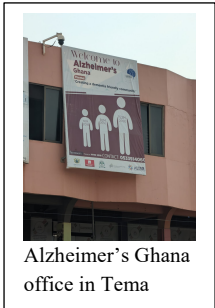
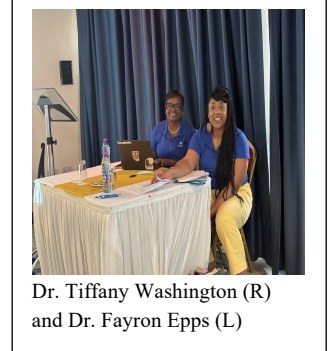


Enhancing Dementia Awareness Through Faith Leadership in Ghana Impact Brief

With support from the Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC), the University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK) College of Social Work (CSW) partnered with the Alzheimer's & Related Disorders Association of Ghana ("Alzheimer's Ghana") to deliver a culturally grounded dementia education initiative designed to strengthen public understanding and reduce stigma surrounding dementia. Building upon the Alter model originally developed in Black faith communities in the United States by Dr. Fayron Epps of the University of Texas Health Science Center San Antonio, this project extended structured dementia education into the Ghanaian context by equipping faith leaders, trusted first responders within their communities, with scientific knowledge and practical tools. The full-day workshop took place on January 8 at the Lancaster Accra Hotel, convening faith leaders and community stakeholders for an intensive, evidence-informed educational experience. Across sub-Saharan Africa, dementia remains significantly under-recognized and stigmatized. Symptoms are often attributed to witchcraft, spiritual attack, stress, or moral failure rather than understood as neurological disease. Families frequently navigate caregiving without formal support, and many individuals never receive medical evaluation. Recognizing that pastors and church leaders are often the first point of contact when families notice behavioral changes, the initiative positioned faith leadership as a critical pathway for public health education.



Alzheimer's Ghana office in Tema



Dr. Tiffany Washington (R) and Dr. Fayron Epps (L)

Education at the Center. The workshop was intentionally structured around education. Participants engaged in sessions covering:

- Brain physiology and how dementia physically alters the brain
- Early signs and symptoms, including short-term memory loss and behavioral changes
- Risk factors such as hypertension, diabetes, head injury, and environmental exposures
- The distinction between dementia, depression, and other mental health conditions
- Strategies for communicating with and supporting individuals living with dementia
- Practical approaches for fostering dementia-friendly congregational environments

Visual brain imagery and interactive dialogue allowed participants to connect spiritual understanding with medical science. For many attendees, this was the first time dementia had been explained as a disease process involving measurable brain changes rather than solely spiritual interpretation. One participant reflected, *"We attributed it to witchcraft before... but today we are able to take preventive measures. This education helps us understand what is happening."* Rather than dismissing faith perspectives, facilitators affirmed the importance of prayer and pastoral care while introducing medical knowledge that reduces stigma and harmful labeling. The result was not replacement of belief systems, but integration, allowing leaders to provide more informed, compassionate guidance.



Live radio interview at GBC Obonu 96.5 FM public radio station under the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation.

Dr. Tiffany Washington (M), Mr. Venance Dey (R), Alzheimer's Ghana CEO and Founder, and Adrienne D. Jones (L), Executive Director of SageNavigator, Inc.

Diverse Leadership Engagement. Eighteen leaders participated in the workshop, including head pastors, reverends, assistant pastors, Sunday school teachers, and healthcare professionals. The interdisciplinary composition fostered dialogue across theological, clinical, and community domains.

Participants raised complex, real-world questions about hallucinations, behavioral agitation, younger-onset dementia, environmental toxins, and caregiving strain. Discussions were candid and culturally grounded, revealing the lived realities of families navigating cognitive decline. Another participant shared: *“When someone in my congregation forgets or begins to behave differently, we must not just pray, we must also understand.”* This statement reflects the transformative shift the workshop aimed to foster: pairing spiritual leadership with informed health literacy.

Research Integration and Preliminary Findings. A distinguishing feature of this initiative was the integration of education with structured evaluation. Ten of the 18 participants voluntarily engaged in a research component designed to assess dementia knowledge and attitudes before and after the workshop. Using validated assessment tools, the study examined how culturally tailored education influences understanding of dementia and perceptions toward individuals living with the condition. Preliminary findings demonstrate strong engagement with educational



UTK CSW PhD student, Shaniqua Richardson, participating in a traditional Ghanaian naming ceremony.

content and meaningful shifts in how participants interpret symptoms, particularly in distinguishing neurological disease from spiritual causation. These early results are already being used to support applications for external funding to scale and rigorously evaluate the program in additional regions of Ghana and across other African contexts. By pairing community education with measurable outcomes, the project contributes not only to local impact but also to the broader scholarship of global community engagement and dementia education.

Impact. Beyond individual knowledge gains, the workshop strengthened the capacity of Alzheimer’s Ghana by expanding its network of faith-based partners and increasing visibility beyond the Greater Accra metropolitan area. The

gathering created new channels for sustained collaboration and positioned faith leaders as advocates for dementia-informed communities. Participants expressed clear intentions to integrate what they learned into sermons, pastoral counseling, and congregational outreach efforts. Impact also extended to student training in international community-engaged scholarship, providing hands-on experience in culturally responsive research, cross-cultural collaboration, and the ethical integration of community knowledge into intervention design and implementation. Graduate research assistant and PhD student, Shaniqua Richardson, stated *“My experience with the Alter Ghana research team showed me how essential cultural understanding and community partnership are to delivering meaningful and effective interventions.”*

Impact at a Glance

Location: Lancaster Accra Hotel

Date: January 8, 2026

Participants: 18 faith and community leaders

Research Participants: 10 completed pre- and post-assessments

Core Outcomes:

- Increased knowledge of dementia signs, symptoms, and risk factors
- Greater distinction between dementia and spiritual or mental health conditions
- Reduced stigma in framing cognitive decline
- Strengthened university-community partnership
- Expanded Alzheimer’s Ghana faith-based engagement network
- Preliminary data supporting external funding applications

Looking Forward. As populations age across Africa, the demand for culturally responsive dementia education will grow. This ESC-supported initiative demonstrates how community-engaged scholarship can bridge rigorous science with faith leadership in ways that are respectful, reciprocal, and impactful. The January 8 workshop marked more than a training, it catalyzed a shift in understanding. By equipping faith leaders with accurate information and practical tools, the project laid the foundation for dementia-informed congregations that respond with knowledge, compassion, and dignity. Through this investment, the ESC enabled a model of global engagement where education, research, and community partnership converge to improve lives and expand knowledge across borders.

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Respectfully submitted, Dr. Tiffany Washington, Associate Professor, UTK College of Social Work