

**Dear friends of Vital Signs Ministries,**

**July 2024**

We really cherish the opportunity to conduct church services every Sunday afternoon at Aksarben Village Senior Living. Indeed, we have loved it ever since we began over three years ago. And I think it's noteworthy that this obviously "religious" ministry came about through an activity that's not-so-obviously religious; namely, the "When Swing Was King" entertainment program that Claire and I created 14 years ago. As you know, that presentation utilizes old music, engaging photographs, and pop culture history in order to lift spirits, alleviate boredom, stimulate the mind, and because we go to the same senior facilities every month, to create personal friendships between us and the residents. Aksarben Village was one of the 12 facilities where we presented "When Swing Was King" and the young activity director there decided to ask us to consider conducting a religious service for the residents. She explained that she had come to realize we were, in her words, "very serious Christians" who truly cared for seniors. And she also knew how deep the desire was of many of the residents for a church service of some kind. She was thrilled when we said "yes" to trying it out. And now, after three years, four months, and counting of Sunday afternoon church services, we remain *really* grateful for the ministry.

Let me use last Sunday's service to illustrate how this important ministry works.

We arrived, as always, around 2 o'clock with all of our stuff: a projector, free-standing speaker, a large unfolding screen, a variety of cords, and the handouts for each person. On these handouts are printed the sermon text, the lyrics to the day's songs, and sometimes such other items as additional Scriptures, quotations, and short devotionals. This particular Sunday's handout included a brief but powerful pro-life testimony by Tim Tebow.

Our ministry begins in the midst of this set-up time because Aksarben residents begin to arrive shortly after we do. (Judy is almost always there waiting for us when we show up!) We talk to our early arriving friends even as we arrange tables and chairs, erect the screen, connect the laptop to the projector, plug everything in, and test the sound. And, by the time we hit 2:30, the church service officially begins.

The formal service itself is pretty short (only 30-35 minutes). We open with welcoming remarks to our small congregation (12-20 residents) and then have a prayer together. Next up are the first two of the morning's three songs. These are actually video recordings that we have downloaded from the internet -- live performances of traditional hymns (with some new songs too) that are presented in a variety of styles by exquisite choirs, duets, quartets, church congregations, and individuals from around the world. For instance, last Sunday's videos featured the Clark Family singing "My King Is Known by Love," the elegant Gracias Choir (originally formed in South Korea) and their accompanying orchestra with "Remember Me,"

**Other Vital Signs Items  
We Don't Want You to Miss**

\* "Stemming the Tide: Denny Speaks to the Nebraska Abortion Ballot Controversy"  
(June 13 on Vital Signs Blog)

\* **"The Top 5"**  
(Every Saturday on Vital Signs Blog & Denny's Facebook Page)

\* "Reflections on Radical Discipleship" (VSM website)

\* "Is Evolution Really a Big Deal?"  
(June 29 on Vital Signs Blog)

and then a rousing rendition of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” from the choirs, orchestra, and a few thousand singers who filled the Royal Albert Hall in London with their praises to God. Terrific worship music.

But what about a sermon? That comes between the second and third song. And though it is a short sermon (8-12 minutes), it is carefully prepared to provide relevant instruction, challenge, and/or comfort. Last Sunday’s text was Isaiah 41:10 & 13. “Fear not for I am with you. Be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you; yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with My righteous right hand... For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”

I began with a couple of stories from the family reunion in California that Claire and I had just returned from, including the poignant experience of walking hand-in-hand with my older sister Linda around the complex where she lives. Linda’s health is such that she appreciated the support, the guidance, and the affection of having her hand in mine. I used this to emphasize how simple but profound and far-reaching a ministry is a person’s hand given to another in love and help. This made a natural lead-in to the text in Isaiah 41 and the wonderful way that God provides His hand to His people when they require strength and help or when they need to be upheld during struggles with fear and dismay. For even these enemies of our spiritual peace can be overcome as believers understand that *the Lord is their God* (emphasizing both His power and His intimate, complete identification with them) and that His might, grace, and love are ever available. It is a tremendous promise. The Creator God walks hand-in-hand with all of His children, all who have trusted Jesus’ sacrifice on Calvary to pay the debt of their personal sins.

I also explained that the force of the Hebrew word translated “uphold” in this text is an unusual word that here expresses the idea of rescue, thus emphasizing God’s power to bring us to our ultimate victory. It’s a word used elsewhere to describe the Father’s comprehensive strengthening of His Son, Jesus. And like with our Savior, this doesn’t mean we will be free in this life from trouble, difficulties, or enemies. But these enemies don’t win; we do. God’s plan is unfolding in the exact way the Lord decrees it day by day. And we are not alone in our troubles. God walks hand-in-hand with us every single step. And even when we might be so distracted by sin and unbelief as to let loose of God’s hand, He never lets go of ours! Never!

Our church service then moved into our commemoration of the Lord’s Table, a simple but deeply-appreciated rite that we offer on the first Sunday of each month. Our congregation comes from a variety of church backgrounds: Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Catholic, you get the idea. Yet everyone appreciates the approach we take to communion -- a symbolic but solemn remembrance of Christ’s death in our place. We also use this ritual as an exercise in thanksgiving for God’s making a way for us to be forgiven and cleansed. We rededicate ourselves to living honorably and faithfully for the Lord.

Next up in the service is our third song after which Claire closes the formal service with a few personal remarks, an encouragement to our congregants to take their handout back to their rooms for use as a devotional, and an invitation to stay and enjoy the treats we’ve brought for the after-church fellowship. Those treats almost always include Claire’s extremely popular chocolate

chip cookies...with a few she makes in the “non-chip category” for residents who are not supposed to eat chocolate Claire then leads us in a final prayer.

With her “amen” the Vital Signs team starts moving chairs and tables around to make visiting more accessible, packing up the equipment to get it out of the way, and distributing coffee, lemonade, and the various treats. Then follows an engaging, heartwarming time as we fellowship together with stories, testimonies, prayer requests, and conversations covering everything under the sun. This informal part of our Sunday afternoon ministry is a terrific motivation for people to attend church in the first place. But more important, it has proven to be of immense value in evangelism, discipleship, and mutual encouragement. Our formal service lasts 30-35 minutes but the after-church fellowship goes about 45.

As you might guess, not everything is roses in this outreach. Like in your church, there are certain individuals in ours too who require more effort, more patience, more inventive strategies, more forgiveness. Also, like in your church, there are certain problems and trials that must be dealt with. And, of course, serving elderly persons does present an added challenge; namely, having to more frequently bid farewell to friends you have come to love and value. Yet even this presents us with “faith opportunities” as we embrace God’s supernatural comfort and as we demonstrate to a watching world the reasons why Christians genuinely celebrate the entrance of friends into the splendors of their heavenly home.

For a para-church ministry like Vital Signs to have had the history of complimentary engagement with the local church as we have had is rather unusual. For instance, I had a long run of “pulpit supply” speaking at Tabernacle Baptist Church in northwest Iowa and then seven straight years of being the “perennial guest speaker” at Faith Bible Church here in Omaha. Along the way, I have preached more Sunday morning sermons at churches and taught more Sunday school classes than I can count. And there have been a gang of speaking duties to church youth groups, seniors, men’s fellowships, couples’ events, prayer breakfasts, and so on. We have produced Sanctity of Human Life Sunday materials for many churches; we have organized letter-writing parties for churches; we have presented “When Swing Was King” shows to church audiences. And so, it goes.

But Vital Sign Ministries having its own church? Believe me, that is something we never dreamed! But when the Lord placed the opportunity before us, we accepted it with enthusiasm. And we are so, so grateful that we did. It has been a remarkable blessing to the residents of Aksarben Village, but also to Claire and I and everyone in our small visitation team, especially our regulars Don, Allen, and Ruth but also our other colleagues who help from time to time like Dick, Tom and Lila, Matt and the kids, Karla, and Pat.

But it doesn’t end even there, because we dare to hope that these Sunday afternoon church services (like all the rest of what Vital Signs engages in) also provides gifts to all of you, our LifeSharers -- gifts of inspiration, encouragement, even examples of specific ways you can “improve *your* serve” to the seniors of your own families, from your churches, and in the senior living centers in your towns.

Isn't this how true ministry works, providing spiritual effects in four distinct directions? Let me count them. **1)** Through your Spirit-led words and deeds and prayers, God blesses the person you serve. **2)** God takes those very same acts of faith and love and turns them into blessings *for your own life* -- your life right now as well as in the "treasury account" that He has waiting for you in heaven. But that's not all. **3)** God uses your faithful action to bless everyone who sees your good deeds. Oh, yes; the world is carefully watching Christ's ambassadors, weighing our professions with our actual practice. And other believers are spectators too. Make no mistake, actions motivated and directed by genuine spirituality will provide others with inspiration, correction, comfort, instruction, and so on. Finally, **4)** In what is certainly one of the deep theological mysteries, God Himself is blessed when His children humbly obey His call. It's fascinating; God gives us four excellent reasons to serve Him with a pure and brave heart.

Well, that's this month's LifeSharer letter. And, because I took the time to detail just one of the "31 flavors" of Vital Signs activity, I didn't have space to tell you about other things from our June calendar: our brief family reunions in California and Colorado; recent speaking engagements at Community Bible Church along with preparations for 2 upcoming Sunday sermons at Wellspring Lutheran Church (and 2 Sunday School classes) and another Sunday morning sermon at Prairie Lane Church; writing an important article giving my counsel on the Nebraska abortion ballot matter; the full "When Swing Was King" schedule; a major correspondence project; the prayers and public pro-life witness in front of the wicked Planned Parenthood; and so on.

You can read more about most of these other things on the Vital Signs Ministries website or Vital Signs Blog or our personal Facebook pages and we certainly hope you do. Indeed, your use of our social media posts is of tremendous value to us. (I would especially point out the items featured in the text block on page 1 of this letter.) So, with that reminder, I will close by expressing once again our profound and ongoing thanks for your financial and prayer support. We will never be able to adequately express our appreciation for your partnership...but we will keep trying!

Until next month, dear friends...

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Denny". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the closing text of the letter.