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 4 |
| 1. How to Be an Active Listener..... | 6 |
| 2. A Pastoral Visit versus a Social Visit..... | 9 |
| 3. The Pastoral Visit..... | 12 |
| 4. Special Circumstances..... | 20 |
| Prayers..... | 31 |
| Resources..... | 32 |



Introduction

We are an aging society. As the general population ages, so do the members of our churches. The foundational members of our parishes are experiencing chronic illness, dementia, physical limitations and isolation, and many are not able to physically join in the sacramental life of the community.

We are all called as Catholics to be a model of Jesus to care for the sick, comfort the isolated and mourn with the grieving. Jesus himself suffered, grieved and knew pain: in serving our brothers and sisters, we serve him by seeing Christ in all people.

Some members of the Church community who have special gifts are asked to use these gifts to bring the parish community to those who cannot join us in person.

In previous generations, people lived in the same neighbourhoods as their extended families, who shared the care of the children and aging family members. In 1981, social worker Dorothy Miller coined the term “sandwich generation” to describe women in their 30s to 40s who were “sandwiched” between young children and aging parents as the primary caregiver. Today, seniors are living longer; the age of the sandwich generation has increased from 40 to 65 years, and includes both men and

women as caregivers. Families are mobile and often do not live near aging parents. In most families, both spouses work, and still they take on the caregiver role for both their children and their elderly parents.

We are a less communal generation. Faith and involvement in the church by the current younger generations is not a priority; they may be growing away from their faith with all the pressures of everyday life. The elderly in our parishes, meanwhile, may lose touch with their faith community as they end up in hospital, move into retirement homes or long-term care facilities, or leave their parish to live with family.

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is for lay ministers in parishes who are commissioned and responsible for the spiritual needs of older adults. The term Ministry of Care (or Minister of Care) is used here to describe the work of lay or pastoral ministers who visit older adults on behalf of the parish for social and/or spiritual support. It will

- address concerns, issues and challenges the Minister of Care may face when visiting older adults in their homes, long-term care facilities, retirement residences and hospitals, and
- incorporate principles and practical approaches for Ministers of Care.

While this booklet is not meant to replace comprehensive training for visiting older adults, it should help you to feel more confident when carrying out your role as a Minister of Care.

1. How to Be an Active Listener

As a Minister of Care, you are a prayerful presence who is a sign of God's love and care for the person. Jesus was always present to people, and he used his eyes and voice to express his love and compassion for others. He listened actively, just as he continues to actively listen to us in our prayer and conversation with him.

Listening involves both hearing and feeling. When you listen, you hear not only the words but the feelings, attitudes and emotions behind the words. You can then echo them back to the person. When you echo, the person can take ownership of their feelings and gain an awareness that will help them decide what to do about the situation. Active listening takes practice: it will allow you as the Minister of Care to understand the spiritual needs of the person, build trust, and show empathy and compassion.

Active listening requires you to be in touch with your own feelings and to take the time to listen and be attentive to verbal and nonverbal cues. Position yourself so the person can see you and can make eye contact. This may mean sitting during the prayers. Challenges to communication may include hearing

impairment, low vision or a language barrier. Having prayers in larger print, a symbols card or translations of simple words and prayers may help. Reduce distractions by asking permission to turn off the TV or radio.

Things to Consider

Active listening takes practice, but if you remember the 5 Rs, it becomes a simple skill that will allow both you and the person you are visiting to build a meaningful and trusting relationship.

- **Repeat** or paraphrase what you think you heard from the person and ask clarifying questions. Always wait for the person to finish speaking before you ask questions.
- **Restate** what was said to be sure you understand and are not assuming or interpreting incorrectly. Try not to finish their sentences; give them time.
- **Reflect** on what they are saying. Do not be afraid of silence, especially if the person becomes emotional. If they allow you, hold their hand and wait until they are ready to talk again. Your hand is a connection that offers support and compassion.
- **Respond** by listening without judging or offering opinions. Show interest through nodding or smiling, always maintaining eye contact. Use a calm, reassuring voice.
- **Respect** the person by avoiding distractions such as checking your phone. Make sure your phone is silenced when you make a visit. Show empathy.

Remember

- Smile!
- Pay attention to the loudness or softness of your voice and adjust it as needed.
- Let your natural personality shine through.
- Give of yourself.
- Be helpful when asked to help.
- Be open to possibilities in your speech and manner.
- Always keep your promises.