

## **The Ins and Outs of Hospital Visits – David P. Gallagher, D.Min.**

Perhaps nothing you do in your ministry is more important than personal contact with the people of your church. While this can throw you into uncomfortable situations, it's also where you can make the most difference in people's lives – so follow these suggestions when you visit people in the hospital and other caregiving facilities.

**Check your attitude, feelings, and emotions.** Conduct a quick spiritual-attitude check before you enter a patient's room. Pause in your car before entering the hospital, or stop in the hospital chapel for a brief time of prayer before making the visit.

**Make the visit comfortable.** Enter the room with a warm smile and a friendly greeting. Say a few words of encouragement, but be careful not to give medical advice. Even simple phrases such as "It will all work out" or "You'll be feeling better in no time" may not be true. While you want to show genuine concern for the individual, focus on conversation that you'd have if the individual weren't in the hospital. Be natural.

**Don't stay too long.** But don't make it seem that you're rushing away, either. Aim to stay for about 15 to 20 minutes.

**Be sensitive.** Try to read a patient's attitude, feelings, emotions, and physical comfort. Even if you've spent an hour driving to visit a patient, make sure he or she is up for a visit, and offer to return later if that would be better.

**Meet spiritual needs.** Of course, your role is a spiritual provider. You offer spiritual strength and encouragement to people in need.

Be sure to be sensitive to the spiritual needs of those you're visiting.

**Accept the person as he or she is.** Use "reflective listening." Reflect back what you hear the person saying or what you sense. For example, "It sounds like you're feeling discouraged today," and then follow up with a word of encouragement. Accept the patient's feelings and attitude.

**Respect the patient.** Always be positive even when it's difficult. You may not appreciate what you hear, but respect each patient's feelings.

**Encourage the patient.** Reading Scripture, speaking a few words of encouragement, and praying for the patient are the best encouragement you can provide.

However, always ask the patient's permission to read Scripture or pray, and honor the individual's response. It's sometimes a good option to pray at the beginning of a visit if you sense a particular patient might be more relaxed once prayer is out of the way.

**Be respectful before surgery.** When someone is hospitalized for surgery, nurses typically have a lot of questions for the patient. When you arrive, check in with the nurses' station, identify yourself as the patient's pastor, and ask if you may visit the patient. If a nurse needs to ask the patient questions, simply excuse yourself and return after the nurse leaves. Respect the patient's privacy.

## **10 Things NOT to do when making hospital visits:**

**Don't disobey posted signs.** For example, if a sign says "no visitors," check with the nurses' station.

**Don't forget your role.** Remember that you're the pastor, not a family member, and you need to stay in that role.

**Don't serve the Lord's Supper without permission from the patient's nurse.** In some situations you could cause serious problems by giving even a small amount of food or drink.

**Don't be negative.** Sometimes that's difficult, but with God's help you can be positive in all situations.

**Don't be the focus of conversation.** Talk about the patient and his or her needs. Don't compare your past experiences with whatever surgery or illness the patient is experiencing.

**Don't try to out-talk the person.** Instead, ask questions to draw out the patient.

**Don't talk constantly.** Some silence is fine. If the patient seems tired, offer to pray.

When you leave, you can add, "I'll stop back and see you [day]."

**Don't compare the patient's situation with others' or offer solutions.** Remember you're not a nurse, doctor, psychologist, or social worker.

**Don't try to organize the person.** Remember, you're not a financial planner, time manager, lawyer, or family member.

**Don't be unnatural.** You don't have to pretend to be any more "super-spiritual" than you naturally are. Just be yourself."

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## **Resources**

### **Books**

*Senior Adult Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Step by Step Strategies for Reaching People Over 50* (Wipf & Stock) by David P. Gallagher

*Healing Takes Time*, (Liturgical Press) by David P. Gallagher

*Pastoral Care in Hospitals* (Morehouse Publishing) by Neville A. Kirkwood

*Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, (Fortress Press) by Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver

*The Gift of Significance*, (In-Sight Books, Inc.) by Doug Manning

*Light for my Path Prayers & Promises*, (Humble Creek Barbour Publishing, Inc.)

*Baby Boomer's Guide to Nursing Home Care*, (Taylor Trade Publishing) by Eric M. Carlson and Katharine Hsiao

*Christian Caregiving a Way of Life*, (Augsburg Publishing House) by Kenneth Haugk

*How Can I Live with My Loss?* (RBC Ministries)

*I Will Trust God* (Kairos) by Paul F. Keller

*What to do When a Loved One Dies* (Dickens Press) by Eva Shaw

*At the Heart of Alzheimer's* (Manor Healthcare Corp) by Carol Simpson

*Losses in Later Life* (The Haworth Pastoral Press) by Scott R. Sullender

*Good Grief* (Fortress Press) by Granger Westberg

*Ministering to the Mourning* (Moody Publishers) by Warren Wiersbe

### **Additional Resources**

*CareNotes*, St. Meinard, IN: Abbey Press (A complete series of helpful booklets)

Dignity Memorial: Picking up the Pieces, Series of booklets and CD's, particularly the booklet and CD *Someone You Love is Dying, How do you Cope?*

*Feeling the Good in Grief*, American Tract Society: ©1992

For a discussion about the stages of grief, see any of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' books; for example, *Death: The Final Stages of Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, ©1986) or *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, ©1981) or *Living with Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner Classics, ©1977. These works are available in various editions and reprints.

GriefShare, [www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org)

*Journeying Through Grief*, A set of four short books to send to grieving people throughout the first year after their loss, Stephen Ministries, St. Louis, Missouri Memorial Bible in a cedar chest, Ambassador Services Associates, P.O. Box 269, 1617 South York Road, Gastonia, North Carolina 82052. 1.800.576.8626; Fax: 1.704.861.1085

Outreach Magazine:

[http://www.outreachmagazine.com/current\\_issue/Jan\\_Feb/passion.html](http://www.outreachmagazine.com/current_issue/Jan_Feb/passion.html)

Purpose Driven: <http://www.purposedriven.com/>

*Scriptographic Booklets*, Channing L. Bete Co., Inc.: ©1976

Stephen Ministries, 2045 Innerbelt Business Center Dr. St. Louis, Missouri 63114-5765,

Phone: (314) 428-2600, Fax: (314) 428-7888

Willow Creek Association, Resources and support for churches:

[www.willowcreek.org/wca](http://www.willowcreek.org/wca)

## **Web**

Gocasa.org – The Christian Association Serving Adults (CASA)

<http://amyhanson.org/intergenerational-ministry/bridging-the-generational-divide/> Amy

Hanson blog

<http://www.churchgrowth.net/> Church Growth, Inc., New Senior Study Center, Charles

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## **Conferences**

LifeServe National Conference 2011, September 26-29, 2011, Louisville, KY  
(<http://lifeserve.group.com/>) Half-Track A: "Involving the 50+ Adults in Ministry" Dave Gallagher

- Energizing Seniors for Serving
- Involving the 50+ Generation in Ministry
- Prerequisites That Will Make or Break an Effective Adult Ministry

The CASA Network International 50+ Ministry Leadership Conference  
(<http://gocasa.org/>) INFLUENCING THE GENERATIONS! ILC-Anaheim on November 9-11, 2011 All events at the Doubletree Hotel Anaheim Orange County, Orange California USA. *Experience three transforming days at The CASA Network International Leadership Conference!*

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