Desired Outcome:

1. Participants will reflect on their own assumptions/attitudes about people with dementia.
2. Participants will reflect on spiritual companioning to people with dementia as a compassionate response to the human need for contact with God throughout life.
3. Participants will expand their view of how spiritual companioning might look when engaging people with dementia, compared to the model they might currently use with people who do not have cognitive deficits.
4. Participants will learn/share strategies for helping people in the three stages of dementia to connect with God, particularly around issues involving forgiveness.

What is Dementia?

- An umbrella term that covers a number of diseases including Alzheimer’s.
- All include loss of cognitive ability and changes in behavior.
- Manifestations of cognitive loss can vary widely among individuals even when they have the same clinical diagnosis.

The Capacity of People with Dementia for Spiritual Connection - Assumptions

- At the soul/spirit level there is an innate human need to connect with something/someone larger than themselves, which we call God.
- People with dementia are still capable of communicating with God at a soul/spirit level, i.e. at the level of their essential being and that God still communicates with them.
- Spiritual companioning may not look the same as when we minister to people without cognitive deficits.
- Although the techniques may be different, the goal is same – facilitating a person’s connection with God.
- People with dementia can benefit from spiritual companioning up to the moment of death. They may even show signs of spiritual growth.
Spiritual Companioning for people with dementia

Characteristics of the person with dementia that affect spiritual companioning

- Inability to sustain a conversation or give coherent feedback.
- Inability to participate actively in shared prayer or ritual.

Considerations for the spiritual companion

- May need to use techniques not routinely associated with spiritual companioning.
- God is ultimately the one who initiates and fulfills spiritual connection and growth; we are facilitators in that process.
- God communicates in a unique way with each individual.
- We cannot always perceive the effects of our spiritual companioning or of God’s work; this does not make our intervention less effective.
- We do our best and leave the result to God trusting that our efforts make a difference.
- The most important qualities for spiritual companions are compassion, patience, the ability to trust that God is in charge, that God can communicate with the person and that our efforts are worthwhile even if we cannot perceive the effect.

People in the early stages of dementia

- Symptoms may include forgetting, lack of focus, inability to maintain a train of thought, problems with word finding, frequent digression.
- They may still be able to participate in and benefit from one to one conversation.
- Conversation may seem rambling or disoriented to us but may be meaningful to them.
- Life review is particularly important at this stage while there is still some cognitive processing ability; often spiritual significance emerges from these stories.
- Encourage story telling about significant events in their lives, about early experiences of faith, religious tradition or spirituality; raise up transcendent experiences that you hear.
- Pay attention to the feelings behind the words and respond to the feelings expressed.
- Pay attention to patterns that may emerge from rambling stories and raise those up.
- Facilitate participation in rituals, prayers or practices that may still be meaningful to them, especially if they can’t remember them on their own.
People in the middle stage of dementia

- In this stage verbal conversation often becomes harder and more frustrating both for the person with dementia and for the spiritual companion.
- It can be helpful to move to a multi-sensory approach, i.e. finding ways to involve all of the senses to explore and express their spirituality.
- This can include art, statues, treasured objects, familiar rituals, music and scents – anything that evokes God for the person.
- It may be necessary to ask the families what is/is not meaningful to the person in order to provide appropriate spiritual companioning.

People in the late/end stage

- This can be the most frustrating stage for the spiritual companion who may feel that the person with dementia is no longer capable of connecting with God.
- Many symptoms develop at this stage which can draw the person further and further away from their/our accustomed ways of communicating.
- The spiritual companion may feel helpless and uncertain of what to do to help.
- Some people at this stage can still respond to sensory stimulation that conveys spiritual meaning.
- The response may be more subtle, sometimes barely perceptible to the spiritual companion, but may indicate that the intervention is spiritually nourishing nonetheless.
- The burden is on us as spiritual companions to recognize the more subtle ways in which people with end stage dementia are communicating and to offer creative ways of facilitating connection between the person and God.
- When the person gets to a point where there is no observable communication, the gift of the spiritual companion’s caring presence itself becomes a connection with Divine Presence. You become the face of God to the person.
- Your loving presence communicates that God still loves the person and walks with them in this last stage of life.
- You trust that the person experiences God’s presence and yours on a soul level.
Issues Involving Forgiveness

- Unprocessed issues involving the need to forgive and be forgiven will likely come to the surface for people with dementia.
- Depending on their level of cognitive functioning, they may or may not be able to process the issue verbally.
- If possible, consult with others who know the person and may be able offer information that will help you to companion the person appropriately.
- Engage people with dementia on their terms, even if the interaction seems rambling, confused or disjointed.
- Trust that God can effect healing no matter what a person’s mental status is.

Effects of this ministry on the Spiritual Companion

Like any spiritual companioning relationship, there is an effect on both the people involved. For the spiritual companion, the work of ministering to people with dementia can:

- Bring on feelings of sadness, grief and helplessness. They need to be processed!
- Reveal the need to reflect on ones abilities and limits, to determine suitability for ministry to people with dementia.
- Lead to growth in compassion for the person with dementia by looking for and recognizing the unique person and responding to that person.
- Deepen trust that God is present and active in even the most difficult circumstances.
- Evoke wonder and awe at the many ways God communicates with people when you recognize subtle responses that show spiritual connection and growth in the person with dementia.
Case Studies

1. You have been asked to visit a man with early signs of dementia. He has led a very full and interesting life. His childhood, however, was marked by trauma and abuse. You learn from his wife that he was physically abusive to one of their children. He was a journalist and loves to write. You engage him in life review and suggest that he write down some of his thoughts and memories. He begins to record what he has just told you. After a minute or so he says, “I’m too tired. I don’t want to do this anymore”. You set it aside. At the next visit, he refuses to write again. His wife is very disappointed.

2. You have been asked to conduct a weekly service at a facility for people with early and mid stage dementia. You put together handouts so they can follow along. At the first service, no one participates. The following week you try a different service, you use larger print for the handouts and you encourage them to participate. They just smile and listen. A few nod off. One woman sits and cries softly.

3. You have been asked to visit a woman in the later stages of dementia at the request of her daughter. She tells you that her mother never got over her father's infidelity, which she found out about only after he died. She said her mother has periods of sobbing inconsolably but cannot say why she is crying. When you approach her at the facility she is walking down the hall. You greet her; she smiles at you and continues walking down the hall away from you.
Spiritual Companioning of People with Dementia
Questionnaire

Assumptions about people with dementia

1. What are your views about the “personhood” of people with dementia?

2. What is your comfort level around people with dementia?

3. What thoughts and feelings are stirred up for you personally when you are asked to consider issues around dementia or when you interact with people who have dementia?

Assumptions about spiritual companioning as a chaplain

1. What is your operative definition?

2. What techniques do you use in your practice?

3. Are there practices that you have heard about or read about but that you would feel uncomfortable using in your own ministry? In other words, where is your comfort level in terms of spiritual companioning practices?

Assumptions about spiritual care for people with dementia

1. How do you view the capacity for spirituality in people with dementia?

2. Do you think that spiritual spiritual companioning is possible/appropriate for people with dementia?

3. If so, what might it look like with this population? If not, why not?