

# Lessons from Mount Carmel

By Dr. Jean Garton

If I am an expert at anything, it is in moving from one location to another. In our 60-year marriage we have moved 16 times and lived in seven different states. When it comes to packing, labeling, downsizing, and garage sales, I am a pro. Move number 16, however, was one for which people don't plan a housewarming celebration. It is likely, though, to be a move many of us will make eventually.

According to studies, by the year 2030 the age-sixty-five-and-over population is expected to more than double to 71.5 million. By 2047, the number of seniors will exceed the number of children for the first time in U.S. history. That means, for many of us, a move to an assisted living facility or nursing home is in our future.

That "future" arrived for me last year when, because of my husband's increasing health problems, we relocated to an assisted living facility. I could have stayed in our home (only a mile away) and visited daily, but that wasn't ever an option.

We now have a small apartment with our own furniture, two bedrooms, two baths, a kitchenette, and a living room. (That's larger than when we started out as newlyweds.) All meals are provided, as is weekly cleaning and linen and bed changes. Free transportation is available for doctors' visits, shopping at Walmart, and special outings such as to the pizza parlor. The facility staff is superb, the food is good, desserts are outstanding, and the arrangement allows me to continue to travel for meetings and speaking engagements while my husband is well cared for. So, what's not to like?

First is facing the reality that any change is difficult. But once that is accepted, there are the inevitable adjustments: having to eat at specific times every day (hungry or not); or a lack of mealtime conversation beyond ailments, food preferences, and facility gossip; and the absence of independent scheduling.

The good news is that I actually don't even miss all the "things" I left behind and have discovered that 80 percent of everything in every drawer in our

houses never gets used. What I do miss, though, is parking my car in my garage on rainy, cold, or hot days, and I really, really miss having my own washer and dryer. Yet there are lots of blessings to be enjoyed in this facility.

While the current-day culture has become increasingly coarse and crude, this is a place of civility. There are some cranky people at times, but most of the residents are mannerly, thoughtful, and appreciative of little things. Those traits were likely learned early on when we'd ask for something, and our mom or teacher would say, "What's the magic word?" Displaying good manners mattered back then, and it helped shape our attitude toward others throughout our lives.

Personal faith is also strong here. When people realize that their next move might well be to eternity, what one believes comes down to the basics. What unites us is a trust in Christ's redemptive work regardless of the church label we wear. Romans 8:28–29, which remind us about how God causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him, is often quoted — and with heartfelt trust — by those sporting oxygen tanks or confined to wheelchairs, or by those suffering unrelenting pain. The residents here have learned that the Christian life is not about feeling good or being happy. As one severely handicapped woman often says, "I just stay prayed up."

While short-term memories are non-existent for many residents, their long-term memories are



the source of many light-hearted moments. Conversations are often peppered with old words like “skedaddle,” “highfalutin,” and “discombobulated.” Smiles and nodding heads abound when residents recall the black-and-white newsreels shown before a movie, or tell about the old phone party line, or remember when Burma Shave road signs were all the rage.

The name of the facility where we live is Mount Carmel, a reference to the biblical location where a miracle occurred. (1 Kings 18:17–39) It is an appropriate name for our small community of 52 women, 28 men, and 45 staff. Here the biblical call to serve others is up-close-and-personal and results in small miracles of daily kindnesses: It is wiping the dribble from a resident’s lips. It is picking up something that can’t be reached by a person in a wheelchair. It is buttoning a man’s shirt whose

stroke has crippled his fingers. It is helping a resident with dementia find his room.

I have discovered that there are lifelong lessons to be learned from the men and women with whom I now live. They are my new family — my new professors in the journey of life — my new brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Dearest Lord, may I see You every day in the residents at Mount Carmel and, while living with them, minister to them as to You. Help me to recognize You in the wheelchairs and walkers, in the confusion of dementia, and in those limited by strokes. Help me to always say, “Jesus, my Lord, how sweet it is to serve You.”*

*Dr. Jean Garton served on the LCMS Board of Directors, was chair of the President’s Commission on Women, and currently is in her fourth year on the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. An active conference speaker, Dr. Garton is the founder and president emeritus of national Lutherans For Life.*