

Centering on Ministry

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Introduction To This Issue

Jerry C. Grubbs

There is nothing in human existence so inevitable as aging. Barring an untimely death due to illness or accident, we all face the prospect of growing older.

The Bible writers frequently treat the subject of aging with dignity and respect. Older persons are valued and praised. Meeting the basic needs of an aging population is mandated by biblical principles.

Often, to the contrary, our present society treats older persons as outcasts. They become the forgotten ones. However, with the number of persons over sixty-five increasing rapidly, the need of these older persons become more difficult to ignore.

Consider the following statistics:

- As of mid 1977 23.5 million (10.8% of the population) in the U.S. were over 65 years of age. In 1870 only 3% of the population was over 65.
- Between 1970-1975 the number of persons over 65 in the U.S. increased by 12%.
- In 1977 there were more than 2 million over age 85 and some 10,700 over age 100.
- By the year 2035 it is estimated that the 65+ age group will be 1/4 of the total population.

In an era of consciousness raising about the needs of many persons in our society it seems appropriate that the church begin to address this most crucial concern. Every sensitive and caring

congregation is being confronted with important questions in regards to our aging population.

Who are these persons? Where do they live? What are some of their basic needs? What is quality of life for these persons? Is there a biblical perspective which could guide our ministry with aging persons? What *is* the church doing to meet some of their fundamental needs? What *ought* the church to be doing to meet these needs? Where can church leaders go for help in developing a meaningful ministry with older persons?

In his speech before the 1961 White House Conference on aging, Dr. Abraham J. Heschel said:

Perhaps this is the most embarrassing aspect of the situation. The care for the old is regarded as an act of charity rather than as the highest privilege. In the never dying utterance of the Ten Commandments, the God of Israel did not proclaim: Honor Me, Revere Me. He proclaimed instead: Revere your father and mother. There is no reverence for God without reverence for father and mother

Ours is a twin-problem: The attitude of society to the old and old age as well as the attitude of the old to being old.

The typical attitude to old age is characterized by fear, confusion, absurdity,

self-deception, and dishonesty. It is painful and bizarre. Old Age is something we are all anxious to attain. However, once attained we consider it a defeat, a form of capital punishment. Enabling us to reach old age, medical science may think it gave us a blessing; however, we continue to act as if it were a disease. . . .

We must seek ways to overcome the traumatic fear of being old, prejudice, discrimination against those advanced

in years . . . The effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend upon our ability to revivify the equation of old age and wisdom.

In this issue of *Centering on Ministry*, there is an attempt to speak to both biblical and practical concerns of older persons in the Church. It is sent with the prayer that God will sensitize all of us to the needs of older persons and to the exciting opportunities for effective ministry with them.

Dimensions of the Christian Perspective on Aging

Gilbert W. Stafford

All persons—whether five days old or ninety-five years old—are aging. To speak of an earthly person as *person* is thereby to speak of one who is aging. In this article, we shall review six important dimensions of the Christian perspective on aging.

Dimension One: Physical aging is one characteristic of the goodness of God's creation.

Genesis 1:31 says that "God saw everything [that includes man, both male and female (vs. 27)] that he had made, and behold, it was very good." Man—uses in the generic sense and not in the sense of maleness devoid of femaleness—is good in the totality of his createdness—and that includes the aging process.

Aging as such is not divine punishment for sin. It is not the result of the Fall of man. Is it not curious that we seldom if ever find rational persons who claim that the aging of a baby is bad? We like to see them growing and developing in all ways—physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually—and quite easily refer to this process as being divine. And yet at some imperceptible moment of magic, we quit thinking of aging as being divine and begin thinking of it as being demonic. But, from the Christian perspective, this ought not to be the case. The loss of physical strength and other bodily changes which Paul refers to in II Corinthians 4:16 as the wasting away of our outer nature, are inextricably bound together with the goodness of our createdness. It is good that our outer nature wastes away. It is good we make a transition from earthly life. That is the way God made us.

Dimension Two: The sting of aging is not aging itself, but sin.

According to I Corinthians 15:54-56, it is sin that gives death a stinging victory. Even so, it is sin that gives aging in the latter years of physical life its stinging victory. No doubt all of us could give examples of believers in Christ whose

faith is translated into a truly victorious experience of aging in the latter years and finally death. There are other believers who are just as truly people of faith but whose faith is not joyfully experienced in the process of aging and dying. The sting has been removed by their faith in Christ but they are not experientially living out the removal. They age and die in Christ but they have not translated the faith of the heart and mind into the existential practicalities of life.

Dimension Three: Divine time is the creative interplay between remembering, experiencing, and anticipating.

Throughout the whole of biblical history, one can observe the dynamic interplay between past, present, and future. The past is always being remembered, the future is always being anticipated, and both for the purpose of experiencing the present in all of its divine meaning and fullness.

The Christian believer can experience a creative interplay between a past which reaches back even prior to the past generations of the human race, and a future which extends forward even beyond the future generations of the race. The Christian believer can live time as the creative interplay between the past reality of God the Creator and the future reality of God the Consummator, both filling the present reality of God the Redeemer. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of an eternal past as well as of an eternal future. This eternal interplay of the singular reality of past, present, and future is biblically referred to as eternal life. The eternal life given to those who believe in Christ is the life of God himself. The chronologically older believer, then, has just as much of the eternal future as the chronologically younger believer has. Ninety-year-old Mrs. Christian has just as much eternal future as ten-year-old Billy Christian, and just

as much eternal past.

Dimension Four: The church is the interdependent fellowship of divine time. It is a remembering, experiencing and anticipating fellowship.

The interdependency of the members of the church is strikingly set forth in I Corinthians 12:7, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." A paraphrase for our purposes here could quite properly read: "To each chronologically older believer is given the manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the good of all age groups."

Chronologically older believers are divinely appointed for the edification of the body of Christ. They edify the church by their remembrance of the past, by the potential wisdom which they may have gained, and by their freedom to be honest.

Dimension Five: Earthly life is a vocational pilgrimage which should be characterized by change along the road but not departure from the road.

Hebrews 3:1 speaks of Christian believers as those who "share in a heavenly call." Paul in Ephesians 4:1 writes, "I therefore . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

The critical question for our consideration is whether believers are ever given the impression in Scripture that they may at a certain age retire from their calling. All of us know the answer, but the church often does not do well making the answer obvious in its approach to Christian commitment. We sometimes give the impression that there is such a thing as retirement from the vocational pilgrimage to which we have been called. However, Christian vocation knows no birthday limitations. The ninety-five year old believer confined to bed in a nursing home needs encouragement and support for change for the pilgrimage to the heavenly home, but never encouragement to depart from the pilgrimage before arriving home.

Dimension Six: The Christ-life is a rhythm of service-Sabbath; giving-receiving; labor-rest.

The fourth commandment of the Decalogue is both the longest but also perhaps the most

widely disregarded. God commanded that we should live in a rhythm of labor and rest. We disobey the fourth commandment by disregarding that rhythm of labor and rest. We disobey it by concentrating on labor until we are forced to recuperate from exhaustion so that we can labor on, in which case we substitute recuperation for rest. Or, we disobey the fourth commandment by concentrating on rest until we end up going through meaningless routines merely to maintain some semblance of emotional stability, in which case we substitute meaningless routine for purposeful work. This divinely ordered rhythm of service-Sabbath, giving-receiving, labor-rest should be a daily, weekly, monthly, annual, life-long rhythm.

The latter years may indeed be Sabbath years, but they can be prevented from degenerating into sad and desperate years only by purposeful service. Will we allow and encourage Sabbath years to be service years?

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Preaching To Older Adults

T. Franklin Miller

Preaching to older adults probably should be kept in the context of the total ministry of the church to the total person who is an older adult. The preacher will become increasingly aware and knowledgeable about the problems, opportunities and needs that are unique to older

adults.

Some physical changes are occurring. There is some diminution of sight, hearing, and stamina. Thus the preacher and worship leader will be more careful in matters that require reading for participation—the choice of hymns, Scriptures,

responses, a printed order of service. The preacher will be more careful in tone, modulation of voice, and enunciation. One may speak a little louder, or learn how to use a microphone if there is a public address system. For persons who find it difficult or troublesome to rise often or stand very long, a preacher or worship leader will consciously try to remember the affect on some in the congregation of arthritis, rheumatism, and other assorted aches and pains.

Communicate Warmth and Love

Few things are more important in preaching than communicating understanding, love, warmth, acceptance. Many older adults have the feeling that no one really cares for them. There is the constant temptation to become introspective and preoccupied with personal problems, so there is the call to see a wider world and vision of witness and service.

Dr. Paul Tournier has observed that older adults fall into two broad categories. There are those who are at peace with themselves and the world, radiant, kind, sociable, serene. They read, study, go on long walks, are interested in everyone and everything. They are growing intellectually and spiritually. They are grateful for any expression of love. They maintain a positive outlook on life. There are also those "awful old people" who grumble, criticize, are demanding and domineering. They are selfish and bitter. Nobody can please them.

One is called to preach to both groups! The latter group, to become happy, really need a decisive turn-around, a kind of conversion. It is difficult but not impossible. Older adults *can* change habits, actions, attitudes.

The person who has worked in a factory or office for a lifetime probably will have a difficult time in retirement. The routine, the authority, the predetermined use of energy and time are gone. The contribution which brought some meaning and purpose is replaced by the machine that now remembers, thinks, makes decisions. How does a person *feel* in being replaced by a machine? Also retirement often comes at a younger age, particularly with the 30 years and out programs in industry. This person's self concept may be one of defeat and failure. The preacher may be helpful in channeling this life into new challenges of service never before dreamed of. Show the meaning of that service and magnify the importance of that contribution and service, and you just might "convert" that person to a new self-image of purpose and worth.

The self-employed person probably will not retire as early and may continue in a rewarding vocation for many years past 65. This is

especially true of some professional persons. Retirement for them may not be the loss of routine so much as the loss of authority and influence. Preaching to them will call their energies to new commitments in other kinds of service to the church and to God. In both cases, however, one will be aware of changes in limitations of physical stamina.

One group has had no reason to develop imagination, the other group has been forced to be innovative and imaginative. Both kinds of persons have to be in the mind of the preacher.

Preach to Their Deepest Needs

Large volumes of books are written on the needs of older adults. Perhaps we can briefly list some that impinge more importantly on the role of the preacher.

1. Loss of a family member, especially the spouse, loss of job, financial reverses may bring self-accusation, guilt, depression. Does the Christian Gospel have anything to say here? How about such texts as these: Psalms 27:10, Isaiah 46:1-4, II Corinthians 4:16, Matthew 6:25-34, II Samuel 18:19, John 8:7.
2. Anxiety, discomfort, dis-ease socially may spring from many causes, but are not rare. Sleepless nights and worrisome days parade relentlessly. Will these help? Ecclesiastes 12:4, Psalm 16:7, Isaiah 26:9, Psalm 92:1-2, Phillipians 4:4-13. It is as helpful to say, "Don't worry," as it is to tell a cut finger to stop bleeding. The *Gospel* has more reinforcement than that!
3. A new fabric of purpose and meaning may be needed. This may be created in new small group relationships for affirming faith and trust and providing support. Free discussion may help the discovery of meaning and challenge. How about preaching from the *larger* perspective of revelation to show the Christian view of history in which God is central and will not permanently be frustrated? Matthew 25:31-46 may offer new calls to service, or try Ephesians 1:15-2:22, Ephesians 4:11-16, Phillipians 1:3-11; 2:1-18, Colossians 1:9-23. A Christian encounter with deep human need, along with some training and coaching in service, could start a small revolution.
4. Some moral problems may arise here that have not been apart of our society in other generations. Two older adults, each of whom has lost a spouse, may be attracted to each other. To get married has financial implications not found in living alone. They may be tempted to just live together as hus-

band and wife without getting married. Young people accept "shacking up" among their peers although it is far from Christian. What does the Gospel have to say about these older adults? Try to maintain compassion, acceptance, and understanding as well as the heart of the Gospel as you preach to *these* persons.

5. The loss of belonging to another person, or even to a job, can bring devastating loneliness. Preaching may help create a congregation of persons who really will care, feel the hurt, minister in empathy and compassion. Is I Corinthians 13 a good base for a series of such sermons?
6. The sense of self-worth must be based on the Christian Gospel, not on secular achievement. One is of worth because of personhood, not for financial contributions, the use of talent or influence. The need for love and to love is greater than ever. Reduced finances for giving or diminished influence and power have no relation to God's care for persons. For a start, look at these Scriptures: Matthew 18:10-14, Mark 1:40-45, Mark 14:3-9. Matthew 10:26-33, 40-42, Colossians 3:5-17.
7. Some persons resist the aging process and reject the idea that they are getting old. Acts 2:17, 18 is just one passage out of scores that reminds us there are special joys and contributions of every age of life.
8. Some need to be reminded that God is not through with them yet. Philippians 1:6 in one of the newer versions could be a great text for a helpful sermon. With libraries,

series of organizations for older adults, community sponsored adult education, limitless opportunities for study and acquiring new skills, knowledge, interests, we should all keep on growing in every way. Is the preacher a good role-model? In continuing education, in disciplined living to maintain physical fitness, in growing toward spiritual maturity, can the preacher say, "Follow me"?

Some General Observations

Let us not assume that people automatically become more religious as they get older. They do not. Some need a few jolting sermons to call them to repentance and salvation.

All need a constant renewal of faith in the God of Jesus. In the midst of rapid and traumatic change all need to be drawn to an unchanging God. The fear of loss of security can be offset by demonstrations and preaching on vital and trusting faith. Restlessness has only one cure—the call to total commitment to Christ. Fear of the unknown tomorrows cannot abide with the Christ of the New Testament.

All need a hope founded on the reality of Christ's resurrection and the promises of God for salvation and eternal life.

Most persons preaching to older adults are younger than their audience. This calls for listening, astute observation, careful study. Older adults can be a source of joy and strength to the preacher who leads them to real security and radiant living.

Worship With Older Adults

Esther Bauer

Jesus said, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life which the Son of Man can give you."

The quality of your life is not determined by what you hold in your hand. The quality of your life is determined by your tears, your hopes, your celebration, your worship. Without worship, one lives in a very stuffy, frustrated world and a very lonely world.

Worship is a noun and as such is more a quality of spirit. Worship is not something I do or certain forms that I observe, but it is the wind of my soul blowing me to the sea of God's vastness and love. In Hebrews 11:21 we find a description of an old man at prayer: "By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff."

What a graphic sight! Jacob, an old man bent with age, leaning on his staff, knowing death was near, and he worshipped.

We may not have seen the fulfillment of all our dreams or all the promises of God, but each of us is a link in God's fulfillment. To each of us is given the tremendous task of helping God make His promises come true.

We know our sunsets can be lovelier than our sunrises when we feel ourselves caught up in a oneness with God.

Blessed, yes, twice blessed is the person who comes to older age with worship as a growing quality of life. Those who have a growing identity with Paul can say, "I do not lose heart, though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed everyday." (II Cor-

inthians 4:16)

I can say after having lived my three score years and ten, I do not know what it means to "feel old". This is true because the spirit of each of us ageless. I read an article recently entitled, "In the Aging Years: Spirit". I think that aging is just that. Aging is spirit, and spirit is ageless. A child and a person my age have equal eternity because the spirit is ageless. We know that the outward perishes. We know we have a few aches and pains now and then from the business of living. I cannot walk on these feet of mine for seventy-three years without getting a few aches and pains in them. You cannot let your heart beat seventy times a minute without something wearing down after a while. But, there is a spirit of agelessness with which we greet life and with which we look confidently into the face of God.

Worship means that you are at home with your inner life. That you can be happy when alone. Someone said, "I talk with God every morning so when a desperate moment comes He will know my voice." That is a part of worship. That is a part that life can teach us as we walk with God. God reinforces us from our inside so that we are strong enough for whatever life deals with us. We are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us.

And so, worship is God's call to us and our response to Him. It is the flowing of God into us, the flowing of our spirits out to God.

As we grow older, the patterns of our worship change as our needs change. We come to realize that physical health, a roof over our heads, a table loaded down with food are not the real essential things of life. It is amazing how little food we can eat and live well. It is amazing how simple our living quarters can be and we can live well. It is amazing how few clothes we have to have and still live well. It throws us back to this: the richness and meaning of our life is found in worship, in devotion, in personal relationship with God.

Older adults have special needs which can be met through effective worship experiences. A minister seeking to be effective with older persons will be aware of these and seek to find ways to minister to these needs through worship.

First, there is the need for creative solitude. We need to be aware that there is a difference between loneliness and aloneness. Aloneness can also be considered creative solitude. It can be a time of life when one deepens the quality of life, when one gets acquainted with the inner self. The pastor can help the older person find a new centering, a new sense of wholeness, a sense of wellness, a sense of completeness in life through creative private worship.

Another need is that of assurance. Assurance

can come to each of us through genuine worship when we feel the presence of God and are able to trust God completely. Worship brings that assurance of inner strength. With God in the center, one is aware that life is conquerable and that it is possible to stand in the face of many problems.

Thirdly, in worship the pastor can help older adults deal with the problem of handling guilt. In each worship experience the pastor deals with persons who have either imagined or real guilt. They find it difficult to forgive themselves. In worship we can help these persons to know that they can trust God, that there is saving grace, there is love, there is understanding, and there is freedom from the anxiety that comes in the later years. A sensitive pastor who ministers to older persons will gently lead them in the presence of God to receive God's grace.

Fourth, worship can become a time of celebrating the trustworthiness of God. Older persons are often trapped in the many fears. Fears of aging, of failure, of non-acceptance, of helplessness, of being senile, or of death. We have always known fears, but age somehow or other brings them into sharper focus. Through worship the sensitive pastor can help the older adult to know of the mercy and goodness of God and know that the Lord is present and that He takes out the sting of these fears. The evening of life brings its own lamp. Sunsets can be just as beautiful as the dawn of our lives.

Several other practical concerns might be helpful. One is the concern of language and worship. A good friend of mine, who was suffering a great deal over some problems, said that she walked through the garage and just lifted up her head and said, "God, it isn't fair, it isn't fair, God!" Did she pray as well as the person who said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts"? I think she did. I think her prayer was just as real, just as vital, because she was really expressing what she felt deep down in her heart. And so our praying and our worship language takes on a different form. We realize as we grow older it is not quite so important what forms we use any more. Perhaps we are too stiff in the way we talk to God. Maybe with the passing of the years we learn that we can change some of our language of some of our approaches or some of our patterns of worship.

Another practical concern is that of the facilities in which we worship. Pastors need to take into consideration the architecture of the building in which we worship. This is especially true in our concern and ministry with older persons. Seats are often uncomfortable, acoustics are bad, lights are too dim, and it is often

difficult to get into the building because of high steps. It is possible to be more concerned about older adults as we plan facilities for worship?

In closing, I share an experience with a dear friend of mine. We had a neighbor who lived across the street from us who died a few years ago. Lula was one of the best friends that Glover and I had. We loved her. Lula was a deeply devout person but never showy in her saintliness. I could not imagine Lula ever having shouted. She died at eight-seven with cancer all through

her body and a heart condition. The year before Lula died, she told me of this incident one spring morning. She said, "I came out the door this morning and it was spring. I saw the green grass and a purple crocus and the trees were budding. I just threw up my hands and said, 'Praise the Lord!'" This it seems to me is the type of thing that I think older age has to have: a spontaneous something that is a part of the worship and the adoration that is in our hearts.

Resources for Ministry with Aging Persons

Ron Mabry

Resources for ministry with aging persons are abundant. There are books, pamphlets, media forms, magazines; and organizations to choose from. The following is a sample of the numerous resources available to you and your church.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Ministry Bibliography. N.E.D.C. order no. 032; \$3.00, 35 pp. Comprehensive, with over 100 entries, of value to counselors, religious and lay leaders and interested individuals. New England Gerontology Center, 15 Garrison Avenue, Durham, NH 03824.

ORGANIZATIONS:

The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA), 298 South Hall Street, Athens, GA 30601, is a prime religious organization providing a clearing-house for information and development of ministry at all levels.

National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA)/American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 1909 K Street NW, Washington, DC 20049, is a secular organization that has developed programs for retired and preretired persons. Excellent materials are available from them.

PROGRAM RESOURCES:

Two resources I am using to develop a ministry are: *An Instruction Manual for the Older Adult Survey Project in Congregations and Communities*, by David Batzka; and *Aging Persons in the Community of Faith*, a guide book for churches and synagogues on ministry to, for, and with the aging. Both can be obtained from Donald F. Clingan, The National Benevolent Association, P. O. Box 1986, Indianapolis, IN 46206, each for \$1.00.

BOOKS:

Some basic books that would be helpful to min-

isters are:

Atchley, Robert C. *The Social Forces in Later Life: An Introduction to Social Gerontology*. Oxford, OH: Miami University, 1972.

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OTHER SOURCES:

The National Board of Christian Education of the Church of God, Anderson, is developing the **Irene Smith Caldwell Older Adult Resource Center**. The purpose of the center is to provide resources on aging to pastors and congregations. An excellent packet of resources is now available from the Board for ten dollars (\$10.00) plus postage and handling.

Other sources of information might be the Sociology Department of your local university or college—some have centers for gerontology. Check the yellow pages of your telephone book under Social Service Organizations.

Contributors To This Issue

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Centering on Ministry

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"Centering on Ministry" is published by the Center for Pastoral Studies and sent without charge to all graduates of the School of Theology and to all persons enrolled in Continuing Education through the Center for Pastoral Studies, and on occasion is sent also to all Church of God pastors and a limited number of other persons. Jerry C. Grubbs is Editor of *"Centering on Ministry"* and Director of the Center for Pastoral Studies of the Anderson School of Theology. He is Director of Continuing Education in Ministry, an opportunity made available to all persons in the Church of God engaged in ministry, regardless of their educational background. A special program is open to persons now serving in ministry who have not had as much education for ministry as they would like. Information will be sent to you if you request it from the Center for Pastoral Studies. The General Assembly has officially asked the Center for Pastoral Studies to carry leadership initiative and responsibility for Continuing Education in Ministry in the Church of God. Our service is just a postage stamp away—why not use it?

AN IMPORTANT DATE FOR YOUR CALENDAR

February 5-8, 1980

"Church of God Heritage: Reformation Reflections"

To be held on the campus of
Anderson College—Anderson School of Theology

More Information Later

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