

Other Ways to Serve

As a Canines 4 Christ (C4C) team we love working with our dogs and bringing the love of Jesus to others. His message of hope, love, and salvation is the best news on the planet. And what a delight when our beloved dogs team up with us to help soften some hard hearts who otherwise might not listen, or to offer comfort during times of stress.

We were instructed by Jesus to "go out and make disciples" (Matt 28:19-20). But honestly sometimes that can be hard! How do we even DO that? Well Jesus gave us a tip. He told His followers to go out "two by two" (Luke 10:1, Mark 6:7). Going out in pairs is a great way to be encouraged. But I know in my own experiences I can never find a partner. No one I know in my sphere of influence is willing to go out and evangelize. No one wants to come with me to visit the elderly or pray with the broken hearted. So along comes my dog, Cookie! Yes, she is my partner when I go out. She is the other half of my "two by two."

As a C4C team we have the added blessing of being able to visit people in hospitals, senior centers, and other areas where dogs may not be allowed. We, as a team, can minister to these people and offer love and comfort. Many times, the dog is what they really want or need, and what a privilege it is to bring them that little bit of joy, a little ray of sunshine in an otherwise dark situation. Is it also a coincidence that sometimes because of the dog we can go into places and speak the name of Jesus where normally we wouldn't be able to do? Even if we don't say it, it is there, on our faithful dog's vest on a bright red banner for all to see!

But what do we do when our partner is no longer able or willing to go out? With their shorter life spans, our dogs age a bit faster than us. Health issues or just being tired from aging, or not being able to handle the environment anymore can be a reason to "retire" your dog. Maybe being in that environment causes some stress to our dogs and they aren't enjoying it as much as we do. Then there are the dogs we hope will be a good partner, but over time we realize they are not a good candidate for doing therapy dog work. If your heart is in doing this work, but your dog no longer wants to or is not able to, what do YOU do to still be able to serve in this ministry?

You and your dog can still serve Jesus and the ministry in many ways. You can still evangelize with your dog, but not in a situation where they feel "forced" to greet someone. Take a walk on the board walk with your dog wearing the vest and use the dog as a conversation starter with people. Have Bible tracts in your pocket to hand out. Walk around in a park, especially one that has a dog park (don't go in the dog park, stay outside of it) and start conversations with people about doing therapy dog work, maybe you will recruit someone! Be sure to have some C4C brochures to hand out if someone is interested. Bring your dog into stores and visit the cashiers. Being a cashier is a very stressful job and many enjoy the quick visit with a friendly dog. These visits tend to be much shorter with each person so may be easier for your dog to handle.

Maybe try some different environments for your dog and see if they like that better. For example, I will share with you something about Cookie. She did not like visiting Alzheimer's patients. It really stressed her out. But she LOVED visiting the depression unit. In that particular environment she was able to "free choice" and interact with who she wanted, and she wanted to visit everyone. She also had a little more freedom to play with them and show off by doing tricks. She comforted those that were sad and made them laugh, which encouraged her to be even funnier. She would even hug a few people, which usually she couldn't do in a more "traditional" therapy dog situation.

You can also bring your teammate to places where the vest is on display but maybe there is no real interaction between your dog and the people. For example, bring your dog to church and give a short talk about the ministry and how God has blessed you in this work. Bring your dog to a children's event such as VBS or to a school and talk about how dogs help people who are sad. You can talk about how important it is to properly take care of God's creatures. If the age is appropriate be sure to talk about ministry. Always share a message about God's love. And then top it all off with some great tricks to entertain the kids. I even have some doggie based Bible tracts and hand them to the older kids to share with their friends and many ask for extras!

Another area where your retired dog can help, depending on their temperament,

is in CGC (Canine Good Citizen) testing of new dogs being evaluated for becoming a member of C4C. All dogs who are part of a C4C team must be able to pass a CGC test. Part of this test requires that your dog can stand or walk near another dog without reacting. If your dog is retired, you can be the "other" for those going through the test. Sometimes it is hard finding a dog for the test that isn't reactive themselves.

Your retired dog can also be the "other dog" when a dog or puppy is being trained to ignore dogs. For this type of training, it is truly beneficial when the "other dog" is non-reactive so the "dog in training" can be taught some distraction training skills and learn to ignore dogs. This helps them to be successful and learn to follow basic commands even though there is a dog nearby.

One area that Cookie and I still "work" is doing private visits with people at home. This can be a more relaxing environment for your dog. In this setting, however, the pressure may be more on you to interact than on your dog. When we visit someone at home typically the first few minutes Cookie is greeting the person, but then she settles in a safe place and it's up to me to interact for the remainder of the visit. If you opt for this type of visit, please be sure to read your dog for signs of stress and allow your dog to move away to relax and make sure the home visit is a safe environment for you as well, visiting with another person at first. One of my visits the lady insists on patting Cookie on the head, and I had to firmly but gently point out to her that Cookie does not like it and showed her how to pet Cookie in an alternative way that Cookie does like. She needs this reminder every time we visit her. Cookie used to stand there and put up with it. But at one point I taught Cookie that it is perfectly okay for her to move away. Some dogs will move away on their own, Cookie needed to know it was okay for her to make that choice. Keep this in mind with your own dog. Just because they are not moving away doesn't mean they don't WANT to move away.

There are many ways that you and your dog can still serve. Watch your dog for signs they are not enjoying the "work" as much as you would like (more on that to come in a future article). Reach out to other teams to see how you or your dog can help them to achieve their goals in the ministry. Be sure to pray about it and whatever

you decide to do be sure it is God's will and is to His glory.

One final word: Thank God for every day that He blesses you with your dog.