

Being Present With Seniors

Sr. Mary Riordan rsm



Older people who have company tend to live longer and sweeter, and with fewer downturns in health, than those who are socially isolated. Mary Riordan's ongoing ministry in Mercy Life, an initiative of the Sisters of Mercy in Mobile, brings a group together in Assisted Living, mostly African American men and women, for a weekly Bible study session. Usually another sister participates with Mary also. Participants love the sessions, and rely on Mary not only as a person who knows her scripture, but as a trustworthy companion on their journey.

“With older people, one-on-one is best. They don't share in a group, but do when they have your ear personally. When you are leaving the group meeting, they will come, one at a time, with their news. One man told me lately, ‘I have a new toe!’ Or when I am wheeling a lady out, she begins to talk: ‘I had a doctor's visit yesterday and got bad news.’ I will hear confidences from them.

They need you to really listen. They need to get the feeling that when you are with them, there is no-one else that matters. Even in the best care homes, people experience loneliness, and the ability to share something of themselves with someone can ease that feeling.

Because I am older, they trust me.

There are a couple of other aspects to group work with seniors. You have to make sure they can hear you. Increasing deafness is a given. I say, “Did everyone hear that, did you hear that, Mrs Johnson?” I don't make anything of it, we move right along, but I always check. I have to be alert at all times. And I notice a shorter attention span. I plan a variety of things to do—a talk, a song, a question: they can't concentrate for very long. From time to time, we have a drawing for a simple prize, and they just love it. My aim is to share the Word of God, and to bring what's happening in their lives, the physical ailments, let's say, with the real

events they want to talk about, like voting in the Primaries, with the scripture reading. It is all the Word of God.

One man in a wheelchair sits at the back. He wears a mask, and doesn't say much. But once in a while he will take down the mask, and say something very profound. I often come away with a feeling of being graced. I think I am getting more from Mercy Life sessions than I am giving.

Pope Francis spoke in a recent reflection on the value of old age, about the lives of Simeon and Anna, the two wise elders who recognized Jesus as the Messiah.

He said that their lives are an example of the call the elderly have to offer a "personal witness of faith," and to thus "build bridges between the generations."

The Pope emphasized the value elderly people have in today's world. "The lives and witness of the elderly," says Pope Francis, "can teach us the primary importance of discerning God's presence in our daily lives."

This article was first published in Rejoice, the newsletter of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy US Region.