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Question:

My mother is 85, in poor health, and is upset because she is unable to attend religious services. I offered to read the Bible to her and pray with her, but that doesn't seem to be sufficient. Do you have any suggestions?

David Ritter, MSW
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Response:

Depending on one's religious and/or spiritual development and experience, attendance at religious services provides many comforts and supports. One can feel a real sense of identity and community as a member of a congregation, and the opportunity for communal prayer and ritual can fill deep spiritual, psychological, and social needs. The sense of place, predictability, belonging, and social support that religious experiences can provide have long been recognized by researchers and behavioral and pastoral practitioners as important components of the human experience. As one ages and experiences more and more relational and physical losses, the importance of such contacts may well increase.

The following are suggestions to consider:

1. Validate the importance of the experience for your mother. Listening without judgment is important.
2. If your mother is mobile enough, check with leaders in her religious community to determine whether there are people who can provide occasional transportation to services.
3. Many congregations will send weekly bulletins that help members feel a sense of connection.
4. Inquire about pastoral visiting from clergy and/or pastoral lay teams. Many congregations will arrange for home visits that may include brief prayer services, communion, and other meaningful rituals.
5. If lack of attendance causes anxiety about the failure to fulfill church obligation, a wise and compassionate congregational leader's reassurance may allay concerns and provide some comfort.
6. Some congregational members who are unable to attend services can be included in ministries, such as a home prayer network, sending cards to congregational members experiencing life changes, or writing cards to those imprisoned or hospitalized.
7. There are a number of religious services available via television, radio, and the Internet. Some denominations broadcast their own programming which can increase an older adult's sense of connectedness.

Since it appears that your mother's involvement with her religious group is significant and positive, discussions with trusted congregational leaders would be a good idea. They may have some additional suggestions. Best wishes.

— **Deacon Jim Calderone, EdD, is a professor of social work at Misericordia University in Dallas, PA.**