



*“Honor your father and
your mother, so that you may
live long in the land the Lord
your God is giving you.”
(Exodus 20:12, NIV)*

Caring for the Caregivers

Ministering to the Sandwich Generation

By Myra F. Smith

This is the fifth commandment, given by God to Moses, as one portion of his instructions to the Israelites. While we often emphasize this command only with children, it is important to remember that there are many adults in your congregation living out this divine imperative every day, and you play a key role in caring for these caregivers.

When I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, caregiving was more of an extended family affair. Both sets of my grandparents lived within twelve miles of my parents. People visited each other frequently, and neighbors and friends were more involved in each other's lives. I'm not suggesting that it was easy, but it involved, I believe, less physical, emotional, and financial stress

than we experience today. Members of today's Sandwich Generation—people who are currently taking care of both aging parents and growing children—are torn among a plethora of responsibilities, often to the detriment of their own well-being.

When my husband and I spent six years helping to care for his parents, we drove two and a half hours each way, sacrificing many of our weekends, and often time during the week as well. We bought supplies, medications that weren't covered by Medicare, and other items they needed. My husband spent time away from work, and both of us altered our schedules to include this time away from home.

The twenty-five to thirty million people who are caregivers today bear similar burdens, at great cost to themselves—both

emotionally and financially. Caregivers use more anti-depressant drugs than the normal population; their social lives are altered; and they experience symptoms such as arthritis, heart problems, insomnia, depression, headaches, and other maladies due to their caregiving responsibilities. Long distance caregivers spend an average of \$392 per month on travel and out-of-pocket expenses as part of their caregiving duties. Unpaid caregivers are estimated to each lose close to \$100,000 in benefits and an average of half a million dollars in wage wealth. The cost to U.S. businesses due to lost productivity from caregivers' absences ranges from seventeen to thirty-three billion dollars a year.

Pastors play a valuable role in easing the burdens of these self-sacrificing individuals. Let's consider four questions in particular:

What should your personal response be to these individuals?

As the leader of your congregation, it is important for you to both identify and empathize with the caregivers in your church family. Members of the Sandwich Generation spend so much time giving love and attention to their parents and children, they need a lot of love in return, and if they don't get it from the right source, they may choose a dangerous alternative. A pastor's sensitivity can make the difference in a caregiver's overall health.

Allow them to vent their fears, frustrations, and concerns for their loved ones and themselves. Don't hesitate to refer them to scripture readings or other devotional materials for comfort, but present these suggestions in a non-accusatory tone. Never let a caregiver feel guilty about his or her emotions. Assure them that their feelings are legitimate, and that God's love and the love of their church family will always be available to them.

How can you more effectively include them in the life of the church?

Caregivers—especially those with parents living with them or requiring long-distance care—have less time for church activities, so long-standing committees with weekly meetings, choirs with weekly rehearsals, and Sunday school teacher positions may need to be put on hold for a time. Gently assure them that their normal church activities will wait for them while they use this time to care for loved ones, but use caution not to make them feel forced out of activities they enjoy.

Find simple ways caregivers can contribute to the ministries of the church without requiring too much of their time. Perhaps they can assist with the delivery of Christmas gifts for the prison or angel tree ministry, help out with limited amounts of baking, or provide non-homemade treats for special events like the Easter Egg hunt, Fall Festival, or Christmas party. They might provide creative assistance or backstage help for the nativity play or musical programs. Another idea is to ask caregivers to submit recipes for a cookbook to be sold at your church festival or other event. The money collected from the sale of the cookbooks could go to a special fund decided upon by the caregivers. They might

want to contribute to an existing church project or create a new "funds for fun" for themselves and other caregivers.

How might the congregation assist them with their needs?

Remember that it takes a village to respond to the needs of caregivers. The Nurture Committee, United Methodist Women, or other groups in your church might sponsor a "Care for the Caregiver" dinner to help them feel appreciated and to give them an opportunity to socialize with peers. Remember to hire a babysitter, so caregivers won't have to care for their children!

Consider implementing an "Adopt a Caregiver" program, through which various committees, Sunday school classes, or other groups and individuals can provide encouragement and support. Great gift ideas include gas cards to help with traveling expenses, gift baskets of "goodies for the road" with snacks and coupons for fast food places, a Starbucks gift card for a "pick me up" cup of coffee, a gift certificate for a massage, or a weekend of babysitting sponsored by members of the youth group.

Set up a table or bulletin board in the fellowship hall, or some other highly-trafficked location on which to display pictures of your caregivers in action. Along with the pictures, you could have a donation jar to collect money to be used for a night out for caregivers. Such a display could be set up at a regular time each year, such as November, which is National Caregiver Month.

What Does God Have To Do With It?

God commands us to care for the sick and to honor our parents, and these commands have the same meaning today that they did two thousand years ago. As leaders of your church, it should be both your duty and desire to share the good news of our Lord and his message to the caregivers in your congregations.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," Jesus said (Mt. 11:28). Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." By "carrying each other's burdens," as Paul reminds us in Galatians 6:2, we can be partners with Christ in lightening the weary load carried by the caregivers in our midst. □

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