



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

The Practice of Care

Discipleship Through Respite Care

WRITTEN BY

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INTRODUCTION

Respite Care

As congregations and leaders in United Methodist churches catch their breath after a season of unrest and division, they are looking for ways to focus on love and spark joy in their mission to reach the least, the last, and the lost. Churches may have fewer resources and participants and some trepidation about planning for the future. Even so, churches want to ensure that making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world remains the supported mission.

A study led by Bishop Lawson Bryan and Dr. John Bell illustrates how local churches can pivot toward a future of hope and vitality during this time of reflection and rebuilding.

Their focus is on the Respite Ministry of First United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Twelve years ago, this congregation asked, “What needs to happen in this community that will not happen unless a church does it?” Church leaders asked the mayor, the city council, the county commission, educators, social service providers, and other community agencies, “What keeps you up at night? What have you longed for but not been able to achieve?” From the long list of answers, the church looked for those that seemed to fit the ministry gifts and passions

of the congregation. One response that resonated with the congregation was, “Something for people living with dementia and their families.”

While praying about this, Bishop Lawson Bryan, then senior minister of First United Methodist Church, Montgomery, received a phone call from Daphne Johnston, a church member. She said, “I see the vision.” Her academic background in gerontology and her fifteen years of experience as an administrator of senior living centers equipped her to recognize the vision that God was giving the church.

Bishop Bryan asked the church trustees for funding so Daphne could spend a year studying what was needed in dementia care. By the end of that year, Daphne had developed the basic model of what would become the church’s respite ministry.

Respite care is highly effective in ministering to those living with dementia and their families. Medical researchers, the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America, and community leaders recognize the need for respite care.

The research project, “Assessing Personal Spiritual Growth Among Respite Volunteers using a Biblical/Theological Lens,” looked at the impact of respite ministry on those who volunteered over an extended period.

Twelve long-term Respite Ministry volunteers were selected to participate in the study, and they met each week for six weeks for prayer, Bible study, and personal reflection. The group acted as a Wesleyan covenant group. Their meetings were reminiscent of the early Methodist movement gatherings designed to form Christian disciples.

Research Results

“God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven’t crossed the mind of any human being.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 2:9 (CEB)

God Will Surprise Us

For twelve years, members of First United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama (FUMC) have expressed their discipleship by volunteering at Respite Ministry, a ministry for those living with dementia and their caregivers. The ministry, referred to initially as the “Respite Program,” has become a national model. The initial concept was for volunteers to care for those living with dementia so that their caregivers could have four hours per day, four days per week, for themselves. While the person with dementia was at the church involved in activities, the caregivers could rest, run errands, or keep their own doctors’ appointments. The program was a God-send. Caregivers expressed relief at having time for themselves. They talked about being more patient, understanding, and kinder to their loved ones because Respite had given them much-needed time to rest.

As Respite Ministry leaders interacted with caregivers, they realized that caregivers needed more than time. They had questions and needed access to better ways of supporting their family members. A support group for caregivers began meeting monthly during the respite ministry time to answer questions, share what works, and socialize with other caregivers. Experts, physicians, and other resource people attended these support-group meetings. Respite was doing what it was intended to do.

By any measure, the church was answering, “What needs to happen in this community that will not happen unless the church does it?” But God was about to reveal more.

God’s First Surprise

God’s first surprise came when what began as “a program” to meet a need in the community became a local phenomenon. Blessings of financial and volunteer support poured in from many sources. Certainly, members of FUMC, especially those immediately affected, were generous in their support of respite care. Then, churches throughout the city began sending volunteers and participants to Respite. “The Respite program” quickly became a multid denominational respite ministry within FUMC. Volunteers came from the local Jewish Temple, Episcopal churches, Baptist churches, AME churches, and other denominations. Respite dissolved barriers, real and imagined, and brought people of all faiths and races together at First United Methodist Church, Montgomery.

God's Second Surprise

God revealed a second surprise when doctors at the University of Alabama Medical School in Birmingham (UAB) began seeing improvement in memory scores and cognitive abilities of their patients from Montgomery. UAB physicians wanted to know why this was happening. Soon, UAB physicians visited Respite to see what had made this difference. What a wonderful surprise to learn that Respite was about more than giving much-needed rest to caregivers! Respite was improving the lives of those living with dementia. By increasing their time in social settings, creating opportunities for dialogue either heard or spoken, and giving them a reason to get up, get dressed, and come to be with others, Respite was making a medical difference. Isolation, often a part of living with dementia, was lessened at Respite each day. As a result, some participants showed cognitive improvement.

After twelve years, it is apparent that the respite ministry is making significant differences for those living with dementia and for their caregivers.

The Respite Ministry Triangle represents the three primary groups involved in respite care. At the apex of the triangle are *friends living with dementia*. They are the focus of each day's programming and activities. Daily socialization has made a significant difference in their lives. *Caregivers*, represented on the left side of the base of the triangle, were the target group in the original idea of Respite. As the name implies, this group needed respite from the daily challenges of caregiving. The respite ministry has been truly life-changing for this group.

**Friends Living
with Dementia**

**Respite
Ministry
Model**

Caregivers

Volunteers
(FOCUS OF THIS STUDY)

The third group, represented on the right side of the triangle base, is made up of volunteers.

God's Third Surprise: The Ah-Ha! Moment

Until 2024, little was known about respite's impact on volunteers. To look at the effects of volunteering on those who logged hundreds of hours, Bishop Lawson Bryan and Dr. John Bell selected twelve long-time respite volunteers to participate in a six-week study of Bishop Ken Carder's book, *Ministry with the Forgotten*. Each week, the group

met for one and one-half hours to discuss the book, talk about assigned discussion questions, and express what volunteering at Respite meant to them. Through this process, God revealed perhaps his biggest surprise about Respite — the ah-ha! moment.

Discipleship is a foundational aspect of the Christian faith, encompassing spiritual growth, mentorship, and community within the church. A church committed to discipleship intentionally fosters spiritual maturity among its members. As individuals engage in regular teaching, study, and application of scripture, they develop a deeper understanding of their faith and want to make a difference in the church, community, and world. As Bishop Ken Carder reminds us:

The Book of Discipline states: "We hold that the wonder of God's acceptance and pardon do not end God's saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor." If prevenient grace is the porch of the house of grace and justifying grace is the doorway, *sanctifying grace* represents the rooms in the expansive dwelling of God's presence with and purposes for humanity. (Kenneth L. Carder, "A Wesleyan Understanding of Grace," United Methodism, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/a-wesleyan-understanding-of-grace>)

Each session of the six-week book study was recorded to capture what participants said about their experience as respite volunteers. The church wanted to know if volunteers' experiences had changed them, especially related to discipleship. Were the volunteers experiencing

sanctifying grace as they assisted their friends living with dementia? Were they developing a deeper understanding of their faith? Some of the most meaningful qualitative responses follow:

Collected Over the Six-Week Course:

- Respite is immediate – I regularly see the difference Respite makes in those living with dementia.
- We do not think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking. Respite is living a process of change.
- Respite has freed me from smothering self-reliance, too much focus on detail, and inflexible thinking. I am a more flexible servant.
- Respite has taught me to be in the moment, to appreciate small gifts, and to be open to the unexpected. That is where God is.
- God speaks in the unexpected, unconventional, and unplanned moments at Respite. Volunteers learn to watch and listen for these moments.
- As a respite volunteer, I have learned radical patience, to listen and make sure I understand what the friend with dementia is asking me to do or what they are trying to do. I am more attuned to others.
- I was hesitant to volunteer, as I thought I would leave depressed and sad as I did when my mother-in-law had dementia for years and had no interaction with anyone most days. However, I learned that I receive so much joy as a volunteer. I leave Respite now with a full heart and

thanksgiving to God for the opportunity to be with all of his children. My day at Respite is the highlight of my week.

- The connections I have made at Respite in six years have been life-changing. Every time I enter the room, I am confident that “surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.”
- Respite is inclusive of religious affiliation, race, gender, personal and professional background. As volunteers, we quickly realize that all friends living with dementia are facing similar challenges, and the usual traits on which discrimination is rapidly based fade to insignificance. Without society’s prejudices, a volunteer quickly learns to focus on each participant’s shared humanity with love and compassion. Respite is a transformational process.
- I see theology lived every day at Respite through gentle touch, genuine smiles, the holding of hands, and love felt by everyone that can only be through God.
- It's become apparent that God is known and experienced beyond our intellect as I observed people’s “body memory” as they sang hymns and took Communion. God is in every cell of our body, not just our brains.
- I first thought that I was at Respite to “take care” of our friends living with dementia. It dawned on me very quickly that we all are at Respite to share a community of love and hope as we care for one another.
- When I retired, I began studying theology. I started to study the footsteps of Jesus rather than following them. Respite reoriented my faith from passive to active. Respite has added more joy and purpose to my life.

- Volunteering at Respite has made me aware of the needs of others. Christ has called me to serve the least, the last, and the lost, not simply to write a check.

As participants thought about their volunteer efforts at Respite, they often became emotional as they relived some joyful, poignant, or particularly moving experience. Part of the focus of data retrieval was to capture words or phrases that were repeated or used most often during the six weeks. Below is a word wall that captures those words or phrases. The larger the words on the word wall, the more times they were used during the class or in written responses. *Unconditional love* was by far the phrase most used to describe volunteer experiences. *Being the hands and feet of Christ, friends, ministry, heart, inclusion, God, patience, empathy, theology, joy, happiness, and compassion* were heard many times. Participants loved seeing this visual expression of their conversations.

Quantitative Data

An instrument was designed to collect before and after data from volunteers to further understand the impact of volunteering at Respite. The instrument asked volunteers to select a number that best represented their understanding, comfort, ability, or some other attribute before and after volunteering at Respite. Each statement on the instrument **1** represented the lowest, and **10** represented the highest. The graphs on pages 15–17 show the before Respite score in dark gray and the after volunteering at Respite score in light gray. The response statements are at the base of each graph.

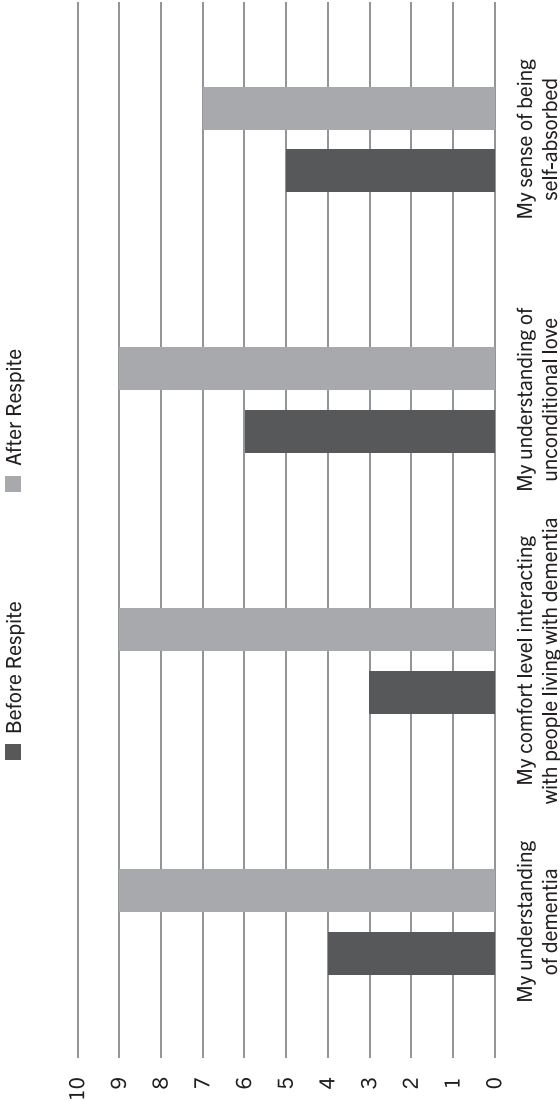
Another instrument was designed to collect “before and after” data from volunteers. Volunteers were asked to select a number that best represented their understanding, comfort, ability, or some other attribute before and after volunteering at Respite. For each statement, **1** represented the lowest, and **10** represented the highest. The graphs on pages 15–17 show the “before Respite score” in dark gray; the “after volunteering at Respite score is in light gray. The response statements are at the base of each graph.

The Ah-Ha! Moment!

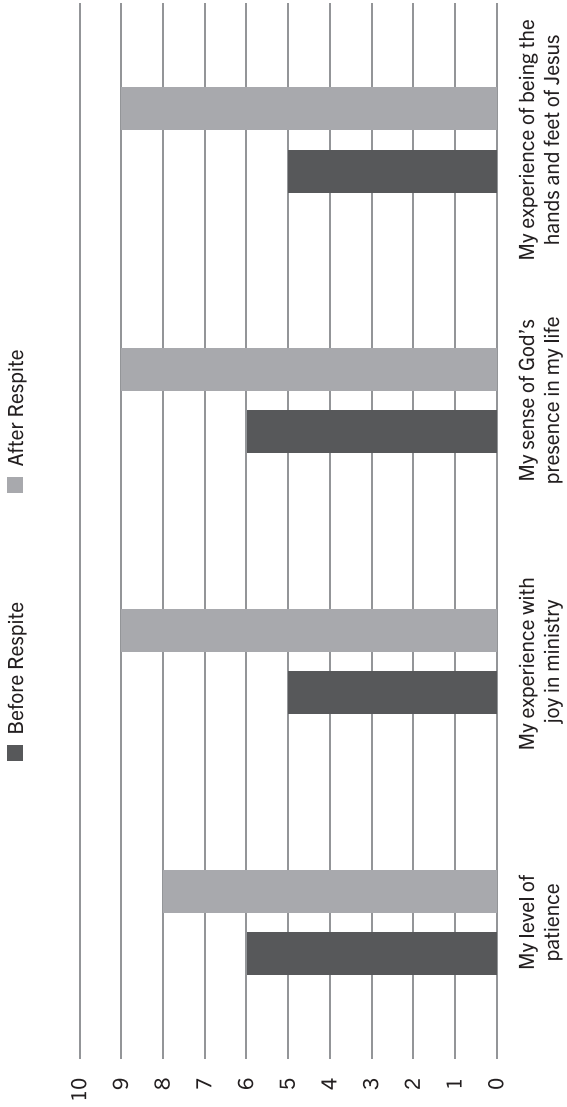
As Bishop Bryan and John Bell reviewed these data, they realized that study participants were describing the fruit of the Spirit as they talked about being transformed by their Respite experiences. They spoke about traits the Bible uses in Galatians 5: 22–23 to describe a disciple of Jesus Christ. Over time, those who volunteer at Respite are burnished by their experience and become more effective disciples of Jesus Christ.

Respite is a development zone for the fruit of the Spirit. Volunteers express and deepen love through their service in respite by serving people during some of life’s most trying times. They find joy in the positive outlook they see despite struggles and disappointment. In dealing with dementia’s unsettling and often challenging situations, volunteers learn to cultivate peace that God, even in the most difficult times, is ever-present. Every hour during Respite, volunteers witness and practice the patience necessary to work with those who take longer to accomplish simple tasks. These situations can be frustrating but must be dealt with gently, patiently, and lovingly. Kindness and goodness fill the Respite space each

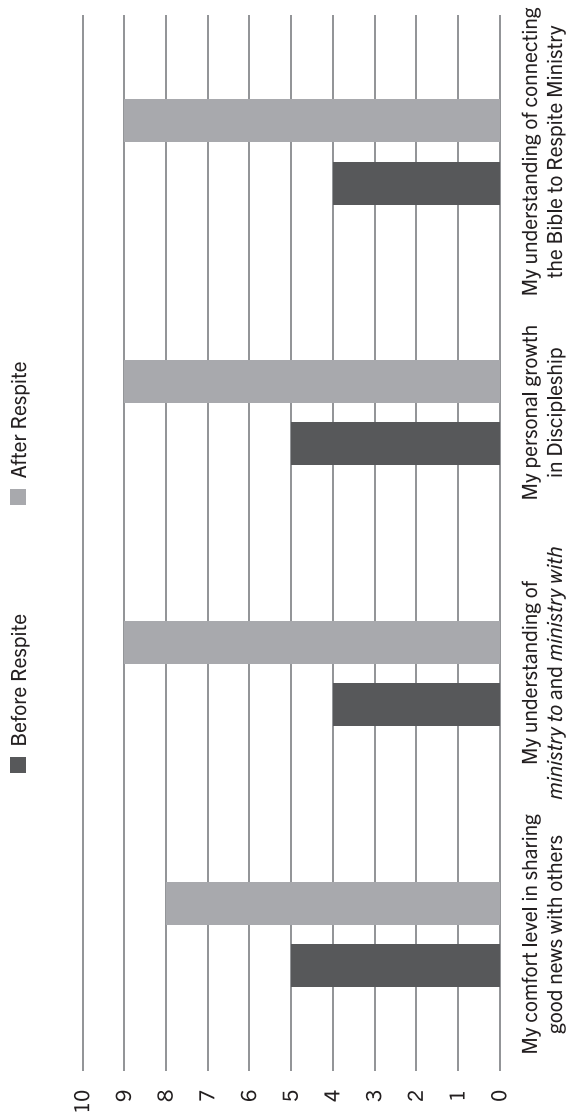
Respite Volunteer Impact on Discipleship



Respite Volunteer Impact on Discipleship



Respite Volunteer Impact on Discipleship



day, even in the face of the knowledge that ultimately, the disease will win over the human mind and body, but never over God's presence and plan for us all. There is great peace that comes with this knowledge. Respite volunteers are loyal to the ministry because they see God at work each day. These volunteers work, day after day, year after year, because they know they are making a difference for those they help and, perhaps even more importantly, because they recognize the difference occurring in themselves. They are becoming stronger disciples of Jesus Christ.

Respite exists to serve those living with dementia and their brave caregivers. However, we know that friends with dementia leave the Respite Ministry at some point in their journey, and their caregivers do as well (although some become volunteers). Volunteers continue day after day to work in the Respite Ministry, burnished by their experiences and God's revelation about what it truly means to be a disciple. Volunteers made it clear through their six-week class conversations that the Respite Ministry is a disciple-forming ministry. It fulfills an ever-increasing need in the community to support those living with dementia and their caregivers, and it is a ministry that enables volunteers to strengthen the fruit of the spirit. At the same time, they serve and grow in their discipleship. What an "ah-ha!" moment God revealed. As the new Respite Triangle illustrates, volunteers in the FUMC Respite Ministry are transformed into better, more dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Friends Living
with Dementia**

**Respite
Ministry
Model**

Caregivers

Disciples

CONCLUSION

Implications for Ministry

While the landscape of the United Methodist church may have changed in recent months, the mission has not: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The church can accomplish this mission by answering, “What needs to happen in this community that will not happen unless a church does it?”

Dementia is a profound and increasingly prevalent issue in the United States. With the projection that incidences of dementia will triple in the United States by 2060, the need for churches to aid those living with dementia and their caregivers increases each year. The need is great; in many communities, support will not be provided unless the church provides it. There is now a model for organizing, funding, equipping, and supporting a respite ministry in your church. **The Respite for All Foundation** (Respite for All Foundation P.O. Box 6178, Montgomery, AL 36106 Daphne@RespiteForAll.org) can provide the answers to starting a respite ministry.

This research project helped us see that what looks like a community outreach ministry can be a means of God’s grace in the lives of the volunteers and those directly served by the ministry.

Respite volunteers are an engine of spiritual vitality in the local church. They welcome the opportunity to reflect on their experience and identify their growth in discipleship. Bishop Carder's *Ministry with the Forgotten* deepens volunteers' awareness by giving them a biblical/theological lens to view their experience.

This project benefits the directors of respite ministries by expanding their understanding of how they can support the continued growth of their long-term volunteers. Directors will find that volunteers will embrace the invitation to reflect more deeply on their respite experience as a means of God's grace in their lives.

Evangelism has a place in this ministry. Respite Ministry draws people to Christ and to the church as they move from isolation to community. Respite Ministry teaches us that living the Great Commandment can fulfill the Great Commission.

One of the most prominent aspects of Respite Ministry is the way the volunteers witness to others about what the ministry means to them. Friends of respite volunteers often say, "They just can't stop talking about it." Respite volunteers are joyful witnesses without any prompting at all. What do they have to teach us about faith sharing?

As the research in this article indicates, respite ministry benefits those living with dementia and their caregivers, and respite ministry volunteers become stronger disciples. Through respite ministry, the church provides a much-needed service and builds stronger disciples for Jesus Christ. How much more of a win-win ministry can there be?

Questions for Reflection

Congregational Reflection

1. What two or three needs in our community is our church uniquely positioned to address?
2. How could we adapt elements of the Respite Ministry model, such as its approach to volunteer support and spiritual growth, to address the needs we've identified in our community?
3. What are three service opportunities we could offer in the next quarter?
4. How can we design our community outreach programs to foster spiritual growth and discipleship in our volunteers?
5. What are two or three actions we can take in the next month to connect service with discipleship in our church? Who will take responsibility for each action?

Individual Reflection

1. What is one thing in your community that “will not get one unless the church does it”?
2. What resources (financial, volunteer, or partnerships) could your church use to address an unmet need in your community?
3. What insights can be learned from the Respite Ministry model?
4. How does the Respite Ministry model exemplify the United Methodist understanding of discipleship and sanctification?
5. In what ways does the fruit of the Spirit manifest in your congregation’s ministries?
6. Reflect on the statement: “We do not think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking.” How can this principle shape your church’s ministries?
7. How might opportunities for acts of service deepen individual discipleship within your congregation? How might connecting discipleship growth with volunteer or ministry opportunities in your church inspire more church members toward action that will help them experience God’s grace more deeply?
8. What are your next action steps? To whom do you need to talk next?

Resources

- Carder, Bishop Kenneth L. *Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia Through a Spiritual Lens*. (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 2019)
- Johnston, Daphne. *Reclaiming Joy Together*. (Montgomery, AL: BookDesignTemplates.com, 2020)
- “Ministering with Families Facing Dementia,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/ministering-with-families-facing-dementia>
- Older Adult Ministries – Discipleship Ministries: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/equipping-leaders/older-adults>
- Discipleship as Care – Discipleship Ministries: <https://store.umcdiscipleship.org/product/discipleship-as-care>

Notes

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