

## **Respite and the Faith Community**

### **Introduction**

Respite is temporary relief for family caregivers from the ongoing responsibility of caring for an individual of any age with special needs. Community respite programs, particularly those with limited resources, may benefit from partnerships with faith communities to meet the needs of families.

Many faith communities seek to serve both the spiritual needs of their congregations and the many social needs in the larger community. Faith community facilities and volunteers can contribute valuable resources for providing respite services or working with a community-based agency to offer respite care. Further, faith communities' connections and recognition within the local community can be a great benefit in starting new services, or enhancing or expanding an existing respite program.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to identify and provide information on how faith communities can provide or support respite services as well as offer guidance to respite programs on ways to partner with faith communities to expand the reach of their services. Resources and information will include the benefits of respite-faith community partnerships, examples of respite and faith community initiatives, and innovative and exemplary faith-based respite models.

### **Benefits of a Faith Community to a Respite Ministry**

Faith communities possess many resources, connections, and characteristics that prove helpful in a respite ministry, including:

- Desire to contribute to the local community
- Culture of volunteerism
- Community connections
- Sustainability
- Facilities
- Family caregiver trust
- Non-profit status for philanthropy

Although some non-religiously-affiliated direct service programs may be reluctant to partner with a faith community for fear of alienating non-religious clients, this concern can be addressed with clear communication that respite services will remain available to all individuals regardless of religious affiliation.

### ***Desire to Contribute to Community***

Often members of faith communities have a desire to commit themselves to help others.

Volunteers inspired to serve without personal gain are a strong resource for a respite program.

## Faith-Based Respite Model: CarePartners

CarePartners (formerly Interfaith CarePartners) offers no-cost respite care services and caregiver support resources through an innovative volunteer-led model. CarePartners' professional staff trains volunteer teams from over 70 local faith-based communities to run CarePartners programs and support groups as ongoing ministries within their congregations. CarePartners also trains members from the greater community to offer its respite care and support programs. CarePartners' professional staff provide training, coordination, and supervision for all volunteers. The CarePartners program has been replicated nationally and has received numerous national awards. CarePartners currently works with over 2,300 volunteers. Guidance and instruction for replicating the caregiving team concept within a congregation are available on the CarePartners website.

**Contact:** CarePartners, Houston, TX

**Website:** [carepartnerstexas.org](http://carepartnerstexas.org)

### ***Culture of Volunteerism***

Most faith communities have a strong culture of volunteerism, with many programs or ministries volunteer-based and volunteer-led. Often, volunteers in faith communities have a long history of working together. This community-based focus is helpful to bring to an existing respite program. For example, youth groups typically engage in volunteerism. Youth group members have the potential to serve as open and enthusiastic volunteers in respite programs. Church mission groups or members with health or human service backgrounds can be a tremendous respite care volunteer resource

as well. If the faith community is interested in starting their own respite program, a ready cadre of volunteers is a valuable resource.

### ***Community Connections***

Faith congregations are strongly rooted within their social community, and therefore are a wealth of information and resources.

### ***Partnerships Promote Sustainability and Stability***

Partnerships between state or community-based respite programs and the faith community allow sharing of administrative responsibilities that can provide the stability to survive beyond grant funding. A congregation partnership can provide a source of volunteers and charitable donations to keep a respite program running once grant funding ends. If the respite program is center-based and uses the congregation's facilities, an advantage is that access can continue indefinitely. As learned from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) Faith in Action national volunteer caregiving programs, "interfaith volunteer projects under the aegis of health and social agencies, in partnership with an interfaith coalition, reduce the challenges of maintaining financial stability beyond grant funding."<sup>1</sup>

### ***Family Caregiver Trust***

Family caregivers can be reluctant to ask for respite care. A faith community may offer the trusted respite environment that family caregivers prefer. Family caregivers needing respite may be more accepting of help from people they know from their faith community than from outside agencies.

Within faith communities, respite volunteers have the potential to build lasting relationships with the families and individuals in their care.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. May 2009. Faith in Action Program Results Report, page 39. Retrieved January 2022 at [rwjf.org/en/library/research/2009/05/faith-in-action.html](http://rwjf.org/en/library/research/2009/05/faith-in-action.html)

Because of these close relationships, caregivers may feel more comfortable using volunteer respite providers in other settings, especially in emergencies. Some volunteers may even offer respite outside the scheduled respite program.

### **Philanthropy**

Applying for federal non-profit status can be challenging for small respite programs. Through collaborating with a faith community, a respite program may be able to use the congregation's non-profit status to provide a tax-deductible receipt for individual donors or corporate sponsors of their respite program. Note that in these situations, donations must be "at the discretion of the faith community" to use as the "ministry of that faith community."

For faith communities undertaking the delivery of their own respite services, the financial support of the congregation that has adopted the provision of respite to family caregivers caring for a loved one as their mission can be an added bonus.

### **Benefits of a Respite Ministry to the Faith Community**

In addition to the benefits that the faith community offers to respite ministries, providing respite brings valuable benefits to a faith community. These include:

- Increased awareness by members of the respite needs of families for faith community members;
- Increased sense of belonging for families of individuals with disabilities or special needs across the lifespan;
- Increased awareness of the barriers to faith community participation for people with disabilities and older adults, and how to remove those barriers;
- New skills for caregivers and volunteers; and

- A positive image in the community and a sense of pride for faith community members of the needed respite service they are providing.

Respite programs create connections between those providing respite and those receiving care. Respite program partnerships can open faith communities to true inclusion of individuals with special needs across the lifespan. Using the skills from respite care program training, faith communities may begin to use trained respite volunteers and staff to include children with special needs in church school classes and activities. They may also offer their support to families caring for an aging family member or provide short term respite support due to surgery or illness of the family caregiver.

### **Faith-based Models for Respite Program Partnerships**

The respite care examples described in this fact sheet can be provided either voluntarily or for pay through any faith-based community. While the following list does not present all options, it offers examples of ways the faith community can provide or support respite care in the community.

#### **Financial Support**

Faith communities unable to initiate a respite program may support their members to access an existing respite program. For example, a faith community may be willing to pay for a respite service provider for its families. To evaluate a faith community's capacity to provide financial support for respite, determine whether the congregation has a fund to support programs serving individuals, families, and/or the local community.

Some congregations may already have a benevolence fund that can be used for this purpose. A benevolence fund is a great way to fund such services, allowing those who wish to contribute to the fund to receive a tax deduction for their support of families. Read more about the [Respite Benevolence Policy](#) prepared by the

South Carolina Respite Coalition and Family Connection of South Carolina.

### **Respite Site**

Even if a faith community is not ready to start a respite program, there can still be an opportunity for respite if they allow others to use their facility as a place to provide respite. For example, many faith communities have child care facilities used for a portion of the day, leaving the facility space available to provide respite after hours.

The same may be true of a community space for adults and seniors. A congregation may be willing to share its facility for others if it sees a need for the use of that space for respite.

### **Support Group Respite**

Some faith communities sponsor parent or caregiver support group meetings in their facilities. To enable caregivers to attend support group meetings, volunteers from the congregation provide child care or eldercare

during the meetings. Similarly, volunteers could be used to provide respite onsite during religious services. This gives new volunteer respite providers an opportunity to become comfortable with those they are caring for, knowing that family members are close by if questions or emergencies arise. It also gives families and those with special needs time to become comfortable with the new care providers, so that after a while the support group could meet at another site or families could take a break away from the faith-based site.

### **Respite Vouchers**

In respite voucher programs, the congregation helps pay the family or caregiver's cost of hiring the provider of their choice. Payments can be made to the family or directly to the respite provider. For example, a church might set up an emergency fund and allow families needing respite to apply for small stipends from the fund, or use a benevolence fund, as described above.

## **Faith-Based Respite Model: South Carolina Breakrooms**

The SC Respite Coalition and the SC Department on Aging developed the Breakrooms Project, where religious congregations offer site-based respite for caregivers to attend worship services and social activities. Trained volunteers provide respite care within the faith facilities for the duration of the religious service or event that the caregivers attend. Breakroom volunteers are also trained in outreach and can provide information and referrals to other community services for families utilizing the Breakroom.

As of 2021, the Breakrooms program operated at five partner sites with plans to open two additional sites. Two have successfully reopened after closing because of COVID-19.

Each Breakroom partner site is a religious congregation of about 100–200 people and serves 3–6 families. Breakrooms partner congregations primarily serve older adults; however, one site provides care across the lifespan. The SC Respite Coalition provides technical support and training for Breakroom programs. SC's Lifespan Respite Grant, through the SC Department of Aging, funds the program. To start a Respite Breakroom, see this [How-to-Guide](#). Learn more in this [presentation](#) on *Advancing the Breakroom in South Carolina's Faith Communities*.

**Contact:** SC Respite Coalition, Columbia, SC

**Email:** [info@screspitecoalition.org](mailto:info@screspitecoalition.org)

**Website:** [screspitecoalition.org](http://screspitecoalition.org)

### ***Adopt-a-Family Program***

In Adopt-a-Family programs within a congregation, families without special needs children agree to provide care for the children of families needing respite. Families schedule and monitor caregiving arrangements to meet the needs of each family. The family providing respite can be reimbursed for incidentals such as mileage or meals.

### ***Family Caregiver Cooperatives***

In a cooperative (co-op), two or more families needing respite trade off care for each other's child, children, or the adult or aging family member who is the care recipient. In a site-based co-op, parents of children with special needs or family caregivers of adults work alongside congregation volunteers to provide respite care in the faith community setting. In a co-op of eight families, for example, two co-op family caregivers may provide care alongside additional volunteers recruited from the faith community.

Faith communities that seek to begin a respite co-op may recruit interested families through local parent-to-parent groups, support groups, school districts, Area Agencies on Aging, disability groups, and other related community agencies (i.e., disability, aging, health).

### ***Inclusion***

Inclusion, or adapting programs so they are available to everyone including those with special needs, gives families another option for respite on a regular or as-needed basis.

Congregations often have a myriad of existing programs (e.g., child development center, vacation Bible school, youth programs, social activities for seniors) that could offer respite opportunities for families. Respite providers can offer workshops and training about disabilities, inclusion strategies, and respite to equip faith community staff and volunteers to open existing programs to individuals with disabilities or special needs.

### ***Congregants as Respite Providers***

A faith community may create a respite provider registry by training members of the congregation to provide direct respite services, either for pay or as volunteers, to individuals or in group settings, for children or for adults. ARCH maintains a [library](#) of respite provider training curricula that might be useful to prepare paid or volunteer providers to work with special populations, and recently developed a competency-based online respite provider and volunteer training curriculum in conjunction with the Respite Care Association of Wisconsin that is currently being field-tested.

#### **Faith-Based Respite Model: Masterpiece Ministry**

The Masterpiece Ministry Respite Night Program, hosted by First Free Church in Lincoln, NE, is a faith-based volunteer respite program. At Respite Nights, parents drop off their child(ren) with special needs of any age, along with siblings through age 13, for an evening while volunteers care for them. There is no charge for the service and all volunteers have background checks.

Volunteer medical professionals are on-site to provide support as needed. First Free Church plans and hosts four Respite Nights per year. In addition to Respite Night, Masterpiece Ministry also offers respite for caregivers during the church's Sunday service. The program was recognized as an ARCH Innovative and Exemplary Respite Service.

**Contact:** Masterpiece Ministry, First Free Church, Lincoln, NE

**Email:** [info@firstfreelincoln.org](mailto:info@firstfreelincoln.org)

**Website:** [firstfreelincoln.org/respite-night](http://firstfreelincoln.org/respite-night)

## Faith-Based Respite Model: National Volunteer Caregiving Network

The National Volunteer Caregiving Network began as a faith-based volunteer respite program in 1984 when the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Faith in Action program funded 25 interfaith volunteer caregiving programs. The Faith in Action project brought together congregations, social service organizations and others to engage and organize volunteers to provide services. Among the volunteer services provided were friendly visitors, shopping, transportation, home repair and respite. Individuals assisted included older adults, those with physical disabilities, Alzheimer's or dementia, the

terminally ill, and people with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Although the Faith in Action program ended in 2008, many of the original faith-based programs remain, along with new community-based programs. The National Volunteer Caregiving Network now unites nearly 700 volunteer caregiving organizations across the U.S., including the territories Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

**Contact:** National Volunteer Caregiving Network, Ventura, CA

**Email:** [info@nvcnetwork.org](mailto:info@nvcnetwork.org)

**Website:** [nvcnetwork.org](http://nvcnetwork.org)

### ***Collaborative Respite, Faith & Community Programs***

Some faith communities have acted as catalysts to bring families, community programs, state agencies, and other faith congregations together to provide respite for families of children and adults with special needs. For example, a collaborative network might unite a congregation, a community recreational program, and a university to create a respite program, or bring a coalition of congregations together to jointly provide a respite program.

The RWJF Faith in Action Program found that it is most helpful when recruiting volunteers, to think beyond congregations for a pool of volunteers, including campus ministries, high school, and college organizations, and employers in town.

### **Initiating a Faith Community Partnership**

To initiate a faith community respite partnership, a community respite program should begin by contacting a faith community to start a discussion. Faith communities are typically

relationship-based. When a respite program initiates a respite partnership, it is helpful if the program already has a relationship with someone in the faith community. This could be a family who needs respite or a member interested in or already involved in providing respite. It may also be helpful to connect with groups within the faith community such as dining clubs, special ministry groups, outreach groups, youth groups, and others.

Knowing the faith community's calendar and its typical program start-up time is also important. For example, youth groups often initiate new efforts at the beginning of a school year or start mission projects over spring or summer breaks. A respite program could propose a new partnership to coincide with the start of the new school year.

### **Matching Faith Community Interests with Respite**

The best faith-based supports are developed through collaboration between families in need of respite and the congregation, or members of the faith-based community. Together they

determine what respite supports are needed and how the congregation can best respond, given its vision and resources.

It is important to know the faith community's membership demographic. Understanding the current focus of the faith community's ministry enables setting goals for providing respite that align with the faith community's vision. This will provide a better understanding of where to spend initial respite program planning and marketing time. For example, if one focus of its ministry is mentoring youth, a respite program may want to tailor its partnership proposal to training and

mentoring youth in providing respite. If most congregation members are young families, recruiting volunteers for respite for families who have children with special needs might best relate to the group.

Many faith communities already focus on serving older members. Such programs offer another natural connection for respite care in the faith community. Programs to help families caring for an aging family member may already be part of their strategic plan. Although they may not identify it as such, this is also a "respite ministry."

### The Importance of the Faith Community in Reaching Diverse Caregivers

#### Alter – Helping and Equipping Faith Communities

Faith communities are often the most trusted places for caregivers to seek support, especially in many diverse ethnic and cultural groups. However, churches and other congregations are not always aware of the needs of families affected by dementia or have the resources to support them. Alter was created by African American health professionals at Georgia State University to raise awareness about dementia and assist African Americans and faith communities to build resources and dementia friendly environments. Dr. Fayron Epps, Assistant Professor at Emory University, is Alter's founder and oversees several faith-based research projects. Resources and support are available to African-American churches to support people with dementia and their family caregivers through partnerships with Alter.

**Contact:** Alter, Atlanta, GA

**Email:** [outreach@alterdementia.com](mailto:outreach@alterdementia.com)

**Website:** [alterdementia.com](http://alterdementia.com)

### Submitting a Respite Program Proposal to a Faith Community

After an initial personal contact, a written proposal is the first formal step in the process of soliciting respite program support from the faith community.

When proposing a respite partnership, a clear understanding for how decisions within the faith community are made is advantageous. Ask questions about how decisions are made to identify program priorities. This will help the respite program partnership to fit its proposal within the well-defined structure of the faith community.

Submit a clear respite program proposal to the decision-making leader or group within the faith community. The decision-making process is different within each faith community. In some, permission from the minister, priest, rabbi, bishop, or imam is needed before the congregation gets involved. In others, decisions start with members of the congregation and work up through committees of the faith community.

A respite program proposal should include:

- A mission statement of what the respite program proposes to do
- Resources requested for the respite program (e.g., financial help, staffing, volunteers, and/or space within a facility)

- The specific resources needed by the respite program to ensure success (e.g., use of facilities during the first and third Saturday of each month from 1–4 pm)
- A clear statement of recommended policies and procedures if a site or staffing is being requested
- The resources that the respite program will provide (e.g., volunteer training and coordination)

### Faith-Based Model: Respite Ministry

The local Respite Ministry at First United Methodist Church (FUMC) in Montgomery, AL, provides support groups, dementia education, and a social model of respite for families caring for someone with Alzheimer’s and dementia in the River Region. Trained professionals and volunteers provide supervision on a 1:1 or 2:1 ratio and oversee activities and service projects. Participants have the opportunity to socialize with others while participating in stimulating activities, including community service projects. Families pay a fee but no one is turned away because of an inability to pay. Based on the success of The Respite Ministry at FUMC, the Respite for All Foundation (RFA) was created to help replicate the model nationally. To date, there are now 20 programs based on the FUMC model in AL, FL, GA, SC, and WA serving 900 individuals relying on 1200 volunteers. Learn more in this [ARCH webinar](#).

**Contact:** Respite Ministry, First United Methodist Church, Montgomery, AL  
**Email:** [djohnston@fumcmontgomery.org](mailto:djohnston@fumcmontgomery.org)  
**Website:** [fumcmontgomery.org/respite-ministry](http://fumcmontgomery.org/respite-ministry)

Note that the proposal approval process may take significant time depending on the decision-making structure of the faith community. Often a proposal must pass through several congregation committees before a decision can be rendered. Ensure that respite program staff are available to meet with these committees if questions arise as they consider the proposal.

### First Steps for a Faith Community to Take in Setting up a Respite Program

If the idea for providing respite services begins with the faith community, the first step might be to identify who in the congregation is most in need of respite support by surveying congregants. The next step would be to identify what resources or programs already exist in the community to provide respite, information, or support for that population. Individuals within the congregation may also possess these skills or experience. These allies might be available to provide training, information about the unique needs of specific populations, such as adults with dementia, or children with autism, help getting started, and ongoing support.

Congregations may want to explore the feasibility of using a benevolent fund to support start-up or ongoing costs. Additionally, if a faith-based program meets program and provider eligibility criteria, and allows all individuals from outside the faith community to use the respite service, they may be able to access Medicaid or other public funds to help families pay for care and/or subsidize the program.

### Conclusion

The faith community is ideally situated to be a meaningful partner in providing respite care, bringing a cadre of ready volunteers, space to provide respite, and possible congregational donors that help ensure long-term sustainability. There are many ways the faith community can provide and support respite depending on their

own resources and capacity. Congregations with a respite ministry offer a trusted and welcoming place for family caregivers who might otherwise be reluctant to seek and use respite care. Faith communities have much to gain from providing respite, including a better understanding of the needs of people with disabilities, older adults and their family caregivers, a positive image in the community, and a sense of pride for faith community members.

## Resources

### Alabama Lifespan Respite

- **Providing Breaks for Family Caregivers: A Toolkit for Volunteers and Faith Communities.** [alabamarespite.org/images/pdfs/alrrn.ProvidingBreaksForFamilyCaregivers.toolkit.pdf](http://alabamarespite.org/images/pdfs/alrrn.ProvidingBreaksForFamilyCaregivers.toolkit.pdf)

### ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center

- **State Lifespan Respite Program Tools for Faith-Based and Volunteer Respite.** [lifespanrespite.wildapricot.org/Faith-Based-Volunteer](http://lifespanrespite.wildapricot.org/Faith-Based-Volunteer)
- **Respite Provider Training and Credentialing Resources.** ARCH maintains a library of respite provider training curricula. [archrespite.org/training-ideas](http://archrespite.org/training-ideas)
- **Volunteer Respite Manual: Creating Valuable Options for Family Caregivers (2020).** [archrespite.org/volunteer-respite-manual-appendices](http://archrespite.org/volunteer-respite-manual-appendices)
- **Webinar: Respite in the Faith Community.** [archrespite.org/webinars-and-teleconferences/webinar-respite-in-the-faith-community](http://archrespite.org/webinars-and-teleconferences/webinar-respite-in-the-faith-community)

### Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network

- **Every Member Counts: An Information and Resource Kit.** [nacdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/every-member-matters-information-and-resource-kit.pdf](http://nacdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/every-member-matters-information-and-resource-kit.pdf)

### CarePartners

- **Congregation & Community Resources.** CarePartners' Congregation & Community Resources webpage provides guidance and instruction for replicating the respite caregiving team concept within a congregation. [carepartnerstexas.org/educational-resources/congregation-community-resources](http://carepartnerstexas.org/educational-resources/congregation-community-resources)

### Collaborative on Faith & Disabilities

- The Collaborative provides supports the disability community and provides education and resources related to disability, religion, and inclusive supports. [faithanddisability.org](http://faithanddisability.org)

### National Volunteer Caregiving Network (NVCN)

- NVCN supports programs and organizations that provide volunteer caregiving. [nvcnetwork.org](http://nvcnetwork.org)

### South Carolina Respite Coalition

- **Presentation on Advancing the Breakroom in South Carolina's Faith Communities, 2021.** [vimeo.com/showcase/8727359/video/590769231](http://vimeo.com/showcase/8727359/video/590769231)
- Respite [brochure](#) for **Spectrum of Respite Options for Faith Community.**

### Union of Reform Judaism

- **Disability Inclusion Learning Center.** The Disability Inclusion Learning Center features education, strategies, and resources to support religious congregations to fully include individuals with disabilities in all aspects of the faith community. [disabilitiesinclusion.org](http://disabilitiesinclusion.org)

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This project was supported, in part by grant number 90LRLT0001, from the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 20201. Grantees undertaking projects with government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official ACL policy.

This fact sheet was adapted from the original prepared for ARCH by Rev. W.C. Hoecke and Kathy Mayfield Smith, Co-founders of the South Carolina Respite Coalition.

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