



## **Touching Spirits: The Power of Spiritual Programs Within the Retirement Community**

*By, Nancy Gordon  
Director*

*California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging*

In the multi-faceted world of senior living, there are many responsibilities to balance as we design and provide services for the older adults deciding to make their home with us. Keeping the living spaces and their adjoining environments attractive and marketable, providing choice and quality in dining, creating systems that provide for safety and security, and providing programs that complement and enhance resident lives are only a few of these responsibilities that senior living administrators must juggle. To produce a well-rounded calendar sometimes feels like a great accomplishment in this environment. But is this enough?

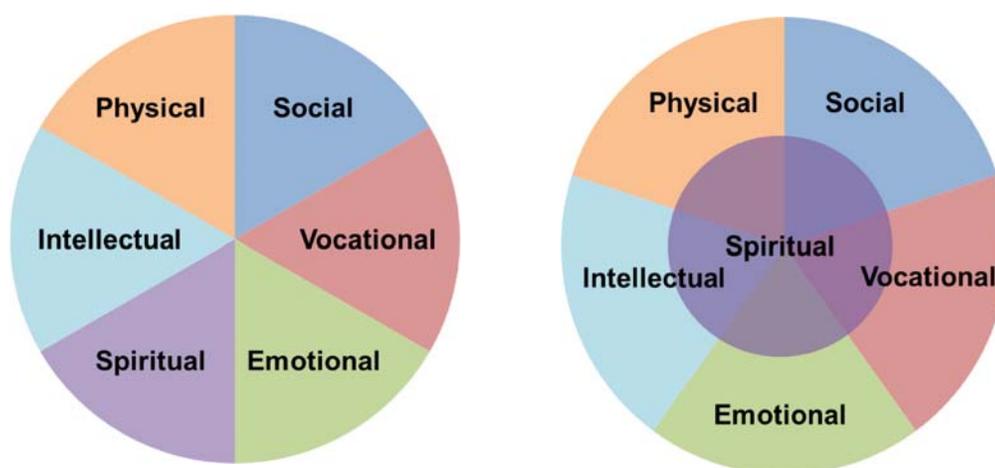
Wendy Lustbader, a noted author on aging, recently wrote about interviews she conducted with Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC) residents. While many were happy with their choice she noted:

*. . . it was striking that each unhappy CCRC resident told me that they felt their lives had devolved into a series of entertainments. One man explained that he was insulted by the sight of the daily calendar posted in the lobby as though he needed to be “kept busy” through a program of activities. He said it seemed as if he were staying at a perpetual resort, rather than living his true life. “This is too empty for me,” he continued. “I need to be useful. Here, I can’t even mow the lawn.”*

Another resident told Wendy: “Attending a program is not living.” She described the weekly, facilitated current events discussion as a far cry from the spirited, engaged conversation she was used to having with friends in her neighborhood and community before she moved into the retirement community. And she reported that the only place she felt truly at home was her church, where she was known and accepted.<sup>i</sup>

While there were many good reasons behind their choice to move to such a community, these residents were lamenting the loss of meaning and purpose, as well as the loss of the multiple connections they had known in their lives before that move. These are spiritual issues and, for the sake of the long-term flourishing of residents, senior living communities must address them.

Spirituality is sometimes difficult to define. For that reason, two responses predominate in the retirement community world: we hire a chaplain and put spirituality in that domain, or we ignore it as a concept that is too diffuse for us to adequately address. Hiring a chaplain can be a wonderful first step in addressing the spiritual needs of residents. But it tends to put spiritual needs into the domain of religion, and ignores those who don't practice a religion, or those who have spiritual needs not met by a religious practice. And ignoring it leads to complaints like those quoted above. I've used two tools to think about how spirituality can infuse and shape the life of retirement communities. The first one is a re-working of the standard wellness circle used by many senior living wellness programs, where spirituality is one piece among many other pie-shaped pieces. Instead, I've reworked the circle so that spirituality is in the center as its own circle, which touches all the other pie pieces and connects them. This diagram reminds us that spirituality is at the heart of everything we do as we serve residents and is the connecting factor in all that we do.



Along with the diagram I use this definition of spirituality:

*Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express **meaning and purpose** and the way they experience their **connectedness** to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred [emphases added].<sup>ii</sup>*

This definition provides lenses to examine our programs. The first is the lens of meaning and purpose. Viktor Frankl says that we experience meaning by: 1) doing a deed or creating a work; 2) by experiencing nature, culture, beauty and the uniqueness of others; 3) by choosing our attitude. These arenas of meaning can lead us to look at our programs in new ways. What opportunities are we providing for “doing a deed”—providing a helping hand within our community or without it? Are we encouraging creative endeavors that involve creating a work, either individually or with others? Are the experiences we’re providing creating new ways of experiencing nature, culture, beauty or one another? And are we seeking through these experiences and other

programs to create a community ethos that encourages the practice of virtues like kindness and generosity, and encouraging residents to choose positive attitudes even in the midst of difficult circumstances?

The second lens for looking at programming is through the lens of connectedness. When residents move into our communities, they are experiencing the rupture of many long-term connections and in the midst of that are trying to form new connections within their new community. How do we meet them at that vulnerable point? Are we creating places where stories and experiences can be exchanged – and where all can know and be known? How do we help them connect to places on our campus and in the wider community where their unique gifts can be used for the greater good? Are we working to provide places for deeper conversation that go beyond the superficial — the weather, the meals being served, the chronic aches and pains?

Meaning and purpose and connectedness go hand in hand. Our experiences of meaning are deepened when they are shared experiences. And our connectedness often occurs around a shared experience. In providing senior living, we have the opportunity to create not only physical places for older adults to live, but to create true communities of purpose and meaning and connection. Wendy Lustbader noted in 1999 that “it is easier to live with the mandatory activity of work and child-rearing than to create voluntary purpose every day. In the long run, days that are empty of obligation are exhausting.” Today she says, “I see now how living environments can be crucial in helping us remain connected with life-enhancing obligations, purposes that give us spirit for enduring physical travail and inevitable losses.”<sup>iii</sup>

So this is our challenge: to engage the spirit in our programming so that the spirit of our residents is strengthened as they age gracefully. This endeavor goes far beyond creating a calendar. It is an endeavor that can inform every aspect of our operation as we wrestle with the ways of encouraging meaning and purpose and connectedness for everyone in our organization. Wrestling with these questions will put us in touch with why we’re in this business and we’ll greatly enhance our ability to serve residents in life affirming and enhancing ways.

#### **About Nancy Gordon**

*Nancy Gordon has been the director of the California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging in Anaheim, CA since June, 2008. Previously, she worked in libraries and historical agencies until attending seminary in mid-life. She is ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church and has served as associate pastor of Winnetka Covenant Church in Wilmette, IL and as director of Growth Opportunities at Friendship Village of Schaumburg, IL, a large continuing care retirement community. The Growth Opportunities program she developed contained spiritual life, activity/recreation, arts, fitness, and life-long learning components. It was her charge to put a spiritual foundation under all the programs, believing that each of them had the potential to touch residents’ spirits in positive ways. The California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality works with Front Porch, a not-for-profit ‘human serving’ organization featuring innovative communities and programs that meet the changing needs of individuals as they age. Through the Center, Front Porch is able to bring to the world an understanding of aging as a spiritual journey, whole-person wellness, and the power of the mind-body-spirit connection to heal and transform lives.*

#### **About Front Porch**

*Front Porch is one of the largest not-for-profit providers of retirement living communities in Southern California. Front Porch active adult and full-service retirement communities offer a full range of options from independent living to continuing care, along with specialized programs like memory support. With innovative communities and programs that meet the changing needs of people as they age, Front Porch communities represent a leading-edge approach to wellness in aging. Front Porch is comprised of 10 full-service retirement communities in California and two adult living communities: one in Louisiana and one in Florida. Of these, five are Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRC). Front Porch, based in Glendale, Calif. and founded in 1999, is a not-for-profit organization that gives back to its residents and the communities it serves.*

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<sup>i</sup> Wendy Lustbader, "It All Depends on What You Mean by Home," *Generations*, Winter, 2013-2014 (37:4), 18.

<sup>ii</sup> Definition from "Consensus Conference: Improving the Quality of Spiritual Care as a Dimension of Palliative Care," held Feb. 17-18, 2009, Pasadena, CA. Sponsored by the Archstone Foundation.

<sup>iii</sup> Lustbader, 20.