

## DOG MINISTRY WITHOUT A DOG

*Dr Jerilyn Felton, the four-footed minister's pastoral care program coordinator at Maryville Nursing Home in Beaverton, Oregon, USA, wrote of her work with her dog, Alya, in the summer 2014 edition of The Ark. Sadly Alya passed away last year and, in this tribute to Alya, Dr Felton describes her work now without her.*

BY DR JERILYN FELTON



Alya, the Four-Footed Minister

**S**ometimes the end of a relationship can set a course for the beginning of a new endeavour.

This is the feeling I had after my beloved four-footed minister, Alya, passed away in November 2014. Alya had been my spiritual/pastoral care research buddy for my doctoral project to formulate a program approach to the integration of dogs as ministerial partners in healthcare settings. She became, in effect, a four-footed minister. After her passing, I moved into a new retirement community and found there an audience open to exploring dog-ministry prayer-group sessions without the canine being present. Here, the attendees heard animal stories based on an extension of scriptural passages; however, would this experience of ‘dog ministry without a dog present’ be profitable to each individual’s prayer life?

As a therapy dog/four-footed minister, Alya had learned her role very well and performed it until the day she died. Her responsibility in our weekly dog-ministry prayer-group gatherings in an assisted-living facility was to welcome the attendees and create the sacred space. She greeted everyone with a lick on the hand and then looked to her mom (me) to give her a treat for a job well done. I had often told my attendees that her gift was her beauty and not her ministerial skills because she ‘worked for food’. I could tell, however, that she seemed to bring an air of the sacred to our gathering. After all had settled and we began our prayer time, she usually parked herself in the centre of our circle and promptly fell asleep. It was the final ‘Amen’ that woke her from her slumber and, together, we initiated our closing ritual, a gift of hand sanitizer given to our attendees to prevent the transmission of infection.

Though I knew at some level that she would not be with me forever, I had not considered how I would continue to spread the concept of dog ministry after she had passed away, other than to obtain another dog and continue as I had in the past. After moving into my new community, I had the chance to discern what other avenues might be open for dog ministry promotion. Thus, to keep my ministerial skills sharp, I

volunteered to conduct a series of biblical reflections on the New Testament readings for the Lenten season that utilized my dog-ministry theological-reflection format. I pulled stories from for the Lenten season that utilized my dog-ministry theological-reflection format. I pulled stories from my repertoire of dog and cat midrashim that seemed to dovetail with those readings, determined to note similarities and differences between groups with and without a dog present, to see if ‘dog ministry without a dog’ was even possible. Reflecting on these gatherings, it became apparent that, perhaps, dog ministry is possible without a dog, but the experience will be different.

### **Differences in Both Scenarios - The Dog**

Alya’s role in our dog-ministry prayer-group gatherings was to act as a social lubricator, an activity that has been empirically demonstrated as beneficial to humans (Giaquinto and Valentini, 2009). She was the facilitator who gathered individuals into community. Her animal presence created a sacred space in the most mundane places within the assisted-living facility. Because dogs have often been described as reflecting the Divine in more than name only, feelings of unconditional acceptance and love seemed to flow out of her to the attendees who had been crippled by age or infirmity. Though she was not the focus of our prayerful reflections and, with her no longer by my side, my Lenten bible study-group was not as vibrant as in the past, where Alya’s presence often functioned as a manifestation of the Divine. I feel that her presence in our group would have made the whole experience more reflective of the Garden of Eden, satisfying the deep human need for connection to nature and through that, to the Divine.

Because Alya was a beautiful dog, people naturally moved to touch her. As it has been pointed out in many areas, meaningful touch is often missing from ministerial interactions because of the fear of being misinterpreted or technology has gotten in the way. Touching a therapy dog and petting him or her offers a level of safe interaction that will usually not open up old wounds of maltreatment or abuse because the dog offers unconditional acceptance. Unless the individual has had a bad experience with dogs, is allergic to them, or fears them, petting a dog has empirically measurable calming and bonding effects on both the person initiating the touching interaction and the dog receiving it. This level of bonding was totally absent from our Lenten dog-ministry prayer-group because there was no live dog present.

### **The Minister**

Throughout my four years of working with dog-ministry prayer-group gatherings, I had developed a good working relationship with my four-footed minister. With Alya present, my role was to be there as the facilitator and storyteller, not concerning myself too much with engaging all attendees in the process of theological reflection. Some of our attendees in assisted-living had challenges keeping present with the group, but had something else ‘holy’ upon which to focus - Alya, as a creature of God. Though it was often an effort to draw individuals into a space where they felt comfortable in sharing

their story, it did not matter in the long run because it was evident that each person drew from the gathering what spiritual nourishment that person needed, whether from our group reflections on scripture and midrashim or from Alya's sleeping presence. Throughout my Lenten series, I found I had to work harder to draw people in, though they were independent-living residents who appeared to be much more able to engage the outside world than those in assisted living. I attribute this to the fact that my four-footed minister was not there as either a presence or a focus. I did discover that the stories were a drawing force that encouraged individuals to return. As the stories were ones I had used in theological reflection with Alya, I discovered that, despite the fact the stories lacked that imperceptible, tangible presence of the Divine, they did provide something meaningful to support an individual's prayer life.

### **Similarities in Both Scenarios**

In reflecting back over our Lenten gatherings, I see that there are commonalities that do make it possible to do 'dog ministry without a dog present', though it is not the same experience. The most obvious similarity between experiences with and without a dog is the encouragement that can be created by the facilitator to have a person tell their life story of faith after considering a particular question. As theological reflection, by its structure, opens a way for attendees to offer examples from their own lives that illustrate a question posed at the beginning of the session, I discovered that elders are willing to share their pet or human stories with others because they realize others are listening to them. Telling their pet/human story in conjunction with the sacred story enables them to feel connected to the group and connected especially to God. In working with elders, I have discovered that individuals often do not perceive their stories about their pets as important enough to be connected to the Sacred. They are surprised when others find their reflections enlightening as well as entertaining.

### **Conclusion**

In the long run, from my limited experience without a four-footed minister present, either a live dog or a stuffed one, I can see that it is possible to conduct a dog-ministry prayer-group without a dog. However, one must realize this experience could be dissatisfying because of its incompleteness on a deep spiritual level. I believe that it is the story, integral to the structure of the gathering, that will be beneficial to the attendees. In creating the midrashic story, the minister should work as if the dog were present, because in proclaiming the Word of God and illuminating it through a pet midrash, a dog or cat comes alive again, if only for a moment. It is the power of story in this instance, bringing presentness to the past that helps the pet to live again, if only in the time it takes to tell the story (Felton, 2008). Thus, in the final analysis, I hope that others will take up the challenge to attempt 'dog ministry without a dog present'. Here is an area where more experiences will contribute insights into the growing field of dog ministry. ☞