

SAMPLER



NEW



TRICKS



HOW PET MINISTRY CAN
TRANSFORM FAITH COMMUNITIES
AND CHANGE LIVES



BETSY SINGLETON SNYDER AND GAYLE MCKUIN FISER

NEW TRICKS

HOW PET MINISTRY CAN
TRANSFORM FAITH COMMUNITIES
AND CHANGE LIVES

BETSY SINGLETON SNYDER AND GAYLE MCKUIN FISER

NEW TRICKS: How Pet Ministry Can Transform Faith Communities and Change Lives

Copyright © 2025 by Betsy Singleton Snyder and Gayle McKuin Fiser

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews. For information, write Upper Room Books®, 1908 Grand Avenue, Nashville, TN 37212.

Upper Room®, Upper Room Books®, and design logos are trademarks owned by The Upper Room®, Nashville, Tennessee. All rights reserved.

At the time of publication all websites referenced in this book were valid. However, due to the fluid nature of the internet, some addresses may have changed or the content may no longer be relevant.

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

ISBN: 978-0-8358-2074-5

Epub ISBN: 978-0-8358-2075-2

Cover design: Cary Smith

Interior design: PerfectType, Nashville, TN

For more information on resources available from The Upper Room
call 1-800-972-0433 or visit www.upperroom.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Introduction: A Tale of Two Pet People</i>	9
---	---

PART ONE: For the Love of Animals

1	Why We Care for All Creatures	19
2	Pets Are Friends and Family Who Make Us Better People	23
3	Unconditional Love	27
4	Mindfulness and Presence	31
5	Stability and Purpose	39
6	Loyalty and Devotion	45
7	Reading the Room	51

PART TWO: For the Love of Neighbors

8	Animals and People: Creating Community	59
9	Compassion and Mercy	65
10	Play	73
11	Welcoming Spaces	79
12	Teamwork	87
13	Animal Ambassadors	93
14	Loving Underdogs	99

PART THREE:
A Field Guide for Creating Pet Ministries

15	Why Communities Should Consider a Pet Ministry	107
16	Potential Pet Ministries	117
17	How to Start a Pet Ministry	125
18	Caring for Families with Pets	129
19	Therapy Animals: Pets in Ministry with People	135
20	Community Service Projects to Benefit Animals	143
21	Education, Events, and Advocating for Animals	149
EP	What's Next	155

<i>Appendix: Resources for Pet Ministry</i>	<i>157</i>
---	------------

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>175</i>
------------------------	------------

CHAPTER 1

Why We Care for All Creatures

Many who practice the Christian faith tradition believe that animals—humans included—share in God’s broad covenant. Likewise, plenty of other folks across the religious spectrum, even those who identify as spiritual-but-not-religious or something similar, also recognize the sacredness of animals as part of an interconnected creation. Our Christian tradition, along with several others, teaches that God has invited humans to produce good things for the earth and all its creatures.

But what does that mean?

In the book of Genesis, the narrator offers a beautiful, poetic account of the creation story, how the world came into being. According to this story, God made the animals on the fifth and sixth days of creation. The animals, like humans, received a shared blessing to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:22), affirming their inherent value to God. All living beings are meant to contribute; all are meant to replenish the earth.

This version of the creation story states that humans, made in God’s image, have a special role in creation—one of “dominion” (Gen. 1:26). While some have interpreted “dominion” as a license for exploitation, the larger Christian tradition teaches that it carries a responsibility to care

for creation. As part of this world, humans are not only responsible for creation but also accountable to the other animals and to the earth itself.

Our vocation is to nurture and protect creation, contributing to its flourishing, not for the long-held idea of the creation's utility but for its own intrinsic, sacred worth. Our call is to create something good, just like our Creator. We can choose to work alongside creation as partners, fostering life and goodness, or we can harm it, diminishing its vitality and ironically harming ourselves in the process. Ultimately, we can either cooperate with God's intention for creation or undermine its interdependence and fruitfulness.

In *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis addressed a wide array of issues related to our shared environment and climate change. He emphasized that "the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish."¹ Think about it like this: when we enjoy the companionship of domestic animals and benefit from their presence in our lives, we owe them abundant lives in return. They depend on us. This dependence means we have a responsibility to provide them with fulfilling lives.

That's why we share the belief that communities of faith "could take the lead in helping 'owners' to understand that we do not, properly speaking, 'own' animals at all; they are first and foremost creatures of God."² Recognizing this connection can deepen our sense of responsibility and compassion, encouraging a more conscious, respectful, and loving relationship with all living things in creation, and may remind humans that we have too often hindered and harmed life for the sake of our own consumption.

In our United Methodist tradition, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement believed, "Human beings must live into their

1. Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §69.

2. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rites: Liturgies of Animal Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 57–58.

status and role as the image of God for the benefit of the nonhuman creation. Original humans, [as depicted in the creation story], had the ability to see ‘with unspeakable pleasure, the order, the beauty, the harmony, of all creatures.’”³ Thus, creation should be a space where humans, nonhumans, and God meet and exist together—ideally a sacred and holistic relationship.

Consider Francis of Assisi, the well-known 11th-century saint—the same friar from whom Pope Francis took his papal name—who called his fellow animals “brother” and “sister.” Using these names for other creatures helps us recognize our shared origin in God and our responsibility for creation God has entrusted to us. In some sense, St. Francis offered Christians a way to see themselves as part of the creation and not separate from it, and to redefine family to include the natural world of which we are a part.

Similarly, Steven Charleston of the Choctaw Nation, who is also a retired Episcopal bishop, explains, “In order to receive the exchange offered by Native American tradition, we must put down the idea that the earth is nothing more than a vast accumulation of natural resources. Instead, we must see the earth as a living presence. We must recognize the interrelatedness of all life and begin to actively engage in protecting and learning from all our relations.”⁴ Like St. Francis, Charleston makes it clear that we and the rest of creation are all in this together.

While our faith background originates within the Methodist tradition, most of the world’s major religions and wisdom traditions teach respect and care for animals, including the active prohibition of cruelty or mistreatment. Judaism, via the Talmud, teaches a slight variation of the Golden Rule: that which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. Islam generally upholds the belief that animals are aware of God, while Hindus and Sikhs believe all living creatures have souls. Jainism,

3. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theologians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 79–80.

4. Steven Charleston, *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder’s Meditations on Hope and Courage* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 140–41.

an ancient Indian religion, emphasizes non-violence and the welfare of all creatures. Buddhism promotes ecological mindfulness and generally supports the interdependence of all life. Native American tribal traditions remind us that our survival depends on the earth, and we must help it thrive in return.

Even many who hold no religious beliefs recognize the interconnected nature of creation and are actively involved in caring for and loving animals. What unites us is the shared awareness that animals, particularly domestic animals, rely on our compassion, care, and protection.

Discussion Questions

1. How has your faith or spiritual perspective informed your ideas about God, humanity, animals, and creation?
2. In what ways has viewing the natural world as a gift influenced how you live and interact with creation, particularly with animals?
3. Many religious traditions emphasize respect and care for animals. How does your faith impact your relationship with animals and the way you treat them?
4. In what ways do you think faith communities can work together to promote compassion and care for animals and the environment?

CHAPTER 8

Animals and People: Creating Community

Several years ago, we all experienced a collective trauma—we survived a pandemic that dramatically altered the way we live. Stuck in our homes, some of them filled—or overfilled—with family, pets became anchors for many amid an uncertain world. They soothed our loneliness and anxiety and provided us with an opportunity to disconnect, even if just for a few moments, from the terrors and frustrations beyond our doors.

The soothing presence of an animal is also featured in the story of Saint Roch, a thirteenth-century pilgrim and caregiver who became the patron saint of dogs. Roch, a wealthy young man from France, was said to have been born with a red cross on his chest. After losing his parents, he devoted his life to Christ, giving away his inheritance to help the poor.

During a spiritual pilgrimage in northern Italy, Roch encountered the devastation wrought by the bubonic plague. Instead of fleeing in horror, Roch stayed and cared for the sick. As could only be expected, Roch eventually contracted the plague himself. Not wanting to burden others or risk infecting them, he retreated to the forest to die alone. However, this was not to be his fate.

Some versions of this story say that Roch had taken his family dog with him on the pilgrimage, while others claim that a stray dog found him during his time of need. Regardless of the version, this dog aided him in his recovery. According to legend, the dog licked his wounds, helping them heal, and brought him bread daily to sustain him. When times are tough, when we need healing, from illness or heavy circumstances that weigh us down, caring for one another may not only create community but sustain it.

At the beginning of the creation story in Genesis, there's a beautiful depiction of God's provision and abundance for all life. As God makes the entire world, an opportunity for community emerges, taking root in the fertile ecosystem of a garden. In that garden, God places a human and observes aloud, "It's not good that the human is alone" (Gen. 2:18).

This divine observation acknowledges the fundamental human need for companionship and community. In response, God creates the creeping things, the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the domesticated animals, but even then, God is not finished.

One of the clear intentions for creation is community—not superficial relationships, but deep, meaningful connections. God creates another human, a companion from the earth, one who carries the same essence as the original form. Both are crafted from the dust of the ground and are called to care for one another and the rest of creation. Within this divine plan, humans are also entrusted with the responsibility of nurturing companionship throughout creation.

However, we are a long way from that perfect garden where everyone has enough—enough love, compassion, resources, and support. Modern societal and technological trends often encourage division, judgment, loneliness, and isolation, rather than the meaningful relationships that help us grow and thrive. As we continue to adjust to this world with its easy technological distractions and temptation toward self-isolation, people struggle to find balance and community between home, family, and work. Many have found that their social skills have diminished, making it more difficult to connect with others.

In addition, the scar tissue of COVID-19 remains for many. Educators have noted dramatic shifts among Generation Z, often referred to as “Gen P” for “pandemic,” referencing the increased social disruption they experienced during a formative time in their lives. The shift to online learning during COVID-19 significantly reduced opportunities for interpersonal interactions, leading to weakened communication skills among many students in that age cohort.

A 2021 survey conducted by the Survey Center for American Life revealed that our social landscape has become much less conducive to creating strong communities. The authors cite lower marriage rates, declining religious involvement, and increased workplace disconnection as major contributors. A rise in virtual interactions—Zoom meetings, webinars, and social media—combined with poor urban planning has made it harder for people to form and sustain friendships. As a result, Americans have experienced a massive decline in close friendships, a phenomenon researchers have called the “friendship recession.” This shift has led to reduced community engagement, volunteerism, and civic participation.¹

In recent decades, the word “religion” has become a stand-in for closed-mindedness, anti-science, and uncompromising beliefs. However, the Latin root word, *religare*, means to bind or connect, more specifically it means to reconnect. At its core, any religious tradition can create opportunities for deep connection and community between people, enriching our quality of life. In a time when we need each other more than ever, we must be intentional about fostering relationships. Yet, in the busyness of daily life, we can easily overlook essential values of relationship building—such as respect, play, hospitality, teamwork, and shared experiences.

Pets, however, offer us unique pathways to engage more fully with one another, helping us forge deeper connections in ways we might not expect.

1. Daniel A. Cox, “America’s ‘Friendship Recession’ Is Weakening Civic Life,” *Survey Center on American Life*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/newsletter/americas-friendship-recession-is-weakening-civic-life/>.

One of our favorite places is Parnassus Books, an independent bookstore in Nashville, Tennessee. Parnassus Books is owned by author Ann Patchett and is known not just for their carefully curated selection of books, but also for their shop dogs, who greet visitors as they browse. For book lovers like us, this store can feel like a cathedral—a sacred space that celebrates the spiritual practice of reading. In our view, having dogs in a bookstore elevates it to the status of a shrine. (For all the cat lovers, Betsy also once adopted two cats from an Episcopalian bookstore.)

Ann Patchett chronicles the journey of the shop dogs in her delightful book *The Shop Dogs of Parnassus*. The first shop dogs were Lexington, a dachshund, belonging to the store's first events director, and Sparky, a rescue dog who belonged to Patchett. In keeping with the bookstore's commitment to literacy and outreach, all proceeds from the book benefit the Parnassus Books Foundation, which provides books to schools and underserved communities.

Gayle and Betsy reached out to Sarah Arnold, Parnassus Books' marketing director, to learn more about the shop dogs and how they help create community in the store. Arnold said,

The shop dogs are definitely a morale booster for our staff. We all bond over playing with the dogs and getting to laugh with them. Even when the store is busy and everything feels overwhelming, it's hard to take things too seriously when a puppy is squeaking a toy behind you—they put things into perspective. Sometimes we forget to take breaks, and the dogs are a helpful reminder to pause, eat a snack, and step outside.

Beyond providing a calming presence for those working in the store, the shop dogs also extend hospitality to customers. Arnold added, "People come into the store asking for the shop dogs all the time—often it's folks from out of town, sometimes it's local college kids who miss their dogs at home, or parents who are appeasing a dogless child. People are usually very happy to see the shop dogs."

For those uncomfortable around dogs, the store posts a sign on the door, letting visitors know that if they're afraid of dogs, they need only notify one of the booksellers, and the dogs can be put in the backroom.

It's not just people who come to see the shop dogs either. Other dogs are welcome too! As long as visiting dogs are leashed and well-behaved, they're welcome to come inside. Some have even become regulars, like a sweet pit bull mix who always wears a fun outfit.

Parnassus Books has fully embraced the joy and community-building power of its shop dogs, hosting special events such as a canine commitment ceremony, a *Where's Waldo* Day, where the dogs dress up in costume, and a mayoral race between the shop dogs. The bookstore's beloved dogs are featured on some of the store merchandise like t-shirts and stickers.

Word gets around quickly when a place is welcoming, and relationships built on this mutual kindness tend to flourish. Barnabus, Sarah Arnold's dog, formed a longstanding bond with the shop's FedEx delivery driver because the man always carried Milk-Bone snacks and gave Barnabus a treat with every delivery. However, when the route changed and a new driver took over, he arrived empty-handed. Barnabus never forgave him. Even after weeks passed, Barnabus continued barking at him, making it clear that he hadn't forgotten the missing treats.

One fall day, our own love of pets and books came together in a meaningful way when our church hosted an animal blessing with a children's literacy emphasis. As part of the event, we invited Paper Hearts, a pop-up bookstore, to set up in the parking lot, asking them to bring a wide selection of children's books. We encouraged church members and guests to buy one book to donate to a local school, ensuring that the event not only celebrated the bond between people and animals but also helped the children in the community around us.

Pets can serve as natural icebreakers, helping people communicate and connect more easily and deeply. They can also inspire creative ways to serve our neighbors, whether by supporting school children in need of books and encouragement to read more, or bringing companionship to those experiencing loneliness.

Discussion Questions

1. How do pets help foster connections between people? Can you think of a time when an animal helped you start or strengthen a relationship?
2. The story of Barnabus and the FedEx driver highlights how animals remember acts of kindness (or the lack thereof). What does this tell us about the importance of consistency and care in our relationships—with both animals and people?
3. In what ways can events like an animal blessing or a pet-friendly gathering be used to build stronger community ties? How might such events be adapted to serve different groups of people?
4. Pets are natural icebreakers. How can we use our relationships with animals to encourage hospitality, kindness, and outreach in our communities?

CHAPTER 15

Why Communities Should Consider a Pet Ministry

Our church campus is located near Pinnacle Mountain State Park. Its beauty attracts large numbers of people who bike, hike, walk, climb, and visit because they love being in nature. We humans are animals, part of nature ourselves. That's one reason it never surprises us when people say they feel closest to God—or the divine or the sacred—while outdoors. Some even tell us they have no need to go to church or participate in a religious community because of their time communing with God in nature.

The sad part of that sentiment is that Christians should know and reclaim, both in our theology and our practice, a deep sense of awe and reverence for the incredible creation of God. We need to recover the witness that all creation praises God. All we have to do is look at the psalms of praise—music from the creation itself—many of which describe how the whole world resounds together in worship: mountains, oceans, and animals alike. Christians are part of the whole creation community, not simply a group inside a building.

Over time and through a variety of experiences, we've realized the need for a ministry with neighbors who have companion animals, including those not affiliated with a faith community. Regardless of their

spiritual background, anyone can participate in pet ministry for the good of creation—for the animals and the people who love them.

Swift Social Changes

Not that long ago, most people kept pets outdoors, within their fenced yards, and didn't allow them into our homes. Today, that practice has mostly faded. For most people, our pets are members of our families. If our dogs or cats aren't sleeping in our beds, they're certainly sleeping under our roofs.

When an EF4 tornado hit the northwest part of our state of Arkansas, one survivor recounted placing her seven cats in the bathtub—their designated safe place. They were not left outside to fend for themselves. They were family and you don't leave family to endure that alone.

We've redefined what family means.

We are not the only ones to notice this societal shift. As we've already mentioned, a growing number of retailers and businesses have acknowledged the role of pets in our families by creating products in areas like clothing, bedding, transportation, accommodations, nutrition, and play that fulfill the desire to integrate pets more deeply into our lives. This trend only seemed to accelerate after the pandemic, a time when people spent significantly more time at home with their pets.

Statistics vary, but it is clear that in the U.S., we have more pets in our households than children.¹ More than half of those who have pets are Millennial women (ages 29–44). Additionally, one-third of the women in that generational cohort are religiously unaffiliated and choosing to have children later.² The U.S. birth rate recently reached a low not seen in more than three decades.

1. Forbes Advisor, "Pet Ownership Statistics," accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics/>.

2. Kinship Partners, "Millennials Choosing Pets Over Kids," accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.kinship.com/pet-lifestyle/millennials-choosing-pets-over-kids>.

The generation behind the Millennials, Gen Z (ages 13-28), also tends to say they'd rather have a pet than a child, though their attitudes and preferences may change over time. Thirty-four percent of Gen Z is religiously unaffiliated.³

These statistics help explain why Americans, including Christians, spent \$136.8 billion on pets in 2022 and are projected to spend \$157 billion in 2025. You can even see this shift reflected in home design, with features created specifically for pet families. Examples include dog show-ers and tubs, built-in feeding stations with pot fillers to keep water fresh, bookshelves designed for feline exploration and play, and furniture that cleverly conceals litter boxes or promotes inconspicuous indoor pet living.⁴

As “church ladies” with a passion for our pets, we want faith communities to do more for people and their animal companions. At the same time, we, along with many other faith leaders, can see that attendance and participation in churches have been steadily declining for years, a decline that accelerated during and after the pandemic. There are a number of reasons people cite for not seeking religious affiliation, including judgmental attitudes from Christians, partisan politics, prejudice, insularity, frequent appeals for money, and, for some, the simple joy of being in nature instead of sitting inside a building.

Yet something has been lost. Generational shifts and the decline in church attendance and affiliation have created a vacuum, with fewer opportunities for organized spiritual community. In our area, a private Facebook group for women often becomes a place where members seek advice or recommendations on everything from healthcare and educational resources to catering services and communities of faith. Regularly, anonymous posts appear from women requesting safe, inclusive communities of faith where LGBTQIA+ families will find a real welcome. Others express a longing for spaces where their children—and they themselves—can

3. Public Religion Research Institute, “Generation Z: Fact Sheet,” accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.prri.org/spotlight/prri-generation-z-fact-sheet/>.

4. Capital One Shopping, “Pet Spending Statistics,” accessed May 29, 2025, <https://capitaloneshopping.com/research/pet-spending-statistics>.

grow morally and spiritually, but without the baggage or harm they associate with a traditional church experience.

We can see that many of these women carry deep wounds. As children, teens or young adults, they were silenced, harmed, or conditioned not to ask questions. As a result, they now perceive most organized communities of faith as lacking in authentic relationships, transparency, and the freedom to question while still feeling safe and included. We suspect many of them also could not imagine churches welcoming their pets.

Unmet Societal Needs

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, did not confine himself within the walls of a church building. We feel sure he would have recognized and embraced new ways of creating “fresh expressions” of community. That’s because he went where the people were ignored and hurting—ministering to the elderly, the poor, those struggling with class divides, the incarcerated, the uneducated children, and those working dangerous jobs like miners.

Recognizing these human needs, Wesley traveled more than 250,000 miles on horseback, bringing the good news of God’s love to those marginalized by society and the staid Church of England. His horse wasn’t merely a mode of transportation—it was his valued, trusted companion. Wesley believed so deeply in that bond and God’s love for all creation that he suggested his horse would join him in the resurrection.⁵ And, in the first *Book of Discipline* published by the Methodists, eighteenth-century circuit-riding preachers were advised to ensure that their horses were well-cared for: “Be merciful to your Beast. Not only ride moderately, but see with your own eyes that your horse is rubbed and fed.”⁶

5. John Wesley, “The General Deliverance,” in *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 1872 edition, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-60-the-general-deliverance/>.

6. *The Book of Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 1784, accessed via Christian History Institute, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/uploaded/50cf81cc64f6c0.60843690.pdf>.

Wesley's travels and his commitment to forming new small groups helped people find connection and belonging, overcoming isolation and building a movement rooted in love and care. We think Wesley would have embraced this "new trick," this new inclusion of pets as a sign of our spiritual care for God's creation and one another.

One way to respond to folks' desire for community and connection is to broaden our understanding of community—especially those of us who are in religious spaces—by recognizing the vital role pets play in the lives of most of our neighbors. These neighbors are people who may be reluctant to seek out a faith community because their own experiences and ideas of religion. A pet ministry can offer a gentle entry point. Religiously unaffiliated persons may feel more comfortable participating in therapy dog training hosted by a church, where the community includes handlers, trainers, and their pets. At a time when it is difficult to build meaningful face-to-face connections, pet ministry can serve as a non-threatening way to share a more gracious, inclusive theology—one that acknowledges and honors the fullness of a family, including their beloved animals.

Another unmet need we continue to see is social isolation, which again was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As people were required to keep their distance, many began to work remotely—and some still do. Children and teachers had to adapt to online education. On top of these adjustments, the shift also disrupted emotional health, physical health, and well-being by creating barriers that made it harder to form deep, lasting relationships.

Additionally, as people age, social isolation can become more profound. Health limitations, the death of friends, and fewer opportunities for connection can lead to loneliness, depression, and cognitive decline. In our experience, therapy dogs serving in rehab centers, retirement homes, and memory care facilities can help alleviate this isolation. Often, the presence of a dog brings back fond memories of a beloved pet. What's most powerful is the dog's non-anxious presence—it doesn't see the surgical scar, mobility aid, or a person's age. It simply shows up with warmth and affection.

Pet ministry can also help another, urgent social need: children's literacy. One out of every five U.S. adults is illiterate and more than half of adults have literacy skills below a sixth-grade level—an issue that costs the U.S. economy trillions of dollars.⁷ One way pet ministry, particularly therapy dogs, can help overcome illiteracy and promote reading is through partnerships between faith groups, nonprofits, and local schools. Organizations like Pet Partners' "We Are All Ears" initiative or BARK Reading Therapy Dogs can help people of faith and their therapy animals to serve kids by listening to them practice in a safe, non-judgmental setting.

One of Betsy's dogs, Dottie, participated weekly in a third grade reading class, patiently listening to children as they read books aloud. That year, Dottie received more Christmas cards from the children at the school where she served than Betsy's own human family received!

Another urgent area of social need is mental health. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, an overwhelming majority of Americans—nine out of ten—believe this country is experiencing a mental health crisis. In their 2022 survey, respondents ranked the opioid epidemic as one of the top concerns, with more than two-thirds identifying it as a crisis rather than simply a problem. Over half of those surveyed cited mental health struggles among children and teenagers as a crisis, and a similar number said the same about severe mental illness in adults. The lingering effects of the pandemic, and other threats such as systemic racism and gun violence, were also identified as contributing factors.⁸

Pew Research added to this conversation with a 2024 survey about teens, social media, and technology, highlighting the near-constant use of digital platforms by American youth. While some apps foster connection,

7. The National Literacy Institute, "Literacy Statistics 2024–2025," accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.thenationalliteracyinstitute.com/post/literacy-statistics-2024-2025-where-we-are-now>.

8. Kaiser Family Foundation, "KFF/CNN Mental Health in America Survey Findings," October 5, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-cnn-mental-health-in-america-survey-findings/>.

heavy use has the potential to limit face-to-face interactions, leaving users increasingly less engaged in real-world relationships.⁹

To respond to this multitude of needs, faith communities can incorporate trained therapy dogs in worship settings to greet attendees, as our congregation does, or recommend facilities where these trained and certified dogs or other therapy animals can offer comfort and reduce stress and anxiety. To prepare for more extreme and acute situations—like in the wake of a disaster or mass shooting—some individuals choose to become certified with a team such as NATIONAL Crisis Response Canines. This organization demands intensive preparation and specializes in the complex physical environments present in disaster areas and provides emotional support to people coping with trauma in the aftermath of a crisis. While highly selective, this represents another meaningful way faith communities can respond when emotional needs are urgent and unpredictable.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does a pet ministry respond to current social needs like loneliness, mental health challenges, and anxiety? How might this form of ministry be uniquely positioned to reach people who feel excluded or spiritually adrift?
2. What does it say about our theology and understanding of community when we welcome pets into our ministries and sacred spaces? How can this shift help us reimagine what it means to be inclusive, compassionate, and connected?
3. In recent years, the definition of family has shifted to more often include pets. How can churches expand their vision of “family ministry” to include the bond between humans and animals?

9. Pew Research Center, “Teens, Social Media, and Mental Health,” April 22, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/>.

What new possibilities does that open for intergenerational connection and pastoral care?

4. In an increasingly polarized and anxious world, what role could pets play in healing divisions and fostering trust within and beyond the church? How can a pet ministry become a space of common ground and gentle invitation?

PETS MAKE US BETTER PEOPLE.



Pets are more than companions—they're family. Whether covered in fur, fins, or feathers, animals reflect God's love in their loyalty, joy, and unconditional love. In a world where two out of three households include a pet, churches have a powerful opportunity to connect with people through the deep bond they share with their pets.

New Tricks is your guide to launching a life-giving pet ministry that opens doors, builds relationships, and invites new people into your church. Filled with heart-warming stories of how animals of all kinds minister to us and how we, in turn, can serve them and their human families, *New Tricks* is a testament to the power of animals to transform communities and change lives.

Whether you're a pastor, lay leader, or a friend of animals big and small, *New Tricks* provides everything you need to integrate pet ministry into the mission of your church or faith group.

Betsy Singleton Snyder is a United Methodist minister and the author of *Stepping on Cheerios: Finding God in the Chaos and Clutter of Life*. She lives in Little Rock, Arkansas with her husband, four sons, two dogs, and two cats.

Gayle McKuin Fiser is a commissioned Community of Hope Lay Chaplain, a certified Stephen Minister and a Congregational Care Minister. She and her husband live in Little Rock, Arkansas with their two therapy dogs.

The authors have nearly twenty years of pet ministry experience, in their own church and teaching other faith communities.

AVAILABLE SEPTEMBER 2025

Paperback | 978-0-8358-2074-5 | \$19.99

Ebook also available.

Preorder now and save 20% off
with promo code **NT20**.

UpperRoom.org/NewTricks

Offer expires September 1, 2025.



UpperRoom.org • 800.972.0433