

ICHM Case Study

George* a 90-year-old member of our congregation moved into a retirement residence three years ago. He had been a 'pillar' in our faith community, sitting on many boards over the years, teaching Sunday school, and until last year attending church services regularly. When he was no longer driving, occasionally George would accept a ride to church; but as his health declined and he became more unsteady on his feet, George chose not to attend.

As the parish nurse, I visited him every couple of months. George walked with a 'rollator' (a walking frame equipped with wheels), had two hearing aids, some short term memory loss—at times he had difficulty finding the right words—and needed some assistance with personal care. Otherwise, he was generally able to manage on his own. Over the past year, George had more frequent falls.

July 11, 2016: Visited George when a community physiotherapist from 'Closing the Gap' was there. She was to visit George twice a week for two weeks to give him instructions on exercises to help him with fall prevention. The physiotherapist noted that George's body leaned to the left. I asked if I could attend when the physiotherapist returned.

July 14, 2016: Met George with the physiotherapist. Completed exercise routine regarding how to properly get up and down from a chair and how to walk with the rollator.

July 21, 2016: Visited George, completed a round of exercises without the physiotherapist.

July 25, 2016: Met with physiotherapist and George. Informed her, with George's permission that I wanted to continue to assist George with his exercises weekly since it would be difficult for him to manage to do them on his own. Took notes while she completed the routine which included strengthening exercises for his legs and lower back.

Aug. 3 – Sept. 14, 2016: Visited George most Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m. Completed round of exercises, talked about church life, knew when he was having better days or not so good, when he was having issues with his dentures. During one of these visits he started talking about making his funeral arrangements.

Sept. 21, 2016: After the exercise routine was completed and we were having our visit, I felt honoured when George asked me to help him plan his funeral service.

Sept. 28, 2016: George had fallen in the early morning and had just returned from emergency having sustained a fracture of his nose so no exercises or discussion about his funeral service.

Oct. 5, 2016: George was able to complete the exercise routine and talked some more about his ideas for his funeral.

Oct. 12, 2016: From a list of suggestions that our pastor had for scriptures and hymns, George chose the ones that he wanted. George added a poem that he wanted included in his service:

Only God Can Plant a Tree

*“I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.”*

Oct. 26, 2016: As usual, George completed his exercise routine. I gave him a copy of his arrangements and had him sign a copy that would be kept in the church office.

Nov. 2 –Dec. 14, 2016: Continued to visit George on Wednesdays. Tried to keep him informed about what was going on in the church. Noted that he had not fallen in some time. He continued to have problems with his dentures, lost and found his eyeglasses, and now had a string attachment to his hearing aids so that he wouldn't lose them.

Dec. 28, 2016: Walked with George from the dining room back upstairs to his suite. He went to the bathroom and when he came out I found him extremely short of breath. His colour was normal but he could not complete the exercises. With his permission, I reported his condition to the charge nurse.

Jan. 3, 2017: Received an e-mail that George had died. He was taken to the hospital on Jan. 1st with a probable heart attack and passed away in the morning.

Jan. 5, 2017: At the visitation, met with one son who thanked me for my visits and assisting his father with his funeral arrangements.

Jan. 6, 2017: When George's son gave his eulogy at the funeral service, he personally thanked me, as the parish nurse, to a full church.

Background

I listened to the Spirit (God) speak to me that this was something that I needed to do weekly with George. Yes, he lived in an assisted living facility, but they weren't going to

complete the exercises with him. Yes, he had family who took him shopping and to appointments, but they too weren't going to complete these exercises routinely.

For me, the exercise routine was a reason to engage with George. It gave us an opportunity to get to know each other. It allowed me to let George know that he was still a valuable member of our church family and in an environment where he could safely talk about anything that he wanted to share with me.

Looking back over the past six months that I spent with George, I am gratified that I listened to that inner voice to spend regular time with George. I was able to support this elderly gentleman, to help meet his spiritual needs and to demonstrate to him that he remained an important part of our church community.

Respectfully submitted by:

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*Name changed to respect privacy.