

Caregiving in the spotlight - churches help those who care for the disabled

On a recent Friday evening, E. Nancy O'Liddy, a member of St. Edward's Catholic Church in Bowie, Maryland, rushed from her job near Capitol Hill back to this suburb to give her 71-year-old mother a bath. "Mom's had eight strokes. Caring for Mom has taken over the life of our family," she said. "Tonight's my night to take care of her. We have to feed her, wash her hair--help her with her finances."

O'Liddy is one of the more than 25 million Americans who care for chronically ill or disabled family members. On January 3 the White House unveiled proposals to be included in the fiscal year 2000 budget that would create a \$1,000-a-year tax credit to help families cover the cost of home-based care for elderly parents, disabled spouses or children.

Beyond the economic toll caregiving can exact on families, it also--as religious communities are increasingly realizing--can exact an emotional and spiritual price. And they are seeking ways to respond. In mid-November, during National Family Caregivers Week, an interfaith service at St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., honored the work of caregivers with prayers and special music. "I ... encountered the issue when I was 12 years old, when my father became terminally ill with leukemia. My mother worked hard to care for him at home.... Today, the situation of my mother, who is 92 years old, is never far from my mind. I am her eldest daughter ... so she feels particularly reliant on me," Rosalynn Carter told the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging at a hearing on caregiving issues late last year. "One of my colleagues has said there are only four kinds of people in the world: those who have been caregivers; those who currently are caregivers; those who will be caregivers; and those who will need caregivers. That's how universal this issue is," Carter said.

"Caregiving can be a 24-hour responsibility," said Suzanne Mintz, president of the National Family Caregivers Association based in Kensington, Maryland. Mintz speaks from personal as well as professional experience. During the service at St. John's, she thanked her husband, Steven, who has multiple sclerosis, for supporting her work on behalf of caregivers. Faith communities, large and small, are becoming aware of how much they can do to support caregivers, Mintz said. "Size isn't the issue here. Compassion is."

From South Carolina to Nevada, congregations are beginning to help caregivers throughout the year. Shirley Whitcome is a member of the caregivers support group of 600-member First United Methodist Church in Carson City, Nevada. She's the caregiver for her 94-year-old mother-in-law. "She's legally blind and her hearing's poor," Whitcome said. "I shop for her. Take her to the doctor. She's getting dementia."

Her support group, Whitcome said, is enormously helpful. "Everything that's said is confidential," she noted. "We talk about things you wouldn't talk about with your children. You don't want to burden them with anything negative." The church is compiling a caregivers resource guide expected to be available this month.

Kay McClure, a registered nurse, is the health minister of 3,000-member First Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina. A year ago the church started a monthly support group for caregivers. The group members ask "really big questions with no easy answers," McClure said. "Sometimes people are angry at God. Some feel doubts about their faith. Often they don't know what to pray for. They ask, should you pray for your loved ones to be healed? Or [because there's been so much suffering] for them to die?"

In addition to prayers and support groups, congregations are supporting caregivers in practical ways. At St. John Vianney Catholic Church, a 16,000-member Houston parish, for example, two teams of volunteers provide respite care to family

members caring for loved ones who are ill. "The volunteers stay with ill members so that their caregivers can do errands, go out for lunch or spend time with themselves," said Tonic Hanson, director of family life ministries. "They'll talk with the patients or help feed them."

Judaism highly values "the dignity of the elderly" and has a high commitment to supporting families, said Rita Keenan, a social worker with the Council for Jewish Elderly in Chicago. "Our monthly support group for caretakers of people with Alzheimer's is a safe place to talk about scary issues that many don't want to hear about."

Caregiving raises difficult issues for religious people, according to C. Roy Woodruff, executive director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. "They want to honor their mother or father, for example," he said. "But they feel guilty if they're angry at God for having to care for their parents. The anger and guilt can become overwhelming." But despite their anger and guilt many caregivers keep their faith. "I don't know why I still have my faith, but I do," O'Liddy said. "I know God's there for me and will only give me what I can deal with."

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