



CRESCENDO

# CAREGIVING FOR AGING PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

SMALL GROUP STUDY





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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Crescendo small group study focused on caregiving! Crescendo is an initiative of the Evangelical Covenant Church's Make and Deepen Disciples mission priority that provides resources based on a framework for ministry to, with, and by boomers and older adults.

This study is designed with small groups in mind, but you may choose to use it for individual study or even in a large group setting with smaller breakout sessions. How you use it is up to your context and needs. Each session consists of four parts, based on the elements of Christian worship: gathering, word, response, and sending. The sessions are designed for small or large groups and can be completed within a 90-minute time frame.

The first Crescendo small group study took a deeper look at a framework for planning that can be used as we envision ministries by, with, and for persons in their pre-retirement and retirement years. The goal was to develop ministries that further the ongoing growth of adults in the later phases of life to be like the tree described in Psalm 1:3: "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (NRSV). Since the release of that resource, we have created more small group studies based on needs that have emerged in conversations and research. This resource is the latest to respond to a growing need.

It's a well-known fact that boomers are one of the largest generations in the US (70.23 million, compared to millennials at 72.19 million according to a study

published in 2022). A 2020 AARP study revealed that boomers are both one of the largest groups of care recipients as well as one of the largest groups providing care to adults aged 50+. Boomers, along with Gen Xers, often find themselves a part of the "sandwich generation," individuals who are primary caregivers for their aging parents as well as for their own children and/or grandchildren. While every situation is different, one thing Crescendo leaders hear often from caregivers is that they long for a supportive community. We hope this small group study is the first step in creating these communities in Covenant congregations throughout the denomination.

The four sessions in this study are designed to encourage and educate caregivers or prepare those anticipating caregiving in the future. While most of the language references boomer caregivers who are providing care for older adults, we recognize that younger generations can also be both caregiver and care recipient. Each session includes helpful information, time for discussion, and time for the group to participate in spiritual practices. We hope you experience these sessions as both informative and life-giving.

If you haven't already, we encourage you to bookmark the Crescendo website and download the Crescendo app from your preferred app store. Just search for "Crescendo Vital Living." Check the app regularly for new digital content.

— Nilwona Nowlin, *Writer*



# CAREGIVING 101

## GATHERING—15 MINUTES

After getting refreshments and getting settled, the group will transition into the icebreaker.

## ICEBREAKER QUESTION

In pairs or small groups, briefly introduce yourself, then answer the question,

- What is the best thing that ever happened to you?

## WORD—30 MINUTES

Each week, before we dig into the discussion topic, we will center ourselves in God's Word using a spiritual practice (or [spiritual discipline](#)) called lectio divina.

## ACTIVITY

The group leader will guide you through John 19:25-27 using the lectio divina practice of engaging with Scripture (Appendix 3).

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

—John 19:5-27, NRSV

## CAREGIVING: AN OVERVIEW

What is caregiving? Who is a caregiver? Who are care recipients? If you ask these questions of ten people, you might receive ten different responses. Before we dive deeper into this topic, it's important to clarify some terms.

Caregivers can be divided into two general categories: paid and unpaid. Paid caregivers are individuals who are trained to provide in-home care. Usually these caregivers have no relation to the care recipient. This study focuses on unpaid (or informal) caregivers who have personal connection to the care recipient. With that in mind, which

of the following scenarios describes a caregiver?

- A. A family member who performs small tasks like taking a loved one to the medical appointments or picking up groceries and prescriptions
- B. A family member who performs complex medical tasks such as catheter and wound care and help bathing, dressing, and toileting
- C. A friend or a neighbor in proximity who helps facilitate connection with children who are at a distance
- D. All of the above

Yes, the answer is D, all of the above. Yet many unpaid family caregivers would never think to use the term "caregiver" to describe themselves. They are simply helping a loved one. In her book, *From Surviving to Thriving: Transforming Your Caregiving Journey*, Amy S. D'Aprix defines a caregiver as "one who does anything at all that helps an older person remain independent or improve his or her quality of life" (p. 3). A 2020 AARP/ National Alliance for Caregiving [report](#) revealed that 53 million adults in the US are unpaid family caregivers. That's 1 in 6 adults. Most of us, at some point in our life, will be a caregiver.

Seventy-nine percent of caregivers in the US care for an adult in the 50+ age group. This is a 7.6 million increase since 2015. Many people step into this role without a second thought because they are motivated by God's command to love one another (John 13:34). More biblical references to the caregiving relationship can be found in:

"You shall rise before the aged and defer to the old, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:32).

"Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old" (Proverbs 23:22).

"Honor your father and mother"—this is the first commandment with a promise—'so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth'"

(Ephesians 6:2-3).

“But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God’” (Ruth 1:16).

You may be one of 53 million, but the caregiving journey is often lonely and isolating. In small doses, it can be manageable, but most people do care for another while juggling other responsibilities such as work, ministry, and childrearing. It is easy to find yourself feeling overwhelmed and alone.

But remember God created us to be in relationship with others. If you don’t already have a support system for you and your care recipient, it’s time to make that a priority. The first step to building community is sharing your story, so that is the next step in today’s session.

#### ACTIVITY

Take about three minutes to briefly share your story related to caring for an aging family member or friend. Include the following:

- The person and their relationship to you
- General nature of that person’s need or condition
- Your role in caregiving (informal to intense)
- Opportunities and challenges in the role

#### RESPONSE—30 minutes

##### WHAT CAN THE CHURCH DO?

In response to what was presented, share in pairs or small groups some ideas on how the local church can support caregivers and their care recipients. Below are a few suggestions to help you get started.

- Be aware and create opportunities (e.g., small groups, workshops, classes, etc.) to increase awareness.
- Create space for people to share their stories.

Close this activity with a time of sharing with the entire group and assign a scribe to record the ideas.

#### PAUSE—SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

##### ACTIVITY

**Pick a Picture.** The facilitator will lead the group in a spiritual practice. (Appendix 4)

#### SENDING—15 MINUTES

In pairs or small groups, pray for each other. The group leader will close with a final corporate prayer.



# FACING THE CHALLENGES

## GATHERING—15 MINUTES

After getting refreshments and getting settled, the group will transition into the icebreaker.

## ICEBREAKER QUESTION

In pairs or small groups, take time answering the following question:

- What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you?

## WORD—30 MINUTES

Each week, before we dig into the discussion topic, we will center ourselves in God's Word using a spiritual practice (or [spiritual discipline](#)) called lectio divina.

## ACTIVITY

The group leader will guide you through John 15:4-5 using the lectio divina practice of engaging with Scripture (Appendix 3).

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

—John 15:4-5, NRSV

## THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Difficult conversations are inevitable for caregivers for older adults. Avoiding these conversations won't make the issues go away. However, being better prepared for them increases the chances that the conversation will go well for everyone involved. One way to prepare well is to divide the conversation into three stages: setting up the conversation, during the conversation, and after the conversation.

- 1. Setting up the conversation** includes thinking about your expectations for the outcome and possibly giving your loved one a newspaper or magazine article about the topic and asking their thoughts about the article.
- 2. During the conversation**, be sure to use active

listening, suspend your judgments, and use open-ended questions. You should also choose a location and time that removes as many barriers to listening as possible.

- 3. Last, after the conversation**, review what was said and how. Were there questions raised that need follow-up? Also, check in with your loved one. Now that time has passed, how are they feeling about the conversation? Did new questions or ideas come up for them?

The topics of these difficult conversations usually fall into a few categories, such as medical care, insurance (health, life, home, car, etc.), end-of-life preferences, aging in place, and the financial and legal issues associated with all of these. The good news is that there is much more free information available about these issues than could fit into this small group study! Below is an outline from a 14-item checklist to help you navigate these conversations, whether with the care recipient, family member, or medical and legal professionals.

## How to Prepare for Aging Parents

- 1. Understand health insurance:** Learn the difference between traditional Medicare and a Medicare Advantage Plan. Review the explanation of benefits booklet. Know what Medicare will and won't pay for.
- 2. Become involved in their healthcare:** Start with setting up [advance directives](#) and making sure copies are given to all family members and healthcare providers. Attend doctor's visits if possible and consider being added to your parent's patient portal.
- 3. Learn about diagnoses and medication:** Keep a current list of all medications and what they're for, make note of any allergies to medication, and keep a list of all medical diagnoses and what they mean.
- 4. Assess finances:** Consider meeting with an estate planning attorney to discuss things items such as a [trust](#) and financial [power of attorney](#).

## Questions to Ask Your Aging Parents

- 1. End-of-life care wishes:** Be aware that this conversation may be one of the most difficult and emotional. Remember that your parents' wishes should be respected by everyone. These [questions](#) can be helpful conversation starters.

- 2. Alternatives to aging in place:** Aging in place is not always possible; in-home care may become too difficult or too expensive. Talk with your parents about alternatives and find out their preferences.
- 3. Finances:** This conversation may require the most patience and time. Some questions to consider are: What's your total income? What are your debts? Do you have a [will](#)?

### Preparing for Caring for Aging Parents at Home

- 1. Home modifications and accessibility:** Aging in place requires great attention to safety. Take a good look at what accessibility modifications will be needed to make the home environment safe and assess the cost.
- 2. Home maintenance:** Over time, routine maintenance may become a challenge. Consider how other family members can help and whether some tasks should be hired out.
- 3. Caregiver responsibilities:** Some families [divide](#) caregiving responsibilities between various individuals, others hire outside help, and others do a combination of both.

### Preparing Parents for Other Types of Care

- 1. Assisted living or memory care:** These are two alternatives to aging in place. Assisted living is for those who need more care than the family can provide in the home. Memory care is for those who have dementia. Remember, when possible, you should talk with your parents in advance about their preferences for alternatives to aging in place.
- 2. Other older adult living options:** There are a number of [choices besides assisted living](#), but be mindful that not all options may be available in your parent's community.
- 3. Rehabilitation:** This is a specialized setting for someone who is recovering from an injury or illness. Rehabilitation is temporary, and the goal is always to return the person back home safely.
- 4. In-home care:** This care is provided by paid or unpaid caregivers who assist with activities of daily living and home health care. It is an insurance covered medical service; however, this care requires a doctor's order and is time-limited. This is sometimes not a preferred option because of the cost and loss of privacy for those in the household.

### ACTIVITY

In pairs or small groups, share responses to the following questions:

- What has been your experience with these difficult conversations?
- Which topics are most difficult for you or your care receiver to address?

### RESPONSE—30 minutes

#### WHAT CAN THE CHURCH DO?

In response to what was presented, share in pairs or small groups some ideas on how the local church can support caregivers and their care recipients. Below are a few suggestions to help you get started.

- Host "The Money Story," a Crescendo seminar in cooperation with Covenant Trust that focuses on values and personal habits in handling money/finances.
- Host educational experiences that provide information on related topics such as: nutrition, grief, mental health, end of life issues, navigating insurance issues, understanding medications, having difficult conversations, etc.
- Connect with Covenant Living Communities if there are any in your area. They can offer valuable resources.
- Incorporate these topics into sermons.

Close this activity with a time of sharing with the entire group and assign a scribe to record the ideas.

### PAUSE—SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

#### ACTIVITY

**Breath Prayer.** The facilitator will lead the group in a spiritual practice (Appendix 5).

### SENDING—15 MINUTES

In pairs or small groups, pray for each other. The group leader will close with a final corporate prayer.

# CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER

## GATHERING—15 MINUTES

After getting refreshments and getting settled, the group will transition into the icebreaker.

## ICEBREAKER QUESTION

In pairs or small groups, take time answering the following question:

- What do you wish you had known when you were younger?

## WORD—30 MINUTES

Each week, before we dig into the discussion topic, we will center ourselves in God's Word using a spiritual practice (or [spiritual discipline](#)) called lectio divina.

## ACTIVITY

The group leader will guide you through Matthew 11:28-30 using the lectio divina practice of engaging with Scripture (Appendix 3).

Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

—Matthew 11:28-30, NRSV

## Case Studies

In pairs or small groups, read through the assigned case study (Appendix 2) and respond to the following questions:

- What were some of the needs you identified—whether for the caregiver or care recipient?
- How were these needs addressed?
- What needs were unmet?

## RESPONSE—30 minutes

### WHAT CAN THE CHURCH DO?

In response to what was presented, share in pairs or small groups some ideas on things the local church can do to support caregivers and their care recipients. Below are a few suggestions to help you get started.

- Provide respite, an organized way to give caregivers time away. This could be providing transportation to medical appointments, picking up medications, housekeeping, visitation/reading the Bible to care recipient, etc.
- Serve communion.
- Understand the critical need for community and be more intentional about including caregivers and care recipients in the church community.

Close this activity with a time of sharing with the entire group and assign a scribe to record the ideas.

## PAUSE—SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

### ACTIVITY

**Personal Sanctuary & Finding a Life Rhythm.** The facilitator will lead the group in a spiritual practice (Appendix 6).

## SENDING—15 MINUTES

In pairs or small groups, pray for each other. The group leader will close with a final corporate prayer.





## SO, WHAT NOW?

### GATHERING—15 MINUTES

After getting refreshments and getting settled, the group will transition into the icebreaker.

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

In pairs or small groups, take time answering the following question:

- Who are some of the people to whom you are grateful? Why?

### WORD—30 MINUTES

Each week, before we dig into the discussion topic, we will center ourselves in God's Word using a spiritual practice (or [spiritual discipline](#)) called lectio divina.

### ACTIVITY

The group leader will guide you through Philippians 4:4-7 using the lectio divina practice of engaging with Scripture (Appendix 3).

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:4-7, NRSV

### Going Beyond: Being Transformed

Each caregiver's journey is different, but it is a safe assumption that you sometimes feel like your life is on hold. You may often feel you're just barely surviving. But the Bible tells us that Jesus came so we could do more than survive. He wants us to thrive, to experience an abundant life (John 10:10)! We read in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (NRSV).

How can you do that when bogged down by the day-to-day responsibilities of caregiving, work, ministry, other family responsibilities, etc.? You must be courageous enough to allow your caregiving journey to transform you.

Amy D'Aprix points out that your caregiving experience "is a part of your own life cycle, not a life on hold, but rather, a life flow" (p. 121). King Solomon put it this way: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, NRSV). Instead of continuing to settle into conversations about health and medical issues, D'Aprix encourages caregivers to take a walk down memory lane with your loved one. This helps shift the mood from gloom and doom to joy and gratitude.

One way you can do this is to set aside time to talk about your loved one's favorite memories. Photos, keepsakes, and specific adventures can help focus the conversation. You may choose to invite other family members and friends into this process and write down or record the conversations for those who don't live nearby—and for future generations. Some suggested prompts are:

- What was it like growing up in your hometown?
- What is the best thing that ever happened to you?
- What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you?
- How about the worst thing that ever happened to you?
- What do you wish you had known when you were younger?
- Who are some of the people you're grateful to? Why those people?

It is possible that your loved one is at a point in their illness where they're not able to recall or communicate memories. You may instead focus on going through photo albums and home videos with your loved one and other family and friends. However it looks, the goal is for you to reconnect to joy and gratitude and be transformed by your caregiving journey.

### ACTIVITY

Take a few minutes to reflect. In pairs or small groups, share responses to the following questions:

- What are some possible ways you can reconnect to joy and gratitude?
- What will it look like for you to be transformed by your caregiving journey?

### RESPONSE—30 minutes

#### WHAT CAN THE CHURCH DO?

In response to what was presented, share in pairs or small groups some ideas on things the local church can do to support caregivers and their care recipients. Below are a few suggestions to help you get started.

- Make sure that pastoral care/visitation teams are trained to meet the unique needs of caregivers and care recipients.
- Explore the possibility of a parish nurse program (multiple churches could do this together).
- Connect with Stephen Ministries or Befrienders Worldwide about resources and training.
- Connect with local organizations that provide educational experiences.

Close this activity with a time of sharing with the entire group and assign a scribe to record the ideas.

### WHAT WILL I DO NEXT?

In pairs or small groups, respond to this question:

- What are one or two tangible steps I can take? (Example: If your church doesn't have a Crescendo ministry, consider gathering people who are interested in leading a "care for the caregiver" ministry.)

Close this activity with a time of sharing with the entire group and assign a scribe to record the ideas.

### PAUSE—SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

#### ACTIVITY

**Use a Timeline.** The facilitator will lead the group in a spiritual practice (Appendix 7).

### SENDING—15 MINUTES

In pairs or small groups, pray for each other. The group leader will close with a final corporate prayer.



## APPENDIX 1

### RESOURCE GUIDE FOR LEADERS/FACILITATORS

While instructions for the activities are provided in each session, you may wish to read them aloud and provide any clarifying information. You are also encouraged to adjust based on the needs of your context. ***Please be mindful of the physical and cognitive abilities and needs of participants as you go through the activities, and adjust as needed.***

Prior to participants' arrival, ensure that the meeting space has been set up in a way that accommodates all activities. If feasible for your context, you may wish to have music playing softly as participants get settled.

#### GATHERING (APPROXIMATELY 15 MINUTES)

You may choose to include a time for refreshments during the Gathering or Sending times if this is a practice in your context. Prior to the start of the icebreaker activity, you may wish to open with a time of prayer. To foster community, you may also wish to provide nametags each week.

You may find it helpful to take time at the beginning of each session to briefly review the session contents; this will ensure that participants are oriented and understand the theme for each session.

#### WORD (APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES)

The intro content in this section can be read aloud by you, or you may choose to have different participants read it aloud during each session.

#### RESPONSE (APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES)

The intro content in this section can be read aloud by you, or you may choose to have different participants read it aloud during each session.

You may choose to play music softly during portions of this component.

#### SENDING (APPROXIMATELY 15 MINUTES)

Prior to the final corporate prayer, you may wish to open the floor for a time of prayer requests and praise reports, to contribute to the fostering of community.

#### SUGGESTED TIMING

The times for the session components are based on a 90-minute session. These times may need to be adjusted based on your context, class size, etc. Please feel free to make the adjustments that will be most effective and beneficial for your group.

#### AUDIO/VISUAL CONTENT

Be sure you have the appropriate electronics—including speakers—if you wish to play music or recordings of Bible verses. Please carefully review the list of suggested materials in advance, to ensure that you are prepared for each session.

#### DIGITAL CONTENT

Be sure to check the Crescendo app regularly, as it will be updated with helpful digital resources.



## APPENDIX 2

### CASE STUDIES

**Note:** Four case studies are available here, but you are welcome to reach out to members of your congregation to share their own stories.

#### CAREGIVING FOR A MOTHER

My mother was widowed in 2012. She had a strong desire to age in place in the house where she'd raised my two brothers, my sister, and me. She walked everywhere in the neighborhood because she'd never gotten her driver's license, and she knew all the neighbors.

My sister had lived in another state for more than 30 years. She had had a strained relationship with Mom, but in 2017, she decided to move in to help Mom. A year later, Mom started showing signs of dementia. As she became less physically able, she would only let my sister help her because she was not comfortable with having a male caretaker. This was very stressful for my sister.

Outside help was resisted because of my mom's fears about having a stranger in the house and my sister's sense that she was the one who "should" take care of Mom. Plus, Mom wanted someone Chinese, like herself. But eventually my sister allowed me to schedule someone for a respite visit. Mom decided she liked the helper, even though she wasn't Chinese, and my sister consented. We hired the helper permanently. She was Mom's helper until Mom passed in June 2021 in her own bedroom.

#### CAREGIVING FOR A SPOUSE

My first phase of caregiving included short-term experiences after major surgeries and my spouse's heart attack at age 64. Taking vacation time, working part-time, and having family nearby provided the time needed to tend to his needs.

The second phase emerged when he was diagnosed with untreatable (at that time) form of macular degeneration in both eyes. This caregiving was different

as we were in a new community, 1,500 miles away from family and close friends.

A visit to a low vision clinic helped us learn about "vision aids" available. Kind, compassionate persons helped us see possibilities. We secured helps such as a talking watch, reading machine, dial phone with large numbers, etc. After learning more about his actual peripheral vision, we secured an electric scooter so he could maintain some independence.

A lifeline for me while away at work were two neighbors who checked in with him regularly. Work colleagues and friends helped me also as drivers and even air travel companions when I was not available.

A third phase emerged following a hospital stay of more than a month after a major surgery with more daily task assistance needed. A son came to help with the transition home and initial adjustment. The rehab time was long. A daytime caregiver was hired for three months with added time if I had late meetings. When I was away for several days, one of our sons or a close friend flew to be with my spouse.

A fourth phase included a geographical move to be close to one son as the needs intensified. I worked part-time now but was not alone as caregiver. My son and his family helped. Our other son at a distance researched and recommended helps to assure safety and comfort. Visits from grandchildren brought immense joy. A team of doctors who took time to explain changes was critical.

During the last six months of my husband's life, the caregiving was more intense. Falls led to new safety measures. After a cancer diagnosis, daytime paid caregivers helped with transportation to/from treatments and daily tasks. Our son and his family also helped with caregiving with the 10- and 14-year-old grandsons being his preference. The visits from family and friends made a difference for both of us emotionally. A group text with our sons provided me with needed daily support.

As I've reflected, I realize I didn't even think about being a caregiver during the process. The words of our



vows, “in sickness and health, to death do us part,” and knowing God was with us, often sending human “angels,” made the difference.

### **CAREGIVING FOR AN ELDERLY PARENT**

Our caregiving role began with my husband’s mother about three years after his father died. She was 88 and had decided to give up driving. She was still living in her condo but now needed rides to church, shopping, etc. Many friends helped with this.

Shortly after her 90th birthday, Mom was still socially active. She held Bible study meetings at her condo and attended church and family get togethers. Our oldest daughter took her to lunch once a week and brought her preschooler with her. Nevertheless, Mom felt lonely. At that point, we started looking at retirement communities in earnest. While Dad was still living, they had put a deposit down on a new development close to us, but the size was overwhelming to her. We found a much smaller community and moved her into an independent living apartment within a few months. There, she enjoyed her new circle of friends.

Less than a year later, however, we realized that Mom was not taking her meds correctly. Early signs of dementia were getting stronger at that point, so we looked into hiring help to come in daily to help with her needs. What we found was that with her long-term care insurance policy, it would be less expensive and more helpful to move her to assisted living. Thankfully, the five siblings were all on the same page regarding the kind of care she needed. This was definitely a good decision. As her dementia increased, she was able to get additional care as needed, which was excellent.

She has now been in assisted living for close to three years. While many facilities would probably have moved her to memory care or skilled nursing much sooner, the staff at her residence has bent over backward to keep her in the same apartment. Two months ago, after a week in the hospital, we brought her back and added hospice care. That team has been amazing in their loving care for Mom. She is now entering her last days before going to Jesus. She’s at peace and is comfortable

most of the time. We’re thankful for God’s provision and for his promise of resurrection.

### **CAREGIVING FROM A DISTANCE**

Mom and Dad were in their early 80s when Mom started showing increasing signs of dementia. Dad was determined to provide care for her at home.

The oldest child, a son, lived 1,500 miles away. He, and sometimes his wife, would travel that distance once a month. Having that regularity gave a good glimpse of a slow steady decline. There were two younger siblings, a daughter who had tragically died in a car accident and another son, who was experiencing mental health issues. So the oldest son assumed the role of caregiver.

During the regular visits, a plan began to form and be implemented. The first floor was converted to an essential living space, and conversations were had about other possible housing options. Discussions started about wills, durable power of attorney, insurance, finances, and end-of-life issues. Home health care was initiated. The local church was a huge help as staff and key laypeople called and visited regularly. Playing hymns and singing brought Mom great comfort. Food was greatly appreciated. All of this activity brought encouragement and hope. Neighbors were also contacted, and they alerted the family if things seemed unusual.

Dad’s willingness to be transparent about resources helped a lot. Although initially resisting a move, he began to recognize that he was unable to provide adequate care. When he was able to articulate this, it became possible to arrange a move to a continuing care retirement community. By then, Mom’s dementia had significantly progressed. It became possible for him to move into an independent living apartment while she moved to dementia care on the same campus. That satisfied his need to be present as he could walk over there every day, eat a meal together, and visit with her. He got to the place of being able to unwind and rest. Mom died within two years. As expected, Dad died within five months after that. It took a while, but his last years gave opportunity for care, communication, and community.



## APPENDIX 3

### LECTIO DIVINA (HOLY READING OR PRAYING THE WORD)

Lectio divina is a spiritual discipline in which an individual or group engages in a careful listening of God's Word, then shares a response. Guide your group using the following outline.

#### I. Lectio—Reading God's Word

*What Christ the Word is trying to convey*

- A. One person reads aloud (twice)\*** the passage of Scripture as others are attentive to a segment that is especially meaningful to them. The person reading reads slowly and distinctly with pauses.
- B. Silence** for 1-2 minutes. Each person hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts them.
- C. Sharing aloud** (a word or phrase that has attracted each person). Simply repeat the word/phrase that spoke to you, no need to elaborate. You may wish to jot down the word or phrase in a journal for later reflection.

#### II. Meditatio—Reflecting on God's Word

*How Christ the Word speaks to me*

- A. Second reading** of same passage by another person.
- B. Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
- C. Sharing aloud:** Briefly share what the reading means to you. Use descriptors, such as I hear, I see, I feel, I was struck by.

#### III. Oratio—Responding to God

*What Christ the Word invites me to do*

- A. Third reading** by still another person.
- B. Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "How is God calling me to respond?"
- C. Sharing aloud:** Briefly pray spontaneously, expressing your response to God's call.

#### IV. Contemplatio—Resting in God

*Being with Christ the Word*

- A. Fourth reading** by another person.
- B. Rest in the Word** in silence for 2-3 minutes.
- C. Conclude** with a spoken prayer or the Lord's Prayer.

*\*Note: Your context and group size may require you to make adjustments. Other options for Scripture reading are: the leader can read the passages, or the leader can use a recorded version of the passage, such as through the YouVersion Bible app.*



## APPENDIX 4

### SESSION ONE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: PICK A PICTURE

To help people talk about their life, ask them to pick a picture and share how it reveals where they are spiritually. Here's how to have pictures available:

- Take pictures and print them out for participants to choose from. This works great for three reasons: it's low cost, participants can take the pictures with them, and you can connect the pictures to a theme, if desired.
- Some companies sell packs of pictures for group use. Youth Specialties sells some called "Every Picture Tells a Story."
- Ask participants to choose a picture on their phone. Be mindful with this option because when we open our phones, our photos can take us to a whole other world and we can forget about the people in the room.
- Cut out magazine pictures. Make sure to cut out just images, as titles, articles, and other words can be distractions.

If you think your group needs to warm up to the idea of spiritual conversations, ask each of them to pick a picture that shares how they're feeling in general, not spiritually. Each time you engage this process, add something a little more spiritual in nature to help them get into deeper conversations. Try to choose pictures that will connect with your specific group and in the direction you want the group to go spiritually.

At the beginning of a group's journey together, pictures can give participants a moment to reflect on where they are with God. Consider using pictures to introduce a lesson. Or end a session with them to check in with how people are doing spiritually before everyone departs.

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## APPENDIX 5

### SESSION TWO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: BREATH PRAYER

Breath prayer is a simple, two-phrase prayer that's prayed as you breathe in and out. It is especially helpful for people experiencing deep anxiety. I've taught it to people who have a difficult time falling asleep at night due to racing thoughts and to people who wake up in the middle of the night with racing thoughts. You can create the prayer personally or use an existing one that fits well for you. One ancient and popular breath prayer is the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I use these words regularly as anxiety rises in my soul, letting them wash over me, reminding me that Jesus is on the throne, and he is in control. Once I have the words, I can start breathing deeply and come to a place of calm in my soul.

Lead the participants by saying something like this: "Take a moment to find your own breath prayer. Think of a name for God that has meaning for you. Say that name in your mind as you breathe in. As you exhale, ask God to give you what you need from him or what you need to give up to him. Pray that prayer silently as you breathe out." Focus on the words as you breathe in and out for a minute or two before you lead this practice.

Have participants share their breath prayer with the group as well as how they created it and how it has served them in the last few moments that they've been breathing and praying it.

Ask them to think of the name for God that impacts them. Encourage them to breathe in deeply as they think of this name. Encourage them to breathe out a few short phrases that express what they need from God or need to give to God. Also encourage them to focus on their breathing. Once they have a good breathing pattern, invite them to begin to pray their breath prayer silently, aligning it with their breathing.

Let them know how long you're going to give them to breathe in and out so they can engage with this breath prayer well.

When the time expires, have them slowly say their breath prayer out loud and then say amen.

Debrief by asking the group if they'd like to share their breath prayer and why it has meaning for them.

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## APPENDIX 6

### SESSION THREE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: PERSONAL SANCTUARY AND FINDING A LIFE RHYTHM

#### PREPARATION

You'll need one piece of paper per person and colored pencils, thin markers, or crayons so everyone has a few colors each. Multiple colors unlock the creative side of our brains. If nothing else, choose colored pencils since they work best for all ages.

#### CREATING A SANCTUARY

When everyone has both paper and writing utensils, ask them to work right where they are in the room, or give them permission to create their own space to meet silently with God. Tell them, "As you're alone with God for the next fifteen minutes, try to draw ten ways you connect best with him. These are ways you create your own sanctuary." Ask the group to draw only on one side of the paper. Also remind them that God can translate pictures that no one else may understand, so they shouldn't worry how good the drawing is. They can get in touch with God by drawing however they wish.

If you keep everyone in the room, every five minutes ask a few people to share something they've added to their sanctuary to help other people think of more ideas for themselves.

After about fifteen minutes of giving participants time to draw and meet with God, ask them to share with the group what they drew. Give them permission to add to their drawing as they're listening, especially if they hear something from someone else that they know would be good for them as well.

Once you feel enough people have had space to share, ask specifically if anyone drew any of the spiritual practices you taught them. Give an opportunity to name some practices they didn't draw. Encourage them to add them if they know they would enjoy doing them more often.

#### FINDING A LIFE RHYTHM

After they're done drawing additional practices, ask them to fold their drawing into quarters, folding the paper in half and then in half again.

Give them instructions such as the following: "In one of the quadrants, write the word *daily*. In that quadrant write what you can do in your sanctuary every day or at least four or five days a week—for example, read my Bible, pray, or journal." Give the group a moment to flip the paper over to look at what they drew earlier to find the ways they can connect with God daily.

After about two minutes, have them share some of the ways they can connect with God daily. Again, sharing can help others in the group get more ideas.

Tell them to write the word *weekly* in the next quadrant. Again give them time to flip back and forth to transfer what they drew into the section labeled weekly. Help them find just one or two things they think they could pull off once a week to connect with God.

Tell them to write *monthly* in the next quadrant. At this point, help participants understand why they'd put something in the monthly spot rather than the weekly spot. For example, few of us have time every week to meet a friend for coffee, do an art project, and go to spiritual direction. However, we can pull them all off comfortably each month.

As before, give participants time to pick one or two things they could do to connect with God monthly. This should be something that takes more for them to pull off, like meeting with a friend or doing a woodworking project. Encourage the group to share some of their ideas.

The final quadrant can be labeled *yearly* or *twice a year*. A good example for this is a spiritual retreat, a Christian conference, or a relaxing vacation.

Tell the participants something like this: "After you have each quadrant filled in, circle one thing in each quadrant you're going to try tomorrow, this week, this month, and this year. Narrowing down what you try first will help you not feel like a failure if you didn't do it in your first week. This process is much like starting a new exercise regimen. If you work out too hard the first day or week, you'll be too sore to keep it up."

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## APPENDIX 7

### SESSION FOUR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: USE A TIMELINE

Another way to process life is to draw a timeline and then discuss it with each other. Take a moment to think about your past and your future at the same time. Encourage participants to draw a timeline with the center being *NOW*. The first part is the past, and the other side is the future. Remind participants that none of us can see the future. God encourages us not to worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:34). However, he does say, “Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28). God wants us to reflect on the past so we can move forward in our lives according to his love and purposes.

One day in a Bible study, I was encouraging a group of women to use a timeline, and I suddenly realized how difficult that would be for our blind member. I found some rocks and clay so she could create a timeline as well. Her group came alive, asking her questions about her life and how God was at work in her.

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## APPENDIX 8

### SAMPLE SERMON OUTLINE

**Title: Jesus Wept, and So Can We**

**Texts:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; John 11:32-35; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Matthew 5:4

**Note:** This sermon was originally preached in November, so the closing prayer also addressed the heightened grief that many experience during the holiday season.

#### Part 1: Relationship between Grief and Loss (Versus Death)

- “Grief is a normal response to significant loss.”
- Death is only one type of loss that can cause us to experience grief.
- Other losses that cause grief are divorce, the end of any significant relationship, being relocated, loss of a job, loss of a material item with great monetary or sentimental value, a functional loss due to illness, etc.
- Whether or not you’ve experienced the death of a loved one, we’ve all experienced loss and grief.
- We don’t always do well with handling our own or others’ emotions during times of grief. This message aims to help us grow in this area.

#### Part 2: Normalize the Grieving Process—It’s Okay to Cry/Feel/Emote

- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 has often been interpreted in a way that stifles those who are mourning the loss of a loved one. Stifling our grief isn’t healthy and creates complications. (If you have a personal story of what this looks like, share it here.)
- John 11:32-35 (specifically v. 35) is a biblical example of grieving with hope. Jesus embodies the hope Paul talks about in 1 Thessalonians, but Jesus still took time to grieve his friend’s death.
- You never truly “finish” grieving, grief is more like a spiral.
- A hopeful and helpful tip for grieving is to understand the difference between “moving forward” and “moving on.”
- Stephen Colbert on [grief](#): “It’s a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering. There’s no escaping that.” He goes on to say (paraphrase) that loss helps you become aware of others who have experienced loss, and it connects you with them . . . and helps you love them in a deeper way.
- Colbert’s comments echo the Apostle Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

- Matthew 5:4 says that those who mourn shall be comforted—and that this is a blessing. However, if you stifle your grief, no one knows that you need to be comforted.
- When we personally experience the process the mourning/grieving and being comforted, we better understand how to provide that care to others in a way that helps and doesn’t hurt.

#### Part 3: Practical Tips for Helping Loved Ones Grieve Your Death

- “Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.” We know death is inevitable, but our society works hard to put off the inevitable.
- Consider creating a “When I Die” file that includes things like:
  - A signed (and notarized) advanced directive
  - A will and living trust
  - Life insurance policy information
  - Marriage or divorce certificates
  - Passwords for phone, computer, email, and social media accounts (consider using an online password manager)
  - An ethical will (transfers immaterial things: your life lessons and values)
  - Letters to loved ones
- Consider using a resource like Five Wishes to start having the difficult conversations with your family.
- A note about social media: Let the immediate family take the lead on sharing the news of a loved one’s death.

#### Close: Take Time Now to Mourn and/or Be Comforted by the Spirit

- Encourage people to write down an action step—one thing they will do because of hearing this sermon.
- Remind them that we have a Comforter who wants to walk with us in our grief.
- Give people space to acknowledge any loss or grief they’re dealing with right now. Play a song (live or recorded) and invite them to use that time to talk to God, receive the blessing of being comforted, and remember the feeling so they can comfort others from a place of authenticity.
- Close with a prayer.



## APPENDIX 9

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

#### BOOKS/ARTICLES

AARP Family Caregiving. “Caregiving in the US 2020: A Focused Look at Family Caregivers of Adults Age 50+” <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2021/05/caregiving-in-the-united-states-50-plus.doi.10.26419-2Fppi.00103.022.pdf>

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciples Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*

D'Aprix, Amy S. *From Surviving to Thriving: Transforming Your Caregiving Journey*

Fogg Berry, Kathy. “13 Practical Ways Your Church Can Support Caregivers” <https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/books/counseling/34467-13-practical-ways-your-church-can-support-caregivers.html>

Fogg Berry, Kathy. *When Words Fail: Practical Ministry to People with Dementia and Their Caregivers*

Gaultiere, Bill. “Insights and Applications from the Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard” <http://www.soulshepherding.org/2012/07/spiritual-disciplines-list/>

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*

Johnson, Evelyn and Forsman, Alan. *Crescendo: An Ascent to Vital Living*

MacBeth, Sybil. *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God*

Marxhausen, Kim. *Weary Joy: The Caregiver's Journey*

Mitchell, Kenneth and Anderson, Herbert. *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*

Shiflett, Diana. *Spiritual Practices in Community: Drawing Groups into the Heart of God*

#### PODCASTS

Better Health While Aging <https://betterhealthwhileaging.net/introducing-podcast-how-to-listen/>

#### WEBSITES

Befrienders Worldwide  
<https://www.befrienders.org/>

Better Health While Aging  
<https://betterhealthwhileaging.net/>

Cake  
<https://www.joincake.com/>

Five Wishes  
<https://www.fivewishes.org/for-myself/>

Stephen Ministries  
<https://www.stephenministries.org/default.cfm>

Your Aging Parents  
<https://youragingparents.ca/>



The Evangelical Covenant Church

[covchurch.org](http://covchurch.org)