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AND AGING

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Home Visitation Made Easier

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Home visitation has long been a staple of pastoral ministry. This is particularly true when it comes to a ministry with older adults. Although older adults these days live more actively, are healthier and live longer the need remains to continue providing spiritual and pastoral care when one is not able to get to church as much as one would like.

There is an art to effective home visitation. During my 27 years as a parish pastor I would make what I called "homework calls." These were visitations to persons whom I perceived were into, or coming into, a time of transition. Many of these home visits I felt were warranted based on conversations that I had with people coming out of worship. It might have been a "look in the eye" or some other non-verbal body language that inspired me to just stop over to check things out and to make myself available. The results were a lot of home visits that were unnecessary and ineffective -- almost a waste of time.

These visits would have been much more effective if I had a useful spiritual assessment tool that could take the visit beyond my intuitions and into a more concrete and focused encounter. I never came across the notion of spiritual assessment until I spent a year in Clinical Pastoral Education and I was transitioning from parish ministry to chaplaincy. While not being a "magic bullet," a tool that is compatible with the pastor's theology and pastoral care goals is extremely helpful. Pastor Lois Knudson wrote a book that uses an assessment tool as a guide for parish visitation. The book, Understanding the Senior Adult: A Tool for Wholistic Ministry (Lois D. Knutson, 1999. Bethesda: The Alban Institute. ISBN 1-56699-217-6) includes a CD that contains the entire tool. Lois' model is for the assessment tool to guide the conversation. I also have other tools available that I can email to anyone who might wish to use and/or adapt for use within their parish. Please send your request to dkoepke@frontporch.net.

There is another way to provide more effective parish visitation and that is to train congregational leaders on how to conduct visits and make referrals to their pastor, priest or rabbi. In Orange County, California, the local Council on Aging sponsors a program called "Caring Connections Friendly Visitors." This program recruits and trains volunteers to make "friendly visits" to persons whose needs becomes evident to them. The volunteers are asked to visit or telephone their "friend" once each week. These visitors are trained to identify unmet health, social service and spiritual needs and report them to "Caring Connections," who in turn refer them to the appropriate agency. The volunteers are also instructed on how to recruit and train other persons in their congregation, synagogue, temple or mosque to conduct "friendly visits" with other members and friends. The council provides all training, materials and supervision. Many congregations already have a Stephen Ministry or a BeFriends program; however, "Caring Connections" provides a simple and effective alternative to these popular ministries. For more information about "Caring Connections" visit the Council on Aging Orange County website at www.coaoc.org and click on "Program Descriptions."