

Church of the Forgotten

The elderly often are ignored by the church. Here's how one compassionate couple decided to provide these people easy access to God's love.

The lilting sound of worship music floats across the humid air on a Sunday afternoon in Jacksonville, Florida. Inside a clean, air-conditioned church building, hands are lifted in praise just as you would expect. But this church is unique because the congregation consists entirely of nursing home residents.

The church, aptly named People Worth Loving Fellowship, is the result of pastor Buck Stanley's 14-year labor of love. Stanley, who became a Christian in the middle of a Texas horse pasture in 1987, says his life was radically transformed when he surrendered everything to Jesus.

He was reunited with his wife, Clarice, in Florida, and their marriage was restored.

Stanley immediately began telling others about his newfound faith in Christ—and in a local nursing home he found plenty of people who would listen. On one of his first visits, he shared the love of Jesus with a woman whose nose and one eye had been eaten away by cancer. When he saw the sparkle that came into her other eye after a gentle hug and kiss, Stanley says he was “hooked for life.”

Soon after, he quit his job, and the couple went on the road full time to visit spiritually hungry people in 21 nursing homes. They lived off their savings and poured everything they

had into the ministry.

Their vision for an organization that would serve the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of nursing home residents led them to form N.B. Ministries (N.B. is short for New Beginnings) and begin what Stanley calls a “war against loneliness, hopelessness and depression.” In 1991 they were chartered by the state of Florida. As their credibility grew, so did the list of nursing homes requesting their ministry.

Though the ministry thrived, Clarice did not. She was diagnosed with cancer in 1993, and despite intensive treatment and prayer, she passed away.

The next year, God spoke to Buck about a pianist named Nikki who had joined the ministry as a worship leader. She shared his vision for transforming the lives of the afflicted with the faith, hope and love of Jesus Christ. When the couple realized that God was bringing them together, they were married and continued growing the work of N.B. Ministries.

After moving Nikki and Buck to Jacksonville, the Lord gave them a vision to see the ministry expand. He continued adding nursing homes to their ministry. Currently they visit 69 homes in Florida and 16 in North Carolina.

But they are also busy at their home base in Jacksonville. Earlier this year they completed construction on a new, \$135,000 nursing home church. Every part of the building is wheelchair-accessible, including the custom-made altar.

The couple now holds weekly services for an average of 60 residents from seven nursing homes. They run four converted

buses equipped to transport the elderly and disabled.

Fully licensed to operate as a nonprofit organization, N.B. Ministries is supported solely by donations. "We've had miraculous gifts of money, and every need has been met," Nikki says. "God puts it on individuals and churches, and they support us."

The Stanleys give every penny to the ministry, including an inheritance Nikki used to pay off the church building four days after it was completed. "Some people are called to build up a church ministry. We are called to give everything we have to these people," she says.

They travel five or six days a week, visiting an average of two nursing homes a day. Returning home on the weekends, they hold a 10 a.m. service every Sunday at a local nursing home before busing people in for their 3 p.m. service at People Worth Loving Fellowship. "This is what we do 24/7," Nikki says.

She acknowledges that it takes a special kind of person to handle nursing home ministry because of the despair you can encounter. "Buck and I approach it from the aspect that we are bringing joy and hope to these people, who are sometimes neglected or even abused," she says. "We are ministering to people who have lost everything but have discovered that Jesus is really all they need."

Nikki explains that some of the residents—even those who have attended church for years—count their frailty as a blessing because it has led them to develop a personal relationship with Jesus. She can identify with their sentiment.

"I was raised knowing God, but not in a personal way," she explains.

"Then I had a breakdown, and I came out seeking the Lord with all my heart. That's when I met the Lord in a motel room 26 years ago."

She says her relationship with Christ came at the expense of her first marriage. Her voice cracks with emotion as she recalls that "during that time, the Lord became my intimate friend."

Her understanding of God's companionship during periods when she felt forsaken forged the perfect background for the ministry she and Buck now carry out. When asked how they work so well together, Nikki says: "We pray before every service to be used. Then we just step out on the Holy Spirit, and He guides how to lead with the music and what to say."

And what He guides them to say to their congregation is significant: "You are not forgotten. Your life is not over. You have the power through prayer to make a difference—in the next presidential election or with issues like gay marriage. You are loved, and you have a purpose."

And the message is getting through.

Not long ago, Rachel, a regular attendee, was in intensive care, and doctors had given her no hope. Now recovered and back at church, she states with confidence, "I know I still have a purpose because I'm still here!"

The church has many first-time visitors who were invited by fellow residents. "They are listening to the Spirit of God," Nikki says. "In eternity, we'll find out how God has used these people to bring about His plan and bring about souls for His kingdom."

Family members also get to see faith in action. "One family member took a picture of a woman in a rare smile," Nikki recalls. "She said that smile is what brought her back to the Lord."

The Stanleys report that some of the nursing home staff members come to know Christ because of the changes they see in the lives of the residents. "I even know of [staff members] who risk losing their jobs to make sure every resident has a chance to hear and respond to the gospel," Nikki confides.

The Stanleys handle the majority of the day-to-day operation themselves—and the number of lives they touch singlehandedly is amazing. In addition to the 1,000 people they visit each month, they also give out an average of 1,500 birthday cards and gifts per month and more than 3,000 gifts during the holidays each year.

Volunteers hold full-time jobs and then help out with the ministry every Sunday. They see firsthand the physical toll the ministry takes on the Stanleys.

"Buck sometimes is solely responsible for loading and unloading at some of the homes," volunteer Vicki White wrote in a letter to Charisma. "That means he physically pushes two dozen or so people in wheelchairs—one at a time—and secures them on the bus."

But if the Stanleys mind the hard work, it doesn't show. Both say the joy they receive far outweighs the many hours of preparation and travel. "It's something we must do," Buck states, wiping the sweat from his forehead as he returns from dropping off the last busload of residents. "We must share the gospel with these people before it's too late."

Although their own ministry is in need of help, their prayer is to see others begin nursing home ministries. They envision sanctuaries with services geared to nursing home residents' special needs. Buck also has had visions of an army of RVs heading out on the road to go into the nursing homes and minister.

"Activity directors will work with anyone who will go in and even just read Scripture to the residents for 30 minutes," Nikki says. "Play games, read a story, just listen to them."

Abandonment by "disassociation" is a cruel price to pay for growing old and feeble, the Stanleys say. "If you really want a blessing, open your eyes and heart to this forgotten civilization. Ministering to nursing home people is truly God's love in action."

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