



Holy Friendship: Reimagining Ministry with Homebound Older Adults

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Memories of my afternoons with Elizabeth are filled with vivid impressions—the muted afternoon light in her sunroom, the smell of her orange-flavored tea, her voice greeting me with genuine Southern hospitality. A former high school teacher and charter member of our church, Elizabeth was a stroke survivor who now relied on visits from home health-care workers and friends for company and for practical assistance. I typically dropped by her house on Friday afternoons, bearing the body of Christ to a faithful member. Elizabeth told me historic details about my new congregation, things I would never hear at a church council meeting. As time went on she also shared her passionate political opinions and, eventually, told me about the quarrel she had with God after her daughter's sudden death. Sometimes we just sat in comfortable silence. As a first-year pastor who was feeling insecure in her new role, I came to rely on my afternoons with this wise woman; I began looking forward to receiving her suggestions and tactful support. I also started bringing her specific prayer requests, mostly for members who were sick, and these, she told me, kept her busy during the week. The details of our situations—that Elizabeth was eighty-nine and confined to her home and I was a

What if ministry with homebound older adults were a matter of developing friendship rather than tedious obligation? With care, just such a ministry can be nourished in our congregations.

thirty-nine-year-old with a hectic lifestyle—were irrelevant. Elizabeth offered me the gift of holy friendship.¹

Thoughts of those afternoons contrast dramatically with my associations as I write the words “ministry with homebound older adults.” Images of *obligation* immediately overshadow *friendship*, and *problem* replaces *gift*. Even though many pastors have at least one Elizabeth in their lives, when we get together and begin talking about the rising number of older members in our congregations, our use of language often changes drastically and, along with it, our perspective. Our recollections of deep, replenishing times with special older friends fade, as do our expressions of appreciation for their “winter grace.”² As we complain and fret, we are tempted to overlook the remarkable ability of some very old persons to remain vitally involved³ and to contribute to the spiritual life of their congregations. They strangely recede into the impersonal, disembodied notion of “old people.” Small wonder, then, that ministries to the homebound can easily deteriorate into what we, as guilt-ridden clergy, “can’t put off,” or we, as reluctant laity, are “talked into.” Our fears threaten to override our sense of calling: how easy it is for us to visualize aging itself as pathological, a troubling concept we’d rather not think about. Thus we resist looking at the boundaries of our own life span by trying to avoid those persons who have frail bodies, cognitive impairments, or failing vision. Whenever the work of ministry is perceived as a personal threat or is envisioned without a sense of vocation, enthusiasm and joy disappear and are replaced by, at best, disinterest and, at worst, antipathy.

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However, it must be acknowledged that not all negative feelings are based on fear and denial. This aspect of ministry, care for homebound persons, is and will continue to be a significant challenge to our resources, particularly to our time. Increasingly, in large urban congregations, provisions are being made for separate, full-time staff persons called “senior adult ministers.” In smaller congregations, where funds are lacking for extra staff and where members often live great distances from one another, visitors to the homebound are spending more and more time driving, and as they drive, they worry—about hours taken from the “real work of ministry,” about time away from their families, about their “dying congre-

¹Although a concept with a long history and understood today in diverse ways, holy friendship in this article will refer to the spiritual intimacy through which persons are brought into close relationships with each other and with God. Holy friends share the belief that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, their relationship is being held in God’s loving care.

²See Kathleen Fischer, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998) 11. Here, winter grace is defined as “the capacity to affirm life in the face of death.”

³See, for example, Erik H. Erikson, Joan M. Erikson, and Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (New York: Norton, 1986).

gations.” Meanwhile, demographers promise that our already “grey” churches (the current median age of members of mainline congregations is sixty-seven⁴) will become increasingly so in the years to come. More accurately, they will become “silver,” since the percentage of adults over eighty-five is growing most rapidly.

Visitation by lay members is an increasingly significant response to these dramatic changes, and we can all rejoice that congregational care is becoming more and more the prevailing paradigm for pastoral care. However, lay ministry to chronically ill seniors is often random, non-intentional, and undertaken without adequate training. Often visitors start with enthusiasm, but, too often, they disappear as the days and months of continued disability continue. Unlike caring for youth, it can be discouraging to visit an ever-declining older person, where there is no end in sight. An additional challenge is a lag in appreciation for and acceptance of congregational care by many seniors themselves. Lay visitors are typically very welcome, but comments such as “I haven’t seen my pastor in weeks” reveal their expectation that the pastor will call, and call often.

Do these realities mean that we will continue to be spiritually and linguistically “stuck,” unable to imagine our most frail older members as more than drains on our time and challenges to our emotions? At times it seems nearly impossible to dream of and plan for ministry with large numbers of homebound members if we are simultaneously to meet their needs, stay energized, and build up the body of Christ. This challenge is, of course, part of a larger test: Can we believe that “growing old in Christ”⁵ can be a time of spiritual depth and personal adventure, both for those who are currently experiencing the “fourth age”⁶ and for those of us who accompany them? I strongly believe that it is possible to answer this question in the affirmative, but to do so will require more than money and programs. We will need to use a variety of resources when we plan, create new models for ministry, and take a hard look at ourselves. Thus we start where Lutherans are always called to begin—with confession.

AGEISM AND MINISTRY

Ageism, defined as pejorative stigmatizations, labeling, and/or categorizing of persons on the basis of age, was first labeled in the 1960s by gerontologist Robert Butler.⁷ This widespread cultural tendency to differentiate, objectify, or deprecate older persons is the very opposite of the appreciation, support, and mutuality of holy friendship. Ironically, ageism is unique among forms of oppression in that it is the one source of disadvantage that we will all face if we live long enough. Like

⁴This statistic offered by Henry C. Simmons, a keynote speaker at the Presbyterian Church USA’s 2004 Encircling Care Conference, “Nurturing Congregations through Health Ministry,” held at Spalding University in Louisville, KY, in March, 2004.

⁵See further, Stanley Hauerwas et al., eds., *Growing Old in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁶I refer here, of course, not to Middle Earth but to the term as used by gerontologists. See further, Elizabeth Mackinlay, *Spiritual Growth and Care in the Fourth Age of Life* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2006).

⁷Robert N. Butler, “Age-ism: Another form of Bigotry,” *Gerontologist* 9/3 (1969) 243–246.

other forms of prejudice, this form of bigotry is learned, beginning at the time we are born, but, unlike others, it leads eventually to self-oppression.⁸ At times explicit and at others more subtle and implicit, ageist attitudes are systemic and reach beyond individual actions and attitudes. Although the “gerontophobia”⁹ described above is a primary cause, ageism is complex and has roots in our capitalistic values (with the assumption, for example, that only those who make money should be labeled as “productive”) as well as in the media images to which we are constantly exposed. Sadly, it has also become an “export commodity,” sent out by the West to cultures where previously respect and honor for the old were emphasized.¹⁰ Ageism is the chief factor working against joyful, vital ministry with older adults.

Thus, before the first ministry plans are made and the first visitor sent out, each congregational planning team needs to become sensitized to their own ageism. Why start here? First of all, because it is true. The consequences of our widespread prejudiced thoughts and behaviors have had, and continue to have, great personal costs for our society, for individuals, and for the church. It is also the place to begin because ageism, like all forms of exclusion, flies in the face of our theology. It stands in direct opposition to our belief in a God who makes no distinctions (Rom 10:12). We are called to repent of this sin, not because it is politically correct to do so, but because we are acquainted with and live under the words “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). Unlike the implications of our cultural script, our holy script never includes the slightest indication that God loves only the young, the beautiful, and the healthy.

In the church, ageism is more frequently implicit and “benign.” It sometimes takes the form of patronizing, what is sometimes called the “poor dear syndrome.”¹¹ Other times it involves a false sense of otherness, such that old age become a separate world. This, again, reflects current social practices where, as social gerontologist Jon Hendricks recently wrote,

one of the paradoxes of our era is that our very successes and the shared values driving our cultural practices have set older people apart from their younger counterparts. “Live long and suffer” might well be an aphorism suitable for describing the situation of older people in our society....Entitlement-linked identities and assumptions of vulnerability permeate virtually every aspect of life, for old people and for others, positive intent notwithstanding.¹²

⁸See further, Toni Calasanti, “Ageism, Gravity, and Gender: Experiences of Aging Bodies,” *Generations* 29/3 (2005) 8–12. Seminary students in my aging classes at Luther Seminary often express dismay when they hear older adults themselves make ageist remarks, but this should not surprise us since ageist attitudes and comments are internalized throughout the lifespan.

⁹See P. Balaram’s editorial, “Gerontophobia, Ageing and Retirement,” *Current Science* 87/9 (2004) 1163–1164.

¹⁰See further, Erlene Rosowsky, “Ageism and Professional Training in Aging: Who Will Be There to Help?” *Gerontologist* 29/3 (2005) 55. I also learned about exported ageism from a Korean student at Luther Seminary who wrote a paper describing changes in Korean congregations in Saint Paul. She wrote that a strong, new sense of individual entitlement is quickly replacing filial piety.

¹¹Jon Hendricks, “Ageism: Looking across the Margin in the New Millennium,” *Generations* 29/3 (2005) 5.

¹²*Ibid.*, 5, 7.

Hendricks wonders whether our own best efforts to design special programs (including those of financial entitlement) may not be leading to exclusionary outcomes and to decreased appraisals of status, that is, to ageist notions.¹³

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This calls to mind ministry programs in which educational and social groups for older adults are designed with an eye to the “lowest common denominator” of cognitive and physical functioning. Program ideas are then presented to the congregation with the implication that they are what *all* seniors need and want. One woman, who is a member of an otherwise progressive congregation in Saint Paul, Minnesota, confessed to me recently that she felt “insulted and diminished” by the senior groups in her church. “Why would I be interested in attending programs that are dumbed down?” she lamented. “I have a graduate degree; I’ve read theology all my life, and now, just because I am old, it is assumed that I want to be part of classes where we are treated like imbeciles!” I had no difficulty visualizing a well-meaning committee, unaware of their own ageism and ignoring the diversity in their older members, assuming that they could create programs based on age distinctions alone. What will happen to that same woman if and when she becomes chronically ill and confined to her house? Will her visitors use appropriate resources and be aware of her needs as an individual, or will they be limited by patronizing, generalizing attitudes and assumptions? Will they be motivated to “comfort the old woman,” as though suddenly all our individual differences are eliminated when our hair turns grey? One hopes that she will receive deep spiritual conversation, prayer, and pastoral care; that someone will respect her as an individual and become her holy friend.

Another aspect of church ageism, less visible but equally harmful, is thoughtless neglect. As I read the papers of seminarians doing fieldwork, I often read, “Currently there is no organized program for older adult visitation in this congregation.” This disregard for the needs of old and mobility-restricted persons springs in part from a larger distorted belief that for a “growing congregation” the primary emphasis must be on younger members. Sadly, as academics, lay leaders, and parish pastors, we often visualize the *missio dei* as a mission to “young persons” and “younger families.” Senior adults are assumed to be well integrated into congregational life and to already possess all the spiritual resources they need, say, for their prayer lives.¹⁴ In mainline denominations, anxiety is high and with it the tempta-

¹³*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴See further, Susan A. Eisenhandler, *Keeping the Faith in Late Life* (New York: Springer, 2003). Eisenhandler found in her qualitative research that parish pastors make false assumptions about older church members’ need for help with prayer.

tion to do senior adult ministry in a reactive mode. Yet those of us who have had the honor of participating in ministry with seniors recognize these exclusionary behaviors as leading to a tragic waste of a human resource.

We need to issue the church a resounding wake-up call. We need intentional older adult ministries that are sensitive, creative, and diverse. We need especially to advocate for the homebound, for those whose cognitive conditions (for example, those with Alzheimer's disease) result in their having little or no voice of their own, and who are often wrongly assumed to have no spiritual needs.¹⁵ To do so, we need first to listen to older adults themselves, to those who are cognitively capable and to the families of those who are impaired, asking for their counsel and suggestions. Overall, as national churches and local congregations, we need to pay attention to the "age wave" that is coming, ready or not, and we need a balanced point of view such that both challenges and opportunities are acknowledged. Why is it that the rest of the world (especially those in the business community) are carefully planning for these dramatic demographic changes while the church lags far behind? Understanding our culture's emphasis on youth and our systemic ageism leads at best to a partial answer. Perhaps the missing puzzle piece lies elsewhere—in the shadow of the cross itself.

FRIENDSHIP AND THE WORD

Ministry with the old and sick is a challenge to our faith and an invitation to God's word. As caregivers of persons living through life transitions, we will not be upheld by weak faith, irregular prayer, or facile answers. Against prevalent ideas that ministry with seniors is easy work, and that this ministry is best left to pastors who can't or don't want to serve a parish or to good-hearted but unprepared laity, the personal and professional challenges of vocations in aging are enormous. They require specific education¹⁶ and they also call for high levels of spiritual maturity. As caregivers, we often watch friends die, go home exhausted, and ponder how it will be when we or our loved ones reach the end of life. Those who visit the old need to read and pray without ceasing, searching for "practical" meanings in Scripture that will prepare them to accompany the sick and dying, to remain physically and emotionally present. If holy friendship is a way to live, not just an occasional act of kindness, faith must be internalized, must be what we sometimes call, in the social sciences, "intrinsic religiosity,"¹⁷ and our faith practices must be exercised with devotion and discipline. An intentional spiritual life is similarly the most important self-care program for a minister working with aging persons.

Burnout prevention is also a matter of mature theological reflection. In our

¹⁵See, for example, Jon C. Stuckey, "The Divine is Not Absent in Alzheimer's Disease," in *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, vol. 2, ed. Melvin A. Kimble and Susan H. McFadden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 74–80.

¹⁶Only two seminaries in the United States offer concentrations in pastoral care and aging.

¹⁷See, for example, Harold G. Koenig, Linda K. George, and Bercedis L. Peterson, "Religiosity and Remission of Depression in Medically Ill Older Patients," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 155 (1998) 536–542.

seminary classes on aging, we explore the urgent need for a constant and conscious stance against the dominant narratives of twenty-first-century society. Against messages of lofty individualism, the terrors of dependency, utilitarian evaluations of self-worth, inordinate fears of death, and an abhorrence of all woundedness,¹⁸ Christian faith holds on to radical, outrageous promises. Against high individualism, we believe that we have been given community, such that we no longer live or

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die alone. Against fears of relying on other people and their care, we trust that the care of God will be sufficient in all situations of life, and that we will be remembered—both by God and by God’s servants on earth.¹⁹ Against exclusionary practices toward those who are different from ourselves, who are “other,” we believe that we are called to embrace all persons, caring for all of creation including a world of neighbors.²⁰ Against utilitarian standards of worth, we know that our ultimate identity is given at baptism, and that we derive our worth through our status as the ones for whom Christ died. Facing decline and death is easy for no one and should never be romanticized, but people of faith do not spend inordinate amounts of time and money on anti-aging products and do not place their ultimate trust in medical/technical cures. Rather, we take to heart a wild story, the news too good not to be true,²¹ of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. We accept the loss of eternal youth for our bodies but we long for the resurrection of our lives. Our wounds do not disgust us, and our suffering does not overcome us, because we know that, in some mysterious way, our hurts and sorrows are part of the wounds on the body of Christ.

In daily work with members of a vulnerable, aging population, these core beliefs cannot be “faked.” A vision of Christ in the brokenness of an old body does not come naturally in a world that chases after the transient beauty of youth, but it is the only vision that will not ultimately betray us, and it is still the only story that will set us free.

FRIENDSHIP AND WELL-BEING

Friendship is a helpful model socially as well as theologically. Friends have re-

¹⁸See further, Keith G. Meador and Shaun C. Henson, “Growing Old in a Therapeutic Culture,” in Hauerwas et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 90–111.

¹⁹See further, John Patton’s emphasis on remembering in his *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

²⁰For a more complete discussion of the theology of exclusion and embrace, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

²¹Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1977).

peatedly been shown to be of great value to older adults, and at no time is this more obvious than at times of disability and illness.²² When familiar roles end, when dependency increases and one can no longer greet one's peers at Sunday worship, the need for friends who remember us is crucial. Laity and pastors who visit do much more than mitigate loneliness—they bring into the room memories of the personhood that feels lost. “This is who I am, too, not just a sick old guy with cancer. I am also the man who ushered at St. John’s for twenty years, who joked with Pastor Tom and mentored the confirmands.” Visitors as holy friends point to the larger community that has been a vital part of the homebound person’s life and continues to be a potential source of their resiliency.²³

A word of caution here: friendship can never be imposed. This indisputable reality reminds us that holy friendship is a *model* for ministry, not a phenomenon to be understood literally or legalistically. On the practical level, and because of the huge diversity of older adults (we have had so much more time to become different from each other when we are eighty or ninety!), not every pastor or lay visitor will relate well to every homebound adult. For a potential visitor to say, “It makes no difference to me whom I am assigned to visit because I like all old people,” is, of course, disrespectful and patronizing. Lay ministry programs must take into account individual preferences, and leaders need to be sensitive to what might make for a “good fit.” This could mean, for example, that instead of simply making a list of older homebound adults, a team coordinator would take the time to get to know the salient characteristics of both visitor and visited. As in any relationship, sometimes things settle in quickly and people “click.” Other times we need to start over or simply hang in there while trust builds. At times, the only real friendship will be between the older adult we visit and the Lord we represent. Here, too, we have fulfilled our vocational responsibility, for friendship is always part mystery and entirely gift, and all friendships have their source in the friendship we have with God through Christ. However, the planning needed to create opportunities for spiritual intimacy is best done with care and intentionality.

SIGNS OF HOLY FRIENDSHIP

What do friends do when they get together?²⁴ One thinks of biblical friendships such as David’s care for Saul (1 Sam 16:14–23), the first historic mention of music therapy (and a reminder that depression can come to anyone!). Mary ran to

²²The author is grateful to colleague and co-researcher Dr. Rosemary Blieszner, who has researched and written extensively on friendship and aging and whose insights have significantly informed my understandings of this topic. See, for example, Rosemary Blieszner, “‘She’ll Be on My Heart’: Intimacy Among Friends,” *Generations* 25/2 (2001) 48–54.

²³See research findings on the importance of spiritual community in Janet L. Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, *Spiritual Resiliency in Older Women: Models of Strength for Challenges through the Life Span* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).

²⁴It might be helpful here to visualize a precious friend in your own life. If your friend were sick, you would realize at once that there is so much more to do than bring him a copy of last week’s bulletin, say a quick prayer, and head out the door.

see her older friend Elizabeth, just to share her good news and to declare God's greatness (Luke 1:39–56). My personal favorite is the drop-in call, at an inconvenient time, by mysterious desert visitors—holy friends in a literal sense (Gen 18:1–15). They assigned Sarah an important job in her old age, reminding us that vital roles for older adults (who may laugh at the very idea) are nothing new. Clearly, there is no formal script for what holy friends do when they get together, but there are signs that things are going well and that the friendship is under God's care.

“friendship differs from other relationships in that friends both give and receive”

One sign is mutuality. Friendship differs from other relationships in that friends both give and receive. This means that, unlike ministry *to* older adults, ministry *with* or *by* them will not result in I-It relationships, or even in gentler, kinder inequities of power. Who wants to be an “object of care,” even when one's caregiver is benevolent? Historically, ministry to the old has been perceived as a kind of rescue of the weak by the strong. Based on a friendship model, however, ministry can be envisioned as open-ended and ever changing, like the other friendships in our lives, leading to an unpredictable flow of energy, interest, and power. After time, no one is calculating; no one is keeping score.

Another indication of this intimacy is that the very space where friends come together becomes transformed and “hallowed.” Memories build, pleasure increases, and the physical surroundings appear changed. Love changes a drab room into a place of beauty and delight.²⁵ As a nursing home chaplain, I was often asked, “How can you work in such a depressing place?” Depressing for whom? It's all about what happens in the room, and Who is present with us as we give and take care of each other.

Holy friends can be recognized, too, by their favorite activity—prayer. Holy friends pray for each other often, typically daily, when they are apart. They sometimes pray out loud together, sometimes finishing each other's sentences, and they like to be asked to pray for specific people and their needs, as Elizabeth did. Because holy friends know each other intimately, they know just what to pray for, on their friend's behalf. During times of sorrow and worry, one friend takes up the prayer work for a time. Other times, both may sit in silence while the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Forgiveness and gratitude are two additional signs of holy friendship. How can one feel cared for and understood and not feel thankful? How can one value a friend and not forgive him if he somehow disappoints? Homebound elders, ironi-

²⁵I am reminded of Anne Frank and her friend, during the Holocaust, laughing and dreaming together in their attic room, or of the laughter that sang out from the slave cabins of the pre-Civil War South.

cally, often teach us these Christian practices, as research has confirmed. Studies show that older persons are more likely both to feel grateful²⁶ and to forgive.²⁷

We speak of the faithfulness of friends, and this covers so many of the more intangible aspects of being a visitor, those we try to explain in lay training sessions. Faithful friends call regularly, hold confidences in sacred trust, and realize the importance of showing up when you said you would. Unlike the “fluff” of friendships in a TV sitcom, holy friends have deep standards of fidelity, based on the life and death of Jesus Christ. They will not say, as I have heard too often, “I decided not to visit her anymore because it just upsets me too much.”²⁸

THE BLESSINGS OF HOLY FRIENDSHIP

In this article I propose a model for senior adult ministry with the homebound. I do not offer this with the naïve assumption that each and every relationship will develop into a close and intimate friendship. I feel, however, that this concept allows us to escape problem-saturated ways of thinking, reexamine our concept of what ministry can be, and enter creatively into partnerships with the Holy Spirit. It is based on our trust that all things can be made new at any age, for both pastoral caregivers and for those whom we have the privilege to visit.

Recently a colleague said to me, “You are such a blessing!” This comment was surprisingly precious to me, not just because it was kindly spoken by a friend (who probably didn’t realize how much his comment meant), but also because it recognized me as a unique individual, referred to the larger Christian community beyond us, and pointed to the Spirit that transforms our ordinary times together, making us blessings to one another. Holy friendships are like that. May the joy of ministry with old and sick friends bless us all! ⊕

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²⁶See Susan H. McFadden, “Older Adults’ Emotions in Religious Contexts,” in Kimble and McFadden, *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion*, vol. 2, 53.

²⁷See M. Girard and Etienne Mullet, “Forgiveness in Adolescents, Young, Middle-aged, and Older Adults,” *Journal of Adult Development* 4 (1997) 209–222.

²⁸This is *not* what we mean by self-care; this is, of course, infidelity.