

# Using Science, Theology & Spirituality to Transform Attitudes About Dementia in the Church

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## Science



- Dementia is caused by a disease of the brain, so why the stigma?
- The brain is far more complicated than we realized – 100,000 miles of fiber, long enough to go around the earth 4 times.
- With all the advances in imaging, there is no one area of the brain for “self” or “spirituality,” and the diseases causing dementia cannot destroy these aspects.
- Even in advanced dementia, much of the brain is still working. The sense of touch is probably the longest lasting. We do not know what the person with dementia experiences, and we should not presume.
- We could see a cure in our lifetime.

## Theology



- Our culture overvalues rationality as a criterion for personhood, making those with cognitive decline “other.” *Stephen Post*
- We are hooked on the Cartesian idea that thinking defines “who I am.” Love, courage, emotion, the ability to appreciate beauty, and spirituality also make us human. We cannot know all the subtleties that a person with dementia is experiencing. Some qualities may not be diminished and may be enhanced.
- Human personhood lies in the fact that God relates to us (vertical dimension) and that we relate to each other (horizontal dimension). None of these relationships change with illness unless we fail to be appropriately accountable to God and to each other. *David Kelsey*
- Even if our own memory is compromised, we are living in the memories of God. *John Swinton*

## Spirituality



- Spirituality comes from an “intense awareness of the present, transcendence of the personal self, or a feeling of connection with all of life, the universe, a supreme being, or a great web of being.” *Robert Atchley*
- People with dementia may move easily among these three forms of spirituality.
- Gerotranscendence occurs when an older person shifts perspective “... from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction.” (*Lars Tornstam*) There is no reason that people with dementia cannot have a similar life experience.

## Memory Café at Churches



- A safe place where people with dementia can go with their care partners to socialize and have fun with others in similar circumstances.
- The church cares – invite the neighbors!



Using science, theology and spirituality will begin to remove the stigma of dementia and provide richer and more effective teaching for those advocating for those with dementia, especially within the Church. For more, see [spiritualityanddementia.org](http://spiritualityanddementia.org)

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## Worship for People with Dementia and Families



- Liturgy has the power to reach the deeper memories of people with dementia and connect them to their faith.
- Teachings about love, hope, personhood, salvation, fruits of the Spirit and caring for others are important for both those with dementia and the people who care for them.