

Retired pastor Howard Wimmer answers another calling as a volunteer chaplain

When Howard Wimmer attended Erskine College in the 1960s, he was unsure whether the pastorate was his calling. The decision was made more difficult by the fact that an older brother had entered the ministry.

"As a matter of sibling rivalry," Wimmer says with a smile, "I didn't want to do anything he did."

He was eventually drawn to the pastorate, completed his seminary education and served 40 years in churches throughout South Carolina -- the last 12 years at Augusta Heights Baptist Church.

Wimmer retired in November 2006. By January 2007, he was back to work. This time, the mission -- to serve as volunteer chaplain at two assisted living communities -- couldn't have been more clear.

"I felt a strong call to do it," says Wimmer, who likens the decision to a verse in Nehemiah (7:5) in which the prophet says to God "put into mine heart" a project.

"The Lord put these people into my heart, there's no question," Wimmer says. "I think it helped that (Elder Source Executive Director) Stan Means knew what he was doing when he told me about the need."

Each Tuesday, Wimmer spends his day at the Gardens at Eastside. Each Wednesday, he visits Homewood Residency. The other days of the week, he visits those in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities.

In his plan to serve as the chaplain at the two assisted living communities, Wimmer intended to spread some joy to those who sometimes feel neglected. Instead, he says they usually spread the joy in his direction.

"To know you're able to help someone occasionally, and pray with them, is very rewarding," Wimmer says. "A number of folks in these communities are lonely. Some of them don't have much family here. They enjoy having someone to talk to."



Retired Pastor Howard Wimmer now volunteers as a chaplain at two assisted-living communities - the Gardens at Eastside and Homewood Residency

Nationally, about 84 percent of assisted-living residents do not get a daily visitor.

Wimmer, 66, serves as an unofficial pastor to the staff as well as the residents.

"In many ways, it's like serving as a pastor. You've got a congregation. A good thing is, the entire congregation is in one building, and you have all day to be with them.

"It gives you opportunities to connect," Wimmer says. "You can really get to know people when you have a milkshake together."

It is the dream of Means, whose Elder Source office is headquartered at the Gardens at Eastside, that every assisted living community in Greenville might someday enjoy the services of a chaplain. That person could be a lay leader or a retired pastor.

Wimmer's role at the Gardens at Eastside is made easy by the fact that the congregation at Grace Church has adopted the community as a ministry project. Greenville First Presbyterian Church fills that role at the Homewood Residence.

"That helps a whole lot. The people from Grace Church, for example, are very active in serving the people here and they let me know when a resident might be helped by a personal visit."

A Grace Church member, Wimmer says, comes into the Eastside facility "almost every day.

"A lot of mothers bring young children and visit several residents. The folks here love to see small children enter the room; it seems to bring out their grandparenting instincts," Wimmer says.

"If a resident has a birthday, somebody from that church brings a gift," Wimmer says. "Grace Church has been a wonderful model for us. The people here love that church."

Means, who joined the Elder Source ministry 24 years ago, serves as a matchmaker of sorts, linking churches to assisted living centers. He and Wimmer dream of a day when every assisted-living community in the area are linked closely to a church congregation.

"We want to put the church back in the business of taking care of seniors," says Means, whose organization is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization devoted to helping senior citizens. His is a ministry, he says, "for people who have been forsaken."

"When you have people investing in the lives of seniors, I have never failed to hear a volunteer say, 'I came to encourage, but left as the one who was encouraged.' It happens every time," says Means.

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