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## Caring Connections - Vol.11 No.4 - Home

# Ministry with People in the Second Half of Life

## Part Two

Click on the table of contents at left for articles.  
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*The second of a two-part series covering everything from substance abuse, dementia, and Alzheimer's Disease to forgiveness, legacy, narrative theology, and the invaluable role congregations play in older adult ministry.*

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# Caring Connections - Vol.11 No.4 - Editorial

## EDITORIAL

**Chuck Weinrich**

With this issue of *Caring Connections*, we are delighted to bring you the second in our two-part series on “Ministry in the Second Half of Life”.

Some of the years in which I worked as a chaplain and supervisor of CPE were hard and challenging: 17 years in a general hospital and 5 at Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin—the latter being the most difficult, as anyone who has worked in or had occasion to utilize a Children’s Hospital can attest. Then I moved to a Geriatric Long Term Care facility: the Village at Manor Park, on the southwest side of Milwaukee, WI. This was a completely different form of ministry—with those in the second half of life (I went from ‘short stories’ to ‘novels’—from being called “Gramps” to being called “Sonny Boy”).

Initially, I enjoyed developing my own ministry “With God’s Oldest Friends.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, I also developed a CPE program focused primarily on geriatric ministry. There was a distinctly different feel to this CPE program. While the students developed their pastoral identities against a backdrop of long-term care and geriatric issues (rather than the backdrop of crisis and tragedy found in a pediatric setting), they also discovered the particular privilege of listening to and learning from “the elders.” They also learned to set aside the urgency and intensity of crisis ministry in order to “hear into voice” (Nelle Morton) the faith of people who had developed, over the years, their understanding about God, grace, commitment and care for fellow humans and all of God’s creation.



This issue of *Caring Connections*—like the previous issue—affords the reader the opportunity to learn from those engaged in a variety of geriatric ministries about other

dimensions of such holy work. Don and I, once again with the assistance of Brian McCaffrey, are pleased to share with you an impressive diversity of articles from a number of colleagues, all of whom are seasoned in the art of spiritual care with/for older adults. We express our deepest gratitude to Darryl Anderson, Nancy Gordon, Donald Koepke, Brian McCaffrey, Jane Thibault, William Randall, William Russell, and Lee and Walt Schoedel for their rich contributions.

### **Fond Farewells**

With this issue of *Caring Connections*, we bid a grateful “Fare well” to Jeanean Merkel. Jeanean has been the designer for our e-magazine since the 2013, Vol. 1. She has utilized her skills in putting together the material we editors sent her, and finding pictures that reflected not only the content, but also the spirit of the articles in each issue. In addition, Jeanean was responsible for designing and implementing a new structure for *Caring Connections*, moving away from a cumbersome 2-column design, meant for hard copies, to the current design, which is easier to utilize in an electronic format. Don and Chuck, along with the Editorial Board, extend our deep gratitude to Jeanean and wish her God’s blessings in her future endeavors.

We also bid farewell and express our profound gratitude to Bruce Pederson. Bruce has served as a faithful member of the *Caring Connections* editorial board since its inception. When, in 2002, a group of representatives from the Chaplains Network (LSA), LCMS, and ELCA met to begin envisioning the possibility of creating an Inter-Lutheran journal by/for those in specialized ministries of pastoral care, counseling and education, Bruce and his wife hosted the group at their home in Minneapolis. Indeed, for over ten years, Bruce has faithfully served as one of the true ‘hosts’ of this shared endeavor, giving it a special home in both his personal and professional life. Many thanks and Godspeed, Bruce.

<sup>1</sup> With God’s Oldest Friends, Simmons, Henry C. and Peters, Mark A. Resource Publications, 2003.

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As always, if you haven’t already done so, we hope you will subscribe online to *Caring Connections*. Remember, subscription is free! By subscribing, you assure that you will receive prompt notification when each issue of the journal appears on the *Caring Connections* website. This also helps the editors and the editorial board to get a sense of how much interest is being generated by each issue. We are delighted that the numbers of those who check in is increasing with each new issue. Please visit [www.caringconnectionsonline.org](http://www.caringconnectionsonline.org) <sup>[1]</sup> and click on “Click here for free subscription” to receive automatic notification of new issues..

Finally, when the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee disbanded a few years ago, the money from the “Give Something Back” Scholarship Fund was divided between the ELCA and the LCMS. This endowment makes a limited number of financial awards available to individuals seeking ecclesiastical endorsement and certification/credentialing in ministries of chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, and clinical education. Applicants must:

- Have completed one [1] unit of CPE.
- Be rostered or eligible for active roster status in the ELCA or the LCMS.
- Not already be receiving funds from either the ELCA or LCMS national offices.

- Submit an application, along with a financial data form, for committee review.

Applicants must complete the Scholarship Application forms that are available from Judy Simonson [ELCA] or John Fale [LCMS]. Consideration is given to scholarship requests after each application deadline, August 15 and February 15. Email forms to Judith Simonson at [jsimonson@pennswoods.net](mailto:jsimonson@pennswoods.net) [2] and to John Fale at [John.Fale@lcms.org](mailto:John.Fale@lcms.org) [3].

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# Caring Connections - Vol.11 No.4 - Anderson

## Seniors Desire the 3 R's

Darryl Anderson

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**Throughout several years of ministry in a geriatric setting, I have found that seniors desire some general sensitivity. They want security, peace and respect.**

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Security of body can embrace having anything from a decent house (shelter) or walking securely (with or without a walker or cane) to having good health care. They want to feel protected – that their physical wellbeing is going to be cared for by those around them. Peace for seniors includes harmony within the family and their living conditions, as well as with friends and organizations. They may not expect to have a perfect world, but they do want to have a sense of calmness and some control. But there are 3 R's they all want to experience.



To one degree or another, nearly all seniors desire respect, regard and reverence. They want to know that they are “somebody,” because they have earned that right by living so many years. They may not be looking for great honor for accomplishments or contributions they have made to this world. They certainly don't want to be put on some isolated pinnacle away from the rest of the world. They do want to still be in the flow of life, involved in daily living. They have achieved one thing for sure: “age.” When you are eighty or ninety, you have “been there; done that” enough times to have earned the right to say “I count – my opinions and thoughts are worth something.”

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**When you are eighty or ninety, you have “been there; done that”**

## **enough times to have earned the right to say “I count – my opinions and thoughts are worth something.”**

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The three “R’s” we in our ministries can show to seniors are respect, regard and reverence. Webster notes that respect is “to hold in high regard or show courtesy; further, it is to show consideration for.” Regard is “to look at attentively; to hold in affection and with esteem.” Reverence is “to treat with love and deep caring.”

In the realm of Pastoral Care, I see respecting seniors as initially acknowledging them with respect for their personhood -- they are not just Sam, Peter, Mary, or Mathilda. They are Mr., Mrs., Miss (and many of these women hold their “singleness” with very deep honor), Rev., Dr. or any other title they have. We request seminary students to use such titles when visiting in a nursing home, until the individual gives them permission to do otherwise. If a person asks to be called by their first name, then do so. Otherwise recognize them as someone to be respected. This is a simple, but important way in which we can show our respect.

To regard someone as being of importance, it is necessary to “attend” to them. We often call it “active listening.” Who hasn’t heard that term a few million times? But if we only take the time to really pay attention to seniors, they often have a great deal to share with us. By looking at the person, beyond just the physical being, we are showing affection and a caring attitude. No one wants to be stared at, but they do want to be seen for the individual that they are. They want to be accepted with a sense of caring that goes beyond a “How are you today?” or “What’s new my friend?” They want to be engaged, and to have the opportunity to be involved with another person. We do this when we regard them as we encounter them.

Seniors generally don’t want someone to “bow or curtsy” to them. That’s an oversell, to say the least. It will probably be seen as phony, because it most likely is! However, this doesn’t mean that they don’t want to be held with deep respect, love and esteem. They may even want others to be in awe of the number of years they have “survived.” My father-in-law often remarked, “It’s not hard getting old, it’s hard being old.” Once someone is in their later years of life, they like to be recognized for having gotten that far. To acknowledge their years with courtesy and dignity is to say you believe they are worthy of reverence.

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**No one wants to be stared at, but they do want to be seen for the individual that they are.**

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I learned a very important lesson one time, when I thought I was showing great respect, regard and reverence: upon meeting a lady who I understood to be 101 years old, walking down the hall in an independent living apartment building. I stopped to talk. My remark was something like, "You must have seen unbelievable changes in your 101 years. Could you tell me about them?" Her response set me back, "Oh, no, young man. I'm not 101. I'm 101 and a half!" Then with a smile on her face she said, "Remember when you were 5 or so and it was important to say you were 5 and a half or so? Well, when you are this age every little bit really counts!"

Respect, regard, and reverence: seniors desire to get them...and they ought to get them!

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*After graduating from Concordia College, Seward, NE ('65) and Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, IL ('72), Darryl began his ministry as a chaplain for institutions caring for the developmentally disabled. For the last 26 years, then he has served in the area of Older Adult Ministries. Presently he serves through Lutheran Senior Services (their Home Office is in St. Louis, Mo.) as the Director of Pastoral Care. This RSO serves some 8,000 residents and clients in Missouri and Illinois. The intent is to assist "Older Adults to Live Life to the Fullest." (John 10:10).*

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## Caring Connections - Vol.11 No.4 - Gordon

# Creating a Story of Hope in the Face of Dementia

Nancy Gordon

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**If asked to name what disease they fear the most, one in five Americans names Alzheimer's. Only cancer is named more often.**

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Just note the momentary panic that we feel when a word or a name is on the “tip of the tongue,” when we can’t find our keys or our glasses, when we realize we’ve forgotten to pay a bill or make an important phone call. We joke about these “senior moments” and fervently hope that it’s just a temporary lapse, not the beginning of something more serious. So what is it that we are so afraid of? Dementia is an umbrella term describing a variety of diseases and conditions that develop when nerve cells in the brain die or no longer function normally. Alzheimer’s disease accounts for 60 to 80 percent of dementia cases. Other types of dementia are vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, mixed dementia, and Parkinson’s disease.



Alzheimer’s disease and dementias with other causes rob those afflicted of short-term memory and the ability to think logically and coherently. While memory loss is often the most worrisome first sign, it is the lack of cognitive function and ability to problem-solve and find one’s way that become most difficult for the persons afflicted, their family, and their friends. Loss of cognition is also often accompanied by personality changes and life as it’s been known changes incrementally both for the persons afflicted and for all who care for them. It is a difficult and often heart-breaking journey as persons we have known and loved no longer recognize us and can’t remember where they are or even who they are.

We live in a society that some have labeled as “hyper-cognitive” – a society that values the ability to think and remember as the highest good and defines our worth as persons based on our cognitive abilities. Churches too value being smart and, like our wider culture, we don’t like to think about growing older and tend to deny that we are all aging. But the fact remains, we are an aging population and as a result, the number of people afflicted by Alzheimer’s disease and other age-related dementias is growing. In 1900 only 5 percent of the population was older than sixty-five; by 2008 about 13 percent was over sixty-five, and by 2030 that number will be almost 20 percent of our population. Today around one in eight persons over sixty-five has Alzheimer’s, with the total number estimated to be 5.2 million. An additional 200,000 individuals are afflicted with an early onset form of the disease. These numbers will continue to grow as more baby boomers join their parents in the over sixty-five category.

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## **We can ... create a new story of hope by remembering as God remembers and loving as Jesus loved.**

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In this context churches have a unique opportunity to tell a new story and expand understandings about Alzheimer’s disease and other age-related dementias. While much money is being spent on research, there is no cure in sight. We can either succumb to the dread and fear that is rampant around us, or we can embark on the journey of understanding these dementias and create a new story of hope by remembering as God remembers and loving as Jesus loved.

When I was first working in a large retirement community, a co-worker lamented the changes she was seeing in residents and expressed fear about Alzheimer’s disease. I said to her, “We are more than our minds.” I don’t know where that idea came from exactly, but it was something I became more and more convinced of as I worked with the cognitively impaired.

Every chaplain who has worked in long-term care can tell stories of residents who seem not to be present during a worship service and then who come alive, usually while singing an old hymn. Everything about their affect changes – they are present, singing with the group and giving praise to God. Such experiences have convinced me that it does make a difference to bring spiritual and pastoral care to persons with cognitive impairments, and that it doesn’t really matter whether they remember the experience ten minutes later. What matters is that in that moment we are all connecting with one another and with God.

Early in my work with older adults I participated in a program on gerontological pastoral care and the major assignment was to write a theology of aging. My theology started with: “We are created in the image of God and we bear that image for our whole lives.”

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## **... we are persons of value because we bear God's image, and that's enough.**

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I'm still unpacking the meaning of that, but it helped frame my work by reminding me that the functioning of our minds doesn't determine the status of our personhood – we are persons of value because we bear God's image, and that's enough. While our minds have often been the focus of learning about and knowing God, the mystical tradition within the church reminds us that the soul is the focus of God's activity in our lives. We don't lose our souls when our mind declines. Bearing the image of God speaks to our capacity for relationship with God and with others. Even when we are suffering from severe cognitive impairment we are still able to love and be loved. We are still capable of relationship. And while we tend to equate losing cognitive functions with losing everything, even when our minds aren't working we still have spirit and body and emotions – all of which are pathways for relating to God and to each other.

Our own fear and dread often hamper our ability to be present with those who are no longer cognitively intact. And since there is no medical cure, we can feel hopeless and helpless in facing the reality of this disease. How can we make any difference? And we wonder if there is any value in providing care and presence for someone who will not know us or remember that we've been there.

A colleague I worked with told a great story of going to the Brookfield Zoo with a group of persons from a memory care unit at the nursing home where he worked as chaplain. He told how they got on the bus on a perfect August day in Chicago – it wasn't humid, it wasn't too hot, and the sun was shining. They rode a tram around the zoo seeing all the animals, enjoying the sights, sounds, and smells. They stopped on their tram ride and got off in a picnic area and had lunch. They got back on the tram, finished their journey through the zoo, and took the bus back to the memory care unit. As they walked through the doors they were greeted by staff who said, "How was it?" "Did you have a good time?" My colleague realized by the puzzlement on the residents' faces that they had no memory of all the fun, laughter, and sights they had experienced that day. He wondered, "Does it really make a difference that we do things like this?"

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## **One of the gifts of Alzheimer's is that it reminds us that we all have only this present moment.**

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He voiced that question to the daughter of one of the residents who had been on the trip with them. She said, "It does make a difference and I'll tell you how I know. I come every Sunday morning and take my mom to church and out to lunch. Later that day or the next day she won't remember that we've done it. But if I have to miss a Sunday, the staff tells me that by the following Tuesday she's climbing the walls. Even though she doesn't

remember, what we do together on Sunday affects her spirit and makes a difference in the quality of her life.”

Could it be that some of us are called to remember those who only have the present moment, and be there with them in that moment? One of the gifts of Alzheimer’s is that it reminds us that we all have only this present moment. In responding to those with this disease we are invited to leave behind our own priorities and distractedness and be fully present with them in that moment in their world. Making that effort is easier if we assume a radical equality between us – if we go into the encounter expecting to receive as well as to give, expecting to learn as well as to teach.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we have story after story of the ways God remembers the people of Israel. For them to be forgotten by God was to die, and to be remembered by God was to live and to thrive. They experienced God’s remembering as actions on their behalf. When “God remembered Noah...God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided” (Genesis 8:1). This is just one example of God’s remembering that involved action, not an intellectual retrieval of a memory. God remembered God’s people in ways that were lifesaving, life giving, and that came at the time they were needed.

I think that we are called to remember others, particularly those who can no longer remember for themselves, the way that God remembers us. We are called to respond to the needs of those with varying levels of cognitive impairment in ways that are lifesaving, life giving, and come at the moment of need. We can only do this when we put aside our fears and are willing to listen to those with the disease and to their closest caregivers. We can only do this when we realize that whether our conversations, deeds, and activities are remembered by recipients or not, in the end it’s not about us – it’s about them and how our presence enriches their lives and touches their spirits. It means trusting that even when we don’t see “results,” the Spirit is at work in ways that are beyond our understanding. It’s being willing to be uncomfortable when our primary method of communication—lots of words—doesn’t work anymore, and finding new, more creative ways of communicating our love and God’s love and care. It’s being committed to finding ways to affirm our cognitively impaired friends and to include them in the life of the community of faith.

So what can congregations do? Here are some suggestions.

- Learn about Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias. Be intentional in learning how to respond to those affected in ways that meet them where they are. Volunteer at a memory care unit or an adult day services program to learn ways of interacting with and providing meaningful activities for those with advanced forgetfulness.
- Maintain social and spiritual contact with persons diagnosed. Be creative and find supportive ways to enable those with cognitive impairment to continue to serve in ways that they have served. Include them and their family in as many of the events they’ve attended for as long as possible.
- Offer regular respite care to families in the congregation who are caring for someone with Alzheimer’s disease.
- Provide support groups for those with the disease and support groups for caregivers. Training to lead such support groups is offered by the Alzheimer’s Association.

- Bring worship to persons who can no longer come to church in their home or in the care center where they live. See such worship ministry as a way to do outreach and take it to care centers and nursing homes in your area.
- Advocate for funding for programs for persons with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Community-based adult day services programs are often hit by budget cuts.

As we intentionally remember those with advanced forgetfulness we will begin to create a new story around Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. It's a story where relationships change but don't end because one person is afflicted. It's a story that has room for hope, for humor, for comfort. I have a social worker friend who recently offered a series of classes to her congregation around these issues. One of the participants was a man who had recently been diagnosed as being in the beginning stages of the disease. After one session, she asked him what it was like for him to be there. "It makes me feel comforted," he said.

His church was learning about his disease and ways they could minister to him and to his primary caregivers. It gave him hope that as the disease progresses they will not be abandoned, but they will be remembered in concrete, life-giving ways. His church is on the way of creating and telling a new hopeful and loving story about aging and cognitive impairment – and it's my hope that many more will join them.

### **To Learn More about Alzheimer's and Other Dementias**

The *New York Times* has a web-based collection of information and videos about the disease here that includes a comprehensive overview of the disease, tips for caregivers, and information about research. One of the most helpful sections for those seeking to minister to those affected is the video Patient Voices: Alzheimer's Disease.

The Alzheimer's Association enhances care and support, advances research, and advocates on behalf of those with the disease. Their website provides educational materials, access to local chapters, and support groups. They publish a yearly statistical summary about the prevalence and impact of the disease. The "2014 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures" can be found here.

### **Resources for Congregations**

*No Act of Love Is Ever Wasted: The Spirituality of Caring for Persons with Dementia*, by Jane Marie Thibault and Richard L. Morgan (Upper Room Books, 2009). This book provides an accessible overview of the disease and creative ways that individuals and congregations can minister to those affected.

*Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship and Flourishing Communities*, by Susan H. McFadden and John T. McFadden (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). Written by a psychologist (Susan) and a pastor (John), this book invites congregations to be communities of friendship that intentionally include those with dementia. They speak to the dread and the fear that surround the diseases of dementia and how congregations can become places of hope and support by building communities of friendship. The key concepts of this book are summarized by John for congregations in a pamphlet, *Aging*,

Dementia, and the Faith Community: Continuing the Journey of Friendship that can be found in a downloadable PDF [here](#).

California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging has information on “Sensing the Sacred,” an award winning worship program for persons with Alzheimer’s disease that could be used by congregations in a worship ministry. Kits for worship modules and training videos are available. Read about it [here](#). The Center website also has other articles and resources for congregations on ministry to older adults and to those with Alzheimer’s specifically. And you can subscribe to the Spirit e-newsletter which includes resources for congregational older adult ministry in each issue.

*A version of this article originally appeared in the Oct. 2012 issue of The Covenant Companion.*

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*Nancy Gordon is the director of the California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging. Previously she worked in libraries and historical agencies until attending seminary in mid-life. She is ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church and has served as associate pastor of Winnetka Covenant Church in Wilmette, IL and as director of Growth Opportunities at Friendship Village of Schaumburg, IL, a large continuing care retirement community. The Growth Opportunities program she developed contained spiritual life, activity/recreation, arts, fitness, and life-long learning components. It was her charge to put a spiritual foundation under all the programs, believing that each of them had the potential to touch residents’ spirits in positive ways. While at Friendship Village she developed “Sensing the Sacred” a worship program for those with Alzheimer’s and other dementias. She lives in San Dimas, CA with her cat, Emerald, and is joyfully awaiting the birth of her first grandchild in April 2015..*

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# Caring Connections - Vol.11 No.4 - Koepke

## Why Older Adult Ministry?

Donald R. Koepke

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**The boomers are coming. The boomers are coming. The boomers are here!**

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### There are so many older adults

Census data tells the story. From 2000 to 2010, those people age 45 to 64 (the boomers) increased 31.5%. The next highest increase was those 65+, who increased over the same period by 15.1% (source: US Census at [www.census.gov/2010census/](http://www.census.gov/2010census/)) It is projected that by 2025 there will be more persons 85 years old (the boomers again) than 5 year olds.

Those who work in and study gerontology have heard for the last ten years that the boomers are coming. The boomers are that huge demographic bubble of people that has affected every portion of our society as they have marched through the life cycle. When they were young, churches discovered youth ministry. When I was a kid I remember my home church debating over hiring a youth minister. "Why a youth minister?" was the cry. "Our youth already have a pastor, our pastor." But the other side of the argument stated: "It may be true that our youth already have a pastor, but there are so many of them. Our pastor is overloaded already." A third argument went this way, "The youth are the future of the church. But this bunch are asking different questions and getting into things that I don't really understand. We need to hire someone who can relate to youth so that we can keep the youth in our church."



When the boomers reached marriage and childbearing years, the church discovered family ministry. Gone were the times when the family just 'naturally' stayed together. At this point, the questions that the boomers had when they were young spilled over into relational life. Again, churches had a large group within the ranks that needed help in a way that was new. Now those issues were front and center.

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**No longer is life's question: "What can I do in life?", but it has expanded to the questions, "Has my life been worth it? Have I lived my life doing what I want? Have I lived with personal integrity?"**

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Then the boomers discovered a new freedom as children left the nest and they had more expendable income. At the same time, there was a hunger within the generation that would not go away. So the church discovered reading self help books, organizing adult retreats, and adult education. So, why have an older adult ministry? The boomers are getting older. They are now between 50 and 70 years old. And as the noted developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, has written about the eight stages of human development, the final stage begins between age 50 and 60. No longer is life's question: "What can I do in life?", but it has expanded to the questions, "Has my life been worth it? Have I lived my life doing what I want? Have I lived with personal integrity?" This transition has often been called mid-life crisis and has evoked many a stereotype of older men suddenly buying a red Jaguar convertible, or running off with a beautiful and much younger woman.

Well, the boomers are not just coming, they are here; and, when added to earlier generations that are living longer, the number of older adults becomes huge and growing.

So why older adult ministry? Perhaps it is because, since WWII, the church has historically followed the footsteps of this generation and has learned lessons that were at first new, untried, and uncomfortable; but, the church learned and grew spiritually as well in the ability to effectively serve others.

### **Because Older Adults are Asking the Right Questions**

When a person reaches older adulthood, they naturally begin to ask the questions that the church has encouraged them to ask their entire life. As noted above, Erik Erikson's work identifies the eighth expression of the human person is the question of integrity vs. despair. From my experience, engaging older adults both in the parish and within retirement communities, this inquiry begins as a small voice proverbially "in the back of the head." At first, it is a nagging question; but, as aging continues and chronic physical and mental conditions arise, along with the loss of loved ones due to death and/or resettlement, it becomes louder and louder. To be sure, the nagging-self can be ignored or even denied. People have done this for years, refusing to go through the anguish that is



required for reflecting on the meaning of one's life. The question of integrity is often drowned out by issues of education, employment and the development of a fulfilling family structure. This big question can also be overwhelmed by the challenge of caring for a loved one.

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## **When a person reaches older adulthood, they naturally begin to ask the questions that the church has encouraged them to ask their entire life.**

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But the church has always challenged participants, from adolescence through adulthood and into maturity, with these very issues.

“If any would wish to follow me they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34 RSV)

“The first commandment is you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The second is like the first: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37 RSV)

”Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all this things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:33 RSV)

“And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which he swore to your fathers, to Aabraham, to Isaac, andto Jacob, to give you with great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Deuteronomy 6:10 – 12 RSV)

And while that challenge is heard and interpreted internally by all people - no matter what their age - it is in adulthood that this question becomes paramount. As eyesight wanes, hearing becomes less acute, and strength is reduced, the questions of “Who am I?” and “What am I?” take center stage. Many older adults are still captured by the way that they have felt accomplished and valuable when they were younger. Our society still values youth, because it takes the strength of youth to continue to be a productive part of our society, and productivity can often seem the only thing that counts in the eyes of our culture. I wish I had a dime for every time I have heard older adults lament: “Why doesn't God take me home? I can't DO anything anymore.” Their emphasis, their search for worth, remains centered on 'doing' (Erikson's seventh stage), rather than 'being' (eighth stage). No wonder that there are so many despairing older adults today. They are looking for worth in the wrong place. They need to hear, want to hear, what God has always said to

them: "I love you not because of what you can do or what you don't do. I love you because you are. I love you just because you are alive, just as I will love you when you are dead."

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## **The challenges of aging drive people to ask the question of integrity, a fact that is like gold to the church.**

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This message from God is the essential teaching of the church. It is the question that older adults inherently ask, and there are many whose spirituality (trust in God) allows them to ask the big question, "Have I lived my life with integrity?" without fear of what they might discover, because they are grounded in God's love, guidance and forgiveness, and because of their experience with God, not just their thoughts about God. The challenges of aging drive people to ask the question of integrity, a fact that is like gold to the church.

### **Strategies for Addressing Integrity**

#### ***Life Review***

Older adults like to talk about the old days. I believe that it is because they are trying to put the pieces of their life together so that they might see the whole picture. Viktor Frankl, the noted Jewish Psychiatrist who survived the Nazi death camps, said, "We do not have memories, we are our memories." Since, according to Frankl, we remember only those happenings that are meaningful, then our memory records how and why God has sculpted us to be the persons that we are today. Thus, intentionally digging into memory is to give voice to our person, who we are, who we have become.

There are many life review resources available to assist in this process. A simple one is Richard Morgan's Remembering Your Story, which gives twelve strategies that can be used at luncheons or small groups because of their accessibility and depth. One of Morgan's strategies, for example, suggests the development of a life-line from birth to the present, noting above the line important events in one's life while below the line provides opportunity for identifying how our view of God and self has developed over the years. Once completed, it is important for participants to share their story with at least one other person whom they trust. The real power of the exercise is found in sharing and not only in writing it out. In the sharing new thoughts and insight often arise naturally.

#### ***Book Studies***

Older adults might have more time to read. Why not offer a study of a book that explores being an older adult? Books that I would recommend are:

*Winter Grace*, by Kathleen Fisher, the best Christian theology of aging I have read.

*What are Older People For? How Elders will Save the World*, by William Thomas MD. The author is serious about the tag line: How Elders will save the world, making this accessible

book particularly interesting reading. Autumn Wisdom, by James Miller, a book providing in-depth insights for group conversation in segments of two pages each.

### ***Bible Study***

This strategy is obviously something into which any church can sink its teeth. Many older adults have been part of such studies their entire life. But older adult Bible Study can be different. Instead of a focus upon gathering information, why not offer a Bible study that explores personal beliefs and perspectives? This form of study is based upon a belief that, while content is important, older adults, because of their inherent need to explore personal integrity, can productively respond to the Scriptures as they experience the passage. A simple but profound method of leading such a study begins with participants being given the Scripture text printed in one column on a two-column page (To accomplish this, download the text from your favorite Bible website, then in your tool bar “click page layout,” followed by “columns.” Finally, click “2” and you’ve done it) Give participants time to read the text silently (usually about 10 minutes). Invite them to simply observe the text, looking for words or phrases they believe to be important to the text. Note also any change in the persons in the text. What are thoughts or words they wish to know more about (This first step allows even a shy person to be able to participate).

The next step is to ask for their observations. There can be a tendency to slip into the next step, which is interpretation, but the leader must help the group remain focused on simply sharing observations [This step, usually taking 20 minutes or so (depending on the size and the insights of the group), allows persons who have not participated in Bible study much to be on a par with those who are veterans].

The third step is interpretation. What is the text telling us about God and/or the human condition? What insights for life are shared? This portion can take up to another 20 minutes.

Finally, for about 10 minutes, the group explores meanings and applications. What does each person glean out of this text, its content and interpretations? How do they respond to the character of God, as demonstrated in the text? Do they see themselves in the text? How and why? Conclude the study in a prayer circle, offering a heartfelt expression of gratitude for the presence of God’s Spirit in their midst.

### **An Invaluable Resource: The American Society on Aging (ASA)**

The people within ASA taught me just about everything that I know about aging, save for my own encounters with older adults themselves.

After 27 years I left parish ministry. TMI! I ended up in a year of chaplaincy training at the UCLA Medical Center. Following training, I worked for a few months with the VA in West Los Angeles and then as Harbor Chaplain for Lutheran Maritime Ministry in LA and Long Beach. Then I was hired by California Lutheran Homes as a chaplain.

I was totally ignorant of ministry with older adults, even though the parishes I served had many such people in them. However, to my surprise I found the retirement community to be the most theologically alive place I have ever experienced. There the issues of God’s love, presence, hope and fear, were constant companions to the residents as they sought

to make sense of what was happening to them. I longed for a wider view that could become a guide to what I was watching all around me. Enter ASA.

ASA, more specifically the constituent group within ASA called the Forum on Religion, Spirituality and Aging (FORSA), became primary in my journey into gerontology. I met long time leaders such as Stephen Sapp, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Miami, Marty Richards, a Master of Social Work from Washington State and a Lutheran, and also James Ellor, now Professor of Social Work at Baylor University. FORSA is a focal point for persons of all disciplines related to aging who are interested in exploring the value of spirituality in the lives of their residents/patients/clients. Marty Richards encouraged me to develop a workshop for the ASA Annual Conference. Jim Ellor asked me to review articles for the Journal for Religion, Spirituality and Aging. Stephen Sapp, also a Presbyterian pastor, helped me apply my religious perspectives to people who might not be religious. ASA and FORSA have been critical for me becoming who I am today. So, what are some of the perks I have discovered in becoming a member of ASA/FORSA?

- The annual conference. You are surrounded by 3000 of your peers from every form of service provision with older adults. There are hundreds of workshops from which to choose and several 'plenary' events featuring formative presenters in the field of aging. One of the conference tracks is Spirituality and Religion, designed by the Forum on Religion, Spirituality and Aging (FORSA). Each year FORSA sponsors an all-day themed conference within the ASA conference. Examples of themes are: "Dementia Care" (2013) and "Suffering" (2014).
- Free webinars are sponsored by various constituent groups. In 2014-2015 FORSA is sponsoring two on The Affordable Care Act and spirituality. But there are also mental health, aging in community (the parish?) and Senior Center offerings, all of which are helpful in stimulating thoughts and ideas for parish ministry with the elderly.
- ASA publications: Aging Today is a monthly 'newspaper' that contains information and ideas from many disciplines of service, whereby you can keep up with the cutting edge of aging services around the country. Generations is a themed quarterly journal. Many issues are appropriate for parish ministry. The ASA website contains articles from a variety of persons, some of which are organized by a constituent group such as FORSA. Finally, there are the ASA Blogs, containing discussions about specific issues or needs. The ASA website is [www.asaging.org](http://www.asaging.org).

One last time: Why an older adult ministry? Because there are so many older adults, and they are living into the very same yearning for meaning as that which lies at the heart of the church's mission.

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