In an age that has come to realize the interconnectedness of all life forms, it has become apparent to many that the presence of a canine companion makes a difference in how meaningful a visit to a loved one can be. It can scarcely be doubted that dogs have found their way into the nooks and crannies of family life and that, in the United States, dogs are in many instances treated as a member of the family. Therefore, it is natural for those who have sought comfort and care from their dogs in the past to respond positively to anyone who brings a canine companion with them for a visit.

As one ages and begins to call a nursing home “home,” it becomes a challenge to have even a few interactions with a beloved canine companion because many care facilities do not allow animals to visit, much less stay for any length of time. Many patients/residents/clients often feel a sense of loss that is eased, at least for a moment, if they see someone whom they trust with their spiritual care, bringing a furry, tail-wagging partner with a cold nose and four paws to them for a spiritual-care or pastoral-care visit. It seems that dogs make things better when they come.

As with any endeavor, there are both benefits and risks associated with permitting animals entrance into a
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healthcare facility. Many of the risks become immediately apparent (biting, allergies) when the discussion turns to the admission of a dog as a four-footed minister who works alongside a chaplain or spiritual/pastoral-care provider. Many of the potential risks are hidden, but could prove to have far-reaching ramifications unless these risks are anticipated and procedures put in place to minimize them.

The following discussion will present the case for the implementation of a comprehensive program for dog ministry. The program was developed over the course of a nine-month study at Maryville Nursing Home, Beaverton, Oregon. The resulting program, the Four-Footed Ministers Pastoral-Care Program, goes a long way to meet the possible objections of administrators and the infection-control department that might be raised when the topic of dog ministry is investigated.

IS A PROGRAM NECESSARY?

One of the first objections often presented is encapsulated in the question of the necessity of a program in the first place. Many chaplains and spiritual/pastoral-care providers already do incorporate their dogs into their ministry in their workplace because they realize that there is an ease of connection with a patient/resident/client when facilitated by the dog; this has been preliminarily demonstrated by research in the field (see Felton, 2012 for resources). Most dogs seem to be naturally drawn to human beings and humans seem to naturally gravitate to dogs. So a spiritual/pastoral-care provider might ask, “If it is working, why do we need a program?”

Unfortunately, both administration and infection control are the first departments to question these casual dog interactions. Administration and infection-control departments often are forced to take a hard look at the reality of the societal climate where liability, defined procedures and safety issues are paramount. Moreover, unless a program is in place, the issue of continuation of dog visitations could be jeopardized if an individual chaplain should move on to other employment. Unless a written policy is presented along with the proposal for dog ministry, a chaplain/director of spiritual/pastoral services can meet with stiff resistance to the admission of dog-teams doing spiritual/pastoral care.

It is here where the program developed at Maryville Nursing Home will be instrumental in pointing a way to using dogs in ministry. This program was built on the time-tested protocols for safe interactions developed by Pet Partners, a non-profit organization that fosters research into the animal-human bond (Delta Society, 2008). These Pet Partners’ written protocols require that dog teams become registered through a series of exams that test for aptitude and skills, ensuring that a team can operate at the highest level of safety with all parties concerned. This registration, renewable every two years, is required by all dog teams working in the Four-Footed Ministers Pastoral-Care Program at Maryville. The teams come to the facility already trained and evaluated, their credentials having been issued by an independent organization.

Moreover, the issue of liability for the facility is lessened because volunteer dog teams are covered by a general liability insurance policy when volunteering. Because volunteer spiritual and pastoral-care providers are equipped with knowledge of proper procedures of both Pet Partners and the facility’s written protocols for dog ministry and are covered by a general liability insurance policy, administration and infection control workers can feel confident that the facility has done its best to ensure safe and fruitful interactions, preliminarily demonstrated as beneficial (Felton, 2012).

WE’VE GONE TO VIRTUAL PETS—ARE REAL DOGS NECESSARY?

As facilities discover benefits of using virtual tools, administrators might further question the admission of dog teams, even volunteer, registered dog teams. In a fascinating study on the effects of the use of video on elder volunteers, Dr. Deborah L. Wells discovered that elders who had viewed animals on video tape exhibited the same calming effects measured in their cardiovascular system as those who had interacted with live animals (Wells 2005). While the use of virtual pets can benefit those whose medical condition would prohibit interaction with live animals, the Maryville study confirmed that it was interactions with live dogs that facilitated community and helped to alleviate isolation.
In the Maryville study, it became apparent that when the dogs (two, Four-Footed Ministers) entered the building, they immediately became the center of attention for eager elders and their family members who were excited to interact with them. Throughout the study, the individuals would seek to touch or otherwise interact with the dogs, often moving beyond the human component of the team directly to the dogs. Some individuals were happy to sit back and just look at the two dogs. The dogs constantly drew a crowd as soon as they came into the building (Felton, 2012).

In another instance, the researcher’s dog occasioned a lively interaction among a study’s resident volunteer and repair persons, as the following illustrates:

[The researcher and her dog, Alya, were on their rounds and found that] Deborah was in her room and was wearing a tiara emblazoned with “2011.” She was in a very festive mood, anticipating the New Year’s Eve party that would be taking place on the following afternoon. As there were repairs being done in her part of the facility, there were several workmen moving about. They gravitated to Alya, who [had been and] continued to lick Deborah’s hand as we talked. Deborah mentioned that Alya “could not hold her licker.” One of the workmen responded that she must not have her “licker license.” We all got a great laugh out of that.3 This dog-ministry visit had provided Deborah with another chance to showcase her great sense of humor (Felton, 2012).

Therefore, it appeared that the interactions with live dogs, even those encounters that happened only once a week, were more effective spiritual/pastoral-care interventions because of the social-lubrication function that live dogs generate when they interact with people.

AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE OF RESISTANCE: SPIRITUAL/PASTORAL-CARE PROVIDERS

It appears that the most surprising objection to dog ministry seems to originate from within the circles of spiritual/pastoral-care providers. Throughout the long history of the Roman Catholic Church, service to the people of God has always assumed that true ministry (service) flows from one human person to another human person (USCCB, 2005). Perhaps because of the long history of the philosophical and theological effort to separate “the animal” from “the human” based on Scripture and philosophical thought (see the full discussion of this topic in Felton, 2012), the integration of dogs into spiritual/pastoral care seems to be an intrusion that has not been considered acceptable. The researcher contends that this unwritten warrant continues to exert its influence today despite the movement in philosophical and theological circles to have a more holistic view of creation.

Various theological camps within the greater Christian community have taken up the challenge to formulate another paradigm for the place of creation in God’s plan of salvation. Given the experience of the global crises that have occurred in the recent past such as climate change, increasing rate of extinction of species, and destruction of the natural world, the philosophical and theological perspectives of the past that worked so well are not adequate for the world we live in today. Therefore, the question of the integration of dogs into ministry so as to provide a more holistic form of spiritual/pastoral care can be viewed as an area where the movement of the Holy Spirit is evident, renewing the face of the earth (USCCB, 2005).

Apart from the discussion of dog ministry as a spiritual/pastoral-care intervention that reveals the work of the Spirit, there are the benefits that have already resulted from interactions with dogs in ministry, as evidenced from the stories of the long-term care resident volunteers who participated in the Maryville study. Here is an example of one of the many stories that reflects how important dogs were in the life of a resident-volunteer whose love of dogs was truly uplifting:

The issue of pet loss is the theme that runs through Dinah’s story. Dinah was a relatively young woman who had to give away one of her beloved dogs because she could only take one dog with her to Maryville. As it turned out, when she began to decline, the care of the dog fell to staff. It was then that the dog was adopted by a staff member. As a hospice patient, she wanted to participate in the study because, she said, it would give her a reason to live. In the initial interview, she related how her dogs gave her love and kisses when she got her terminal diagnosis that required

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her to move to Maryville. She remembered how they knew that something was wrong with their "mom" and they "licked away the tears" from her eyes."

As time progressed, she seemed to enjoy the visits with the FFM [Four-Footed Minister] dogs and was always happy to see them. We, [the researcher and her ministry volunteer], were there for her and we always prayed with her, giving her a blessing as we were about to leave. Though she had times throughout that year when she rallied physically, the strain of not having a dog of her own began to weigh heavily on her. With outside help, she moved out of Maryville at the end of 2010 to a location where she could have a 'dog of her own' (Felton, 2012).

CONCLUSION: FROM A BEGINNING TO . . . ?

The Four-Footed Ministers Pastoral-Care Program is in its infancy, but from its inception it focused on issues of safety, liability, and sustainability through written protocols. From the beginning of the discussions with administration before the study began at Maryville, it was apparent the all-volunteer spiritual/pastoral-care program had adequately covered the issues of safety and liability. The animals to be used in the study had been fully trained and registered by an independent entity. The facility could feel comfortable that those who participated would be knowledgeable about safe interactions and minimizing risks. Their dogs were screened for health and an appropriate level of obedience training before they began their work in the facility. The issue of general liability coverage, borne by an independent agency, further reduced concerns over potential risks of lawsuits should an accident occur. Finally, the study itself helped define written protocols that were incorporated in the Maryville Volunteer Handbook by the end of the study.

Though the use of virtual pets is often valuable for those who cannot or will not interact with dogs, the Maryville study seems to confirm that the interactions with live dogs and their spiritual/pastoral-care providers facilitated community. Though it can scarcely be doubted that elders in nursing homes can be susceptible to feelings of isolation, interactions with "the girls" (the Four-Footed Ministers used in the study) went a long way toward facilitating conversation, interactions and enjoyment. The stories presented illustrate just a few instances of these potentially fruitful spiritual/pastoral-care interactions.

Finally, perhaps the most difficult objection to refute is an unwritten one—the resistance by those in spiritual/pastoral care to look at the possibilities of using dogs in ministry. The paradigmatic shift within Christian circles from the "domination over" view of nature to one of the human stewardship of creation has allowed the use of a comprehensive dog-ministry program that is "road-tested," safe, effective and sustainable. Dog-ministry programs open up avenues for exploration not possible under the philosophical and theological perspectives of the recent past.

The time has come for those in chaplaincy to look beyond human beings to other creatures as fellow co-workers. It is time for a spiritual/pastoral-care provider’s working companion to have a wet nose and four feet.

ENDNOTES

1The training manual developed from the Maryville study is in the process of being published. Please check the website, www.fourfootedministers.com for further information on the publication date.

2The issue of a professional chaplain’s use of his or her dog in job-related activities requires further discussion.

3Chart notes: dated 12/30/2010. In order to ensure confidentiality, the names of the residents who participated were coded twice. The first level was numeric in nature and the second was the assignment of a biblical name to obscure the story’s originator. The names used are those that appeared in the final presentation.

4Chart notes: dated 7/18/2010. Stories quoted from chart notes will be noted by the date alone to protect the identity of the study participant.

RECOMMENDED READING


Felton, J. E. Four-Footed Ministers: Their Theology of Presence—A Research Study on CAM/PS (Canine-Assisted Ministry/Pastoral and Spiritual Care). Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, Oregon, 2005.


