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Quiz: Pet ministries and the spiritual growth of congregations

Religious institutions responding to Americans' love affair with their pets are adding new ministries, drawing new people to church and advocating greater care for all living creatures. Take our quiz to test your knowledge of the relationship between believers and their nonhuman loved ones.

by [David Briggs](#)



Photo by Salih Guler/iStock

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The tears came easily for the burly truck driver in his 40s at the animal memorial service at Christ United Methodist Church in suburban Pittsburgh.

[Take the quiz](#)

For nearly two decades, his black-and-white cat slept with him and his wife at night, greeted him every morning and was there each time he came into the house. The cat, he said, was like one of his kids -- one he didn't have to send to college.

The memorial service gave him a chance to recognize his loss and say goodbye. "I really needed this," he told a church volunteer afterward. "I think this was what Christ would have done."

The monthly animal memorial service, part of the church's [Hearts and Paws](#) program, is representative of a growing number of pet ministries throughout the country. In a nation where commercials refer to

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dog and cat owners as “pet parents,” and not even a recession can slow spending on animals, religious institutions are responding in multiple ways.

The Hearts and Paws website states its mission theologically, explaining that “God has given us dominion over the animals of the earth, meaning that He has challenged us to take care of them. God also expects us to be in love and charity with our neighbors, meeting the needs of others whenever and wherever possible.”

Animal ministries, once largely limited to Catholic churches offering annual pet blessings around the Oct. 4 feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, have become a regular part of congregational life around the country, from liturgical services affirming pets as part of God’s creation to the development of pet food pantries and advocacy groups for animal rights. There are animal chaplains serving all major faith groups. The exact numbers are hard to quantify, but many of those who work in animal ministry report strong demand.

In the four years since the Humane Society of the United States started a [faith outreach program](#), the animal welfare organization has worked with tens of thousands of churches engaged in animal ministries and distributed more than 20,000 educational DVDs to religious groups, said Christine Gutleben, program director.

The popularity of animal ministry is tied to both environmental awareness and an increasing understanding of the importance of pets in the lives of individuals, she said.

“We are becoming more aware of the connection, the meaning of pets in our lives, the joy that they bring,” Gutleben said. “They make us more aware of the creation around us. They are a conduit to that.”

Denominations have been supportive. In July, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ called on Christians to explore ways their food choices have an impact on [human and animal welfare](#). The Episcopal Church is developing a liturgical resource offering pastoral care for the loss of a companion animal for consideration at its [2012 General Convention](#).

In an interview with the Episcopal News Service, the Rev. Lee Shaw of Utah, who [proposed a resolution](#) calling for the resource, said, “This is not a feel-good resolution for those of us who love dogs and cats.”

Rather, he told ENS, it responds to a pastoral need, particularly in ministering to children, for whom an animal’s loss often is “their first real experience with death,” and to the elderly, for whom a pet “may be the last relationship this person has on earth.”

Pet ministry also can be an important path leading people to greater involvement in congregational life, say advocates such as Joe Hirsch, chair of the Hearts and Paws ministry at Christ United Methodist.

The original intent of the ministry founded eight years ago was to provide grief support for those who had lost pets. But volunteers found the needs to be much greater, with some pet owners denying themselves food to provide for their dogs or cats or refusing to go to the hospital if it meant abandoning their pets, Hirsch said.

Today, the ministry also offers a prayer line, an emergency pet-sitting service, an animal food pantry and an annual pet fair with representatives from more than 50 pet rescue groups. Several unchurched people have joined the congregation through the various animal ministries, Hirsch said.

Like any mission work, it is a two-way ministry. Hirsch said he gains a greater appreciation of the role of pets in God’s creation through the Hearts and Paws program, whether it is in the tears of a macho truck driver whose cat died or, more recently, in the plight of a woman who struggled to get out of bed in the morning after losing her dog.

“Animals have the most Christlike love available. They don’t judge,” Hirsch said. “[A dog] will forgive you over and over again.”

