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Innovations in a Nursing Home Ministry

H. L. Ward, Jr.

When I think of innovation, the first person who comes to mind is the fictional character, Angus “Mac” MacGyver, the star of a hit television series that was first introduced in 1985 and later rebooted in 2016. Special Agent MacGyver was quite adept at getting out of a jam using his genius intellect, a Swiss Army knife, and any basic items available in his immediate vicinity. He never seemed to panic and always kept focus, which allowed him to come out on top of any situation without resorting to violence or use of deadly force. MacGyver was an innovator and was always capable of adapting to changes without succumbing to distress. As a result, he preserved his life and those whom he was entrusted to save.

Innovation is the buzzword for responding to the multi-faceted challenges presented by the pandemic. Over the past year, I have found myself navigating the “new normal” in ministry practices amidst the restrictions placed upon our evangelistic outreach to the local nursing homes here in northwest Florida. Before I explain the particular innovation we implemented, I would like to give you some background information.

Approximately five years ago, I was led to start a ukulele group that would rehearse weekly with the intent to perform monthly at our area nursing home. Although we played sacred and secular tunes, I would always weave the Gospel into every performance. Unlike any other form of treatment, music awakens the spirit of those held physically and mentally captive through dementia, Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s diseases. Several members of our congregation were on the senior living side of the residence, but many had moved over to memory care due to these illnesses. We felt those in the nursing home were often overlooked and forgotten – their

memory truly lost. We were faithful to honor the Lord's calling to go and share His love and truth through music to them – no matter how much time they had left with us. As we sang the familiar hymns, I could see those lips move and sing with us. Their faces lit up and their eyes twinkled. Even the residents that were not necessarily connected with a church felt the Spirit of God move through His Word and power. It was awesome to behold, and over the course of the next several years, our musical outreach ministry gained momentum exponentially. In the course of a year, we added an additional group of ukulele players comprised of third through eighth graders. They were assigned to another local nursing home. Over the course of four years, these groups rehearsed weekly and performed monthly as part of an evangelistic outreach ministry of Community Church. During the summer months the groups would combine in their efforts and facilitated an environment where five generations could interact and serve the community.

In March of 2020, everything came to a grinding halt. We were restricted from entering any of the facilities because of the COVID pandemic. Initially, we were also restricted from rehearsing in person. The ministry doors into the nursing homes were literally closed. We all desired to find a way to stay connected and polished in our skills. It took some creative thinking, prayer, and persistence, but thanks to current communications technology, we were able to redeem the situation. I utilized a Zoom meeting setup to keep everyone together and informed on our next steps. I began praying for wisdom to know how I could still minister to those disconnected from our merry band of ukulele players. Zoom meetings provided such a great opportunity to keep everyone engaged through online rehearsals and discussion on evangelistic outreach continuing through the pandemic. This facilitated connection among the group and communication with the leadership for the area nursing homes.

Over the next two months, I began reaching out to the facilities to see what creative avenues we might consider to safely connect and encourage the residents. While the age group at the nursing homes was considered at-risk for COVID, I knew the emotional impact of isolation was another huge risk factor. I began to proactively reach out to leadership and regional directors to express these concerns and seek solutions, even inviting them on our Zoom meeting calls with ukulele players. It was important for all involved to see the impact of our ministry—not to mention the strength in sheer numbers committed to seeing it through into this “new normal.” We were able to convey the importance of the emotional well-being of the residents and assure leadership that we might have to figure out a way to minister—even if it meant digitally or isolated in a small area outside. Prayer and persistence in this endeavor paid off in the long run.

Since many of the large, assisted living facilities are corporately owned, they maintain a corporate mentality to protect assets and liabilities. The legal ramifications associated with the coronavirus seemed to overshadow everything to the point that the emotional risk factors of isolation had not been adequately taken into consideration. This fact was fully realized when one of my church members in the memory care facility passed away. I ended up working with one of her local family members to plan the funeral via live stream, because no out-of-state family members were allowed to attend—just one of the daughters, a son-in-law, and the father who just lost his wife of nearly 74 years. It was heartbreaking for both the surviving husband and the family who was only allowed to see the funeral via live stream. Once the funeral was over, the widower went back to assisted living and remained in quarantine for two weeks. Less than one month later, this saddened and lonely husband passed. I believe it was a combination of grief at the loss of his wife of so many years and also the fact that he remained in isolation from his support and encouragement.

After several discussions concerning the greater risk factors of isolation, we were allowed to begin performing outside the facility with limited players in masks and socially distanced beginning in July 2020, just shy of four months since we last visited the facility. It was like a shot in the arm for many of the residents because they had not been allowed outside the care facilities, except for medical appointments—then placed in quarantine for a minimum of fourteen days. Thankfully, we have been allowed to perform our evangelistic music outreach every month since and throughout the pandemic. Each time it lifts the spirits of all, including the staff and nurses. Contagious joy and smiles abound. I hope to continue in this ministry as long as I see the benefits of it blessing both the participants and the recipients.

We have continued a hybrid rehearsal online via Zoom meeting and in-person with social distancing. Approximately a month ago, most of the players and residents completed their vaccinations, and this has started the gradual re-opening of the assisted living and memory care residents to visitors. We are looking forward to being back with them to cheer them on and remind them that they are not alone—God is with them, He loves them, and He will never fail or forsake them.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage church leaders to continue trusting the Lord for wisdom, guidance, and strength in their innovations to adapt methods and persevere in their efforts to share the Gospel message and make disciples. God has called us and will equip us. His resources are limitless. The joy of His presence is the best part of the journey. May we all keep our focus on Jesus and know that the task in front of us is never greater than the God who goes before us and is with us always. He will complete the

good work He's started in and through us. We can rest assured that no labor in the Lord is ever in vain and look forward to His eternal reward for faithfulness in following Him.

About the Author

Rev. Dr. H. L. "Scooter" Ward, Jr. Scooter is the associate pastor and music minister of Community Church of Santa Rosa Beach located in northwest Florida. He also serves as President of the South Walton Ministry Association, a Kingdom-oriented, Christian cooperative of participating churches and parachurch organizations in Walton County, FL. He earned a B.A. in Theology from Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham, AL and received his commission as an officer in the United States Air Force where he served on active duty for nearly ten years as an Air Battle Manager on-board the E-3 Sentry (AWACS). A decorated combat veteran, Scooter also received an M.A. in Christian Studies & an M.Div. from Luther Rice Seminary in Lithonia, GA, and a Doctor of Worship Studies degree from the School of Music at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. Scooter and his wife, Amy, have been married for eighteen years and currently reside in Freeport, Florida. They both enjoy spending time with family, playing card games, swimming, and walking. When the opportunity presents itself, Scooter loves performing with his big band, Cloud 9 Orchestra, where he creatively shares the Gospel through music in patriotic and Christmas outreach events. He also leads two ukulele orchestras weekly at his church and they perform monthly as an outreach ministry to three local assisted living and memory care facilities.

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF SANTA ROSA BEACH SANTA ROSA BEACH, FLORIDA

Year founded: 1940S

Denomination or Network: Nondenominational

Weekly Attendance: 130-180

Location: Suburban, 65 miles east of Pensacola

Website: srbcc.com