



Name of Organization: Pacific Spirit United Church

Name of Program: The Beacon Project: *shining light on dementia

Contact person: Sabina Harpe, sabharpe@gmail.com

What happened last year:

Within a church community such as Pacific Spirit United Church, there is always a sensitivity to people's needs as they age. Cognitive decline, like physical decline, is a natural part of the aging and for some, this expresses itself in a pattern that changes the ability to function well. The Pastoral Care committee of Pacific Spirit United Church started noticing an increased number of people in their church community experiencing a decline in their cognitive ability. They witnessed family members and friends struggling to care for loved ones. And they wanted to offer support to offer the "right" kind of honest conversation around how best to offer support. They knew intuitively these situations often involved an element of shame and fear. They were sensitive to maintaining everyone's sense of dignity and personal comfort. So, the committee gathered to discuss an approach. The first step was sharing their own stories about loved ones in their past who had experienced dementia as well as friends who'd cared for their loved ones. They realized early on in their meetings that story was central to the process of developing support, and that no one was untouched by dementia. It also became evident early on that this process would take time and a commitment to flexibility.

One member said, "Had you put me in charge, I'd have planned and executed the whole thing in under three months. But thank goodness I didn't get my way." Instead, the group offered a collaboration of ideas and resources that organically evolved, and eventually became a four-part online series looking at dementia from a community perspective. The series offers reflections on supporting people living with dementia, reducing stigma, and staying engaged with our communities, activities and friends. To view the series and find other resources from the initiative, see <https://www.pacificspirituc.com/ministries>.

Challenges and opportunities going into next year. What's envisioned in terms of impact?

While the Beacon subcommittee was not meeting regularly this past year, they are now discussing what may be next.

They are committed to “leading from behind” , acting on congregational needs and priorities. “Beacon * shining light on dementia” could well lead to work featuring a different and equally crucial focus like death and dying or advanced care. The planning will always include a focus on persons living with dementia. Also in the realm of possibilities is an art series designed to be richly inclusive with embedded support for those needing one-on-one attention.

Currently the church offers a mid-week contemplative service which is designed to make room for those who require a low stimulus environment and for those who might need to connect for quiet conversation on everyday coping. These possibilities arose from their continued learning about how to integrate pastoral concerns with what they now know about people living with dementia. There is no question that wherever they shine light, the committee within the Pastoral Care Committee, and within the wider congregation now has a sensitivity for people with dementia and is committed to holding their needs and priorities in mind.