

A 'soul-winning script' for the nursing home

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue

Rhonda Rowe and her team gathered around a diagram of the nursing home's floor plan and determined how to split up to avoid praying with anyone twice.

Rowe made her way to a room where a 93-year-old woman lay in her bed while her 87-year-old roommate sat in a wheelchair. Rowe knelt between them and went through her "Nursing Home Gospel Soul-Winning Script."

"Fill me with your Holy Spirit and fire of God," the 93-year-old repeated. "I'm on my way to heaven. I have Jesus in my heart."

Rowe was soon off to the next room, but before she left, she acknowledged that she might never see them again on earth. "I'll see you girls in heaven!" she chirped.

Welcome to the world of nursing home evangelism. Rowe was attending a three-week Celebrate America revival recently in downtown Washington and was part of a team of evangelists focusing on area nursing homes.

"Do you know, for sure, that you will spend eternity in heaven?" Rowe would ask a typical resident.

Pastor Eric Gonyon, coordinator of the Celebrate America revival, reviewed the rules before the evangelistic team began its work.

"If you do go to the nursing homes or assisted living homes, there's HIPAA rules, and we do follow them," he told about 60 people at a training session, referring to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the federal law that governs patient privacy. "You can't give follow-up information in nursing homes and assisted living homes. We don't bring anything in."

Ministry officials had contacted a nursing home in Alexandria, Virginia, ahead of time to get permission for the visit.

Sometimes Rowe and her five-member team asked residents who couldn't speak for nonverbal answers, such as blinking their eyes or squeezing a hand if they agreed

with the script.

The website of Revival Ministries International includes detailed instructions on how to search Google for nursing homes, determine the size of a visiting team based on the number of beds, and tally the decisions garnered during the visits.

Of the millions of souls the ministry claims to have won, Gonyon says more than 500,000 came from commitments and recommitments at retirement and nursing homes since 2007.

“Many of these people, they don’t have friends or families that visit,” said Lauren Bowerfind, a 27-year-old Bible institute student who was on Rowe’s team. “We’re the only Jesus that they may see.”

Some experts on elder spirituality said the methods give them pause.

“In a sense, it’s good that they were remembering older people who often are just totally not remembered, but I do just have some reservations about the sort of conversion emphasis,” said the Rev. Nancy Gordon, director of California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging.

“From where I sit, it’s a little disrespectful to just launch into nursing homes and start to talk to people with a script, basically wanting them to believe in Jesus,” Gordon said.

John McFadden, a retired United Church of Christ minister and the memory care chaplain at Appleton Health Care Center in Wisconsin, said spiritual care in elderly home settings ranges from a “wonderful, person-centered” approach to those “fearful that some of the residents are going to go to hell if they don’t do the deathbed confessions.” Most religious groups, he said, tend toward the first option.

During Rowe’s visit, some residents were more receptive than others. A 57-year-old man halted a solitaire game on his laptop and let Elizabeth Christensen, another Bible institute student, pray for “a favorable report” at an upcoming doctor’s appointment.

Abebech Tebeje, a first-time trainee from Silver Spring, Maryland, found her English script was too hard for a bedridden resident to repeat. When she switched to Amharic from her native Ethiopia, the man followed along and repeated her words. But a woman, who was standing in another room when Tebeje approached, listened

as she started the script and eventually said: “Not today. I’ve got to think about it.”

—RNS

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