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The Role of the Church in Helping Older People

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A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Richard Mills

Ouachita Baptist University

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In Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Special Study

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by

Diana Edmondson

May 2, 1975

## PREFACE

This paper is a follow-up to an earlier paper I did which discussed the basic needs of older people, including physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Therefore, I see no need to deal with all of these needs again, but wish instead to discuss the church's place in helping to meet some of these needs. Most of the ideas in this paper could be helpful to almost any organization dealing with older people, but focus is placed upon the dealings of churches of the Christian faith with the elderly.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN HELPING OLDER PEOPLE

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## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN HELPING OLDER PEOPLE

"No one should die before his life is over" is a phrase used by an organization called the Gray Panthers that is a group of old and young people working together for social change. <sup>1</sup> This saying should be a motivating call to churches to begin and continue work with their older people. The church needs to provide a place where these older people can learn, grow, develop, serve, and minister. The church needs an environment of love and acceptance of these people. It needs to realize the many special needs that the elderly have. "The church, if it is to minister adequately, must identify the needs of the elderly and reaffirm their personhood as older, but as no less valuable, children of God." <sup>2</sup>

Trust in God is an important source of happiness in later life. As people grow older many find religion and the church to mean more to them than it did before. "Older people participate more in church life than in all other types of social organizations combined." <sup>3</sup> The goal of the church should be to help these interested older people become mature Christians who find joy in communication with God and in sharing in service with others. The Greek poet Sophocles said, "One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been." Just how splendid the days of an older person have been may depend on what church leaders do to minister to aging persons and their families. <sup>4</sup> Those older persons who are church members or who have been involved in church life for some time are shown to have better personal

adjustment in old age than non-members. <sup>5</sup> The Church can play a positive role in personal adjustment in old age.

Christians have a special obligation to affirm the worth and dignity of every person--- this was the thrust of much of Jesus' earthly ministry. More than any other institution in our society, the church has a unique opportunity to protect the personhood of senior citizens. "The Gospel speaks to the needs of the total man throughout the total life cycle. Christ cared; we should too." <sup>6</sup>

The Bible speaks of the importance of older people and that they should be respected and revered. "Hearken to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old." (Proverbs 23: 22, RSV). "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent." (Psalms 71:9). The Bible speaks in such a way to tell that there is beauty in old age. "The glory of young men is their strength, but the beauty of old men is their gray hair." (Proverbs 20: 29). In Old Testament times, the aged occupied a prominent place in the social and political system of the Jews. They were looked up to as the ones having much knowledge. They were allowed to give their opinions first. The attainment of old age was regarded as a special blessing. In public affairs age formed the main qualification of those who acted as representatives of the people in all difficult matters (elders).

The older people in our churches today have much to offer by way of knowledge and skill. They are masters of survival; they have gone through alot of change. Our churches can gain alot from what they have to add to our fellowship. "Both the increasing number of old people in our population and the increasing emphasis upon the place of religion in the lives of individuals and in the affairs of society make an examination

of the relationship between the older person and the church especially pertinent and appropriate today. Churches, in cooperation with other agencies and institutions, are trying to meet many of the needs presented by the problems of the aged. There is a need to survey the effectiveness of their programs and to suggest additional ways in which they can improve their work." 7

There are many things that a church can do for older people. A vital need of the church's older people is spiritual growth continuation. The Christian life should be viewed as a spiritually growing journey, with growth being not just important for the elderly, but essential. The pastor and other church members may hold the key to helping the older persons achieve this growth. One way is through effective worship services using some of the things the elderly used to have, such as older hymns. Another way the pastor could aid the members would be through preretirement counseling and other counseling. Another idea is a Vacation Bible School for Senior Adults, including Bible study, films, singing, and devotions. One of the activities included writing letters to themselves in which they outlined goals they wanted to work toward during the next three months. The letters were collected and mailed to them in three months. It proved to be a good check-up for them on their progress. The church should encourage the elderly to have their own personal devotional activities. Reading the Bible and meditating upon its contents can be a major source of peace and comfort.

Many older people take into their mature years the same idea of the function of religion as they had when they were young. But if religion is really going to be meaningful for senior citizens, it must relate to their changing needs. Whatever types of classes or spiritual

growth activities are held, it is important to remember that it is a basic task of the church to teach spiritual lessons and to meet the spiritual needs of the people.

The church can also aid the older people through educational programs. Classes on death, retirement, illness, or aging could be held. These educational sessions are to help the aged become better persons and the younger people prepare for old age. Education can have an important part in church work with the aged, because older people can have much to live for if their interests are kept at a high level.

Another area of ministry that must be met in dealing with older people is providing for their physical needs. This may involve providing such things as transportation, often through bus ministries, or meals, through "meals-on-wheels" or at the church. Housing for older people is one area that involves difficulty for the person and the family. Southern Baptists have homes for the aging in twelve states and the District of Columbia. <sup>8</sup> These institutions are a fairly recent development for the Baptists. Before this century, care for the elderly came from family and relatives. However, the modern trend now is away from large family units and the relative instability of the modern family is making family arrangement less adequate. Older people often have many physical problems and this therefore is an important type of ministry. Physical needs most often need to be met before any others can be.

Another important area of ministry in the church to older people is through fellowship with others. The aged should be provided with opportunities for fellowship through creative recreation. Many older groups enjoy bowling leagues or craft classes together. The activities supply an occasion for fellowship among other older people. Some churches



have Senior Adult Choirs for those 65 and older that sing regularly in church and travel to other places. Holiday activities are usually emphasized because they are family times of the year and many of these people are alone now. The Church should not let it be an empty holiday for them.

There are special needs of those that can not attend Church services. The most important ministry in this area is visitation. Personal visiting and listening to the older person who is shut-in is usually what he will appreciate most. Many churches have visitation programs set up. Some have visitors that go and teach a Bible lesson at least once a month. There are important things to remember when visiting. Don't promise to visit again soon if you may not be able to. Unfulfilled promises distress an older person. Don't visit in large groups; too many people will confuse the elderly. Important objectives in visitation to the elderly are: demonstrate that they aren't forgotten, express real interest and a helping attitude, and carry the church news, especially that about special activities for the older people. Some people who live too far away to visit often are on a "mail-out" visitation program. Another type of service is a Telephone Check Service where older people who live alone are called daily to be sure they are all right. In nursing homes, community chaplaincy programs can be started. Also, an "adopt" a neighborhood block program can be started where visits are made to forgotten elderly on a certain block.

There are an infinite number of things a church can do to help its older people and others in the community. Each church has to decide for itself what programs are best for it through examination of the other community programs already available and through the needs of its immediate members.

Senior adults, like any other group of people, would rather have leaders who work with them than to have leaders do things for them. Older people want to continue to be useful and needed. The older committed Christian is eager to be active in his service to God, his church, and his fellowmen. "God has called us to be servants all of our lives-- not just until we are sixty-five. As Christians we need to continue to serve." 9

Reaching retirement age should not mean retiring from service with the church. It should be the age to really begin using the reservoir of energy and ability that many older people have been storing up. Often senior adults haven't been given opportunity to serve, though.

By allowing an older person to use his skills, he can know that whatever talent God has given to him is still very important and needed. Many older people have musical talents that they have continued to keep in practice. Some have writing skills and art talent that have improved with age. Others have talents in ceramics, woodworking, or other trades that they can help teach to others, thereby expanding the number involved in such activities.

A church has jobs that are always needing done, and elderly members are often there to help. Some are bus drivers; others are sewing for the clothing room. Some help in clerical or administrative work; others help clean-up the grounds. Older members are also very often involved on committees, in visitation, or as teachers of Bible classes.

Some churches have an organized club or group of these dedicated older people who work together, often for some needy cause, such as aiding underprivileged children. These groups have come up with such names as: The Keen-Agers, SAFO (Senior Adult Fellowship Organization), LLL ("Live Long and Like It" Club), Golden Age Club, XYZ (Extra Years of Zest), and JOY Fellowship (Just Older Youth).

Groups of dedicated, serving older people have promoted many types of activities. An interesting program is a widow-to-widow program that involves a widow helping out a new widow in any way she can. She may simply be there to listen for a couple of hours or she may stay with the woman for a few days.

Within the church organization, a study committee is often organized in which the church staff meets with a few of the older members to listen to their ideas on what kind of ministry they would like to have.

All of these services which older people can perform within the church will not be used if wise leadership is not present to invite and encourage them to do so. If there is this guidance and encouragement, the Church will benefit and the older people themselves will prosper.

Every problem of an individual could be viewed as a spiritual problem, or at least having spiritual implications. However, there are some specific spiritual problems which many older people have.

One main problem with older people is their fear of the future, especially of death. To the older person, death is a very real, near thing. A church should take steps to try to aid in helping these people face this major problem. The question could be raised, "How do you help someone get ready to die?" There is no easy solution here, but it is here that the Church should be closest to having the answer. Perhaps discussions and lectures could be held to attempt to point out some of the simplicity and even beauty of dying that God can put into death.

Another spiritual problem is the guilt that some older people still have from failure earlier in life. Or, this guilt may have come about from an overall sense of failure in achieving goals in life by the

older person.

Also, the elderly person's spiritual life, specifically his personal acts of devotion to God, may suffer, too. Most of this is caused by physical impairment, especially of the senses, such as poor eyesight when trying to read a small print Bible or poor hearing when listening to radio or TV sermons.

The elderly person may have problems trying to get to church. Such things as bad weather, no transportation, and physical problems makes it difficult for attendance. The older person may feel like he should not attend sometimes because he cannot dress well or he cannot contribute financially to the church, and he therefore stays away.

There are some attitudes and feelings that an older person receives from within the church that may keep him away. Today so many churches are almost completely youth-oriented that this is, and understandably so, enough to keep the older person away. He often feels pushed aside by all of the younger members. Most old people have difficulty adjusting to changing conditions and this can cause many problems in the church unity. They become dissatisfied with the new ideas and changes within the church. This over-emphasis on youthfulness and change in churches had cultivated the attitude into people that time spent with older people is wasted and all that they do have are problems. These social attitudes need to be changed and the church should be a leader in changing them. "Confronted with all the problems which our society contributes to older people, the elderly individual is often more open to the message of the church than he has ever been before. " 10 It is therefore important that Christians aid these people and give them the message of love and fellowship that they need in order to continue living "life".

The church today has a very wide range of roles to play in helping the older person. It needs to be an encourager of the aged to believe in serving and growing, not just letting themselves grow old. The Church can be the one to break the bondage of age-ism and to show all ages how to live and fellowship together. The Church has the role of being a minister to the aged, through such programs as spiritual guidance, recreational activities, and fellowship. Being a minister to the aged also involves utilizing the elderly. The concern of both types of these ministries is Christian service-- one is service to the elderly, and the other is service through them. In general, the role of the church could be summed up in making church membership meaningful for these senior members. Geneva Mathiasen said, "We believe that religion is the key to a happy life in old age as it is in all ages. The church or synagogue working with and making use of its own spiritual and social resources of the community can be the most effective instrument in helping people live out their lives with maximum fulfillment and grace." 11

The main place that I see should be worked with most in dealing with older people is the same as that emphasized by an older woman that I interviewed in a nursing home. She feels that the main thing that needs to be done is for more visiting with individual, lonely old people to take place. Personally aiding an older person in growing spiritually and socially is the greatest thing that can be done to help that person. Helping an older person to feel needed, loved, and alive should be the goal of the Church today. "Christians can find assurance and victory in the knowledge that while science can add years to life, God in Christ can add life to years." 12

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Houglan, "Liberation from Age-ism: The Ministry of Elders," The Christian Century, XCI (1974), 342.

<sup>2</sup>Outreach, V (1975), 8.

<sup>3</sup>Mike LeFan, "How a Church can Minister to its Older Members," Church Administration, XV (1973), 31.

<sup>4</sup>W.L. Howse, III, "How to Help Families Relate to the Elderly," Church Administration, XIV (1972), 22.

<sup>5</sup>J. Paul Brown, Counseling with Senior Citizens (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Cheryl A. Forbes, "Old and Ugly: Never!" Christianity Today, XVI (1972), 40.

<sup>7</sup>Robert M. Gray and David O. Moberg, The Church and the Older Person (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Howse, III, op. cit., 29-30.

<sup>9</sup>Outreach, op. cit., 6.

<sup>10</sup>Gray and Moberg, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>11</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>12</sup>Howse, III, op. cit., 30.

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