Listening to Caregivers

What bēkn's 2026 Survey Reveals About the Church and Care

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As families navigate the realities of aging, dementia, chronic illness, and caregiving, churches have an important opportunity to come alongside them with practical help, spiritual encouragement, and meaningful community. This summer, bēkn conducted its first Senior Caregiver Survey to better understand those needs and identify ways congregations can respond.

Made possible through a grant from the Maclellan Foundation, the survey gathered 177 responses from individuals connected with ten congregations throughout the Chattanooga area. While the survey was not designed as a scientific representation of every congregation in the community, the responses offer a valuable picture of what many families are experiencing—and what may lie ahead.

Caregiving is already part of church life

Nearly one-third of respondents (57 people, or 32%) identified themselves as current primary caregivers. Their responsibilities range from transportation and companionship to medical care, daily activities, and financial or legal assistance.

But the survey also points toward a growing need. When respondents were asked whether they expect to have caregiving responsibilities within the next three to seven years, 78 said yes and another 64 were unsure. Together, that represents approximately 80% of respondents who either anticipate caregiving or recognize that it may soon become part of their lives.

That finding is particularly significant because 79% of respondents were aged 56 or older. Many church members are entering a season when they may be caring for aging parents, spouses, siblings, or friends while also confronting their own changing needs.

Caregiving carries an emotional weight

Caregiving is about far more than completing tasks. Survey participants described the emotional experience of caregiving with words such as overwhelming, sadness and grief, guilt, burnout, chaos, and anger. Others identified positive experiences such as peace,

contentment, and happiness. Every caregiver's journey is different. Often, a caregiver finds themselves caring for parent with whom they've had an estranged relationship – at best. Exhaustion can quickly turn to angry outbursts – for both caregiver and cared-for, creating ripe opportunities for unintentional neglect and abuse. (See bēkn article "Shepherding the Silent" at www.bekn.org/articles).

These responses remind us that caregiving can hold love and gratitude alongside exhaustion and grief. Churches have an opportunity to recognize both realities and offer practical, loving support to both body and spirit.

Among the concerns respondents identified were memory loss and dementia, physical caregiving responsibilities, medical decisions, caregiver burnout, care planning, financial concerns, and questions surrounding assisted living or memory care.

These are areas where families often need more than information. They need trusted people willing to walk alongside them.

An opportunity for congregations

One of the survey's most notable findings involved awareness of existing church support. Eighty-three respondents—47% of the total—said they knew of no current church caregiving support.

This does not necessarily mean churches are doing nothing. Many congregations already provide meals, visits, transportation, prayer, and other forms of care. Instead, the finding may reveal a gap between the help churches provide and members' awareness of that help. It proves that until you need it, you may not know it is available.

The survey also suggests opportunities for education and ministry development. Respondents expressed interest in resources such as caregiver support groups, planning workshops, respite care, in-home caregiving assistance, family and friend training, and dementia-related activities.

Encouragingly, many were also willing to help. Fifty-eight individuals indicated willingness to make monthly visits, 57 would help provide meals, 45 expressed interest in caregiver support groups, and 35 would consider helping with transportation.

In other words, the survey identified not only needs but potential ministry partners. Just one person can make a beautiful difference. When you show love to an aging parent, you love their whole family too.

From survey results to ministry

For bēkn, the purpose of this survey is not simply to collect statistics. It is to help congregations listen carefully to their own people and consider thoughtful, sustainable ways

to care for aging adults and caregiving families. The next step begins with prayerful conversation.

Churches can review their individual survey results with pastoral and ministry leaders, and provide practical workshops, identify existing ministries that could be strengthened, and explore new approaches where significant gaps exist. Some congregations may begin with a caregiver support group or educational seminar. Others may develop visitation or respite teams for dementia, transportation, or emergency planning and support ministries.

Making Practical Care Part of the Church Culture

From Listening to Action: Fall Workshops

As a follow up, bēkn is inviting congregations that participated in the Summer Survey to attend one of two fall workshops, made possible through the generous support of The Generosity Trust. These half-day workshops will address three of the most significant concerns identified by survey respondents: navigating medical decisions and healthcare, managing the practical demands of caregiving, and preparing for future care and emergencies. Through practical instruction, helpful resources, and opportunities for conversation, participants will gain tools to better prepare themselves and their families for the challenges of aging and caregiving. Church leaders will also be encouraged to consider how these insights can shape compassionate, sustainable ministries within their congregations. The workshops are an opportunity to move from listening to action—equipping individuals and churches to respond to the needs revealed through the survey.

The goal is not for every congregation to do everything, but for each church to understand the needs within its own community and develop ministries that reflect its people, resources, and calling. The bēkn survey provided a glimpse into those needs—revealing both the caregiving challenges families are currently facing and the willingness of church members to help meet them. It gives congregations a place to begin by asking a simple but important question:

Who among us is carrying the responsibility of caregiving—and how can we faithfully walk beside them?

That question is at the heart of bēkn's work: Supporting Caregivers. Honoring Seniors. Empowering Churches.

A beacon of hope for aging and caregiving.
Let's be that light together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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