

Kenneth and Linda Carder find grace amid memory loss

by [Sam Hodges](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue

Some residents of the Bethany memory care unit can't remember their loved ones' names, much less the unit chaplain's. But when Kenneth Carder preaches, they lean in.

"He really captivates them in those worship services," said Rene Driggers, director of memory support for the Heritage at Lowman, the senior community near Columbia, South Carolina, that includes Bethany. "They listen. They sing. They do a lot of things they haven't done in a long time."

Carder, 75, was bishop of the Mississippi and Tennessee conferences of the United Methodist Church and served on the faculty of Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Now he's interim chaplain at Bethany, his flock consisting of 40 people.

Linda Carder, who has been married to Carder for 55 years, has advanced dementia and is a Bethany resident.

"She's been my primary vocation since her diagnosis, but I felt the real question is: How do I live out my discipleship and calling in this context?" Carder said.

One way was to start a support and study group for spouses of people with memory loss. Then, this January, Carder organized and cotaught Dementia Through a Pastoral Theological Lens at Columbia's Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. The class met at the Heritage at Lowman, and the students spent time with the Bethany residents.

"The staff began telling us, 'This is wonderful that you're having students come in, because we don't see pastors over here very often,'" said Norma Sessions, a social worker who helped teach the course.

Six months ago, Carder became Bethany's chaplain, which includes being part of family consultations and caring for staff. On Thursday mornings, Carder gives a Bible study. Sunday mornings, he leads residents in worship.

“I always use the Apostles’ Creed, and I’d say 50 percent can recite it without missing much,” Carder said. “Probably 80 percent can pray the Lord’s Prayer, even when in normal conversation they cannot put a sentence together.”

Familiar hymns draw them out too, and Carder was thrilled to hear one woman singing “Amazing Grace” in her native Portuguese—a language she had not spoken in years.

As for sermons, Carder keeps them short and interactive. On Pentecost, when he described the “rush of a mighty wind” in the Acts account, one man called out, “Oh, my Lord!”

Carder said, “I just stopped and told him, ‘I’ll bet some people there said the same thing’” at Pentecost.

Carder is passionate about the church’s need to be more engaged with people with dementia and their families. Some 5.4 million Americans have Alzheimer’s disease, dementia’s most common form.

“In the mainline churches,” Carder said, “we have a disproportionate number of people who have dementia.”

Carder does not sugarcoat his family’s experience. About ten years ago, Linda Carder began to falter at the family bookkeeping.

“It became more difficult to do things that required sequencing, even putting on clothes,” Carder said.

For a time, Linda was belligerent. Though that’s passed, her memory loss is severe.

Yet dementia offers invaluable lessons, such as what Carder calls “love without reciprocity.”

“Linda can no longer express love to me in the way she has for most of the 55 years we’ve been together, but I can love her without any expectation of return,” he said. “I do that imperfectly. God does it perfectly. That’s what agape love is.” —United Methodist News Service