



Ministry with the Aging

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The Greening of America by Charles Reich (New York: Random House, 1970) became a best-seller because it analyzed the youth culture of the sixties. Were one to write a book about one age segment of the eighties, the title could well be *The Graying of America*, for the elderly are attaining a high degree of visibility. The 1980 census reveals that 11.3% of the total population of the United States is aged sixty-five and older.¹ Projections indicate that this percentage will increase to 15% by the turn of the century. Even in view of the youth-centered contemporary culture, aging has come of age and the aging and older adults cannot be ignored as a social force. As such, the elderly cannot be ignored in a congregation's ministry.

However, ministry with the aging must first come to terms with presuppositions, misconceptions, and negative attitudes toward those who are considered "old." These attitudes, presuppositions, and conceptions come out of the irrational and illogical fear of growing old which ignores the reality of the aging process. Because "age takes hold of us by surprise," as Goethe observed, congregations often perpetuate this fear of aging in their preference for younger pastors. Self-study reports of vacant congregations often voice the desirability of calling a younger pastor in order to "attract the youth." Although youth are the future of the church, the aging and older adults are the church of today. Thus ministry with the aging should not be neglected in the congregation's total mission.

But ministry too often focuses uncritically on the middle years as a time of *doing* ministry, and on the years of youth and old age as a time of *needing* ministry. Ministry, however, spans a whole lifetime, and aging reaches beyond that one tiny part of a lifetime. One becomes *old* as a result of a process; and although this process becomes most obvious in the last decades of life, aging is synonymous with being alive. "[Aging] is closely related to our human finitude and points as a constant reminder to the limited amount of time available for living within the life cycle."²

The distinguishing quality of the relationship between ministry and aging appears in the word *with*. Ministry *with* the aging implies that ministry takes place among persons who interact in a dynamic and evolving relationship to-

¹*Supplementary Reports, 1980 Census of Population* (U.S.A. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, PC80-SI-1, May, 1981).

²William M. Clements, "Introduction," *Ministry with the Aging*, ed. W. M. Clements (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 9.

gether. *With* exhibits a communal quality, a commonality of experience, that *to* or *for* lacks.

Ministry is an interacting give-and-take, and it takes place *with* the aging as a shared service together.

Ministry as a “shared service together” has sound theological bases. Since aging is ultimately a matter of life and death, a Christian appreciation of the later years begins with a conception of God, the church, and the world. So this appreciation of the later years encompasses the opportunities and joys as well as the responsibilities, problems, and suffering those later years contain.

But since there is no theology of aging as such, we must look to established appropriate biblical and confessional norms upon which to formulate theological affirmations. Thus, the theological foundations for ministry with the aging are built upon the “biblically and confessionally based theology which is applied to the peculiar problems of the older adult.”³

The Social Statement of the Lutheran Church in America, entitled *Aging and the Older Adult*, begins, “Life is a gift of God, and aging is a natural part of living;” and it continues with the affirmation, “God’s love for all persons is creative and unconditional.”⁴

God’s unconditional love is the fundamental theological affirmation for ministry with the aging. God’s love is an unconditional, self-giving, suffering love that spends itself for the sake of the loved one. No one lies outside the breadth of God’s love, nor is anyone forgotten. The Christian community, the object of God’s love embodied in Christ, is the channel through which this love flows through and out to all human beings, young and old alike.

The second theological affirmation for ministry with the aging interrelates love with justice. “Human beings have dignity not because they have achieved success or the esteem of the world, but because they are made in the image of God.”⁵ Being made in God’s image, humans have been given the capacity to relate to God in responsible freedom.

A just society affirms the physical needs of all its citizens. But the aging frequently suffer injustice in the abuse of their dignity and rights, and this abuse limits their freedom of choice and movement. The Christian community as the channel by which God’s love flows out to the world upholds the dignity of all human beings. It looks upon all of human existence from the perspective of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ which gives hope in every stage of life.

A third theological affirmation for ministry with the aging is baptism. “[Baptism] means unconditional acceptance by a gracious God and forms the basis for a lifelong confidence.”⁶ Baptism frees the Christian to a vocation—a calling—that empowers the Christian to live for others by faithfully serving the neighbor in love and justice. The church’s ministry with older adults therefore operates on the principle that “older members of the church have skills, wis-

³Martin J. Heineken and Ralph R. Hellerich, *The Church’s Ministry with Older Adults: A Theological Basis* (New York: Lutheran Church in America, Division for Mission in North America, 1976) 1.

⁴Lutheran Church in America, Social Statement, *Aging and the Older Adult* (Chicago Convention, 1978) 1.

⁵*Ibid.*, 1.

⁶*The Fullness of Life*, ed. Cedric W. Tilberg (New York: Lutheran Church in America, Division for Mission in North America, 1980) 185.

dom, and experience to share in exercising the universal priesthood of the baptized,”⁷ and thus the church includes them in the ministry of serving love to all people.

Baptism also offers confidence in the face of death that becomes more immediate with

each passing year. The Bible takes death seriously; but in implanting the hope of resurrection, it puts earthly life in the proper perspective that enables the Christian to live *in* but not *of* the world.

An agenda for action in ministry with the aging develops from these basic theological affirmations. Before proceeding to guidelines for an agenda, however, another factor must be taken into consideration. This is the general opinion expressed by contemporary society (apart from those working in the disciplines of gerontology, sociology, and psychology) reflected in generalizations that state

Older people have “had it.”
Older people don’t “need it.”
Older people aren’t “worth it.”
Nothing significant can be done.⁸

In order to break the vicious circle of these generalizations, the congregation has to muster the courage to admit that too little has been done in the past in ministry with the aging, and that most of what is now being done is done in bits and pieces. These bits and pieces have few insights either from biblical sources or theological reflection on the one hand, or from gerontological research and practice on the other. Also many congregations that engage in ministry with the aging have not consistently evaluated their agendas by testing their effectiveness so that better ones can be developed. The “scientific” and “spiritual” approaches to the whole area of ministry with the aging need each other. Only as both approaches interrelate for learning and involvement to improve society will the image and conditions of the aged improve. An agenda for action in ministry with the aging requires the gathering and internalization of information from biblical and theological insights together with information from the physical, social, and behavioral sciences.

Operating out of these insights, a four-fold agenda for action in the congregation’s ministry with the aging will:

1. *Provide opportunities for intergenerational activities.* This will require the full participation of all the members of the congregation in all dimensions of parish life. Too many congregations segregate members into age groups. But when learning and activity experiences, for example, are so segregated, the reservoir of wisdom and experience that aged persons have accumulated through the years is lost. It is a fact that some of the most effective teaching of small children takes place in a grand-parental relationship. Thus the knowledge and skills of the older man or woman enlisted in intergenerational activities benefit both old and young by the sharing of mature values and priorities.

Congregations too often rely on “Senior Citizens” or “Golden Age” clubs exclusively to give social and experiential outlets for the older members. By contrast, intergenerational activities provide opportunities for continued social,

⁷LCA Social Statement, *Aging and the Older Adult*, 2.

⁸Robert W. McClellan, *Claiming a Frontier: Ministry and Older People* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1977) 29.

spiritual, and intellectual growth for the older persons. Because health and well-being of the

elderly need this mental and social stimulation, intergenerational activities—social, educational, spiritual—benefit the whole community of faith by way of an interrelating fellowship that transcends age classifications.

2. *Provide a supportive community through the whole congregation.* The congregation as a community of faith has an unsurpassed opportunity to assist all people, especially the aged, when they suffer the anxieties and tensions inherent in life changes. These anxieties and tensions occur either when the elderly move to other living arrangements, lose their physical capacities and are incapable of much self-help, retire from productive employment, or suffer debilitating illness. An especially acute form of suffering afflicts the elderly when they experience the loss by death of spouse or old friends, for this brings them face to face with the prospect of their own death. Also because society judges a person by productivity, retirement tends to erode the older person's sense of self-worth. A greatly reduced income often causes the older person to cease attending worship or engaging in congregational activities because they can't "pay their way." This is one of the major causes for the older person to become a "drop-out" from social and congregational life and activity.

The pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament provides care for the personal crises of the aging. In addition, the congregation's education, worship, and witness ministries open opportunities for learning and service by accepting and utilizing the aged person's wisdom, learned skills, and experience. These "elder statespersons," transmitting the ideals and traditions of the congregation's history, help to open up opportunities for the present and future. The congregation as a supportive community accepts the aged into its mission regardless of their limitations of financial or physical abilities, helps them to cope with the limiting and debilitating experience that they suffer, and affirms their worth and dignity as human beings.

3. *Offer an extended family life.* The nuclear family is a norm of contemporary society. Instead of living in a three generation home, grandparents remain in their former home or move to retirement communities. When the disabilities of old age afflict them, they enter nursing care facilities or institutions for the aged.

Negative attitudes toward aging often surface in the nuclear family, however. The generation gap causes tension leading to misunderstanding when the needs and concerns of older parents clash with those of their children. Unresolved, this often results in open rupture in the family relationship. When older persons have become isolated or alienated from their children, the congregation then has the responsibility to cultivate resources that will foster love, respect, and a sense of mutual obligation across the generations. In this way the congregation acts as a constructive healing force in the alienated relationship and, through its ministry to all the family members, helps effect a reconciliation between the older and younger generations.

Often the family relationship suffers from a distance barrier when parents and children are separated from communities or states which makes regular visits impossible. Or there are older childless couples or single, aged persons living within the parish bounds. In both these situations the congregation acts as

an "extended family," offering a supportive relationship to the lonely, isolated, home-bound elderly.

As an extended family, the congregation pays special attention to lonely, homebound

aged persons through a practical ministry of support and assistance. It does this with a program of regular visitation by pastor and lay persons. It offers telephone assurance in times of crisis. Members of the congregation contribute time or money for home health care and chore service. Transportation is always a pressing necessity as are either meals furnished in parish facilities or the “Meals on Wheels” service. The congregation should budget financial help to meet special needs for those on limited income. Finally, the congregation provides guidance and assistance in seeking out and utilizing local, state, and national resource agencies.

4. *Act as an advocate for the needs of the aged.* An advocate is a spokesperson who pleads the cause of those who for one reason or another cannot speak for themselves. The congregation brings the physical and social needs of the aged to the attention of appropriate civil authorities and agencies and works with the authorities to address those needs and solve related problems. When necessary the congregation brings pressure upon the civil authority either to initiate legislation to meet the needs of the aging or to assure that existing legislation is wisely and justly administered.

Is advocacy before civil authority a valid ministry of the congregation? Maggie Kuhn, leader of the Gray Panthers, has asserted,

I think of the church as an advocate. There ought to be reform in nursing homes, church planning for neighborhood revitalization, and enlistment of older residents to be a part of neighborhood renewal and economic viability. These the church ought to do.⁹

The congregation’s ministry as an advocate should encourage the community to provide essential resources, or itself foster programs out of its own resources. As an advocate for the elderly it recognizes the injustices inflicted upon the aged that result in extreme hardships for many older citizens, most particularly as a result of federal and state budget economies. As an advocate the congregation should join national and state *Impact* networks to be alert to existing or pending legislation that affects the needs of the elderly. Then—through its members and as a corporate body—the congregation should address the appropriate civil authorities to let its voice and opinion be heard on the issues.

It is extremely important that older men and women share in the responsibility for planning and operating this four-fold agenda for action which ministers *with*—not *to* or *for*—the aging. For unless ministry be *with* the aging, no agenda will address the needs. Accepting the elderly in the planning process honors their personal dignity by the openness shown to their expressed needs and concerns. This acceptance also includes the homebound and bedridden who are fully capable of rendering service to others within the limitations of their health and activity.

⁹Phyllis Mather Rice, “Interview with Maggie Kuhn,” *Your Church* 27 (1981) 61.

However, no agenda for action applicable to all congregations can be formulated. The agenda offered here is meant to be a guideline to assist the congregation in creating its own agenda. Ministry with the aging always takes into account the unique needs that surface in any given place. But in developing its own agenda, the congregation must ever consider the spiritual

well-being of all its members in harmony with the following definition:

Spiritual Well-Being is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness.¹⁰

The congregation's ministry with the aging confronts the challenges of aging by affirming life, and works toward the goal of nurturing and celebrating the wholeness of persons created in the image of God. For

“We the elderly are people, no less important than when we were young. Love us with all your love, touch us with your presence....”¹¹

¹⁰National Interfaith Coalition on Aging, “Spiritual Well-Being,” 1975.

¹¹Department of Specialized Pastoral Care and Clinical Education, Division of Mission and Ministry, “Toward Better Ministry to the Aging in Institutional Settings” (New York: Lutheran Council in the USA, 1982); quoted on cover of pamphlet.