

The Church and Its Elderly Members

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That the senior population is burgeoning in our society is undeniable. The growing numbers make urgent our attentive response, particularly as the believing community, to this segment of society.

Increased longevity may be due to better health, but as we age health inevitably breaks down and we become increasingly dependent. This presents huge challenges for both the older dependent person and the responsible caregiver. To meet these challenges we must be shaped by a loving understanding of the elderly and a humility that eagerly accepts and embraces them.

Considerable resources are needed to meet these challenges. The church, as body of Christ, is uniquely equipped to provide leadership in promoting and modeling the kind of caring community that is needed to respond to these challenges.

SOME THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Created in the Image of God

We believe, rightly, that human beings are created in the image of God. There is no age at which we outgrow that distinctive and privileged blessing. But in a culture that evaluates people on the basis of work and production, it has become easy to depreciate human beings who can no longer produce the things our society desires and demands. In many churches there is a commendable and healthy appreciation for children and for youth, even when they are on the “demand” side in the supply-and-demand scheme. The church, to be theologically consistent, must carry that same spirit into its care of people at the other end of the age spectrum.

2. Baptized into One Body

In many of our baptismal forms, the congregation is asked: “Do you, the people of the Lord, promise to receive this child in love, pray for him/her, help care for his/her instruction in the faith, and encourage and sustain him/her in the fellowship of believers?” As we respond, “We do, God helping us,” we are not permitted a mental reservation about an age at which we as a congregation are absolved from this promise. As the body of Christ, we bear a solemn responsibility to encourage and sustain him or her in the fellowship of believers throughout the whole of life.

3. Called to Servanthood Ministry

Jesus said, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). His calling is also our calling (John 20:21). Dependent children give us opportunity to serve; those with handicaps and disabilities depend on us as well; and the elderly are in similar need of

our loving service. So much in our self-centered society and our youth-oriented culture militates against the servant mind. The church, as God's counter-culture agent, shows the mind of Christ in its humble and sacrificial care for the weak and needy, including the elderly.

SOME SIGNIFICANT BENEFITS

1. The Gift of Receiving

One of the gifts older members give to the church is the gift of receiving. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." The elderly often provide the opportunity for us to be "more blessed" as they humbly, graciously, and gratefully receive what we are able to give. It is a truism but a beautiful and deeply meaningful one: Without people willing to receive, no one can give.

2. The Gift of the Past

The elderly also are for us a living link to the past, becoming an invaluable resource in knowing and understanding the history and background of the church's practices and ways. A willingness to listen and learn from those who know our traditions often brings younger generations a wiser and more appreciative awareness of the heritage that is ours.

3. The Gift of Life Experiences

Personal life stories are a treasured resource for the church. How rich and varied the stories are, and what a testimony to God's work in their lives! Many of these stories tell of God's goodness, the ways in which his blessings have been so obvious. But there are also the regrets and failures that some are willing to speak about. As they speak with conviction of God's lavish grace and his completely adequate forgiveness, their stories are a healthy encouragement for people of any age. We all need those stories, and they ought not be told only at their funerals.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. Remember the elderly.

Faithfully remembering the elderly is not only a biblical given, it also blesses them and it makes us a better people when we do. Visits, cards, telephone calls, helpful deeds, especially on special occasions (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays) will help them feel like members of the body of Christ. These actions will also bring blessings to us who remember.

2. Give opportunity to members to share publicly their experiences.

Special worship services in which we invite members, including the elderly, to tell their stories can enrich the lives of the whole congregation.

3. Begin an "Adopt a Grandparent" program.

For those members who have no family or whose families for various reasons are not able to visit them, a church that creates some type of plan in which families or

individuals adopt a member and regularly attend to them will experience blessings flowing in both directions.

4. Conduct “official” visits.

As church let's avail ourselves of the structures already in place. Visits by elders, deacons, pastors, Stephen Ministers, and others are special opportunities to be attentive to the needs of the elderly and to minister to them. Working to use these opportunities will spill over in blessings to those who visit and enrich the congregation as well.

5. Relocate for special worship services.

On occasion it is very meaningful, both for the older members and for the congregation, to take the worship service to a facility where several church members live. Involving members of various ages through music or Scripture reading and testimony helps bridge generational gaps. It is particularly meaningful to celebrate the Lord's Supper in such services.