

Don't Waste Your Nursing Home Visits

Steve Burchett

Nursing homes are sobering places where mostly older people dwell with physical (and sometimes mental) disabilities and spiritual needs. Some of these facilities are bright and clean, others are dark and somewhat dirty, and almost all have a distinct smell. If you haven't already visited someone there, you will soon. You may even begin a ministry at one of these facilities.



How can you make the most of your visits to a nursing home?

Arrive ready to say something from the Bible.

If the one you are seeing is a believer (and thinking clearly), he or she will be delighted to hear the Bible read. A conversation about God's promises is always steadying for the elderly Christian who is suffering and perhaps near death.

Just showing up and spending time visiting about non-essential matters, without ever getting to Scripture, is actually unloving. This is especially true if you are there to see an unbeliever. Without faith in Christ, the person you are visiting with will perish. Usually, an easy way to proclaim Christ is to ask if you can read a passage of Scripture. The resident will almost always oblige. A conversation about the gospel could follow. Most are happy to dialogue about anything, so why not make it Jesus?

Show you care through non-verbal actions.

Too many people in nursing homes are visited by family and/or friends only occasionally, if at all. You may be the only person who shows an ongoing interest in the person's life. As important as it is to communicate the gospel, you must also demonstrate that you care by hearing the story about Uncle Harold for the twentieth time. If you listen to them, they may listen to you.

What about physical touch? A soft pat on the shoulder or a warm handshake is usually received well. They may not let go of your hand for a few seconds longer than normal, but that's okay. I was once in a nursing home conversing with a disabled lady in her eighties. While we were talking, she grabbed my hand and kept on holding it. Though I'm a married man, it would have been heartless for me to let go.

Remain faithful during difficult, seemingly impossible situations.

I was preaching in a nursing home when a woman started to cough uncontrollably. Before I had time to step back, she threw up a few feet from where I was standing. After a nurse came over and cleaned up the mess, another man started coughing without a break. Thankfully, he kept his breakfast down. Another time, while I was leading a service, a delusional woman stood up and pulled her pants down. The staff was quick to shield her and correct the situation. None of these situations made me say, "God is moving among these people."

We may never know what God does through us. Some will hear and receive the truth (by God's grace), but are incapable of expressing anything.

So, should a wife continue to pray with her unbelieving husband and read Scripture to him even though he's in a coma with only a few hours to live? Yes. There's hope in this reality: Jesus spoke to a dead man, and by the power of God Lazarus heard and obeyed. I'm not advocating preaching to the dead, but until a person dies, God might open his ears to hear and believe in Christ. Don't let closed eyes or a breathing machine keep you from proclaiming the gospel.

Treat the staff kindly.

Most often when I go to the local nursing home, I'm greeted by a member of the staff. Like most people, they appreciate kind words. Remember their names and ask about their families. Occasionally tell them you appreciate their hard work. And smile.

Also, one way of treating the staff *unkindly* is to talk negatively about them with the residents. Don't do it. Remember, people like to complain, especially about those who are "forcing" them to take medicine and eat food that is actually for their good and keeping them alive. Granted, you may sometimes be the person to advocate for better care, but overall make your presence at the nursing home about love and the gospel.

Read Steve's article about nursing home ministry, "Ten Reasons Why Nursing Homes are Great Places to Minister," at www.ccwtoday.org