

## PARISH NURSE IN ACTION: THE POWER OF PETS

by  
Jill Milner, Parish Nurse

Recently, I had the honor of keeping vigil with a church family, the Filsteads, during the partial paralysis and eventual sad passing, of their companion and guardian of eleven years, a great German shepherd named Hans. This was the loss of a very special family member, and akin to losing a guardian dog for the blind. Hans had been with Susan since before her brain hemorrhage, and has been a “brother” through all of her son, Matthew’s, life. He kept Bill company during Matthew’s first few weeks of life, when Susan was still in rehabilitation, and later diligently observed all of Susan’s home therapy. Once he even attempted to help as she struggled repeatedly to keep her hand flat on the table, by placing his head on her hand. All visitors, including myself, had to pass his inspection before they were allowed in the house. Extremely bright, Hans had the amazing knack of letting Susan know if a seizure was approaching, by nudging her to sit down to prevent injury. Susan claims that Hans knew she needed his help, and that he picked her out the day she met him as a puppy.



This experience renewed my belief in the importance of animals in the wellness of humans. Perhaps Hans has nudged me as well, to get going with the pet therapy project I have had in the works. I have seen the beneficial effect pet visits can have through my work in rehabilitation, and would like to share that with the congregation.

There are isolated elderly persons in the congregation who brighten enormously as they talk fondly of remembered cats, dogs, birds and even butterflies. Usually they are either not allowed to have pets in their present living situation, or would find it hard to care for one. I presently am seeking to match a gentleman with Alzheimer’s disease with visitors with a small dog, an elderly lady with an occasional cat visitor, and a bird lover with a family with an interesting bird.

If you know of someone of any age who would be cheered by a pet therapy relationship, Jim Valentine and I have a list of middle school students who have volunteered to make visits with their pets, which we could provide to you. Or if you have a well-behaved pet and would like to be a part of the project, please give one of us a call. It is helpful to know what kind and size of pet you have, and when the visits could be made. I don’t believe we have any guinea pig or bird owners yet. I also have information about Canine Companions, if you are seeking a more permanent pet helper.

The Bible is full of examples of animals being used by God for His purpose. When I encounter a special dog like Hans, I see His unconditional love incarnate. Let’s help the children and the animals spread a bit of that around.