

Home in later life

Kathryn Cressman

Home. This is a loaded, complicated word with many meanings, feelings, and descriptors attached to it. Consider the various common phrases and words that include the word in it: *home away from home*; *home sweet home*; *there's no place like home*; *homebody*; *homesick*. These phrases and words all suggest a longing for somewhere, someplace. Home can be a noun: a house or particular space. It can be an adjective: used to describe something of belonging, such as a home community or home church. Home can also be a feeling: when one describes a place as feeling *homey*. In this essay, I explore more deeply what home is, focusing specifically on home from the perspective of older adults who often face transitions in their living arrangements. I investigate what makes a place home for any age and what the idea of one's eternal home might look like. I explore questions such as what needs to be considered when an older adult makes decisions around their living arrangements and how can they be supported, what challenges they commonly face, and how spirituality and religion can shape one's transition when leaving one's family home.

What is home?

In her book *Homebody*, interior designer Joanna Gaines labels herself as a homebody. Her home is her favorite place to be. She describes this feeling:

*I'm a homebody. There's really no other way to say it. The world can feel overwhelming with its pace and noise, its chaos and expectations. Home for me is like the eye of a hurricane. There's a certain calm I experience there no matter what is swirling about on the outside. Home is where I feel safe, it's the place where I am most known and most loved. If you were to ask my family, I'm pretty sure they would tell you the same thing about themselves: there is nowhere they would rather be than home. I think it's because our story is all around us there.*¹

1 Joanna Gaines, *Homebody: A Guide to Creating Spaces You Never Want to Leave* (New York: Harper Design, 2018), 8-9.

Gaines's description of home provides insight into the various aspects of what makes a particular space a home: comfort, security, and a place

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of belonging. Holly Nelson-Becker suggests that “home serves as a metaphor for being comfortable in the world and finding one’s place.”² There are endless metaphors that symbolize home. Home acts as a nest or a refuge and is perhaps where one has deeply embedded family roots.³ Home is an anchoring point.⁴ It is the place we depart from and return to each day. Walter Brueggeman suggests there is historical meaning to our homes: “It is the place where we raised

our children, returned to after hard days at work, celebrated birthdays, and mourned the loss of loved ones.”⁵ Our home has the opportunity to tell the story of our lives; indeed, there is an autobiographical sense to how our homes tell such stories.⁶

A dwelling, however, does not simply become a home without intentionality and the process of habituation. Houses, assisted living residences, and long-term care rooms are all empty spaces. A transformation from space to place must occur to create a home within these spaces.⁷ This transformation relates to any conversion of space to place, whether it is unpacking a suitcase in a hotel room or taking an empty apartment and filling it with personal, meaningful contents. Rowles and Bernard explain that “the creation of place involves the *use* of an environment, our pattern

2 Holly Nelson-Becker, *Spirituality, Religion, and Aging: Illuminations for Therapeutic Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 197.

3 See Douglas Burton-Christie, “Living Between Two Worlds: Home, Journey and the Quest for Sacred Place,” *Anglican Theological Review* 79, no. 3 (1997): 416.

4 See Graham D. Rowles and Miriam Bernard, “The Meaning and Significance of Place in Old Age,” in *Environmental Gerontology: Making Meaningful Places in Old Age*, edited by Graham D. Rowles and Miriam Bernard (New York: Springer, 2003), 11.

5 Quoted in Gerald W. Kaufman and L. Marlene Kaufman, *Necessary Conversations: Between Families and Their Aging Parents*, 2nd ed. (New York: Good Books, 2017), 81.

6 See Graham D. Rowles and John F. Watkins, “History, Habit, Heart, and Hearth: On Making Spaces into Places,” in *Aging Independently: Living Arrangements and Mobility*, edited by K. Warner Schaie, Hans-Werner Wahl, Heidrum Mollenkopf, and Frank Oswald (New York: Springer, 2003), 79.

7 Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance,” 9.

of behaviour within a setting.”⁸ I would suggest that in addition to the use of the environment, the creation of place is also dependent on others who are occupying the space. While reading between the lines of Joanna Gaines’s words, one gathers that her feelings of being known and loved are connected to the other individuals occupying the space alongside her. The transformation of space to place results in many feelings: “familiarity, security, centering, ownership, control, territoriality, display, comfort and identity.”⁹

Having a home brings freedom but also responsibility. One has the responsibility to look after a home; there is regular upkeep and maintenance. Yet, there is reward to this responsibility in that one has the freedom to express identity and showcase their interests and personality with home decor and perhaps an outdoor garden.¹⁰ A huge amount of emotion is attached to home. Maya Angelou puts it well: “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”¹¹

Eternal home

A spiritual person may wonder about their eternal home. Jesus speaks of the home waiting for us in heaven, as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson: “You trust God, don’t you? Trust me. There is plenty of room for you in my Father’s home. If that weren’t so, would I have told you that I’m on my way to get a room ready for you? And if I’m on my way to get your room ready, I’ll come back and get you so you can live where I live. And you already know the road I’m taking” (John 14:2, MSG). Richard Rohr believes home is bi-directional. One direction points to where we came from and the other to where we are going, almost like our life is a full circle.¹² Perhaps our eternal home is one that is familiar since this is where we originally came from. God sent us on this journey of life, anticipating our return. As Henri Nouwen writes,

This is what life is about. It is being sent on a trip by a loving God, who is waiting at home for our return and is eager to

8 Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance,” 9.

9 Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance,” 9.

10 Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance,” 12.

11 Quoted in Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance,” 3.

12 Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 88.

*watch the slides we took and hear about the friends we made. When we travel with the eyes and ears of the God who sent us, we will see wonderful sights, hear wonderful sounds, meet wonderful people . . . and be happy to return home.*¹³

Inside each of us is what Rohr describes as a “homing device,” often referred to as one’s soul, spirit, or True Self.¹⁴ Until we have encountered this Spirit and connected with God, Rohr would say we are still searching

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for home. He suggests we are homesick, which presents itself in today’s context as many emotions and experiences: “loneliness, isolation, longing, sadness, restlessness, or even a kind of depression.”¹⁵ Rohr believes that this finding of True Self or one’s soul (however we want to name it) is eternal. This can only be found by digging deep and responding to what God planted inside of us

from the beginning. Rohr suggests that religion’s mistake is believing that this discovery is pointing toward heaven, to the next world, rather than accepting it can occur now. According to Rohr, we have the opportunity to enter our eternal home on earth. This home is a state of being, a state of knowing one’s true self and living out what God has called us to do. Nevertheless, for many Christians, the words from John’s Gospel are also comforting in anticipation of what comes next. Home is the safe, loving, welcoming destination of being in relationship with God. Eternal home is both a feeling and a destination.¹⁶

Housing options for older adults

Most older adults prefer to remain in their home—a home of familiarity.¹⁷ This could be the home they have raised their family in or a home they

13 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image, 1994), 106–107.

14 Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 88.

15 Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 91.

16 For an Irish folk worship song that resonates with this perspective, see Rend Collective, “Coming Home,” by Chris Llewellyn and Gareth Gilkeson, Thank You Music Ltd., 2015.

17 In this essay, I use the term *older adult* interchangeably with *senior* and *elder*.

downsized to later in life. For this option to be viable, things like ramps, widened hallways, main floor bedroom and bathroom, walk-in showers, and grab bars may need to be considered. One's local health integration network (LHIN) can provide in-home care, which helps seniors remain at home. These services include health care, personal care, home care, and end-of-life or palliative care.¹⁸ Retirement homes, or senior communities, are an option for individuals who, for various reasons, need to move from their family home. Many communities provide a tiered level of living, offering living arrangements to suit the needs of the individual. Communities such as Parkwood Senior Community in Waterloo, Ontario, offer assisted living, supported living, and independent living options, which, based on the tier one chooses, have various services included. These could include meals, housekeeping, personal care services, or medication administration. In addition to these various tiers, homes such as Parkwood also offer a long-term care residence for seniors who require a higher degree of support, most often due to health and mobility issues.

Some seniors choose to move from their family home to a neighborhood composed of others in their same stage of life, often referred to as adult lifestyle communities. These communities typically have recreational

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programs available targeting the age and stage of the residents. This option still allows for independent living with the advantage of yard upkeep and maintenance provided. Home sharing or multigenerational living is another option for seniors and families to consider. Pearl Lantz writes about home sharing as an opportunity for the housing situation to be a win-win for both sides of the agreement. She suggests that home

sharing can take various forms.¹⁹ One option is for the older adult to be paired with someone who is not a family member. A Canadian program called Home Share Canada helps individuals partner together to create a living situation that provides the older adult with extra help and the

¹⁸ "Home and community care," Ontario Government, 2019, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/homecare-seniors>.

¹⁹ Pearl Lantz, "Home Sweet Home: Housing Options," in *Reinventing Aging*, edited by Shirley Yoder Brubaker and Melodie M. Davis (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 100-101.

younger person a place to live, who could possibly not afford it on their own.²⁰ Home sharing could also look like multigenerational family living where the senior family member moves in with their adult children or grandchildren. Perhaps part of the house is converted to a “granny flat,” or as with traditional Mennonite communities, a *dawdi haus* is part of the farm and the grandparents live there.²¹ Lantz also suggests the idea of multiple seniors moving in together as housemates, helping to look after each other.²² Such options are dependent on the individual care needs of the senior and what is manageable for others to provide.

What to consider when making a housing decision

People are living longer than previous generations, which makes the decision of where to live more complicated than in the past. It is no longer the norm or expectation for families to take in an older parent, and more commonly adult children are not living near their aging parents to provide care. Even if adult children are close by, many seniors feel opposed to the idea of placing the burden of care on their children.²³ According to Gerald W. Kaufman and L. Marlene Kaufman, “Various studies show that eighty percent of us say that we want to stay in our homes as long as possible, but few of us have given much thought to other possibilities. It doesn’t seem to be on our adult children’s minds either.”²⁴

Many aspects of life need to be considered when discerning the best housing situations for older adults. These include the ability to carry out activities of daily living such as cooking, cleaning, and yard maintenance; age; health status; whether both parents are living; the size, condition, and adaptability of current property and the cost of maintaining the property; the proximity and availability of family members; access to community services such as doctors, hospital, church, and shopping; transportation needs; financial status; and personal preferences, such as whether one prefers to be with peers or people of varied ages.²⁵

20 “Home,” Home Share Canada, <https://www.homesharecanada.org/>.

21 Lantz, “Home Sweet Home,” 101.

22 Lantz, “Home Sweet Home,” 101.

23 Kaufman and Kaufman, *Necessary Conversations*, 82.

24 Kaufman and Kaufman, *Necessary Conversations*, 84.

25 This list is derived from Kaufman and Kaufman, *Necessary Conversations*, 85; Lantz, “Home Sweet Home,” 96–97.

Staying at home poses greater challenges if the health and mobility of the older adult begins to decline. Older adults spend much more time at home compared to their younger counterparts, and it is common for seniors to adopt their favorite place in the house as a home base that is comfortable, provides a good view to outside, and allows for necessary items to be in reach. This concentrated time at home binds them to their home even more, while still allowing them the control of their environment.

Leaving a familiar home, whether to long-term care or simply downsizing to a smaller house, can be approached with two basic mindsets or attitudes. One can approach a move with openness and preparedness. Lantz suggests the opportunity for seniors to “seize the moment.” She writes of the opportunity to “enter this stage just as you would the college age: with curiosity, with anticipation, by doing self-inventory and researching the options.”²⁶ Alternatively, one could have a more passive mindset, waiting for others to make decisions. This leaves the senior with the feeling of being taken captive.²⁷

One’s mindset is determined by many life variables. Perhaps an individual has relocated many times throughout their life and one more move is not a big deal. Some individuals may be open and energized by the opportunities awaiting them; perhaps a move to a retirement home is exciting. There is opportunity to make new friends and devote more time to favorite hobbies and less time to responsibilities like chores and maintenance. For some the idea of downsizing is fearful. It is difficult to let go of personal objects, and for some there is fear of losing memories tied to a physical location. The physical cues of a familiar environment are no longer there to prompt a memory.²⁸ Openness and preparedness might also be influenced by whether the senior is married, single, or widowed. If the older adult is widowed, it can be more frightening to approach a move.

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26 Lantz, “Home Sweet Home,” 104.

27 See Lantz, “Home Sweet Home,” 91.

28 See Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance of Place,” 16.

When leaving home is challenging

Home provides a place of emotional safety and refuge. It is a place of comfort and belonging. Imagine the feelings provoked when home no longer exists. As Rowles and Bernard observe, “to take [home] away is an often unknowing but generally pernicious cruelty.”²⁹ Such a description can feel heavy by well-meaning family members who have to make such decisions

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and can leave them feeling guilty for urging their parents to move against their will. Consider an example from writer Valerie Schultz who was left to make the decision of moving her mother to assisted living in a senior residence. Despite attempts to live with the Schultz’s sister, this eighty-year-old mother with Parkinson’s needed the care provided by a senior residence. As a daughter, however, Schultz felt guilt: “I feel that I have failed to live up the multigenerational ideal for

a functioning family, of providing a home where the wise grandmother enriches the daily life of her offspring’s family with wit and grace, of caring for an aging parent with the same love and attention with which she once cared for me. Instead, I have warehoused my mother.”³⁰ In this case, the mother adjusted and is thriving in her new home.

Knowledge of the difficulties of leaving one’s home might propel family members to help their aging family members transform their new space into home as best as possible. Consider the consequences if one is not able to make their new space into a place of home; they are left to feel “out of place” or “homeless.” Rowles and Bernard suggest this is the fate of many older people in these vulnerable years and is a terrible way to spend one’s final months or years of life.³¹

The challenge of leaving one’s familiar home could be compared to the biblical narrative of exile faced by the Israelites when the Babylonians took over. The feelings experienced by the Israelites are like those of many older adults who are forced to leave their beloved home. Feelings of loss,

29 Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance of Place,” 12.

30 Valerie Schultz, “It Takes a Village: Finding a Place My Aging Mother Can Call Home,” *America*, May 27, 2013, 15–16.

31 Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance of Place,” 18.

grief, and captivity are reasonable during circumstances such as these. There are only memories left from their home. Lantz suggests that individuals be encouraged to lament their circumstances just as the Israelites did in their situation thousands of years ago.³²

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for themselves that propels a move in the first place. Perhaps cognitive health is also failing. These older adults are grieving what they have had to give up: their home, personal environment, and autonomy, which scarcely exists in an institutional setting.³⁴ Individuals enter

this new phase of life with many anxieties, including the concern of sharing space with strangers and the lack of privacy.³⁵ The transition can be a lonely one with the past feeling absent since no one at this new place shares their personal history.³⁶

Friedman explains three critical spiritual challenges in long-term care settings. First is the feeling of empty, burdensome time. All of a sudden, one's daily life is scheduled, and the routine is not individually controlled. Time feels like an endless desert. Days pass by slowly, and time is spent waiting—for medications, meals, or toileting. Second, one often feels that their life is meaningless. They are no longer contributing to a greater purpose in the same way they once did. Finally, it is common for individuals to feel disconnection. They are isolated and feel "cut off from the past, from familiar surroundings, from past life roles." It is likely they have lost many friends and family members to death or distance.³⁷

32 Lantz, "Home Sweet Home," 92.

33 See Dayle A. Friedman, "Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life," in *Aging, Spirituality and Religion: A Handbook*, edited by Melvin A. Kimble, Susan H. McFadden, James W. Ellor, and James J. Seeber (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 362.

34 Friedman, "Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life," 362.

35 See Susan H. McFadden and John T. McFadden, *Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship and Flourishing Communities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 131.

36 See Friedman, "Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life," 363.

37 Friedman, "Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life," 363–65, quote from 364–65.

Since “many older people resist calling places of care home,”³⁸ it is important for family members and care providers to know how to alleviate some of these challenges, allowing the feeling of homelessness to be avoided. Rowles and Bernard make a few tangible suggestions. Prior to the move it is helpful for the older adult to have actual or simulated visits to the new location, while also ensuring that there will be space for special personal objects to come along when they relocate. If possible, the opportunity for return visits to cherished residences or neighborhoods proves to be beneficial in sustaining continuity. Additionally, maintaining memberships and participation in various clubs or church is significant

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in reducing loss. In his retirement, my dad was a volunteer driver who took seniors from local long-term care homes on afternoon drives. Typically, they would end up driving through the countryside where these individuals grew up or raised their family—a special excursion for these residents who otherwise are physically isolated from their past. Rowles and Bernard explain that many long-term care homes are using reminiscence groups as a means for seniors to

connect to their past, even with others who have no connection to them at all. Photographs of former houses are helpful for reminiscing and prove to be significantly helpful for individuals with Alzheimer’s. In today’s age of social media, technology is becoming a popular way for long-term care residents to connect to their family members outside of the home.³⁹

From a spiritual perspective, Friedman offers suggestions to curb the challenges faced in a long-term care setting. I especially find her emphasis on “ritual time” profound, especially for individuals struggling with the reality of empty, meaningless time. Ritual time focuses on the pattern of significant moments in life.⁴⁰ Friedman explains that “in religious life, time is divided into cycles of the week, month, and year.”⁴¹ In the Jewish context this weekly cycle would be Sabbath to Sabbath; perhaps in

38 Nelson-Becker, *Spirituality, Religion, and Aging*, 197.

39 See Rowles and Bernard, “Meaning and Significance of Place,” 18–19.

40 Friedman, “Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 365.

41 Friedman, “Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 365.

the Christian context a yearly cycle would be Advent to Advent. When looking at time from a ritual perspective rather than from a present, chronological perspective, one can see that “today exists in relationship to significant moments. There is always something to look forward to and something to savour.”⁴² It creates security and continuity. One can remember the past while in the present context—perhaps remembering the same religious events from childhood, such as what one grew up doing on the Sabbath or a yearly tradition to mark Advent. One can see that life is linked by many moments of rituals. It is a continuum, and the older adult can connect where they are now to something familiar.⁴³ Additionally, by focusing on ritual time, one can find comfort knowing that rituals will come again, some weekly. The significance of ritual time is important for

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Religion in general is helpful for seniors in long-term care homes who see themselves as powerless, worthless, and dependent.⁴⁴ Despite the societal norm of worth being connected to productivity, everyone has worth as a creature made in the image of God. Everyone “has a contribution to make in the com-

munity of faith and in service to the divine.”⁴⁵ I think of an elderly woman once part of our church family, who contributed significantly to the assisted-living community around her. She edited the community newsletter and provided friendship to the people in her midst. Religion can build community within the residence. Through passing of the peace or singing a hymn together, people connect in ways they might otherwise not.⁴⁶

Religion can build connections between the residents and outside faith communities as well. Churches can provide worship experiences for

42 Friedman, “Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 366.

43 Friedman, “Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 366.

44 Friedman, “Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 366.

45 Friedman, “Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 367.

46 As Friedman writes, “Sharing in worship forges community within the long-term care institution” (“Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life,” 368).

those in long-term care homes or offer programs of special music throughout the year. I remember various occasions of having the responsibility as a child to lead worship at local long-term care homes. This is an important experience for the child and the senior. The child becomes exposed to seniors, and the older adults welcome the visit from young children. Religion helps residents to know they are connected to the outside world. There is faith beyond the walls of the residence; participating in the yearly religious calendar connects them to that broader world even from inside the long-term care home.⁴⁷ Connection to a former church community can also still be maintained if the long-term care home is in the same community. Church pastoral care teams often have programs in place to stay connected with their members who have moved to long-term care. Regular pastoral care visits are often meaningful experiences for both the resident and the visitor.

Conclusion

I have often been concerned about the concept of institutionalized senior living, while understanding that for some this is the only feasible option. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I questioned the institutionalization of such vulnerable people even more. I visited my ninety-three-year-old aunt recently. As I left, I felt sad knowing how lonely and isolated she is as a widow with adult children living hours away. I have witnessed the stress of grandparents, mine and my husband's, being urged to move off the farm to a place in the nearby town, making care more manageable. This was met with resistance and took time for the new space to be transformed into home. I watched my mom care for my ill and aging father at home and the incredible patience, strength, and courage that took. Despite the toll this took on the caregivers, with the help of nurses and personal support workers, my father was able to live out his days in a familiar environment.

A recent conversation with my mother-in-law provided a glimpse into the rich experience of multigenerational living. She grew up on a traditional Mennonite farm with the farmhouse divided into two parts. The young family lived on one side and grandparents were on the other—two homes within one house. Each home was independent of the other, with separate kitchens, bathrooms, and living spaces. Living closely like this provided a relationship of reciprocity. It was helpful for the younger generation to have an extra set of hands next door and a place for the

47 Friedman, "Spiritual Challenges of Nursing Home Life," 368.

children to visit when they needed a break from the immediate family. It also provided a safe, familiar place for the grandparents to age where they still found meaning and purpose. Grandma would help with tasks

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like mending, and Grandpa had regular farm and garden chores right up until he died. Thankfully, this situation did not require intense physical and personal care, as both Grandma and Grandpa died quite suddenly from a stroke and heart attack, respectively. Once Grandma died, more responsibility was put on the younger mother to care for her aging and now widowed father. This was a busy time for her, often making meals

in stages to feed her father and her busy, growing family. She also looked after doing her father's laundry. My mother-in-law reflects fondly on this experience of growing up with grandparents as part of the family.⁴⁸ Sadly, this multigenerational living seems to be a thing of the past in Western society. Yet, it is much more common in other parts of the world and has biblical resonance with stories like Jacob moving to Egypt to be cared for by his son Joseph or Ruth leaving her homeland behind her to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, to her home.

Ultimately, there may be no one right answer for what home should look like for older adults. Although I struggle with the institution of long-term care homes, some individuals are brought back to life by the care they receive. Like many things in life, the best option is based on the individual. In this instance, many variables determine what is best. For those making the transition from one home to another, I conclude with this prayer of transition:

God of protection and provision, we are grateful for your security, for the roof over our heads every day of our lives. All over the world there are people living in desolate circumstances. We thank you for the privilege we have.

Today marks a transition for our loved one. Today they embark on a new journey, a journey that is bittersweet.

48 Lois Cressman, interview by author, Plattsville. March 27, 2020.

As they leave their family home of many years, may they be reminded of the precious time experienced within its walls—the comfort, refuge, warmth, protection, growth, joy, and even sadness felt there over the years. May they carry the memories made with their family.

As they approach this new home, may their anxiety be minimal. May some excitement dwell within them as they enter a new phase of life. We pray for this space to quickly transform into a place of comfort and become home. May this be a home filled with love and with many cheerful visitors.

God, help us to remember our home here on earth is only temporary. We know an eternal home is found in you. May this knowledge be a comfort to us in times of transition.

We pray this is Jesus's name. Amen.

About the author

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