



When Christmas isn't 'merry and bright'

By DENISE M. BARAN-UNLAND

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About 30 people attended the annual Blue Christmas service the afternoon of Dec. 10 at Hope United Methodist Church in Joliet.

The Rev. Lora Zink, director of pastoral care at Grace United Methodist Church in Joliet, said the service is offered for people experiencing any form of loss: death of loved ones (including pets), divorce, job loss and loneliness.

The service included lighting candles and singing songs. Afterward attendees could participate in memory crafts or talk one-on-one about loss, Zink said. Plainfield United Methodist Church and Grace United Methodist Church collaborated on the event, Zink said, which was offered to the community.

"We don't care if you go to a Methodist church or not," Zink said. "We just want you to know people care about your pain."

Peace Lutheran Church will offer its own version of a Blue Christmas service Dec. 17. The Rev. Dave Hedlin, Peace Lutheran pastor, said the "Shortest Day/Longest Night" service is open to all.

"The image everyone wants to project is, 'Is this grand?' and, 'Everything's wonderful,'" Hedlin said. "But if you're not there, you can really feel left out, as if something is wrong with you."

Hedlin said he encourages the community to invite anyone who is lonely or grieving. Not only will the service validate those feelings, but it will invite people to drawer close to Jesus.

"God was born in a remote place and then he died on the cross," Hedlin said.

Loneliness and loss

Research shows lonely people have greater risk for infection, cardiovascular disease, depression, cognitive decline and increased mortality, said Anna Walters, director of health services at Senior Star at Weber Place in Romeoville.

This isolation can occur in older adults in two ways. One is a social disconnectedness that occurs from a pure

lack of contact with others, Walters said. Causes may include the death of a spouse or losing friends after moving closer to their children, she added.

As they age, seniors may become housebound due to health issues or losing the ability to drive, Walters said. Or perhaps they've recently moved out of their family home and into an assisted living facility, she added, away from everything familiar.

But some people may feel isolated regardless of their life situations, Walters said. This perceived isolation – feeling alone in a crowded room – also increases health risk, she added. Part of the solution in all cases lies in creating new opportunities for socialization and new life goals.

"They now have the free time to do what they always wanted to do. What is that going to look like?" Walters said. "If you have the ability to embrace this next phase of life, you can create a sense of purpose and connectedness in lots of ways."

Walters said new residents at Senior Star are assigned a volunteer ambassador who eats meals with them and eases them into favorite activities. Senior Star also partners with schools and other organizations in the community to offer a wide range of events, she added.

Just because seniors never had families – or have families that live far away – doesn't mean no one needs them.

"They could volunteer in hospitals and read to young kids at the library," Walters said. "There are lots of opportunities."

For people who are lonely, grieving and living at home, Walters said, family and friends can take turns bringing dinner and scheduling phone calls and video chats. Reminiscing over scrapbooks doesn't replace loved ones, Walters said, but that's OK.

"It can help them relive those memories and enjoy them," Walters said.

It was just a dog

Although pets are often treated as

family members, it's often not socially acceptable to deeply grieve the loss of a cat or dog, said Julie Blackburn, licensed clinical professional counselor and registered art therapist.

"In that mindset, when someone is not an animal lover, it hard to explain why your heart is broken and how part of the your everyday life is gone," Blackburn said.

That's why Blackburn is offering monthly pet loss workshops at Kramer Veterinary Services in Plainfield starting Dec. 13.

"The idea is to have some place for people to talk about that, as well as create a memory piece around them," Blackburn said. "A lot of times, people don't know what to do."

Blackburn encourages people to commemorate their pets during the holidays, too. They can hang up stockings with pets' names on them or create ornaments from photos. Such activities can help children work through their sense of loss.

"My son tells people, 'We had a dog named Aragorn,'" Blackburn said. "But he's in heaven now."

If you go

■ **WHAT:** Shortest Day/Longest Night Service (Blue Christmas service)

■ **WHEN:** 5 p.m. Dec. 17

■ **WHERE:** Peace Lutheran Church, 1900 E. Lincoln Highway, New Lenox

■ **ETC.:** For anyone experiencing any type of loss, including death, divorce and job loss

■ **KNOW MORE:** Call the church office at 815-485-5327

If you go

■ **WHAT:** Pet Loss Workshop

■ **WHEN:** 6 to 8 p.m. Dec. 13

■ **WHERE:** Kramer Veterinary Services, 24020 W. Riverwalk Court, Plainfield.

■ **ETC.:** Julie Blackburn, founder of Charreusse Center, licensed clinical professional counselor and registered art therapist, will lead this new monthly workshop.

■ **REGISTER:** By 3 p.m. Dec. 13

■ **COST:** \$45 includes shadow box. \$10 extra for brick activity. Special rates for two

or more members of the same family.
■ **KNOW MORE:** Call 815-436-8387.



Photo provided

More than 500 people participated in Joliet Area Community Hospice's 12th Annual Lights of Love Memorial Tribute and Tree Lighting Ceremony held the night before Thanksgiving at the Rialto Square Theatre in Joliet.