

A few years ago, the mother of a friend of mine went to the doctor because of pain in her left arm. After waiting a long time to see the doctor on the day of her appointment, the doctor quickly and superficially examined her and then said, "Well, what can you expect? You're 71, you know."

Louise immediately responded, "My other arm is the same age and it feels absolutely fine."

Might that real-life episode be symbolic, a representation of all that goes on today, in every area of life, regarding those who are growing older? Even though much research, increased understanding and holistic practices are happening today, there is still a long journey to travel to move beyond the heresy of ageism in our society and culture, and even our congregations.

Ageism has been described as the prejudice and discriminating behavior toward senior adults resulting from holding myths and stereotypes about aging and older persons. An inaccurate assumption of ageism is that chronological age, in itself, determines the personality, behavior and social traits of all senior adults. Ageism implies that one age group is superior to another and the undercurrent is usually that "older" is inferior.

As with any prejudice, we are often unaware of all the beliefs we hold, all the things we do and say. Becoming more aware of our attitudes, myths and stereotypes, and perhaps even hang-ups, regarding growing older will influence our approach and ministry for senior adults.

### **How do we describe this growing population?**

Foundational to our ministry with and for maturing adults are the words we use.

Angelita Fenker, D.Min. (*Grace-Filled Transitions unto Transformation: Adapting the 12 Steps for a New Vision of Spiritual Eldering*. Wyndham Hall Press, 2004) says: "Never treat ourselves as 'old.' Never treat an older person as 'old.' Never let anyone treat us as 'old.'" It's interesting that at no other time in life are disabilities equated with personhood except when one is labeled 'elderly.' In our society, 'elderly' or 'old' connotes diminishment and finality. If we use 'older,' that term fits everyone. Everyone is always getting older.

Many people today are using the word 'eldering' rather than 'elderly' or even 'elder.' The Eldering Institute (<http://eldering.org>) asserts that eldering is

- "transforming our experience of growing older
- relating to people of all ages with respect and dignity
- living life as a contribution
- creating our collective future
- learning and growing throughout our lives"

“Eldering,” the noun used as a verb, suggests action; people are actively doing something about life, about growth in life, rather than static words, such as aged, old, senior, etc.

In March 2009, *The Midweek Herald* in Devon, England even called for a ban on the word ‘retirement.’ The word comes from the French, meaning “to withdraw.” *The Herald* quotes Honey Langcaster-James in the *Death of Retirement Report* published by Standard Life, “(The word retirement) no longer represents the hopes and aspirations of the baby boomer generation. ... The report followed a survey which found half of 46 to 65 year olds in the South West plan to travel more in their long-term future. In contrast, only 39 percent of their parents’ generation planned to travel more at retirement. Almost half of those surveyed hoped to learn a new skill, such as a hobby or language – five times as many as their parents.”

In reality, the word ‘retirement’ no longer has an accurate meaning. We never really ‘retire.’ We just move from one phase of life to another. (Scripture never mentions the word “retirement.”)

### **Many groups within the “eldering”**

Who really are today’s eldery, today’s maturing population? The first tenet of gerontology is that as we mature, we become more different from, rather than more alike, all other people. There is absolutely no way to give a concise description of all in the maturing age groups. Each person is unique; within that group (which is growing larger by the week) there are multiple descriptions, numerous needs, and countless gifts.

Many people have attempted to describe several groups within the growing eldery. Richard P. Johnson, in *Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2007) talks about three groups:

- Boomers (ages fifty-five to seventy-two): This stage “of life development is best seen as a time of growth, challenging (in a positive way), stimulating, engaging, and participatory...”
- Builders (ages seventy-three and above): “The distinguishing factor is a general physical slowing down. Builders’ minds may be just as sharp and quick as always, but they suffer some physical diminishment...”
- Elders (those who live very long lives): This is the name that Johnson gives “to those maturing adults ...who have experienced some form of physical or cognitive debilitation. ...many in this group require special assistance or personal care.”

Colleen Johnson and Barbara M. Barer, in *Life Beyond 85 Years* (Prometheus Books, 2003) likewise places people into three groups (focusing, though, on loss and disability, rather than continuing growth):

- The “functionally fit survivors” who suffer “only moderate disabilities”
- The “chronically disabled” who manage to live “with a high level of disability”
- The “increasingly disabled” who require rising levels of assistance

One church, Heights Christian Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, affectionately divides their maturing members into three groups:

- The Go-Go's: You all are still full of energy and vitality. Age hasn't seemed to catch up with you yet, although there are signs. You're still physically active, able to go almost anywhere – even though sometimes you sneak a nap before you do. You also may be in the last stage of denial!
- The Slow-Go's: As the name implies, you're slowing down and feeling your age. You still like to go but just not as long. You have been known to take a nap before you go to bed. You're the life of the party – even if it lasts until 8 PM!
- The No-Go's: The only thing holding you back is probably your health. Your spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, but your wisdom has not diminished. You're a delight to visit, have a great attitude about your circumstances and are a testimony of God's love to those around you.

Donald R. Koepke, in *Ministering to Older Adults: The Building Blocks* (The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005), divides the eldering into four general categories: “the active, transitional, and frail elderly as well as caregivers (which overlaps both the active and the transitional categories).”

### **Current Statistics**

Fortunately, there probably are more studies and research happening today than ever before, probably because 10,000 Baby Boomers are turning 65 every day. Let's explore some of the statistics, because they have implications for faith formation and ministry. These are taken from Transgenerational Design Matters (<http://transgenerational.org/aging/demographics.htm>).

- Never before in human history has our planet contained so many older people or such a large percentage of them. This has not always been the case. As late as 1930, America's older population numbered less than 7 million, only 5.4% of the population. Today, one out of every 9 Americans is "old;" another former youth turns 50 every 8 seconds. Those age 65 and older now exceed 35 million, a number poised to explode. January 2011 ushered in the first of approximately 77 million Baby Boomers, born from 1946 through 1964 and are surging toward the gates of retirement.
- The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau brief on data from the 2010 Census (<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf>) shows seniors increasing faster than younger populations, raising the nation's median age from 35.3 in 2000 to 37.2 in 2010, with seven states having a median age of 40 or older. Nearly 40 million Americans are 65+, greater than the combined populations of New York, London and Moscow. By 2050, the 65+ total will soar to over 80 million.
- Each year more than 3.5 million Boomers turn 55. (In the U.S. every eight seconds a Baby Boomer turns 65.) According to the UN Population Division, 1 in 5 people are expected to be 65 or older by 2035. By 2050, the U.N. estimates that the proportion of the world's population age 65 and over will more than double, from 7.6% today to 16.2%.

- The sex ratio (the number of men per 100 women) changes over the human life span. Surprisingly, 105 male births occur for every 100 female births. As time passes, the number of males continues to exceed females until the third decade (20-29). From that age on, women increasingly outnumber men. For every 100 females in the 65-74 age group, we find only 86 males. Their number continues to drop to 72 in the 75-84 age group. For the old-old groups (85 and older) the sex ratio becomes even more pronounced expanding to an astounding 49 men for every 100 women.
- The dramatic growth in numbers and proportions, increased life expectancies, and energetic life styles, now enables us to live 20 to 25% of our lives in active retirement. Boomers will continue to bike, hike, swim, sail, and ski, play softball and basketball. They'll move to the mountains, beaches, islands, and college towns where the physical and intellectual action is. A survey by Del Web showed that half of them expect to work at least part-time once they retire. And they'll want offices in their homes, with high speed internet connections for those two or more computers, which 40 percent of them already own. As LeRoy Hanneman, president and CEO of Del Web says, "Boomers should be called Zoomers."

### **Research and developments regarding learning in the eldering years**

This topic, of course, could fill several books. Looking at just a few developments (and our own experiences) will give us a picture of the changing landscape, for this reality touches all we do in adult faith formation.

In her book, *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk and Adventure in the 25 Years after 50* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, interviewing women and men who were redefining themselves as new learners, discovered that learning within the Third Chapter is different from the way learning traditionally takes place in schools. "Competition, speed, the single pursuit of achievement, masking failure are things we all learn to do in school. The learning and productivity we have in our Third Chapter has to do with patience, with collaboration, with restraint and incrementalism."

Lawrence-Lightfoot discovered that Third Chapter learners go through four stages when they are new learners:

- They are deeply curious about the subject they have chosen to study.
- They let go of their fear of failure, and their fear of making a fool of themselves.
- They display a willingness to be vulnerable.
- They develop empathy and put themselves in the place of those who will become their teachers – often people from different backgrounds, cultures, geographies and generations.

Another development, the desire for on-going learning, results in the reality that the eldering are designing their own learning opportunities. Their familiarity with the internet and various forms of social media certainly contributes to this. One intriguing example is the University of the Third Age (<http://u3a.org.uk/>). U3A "aims to encourage men and women no longer in full-time employment to join together in educational creative/leisure activities. The

word 'University' is used in its original sense of people coming together to share and pursue learning in all its forms.”

### **Research and developments regarding spirituality in the eldering years**

Holly Nelson-Becker, in an article in the July 2011 Generations Review newsletter (<http://www.britishgerontology.org/DB/gr-editions-2/generations-review/research-in-spirituality-religion-and-aging-an-eme.html>), surveys some of the challenges in researching spirituality and aging (e.g. differing definitions of spirituality and religion, measuring the immeasurable, the changing dynamics in religion and spirituality today, the diversity of people); yet calls for an increase in research on spirituality, religion and aging since there are so many ramifications for the elderly as well as for congregations.

Many researchers agree that spirituality deepens as we age. Richard P. Johnson’s constant theme throughout his research, his resources and his website ([www.senioradultministry.com](http://www.senioradultministry.com)) is “As we mature, our spiritual pace quickens!”

Former President Bill Clinton called on religious and spiritual organizations and delegates of the 1995 White House Conference on Aging to address the religious needs of older adults and their spiritual well-being. This led to eleven mini-conferences on the spiritual and religious aspects of aging. These were held across the U.S., and affirmed the importance and everyday impact of spirituality in the lives of older adults.

Today, most researchers and practioners are also pointing out the changing face of spirituality. The website, *Transforming Life after 50* (<http://www.transforminglifeafter50.org/midlife-trends/spirituality>), states: “Boomers are embracing spirituality in their own unique way, transforming the religious landscape of America and giving birth to a broader ‘spiritual marketplace’ that incorporates many spiritual perspectives, including both traditional and non-traditional religious communities.” Boomers are seeking “a self-reflective quest for individual wholeness, a search for depth and meaning, as well as guidance for living one’s life. As Boomers grow older, they tend to recognize that spirituality must be cultivated through practice, and that there will be no ‘quick fix’ when it comes to spiritual depth. Spirituality will most likely remain a significant aspect of their lives for the remainder of their lives.”

During a workshop in the fall of 2009 at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Rev. James Shopshire, Sr., professor of Sociology of Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary and Rev. Ramonia Lee, chaplain of the Interfaith Center at Leisure World recounted the needs and aspirations of today’s maturing population.

Shopshire said Boomers as a whole “have a distrust of institutional authority, including the church. ‘I believe in God but I don’t believe in the church’ is the way Boomers express their religion.”

Citing the statistics that Boomers are returning to church (in the 1970s only 30 percent attended services, today 43 percent attend services), Shopshire asked, “What do Boomers seek in

a church? They want a church open to spiritual experience, Bible studies that stress the practical, a healthy emphasis on relationships, fewer titles and less formality.”

Lee said, “Boomers want to link having a ‘spiritual experience’ with ‘worship,’ and expect worship to be participatory with a friendly and casual atmosphere, visual stimulation (using screens, not hymn books), and arts and music. They want variety in worship, service and study, and are insistent on excellence. They prefer worship that leaves room for interpretation, spiritual reflection and personal application. They are open to theological interpretation as long as it is free of dogmatism.”

“If the church is just religious, or just spiritual, it doesn’t meet the needs of Boomers,” Shopshire said.

“One method of adult Christian education many like,” Shopshire said, “is to receive by e-mail a news story, text and questions, which they see ahead of time then can meet on Monday to discuss, ‘God’s views on the news.’”

Lee commented that age-segregated ministries do not appeal to Boomers; they will take advantage of every possible opportunity to mix with the generations, Lee said. They want partnerships with other groups in the church and the community, including mission groups, choirs, coffee conversation groups, even confirmation classes with older members studying with the children. “

### **Some Needs of the Eldering related to Church ministry**

Much of the literature and research identifies the needs of the elderring population. These can be the foundation upon which to build a practical and compassionate ministry and adult formation opportunities with/for the elderring.

*In Need for Community and Connectedness*: Dr. David P. Gallagher, *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), makes some observations about the elderring. One of them is described as: “We love to be with friends, and we need a warm, loving and caring church family to do that. A lot of us have family members spread out all over the land and we don’t get to see them as often as we would like. But because our church friends are close by and accessible and we have more time, we love to be with each other for times of fellowship and activities.”

David O. Moberg (*Aging and Spirituality: Spiritual dimensions of aging theory, research, practice, and policy*. The Haworth Press, 2001) suggests the following overlapping categories of needs:

- *The Need for Meaning and Purpose*: The need for meaning and purpose relates closely to the deeply ingrained desire to maintain one’s personal dignity and self-esteem.
- *The Need for Love and Relatedness*: Sharing companionship, conversation, intimacy, laughter, a hug, or caressing touch and giving oneself to others by work or service help to satisfy this need.

- *The Need for Forgiveness*: Most of us have experienced failures ... these can be resolved through accepting the forgiveness of God and others.
- *The Need for Spiritual Integration*: We need to know and to feel ourselves spiritually integrated beyond our own existence into an absolute order of existence.
- *The Need to Cope with Losses*: Even losses can enrich one's life journey for each provides an opportunity for spiritual growth and development.
- *The Need for Freedom to Raise Questions*: Usually it is cathartic for people to share ... questions with a sympathetic listener.
- *The Need for Flexibility*: old age is a period of life in which many changes are imposed upon people, despite whether they desire and seek them.
- *The Need to Prepare for Dying and Death*: Much of this preparation seems purely physical and materialistic, but also old emotional accounts from past mistakes and grudges can be settled.
- *The Need to Be Useful*: This is a form of the need to love others and, in turn, to receive love from others.
- *The Need to Be Thankful*: The life review can stimulate a more balanced perspective that includes one's happy experiences, profitable accomplishments, and good circumstances.

### **Some Gifts of the Eldering related to Church ministry**

*The Gift of Memory*: In *Growing Old in Christ*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas, Carol Bailing Stoneking, Keith C. Meador and David Cloutier (Eerdmans, 2003) the essayists write of the importance of holding on to the Christian story, which gives meaning to individual stories and provides "rich resources to make possible friendship between the elderly and, perhaps most important, becoming and remaining friends with ourselves as we age." Since Christian communities live by memory, since the church's central feast is a feast of memory, the eldering have a unique and essential role in the church. They are the keepers of the meaning, the repository and tellers of the story of the communion of saints.

*The Gift of Wisdom*: Rabbi Marc Disick of Temple Sinai in Stamford, CT believes that the most important thing we can do for older people is make them feel that their wisdom and years count for something. (<http://www.pbs.org/lifepart2/watch/season-2/spirituality-and-aging>)

The reflection from former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan becomes truer each day, with today's vibrant maturing population: "Trees grow stronger over the years, rivers wider. Likewise, with age, human beings gain immeasurable depth and breadth of experience and wisdom. That is why older persons should be not only respected; they should be utilized as the rich resource to society that they are.

*The Gift of More Developed Abilities:* In the July-August 2012 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine, Helen Fields recounts several studies illustrating that the mind gets sharper at a number of vitally important abilities, even while certain skills decline, as we get older.

“In a University of Illinois study, older traffic controllers excelled at their cognitively taxing jobs ... They were expert at navigating, juggle multiple aircraft simultaneously and avoiding collisions....

For a 2010 study, researchers at the University of Michigan presented ‘Dear Abby’ letters to 200 people and asked what advice they would give. Subjects in their 60s were better than younger ones at imagining different points of view, thinking of multiple resolutions and suggesting compromises....

For a study published this year, German researchers had people play a gambling game meant to induce regret. Unlike 20-somethings, those in their 60s didn’t agonize over losing, and they were less likely to try to redeem their loss by later taking big risks....

In 2010, researchers at Stony Brook University analyzed a telephone survey of hundreds of thousands of Americans and found that people over 50 were happier overall, with anger declining steadily from the 20s through the 70s and stress falling off a cliff in the 50s.”

### **Some foundational guidelines**

Regardless of how the eldering are divided into sub-groups, and because of today’s increased understanding of this growing population, there are several foundational guidelines that are important to remember, especially for those in ministry, in faith formation:

- As previously mentioned, each person is unique. No one can be placed into a category with set characteristics, especially according to their age. As Ronni Bennett said on her blog: “One of the most striking features of old age is its diversity. We age at dramatically different rates and some people in their fifties can be decrepit while some in their nineties are as sharp and nearly as capable as in their mid-years.”  
(<http://www.timegoesby.net/weblog/2012/08/what-is-it-like-to-be-old.html>)  
Therefore, ministry for/with the eldering has to be multi-faceted.
- There are numerous and varied needs within this population.
- There is an abundance of gifts and wisdom within these members of our parishes.
- Because today’s older adults are living longer, are healthy and energetic, ministries for/with them need to be viewed as being *with* and *through* older adults rather than *to* older adults.

- Aging needs to be recognized as a normal, natural process, filled with opportunities for continued life and growth, rather than something to fear. Author Amy Hanson (<http://amyhanson.org/>) dares church leaders to let go of stereotypes about aging and embrace a new paradigm, that older adults are for the most part active, healthy and capable of making significant contributions for the Kingdom of God.
- In the words of Richard P. Johnson: we “need to dramatically shift our perspective on senior adults away from a deficit perspective and toward an abundance perspective. A deficit perspective leads us to the question, ‘How can we possibly take care of all these older persons?’ An abundance perspective asks instead, ‘How can we harness the depth of wisdom and well-learned adaptability resident in our senior adults?’ (February 2006 newsletter from [www.senioradultministry.com](http://www.senioradultministry.com))
- Today, perhaps, there should be a shift in the emphasis from the duties of the *eldering to the church* to the *church’s duty to the eldering*. When this is done well, of course, the gifts of the eldering will be called forth for all in the community.
- Ministry for/with the eldering is not an end in itself; it’s not simply a calendar of activities or services to be provided. It “seeks to be attentive to, tend to, cultivate, encourage, and deepen a person’s spiritual life.” (Donald R. Koepke, in *Ministering to Older Adults: The Building Blocks*. The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005)
- Ministry for/with maturing adults needs to be both age-specific and multigenerational.

### **What is ministry and adult formation for/with the elderly?**

It is obvious that it has to be varied, since the needs and gifts of the people are diverse and numerous. One-size-doesn’t fit all. Certainly we know it needs to be beyond “busses, bingo, and brownies.” (Richard P. Johnson in *Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults*. Twenty-Third Publications, 2007.)

Before looking at specifics, it might be helpful to reflect on the twelve guiding principles for ministry for/with the elderly as proposed by Richard P. Johnson (*Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults*. Twenty-Third Publications, 2007).

Ministry for maturing adults:

- Pays attention to three dimensions of growth: spiritual, psychological, and physical
- Is part of the parish plan
- Employs styles of teaching and learning unique to the people being served
- Is based on the idea that God is calling each person in the parish to a profound personal vocation
- Shifts the focus of parish activity to a broad understanding of ministry that includes shared activities as well as shared growth in faith and life
- Welcomes elders into mainstream ministries of the parish
- Embraces a goal of spiritual transformation
- Offers programming that arises out of the real situation in which elders live

- Focuses on both interior and exterior growth
- Is Christ-centered
- Is developmental, ongoing, and lifelong
- Honors diversity of age, stage, personality, ethnicity, and spirituality

What are the specifics? Donald R. Koepke (*Ministering to Older Adults: The Building Blocks*. The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005) suggests five categories, which will keep all the aspects of eldering life in balance (these certainly overlap with each other):

- Spiritual development
- Continued education
- Opportunities to serve
- Opportunities to be served
- Community building (social interaction) events

### **Spiritual Development**

In many ways, the other four categories can be rolled into this one, since spirituality touches all of life. Our spiritual growth is meshed with every other aspect of our lives. We are holistic people (body, mind and spirit). As we grow in one area, we also grow in the others. Our spirituality expands with all growth, when we're open and aware.

David Moberg ("Spiritual maturity and wholeness in later years" in *The Journal of Religious Gerontology* 7, 1/2 5-24, 1990) notes that among all change opportunities in human life, the one that provides the most opportunity for continuing growth in the eldering years is the spiritual. By its very nature, aging can foster spiritual development by inviting people into the spiritual tasks of discovering, pondering, integrating, surrendering, growing and companionship.

- Are prayer and reflective opportunities provided, opportunities which connect with the current life experiences, questions, hopes and fears of the eldering?
- Can we begin prayer groups where persons of deep faith, and perhaps limited physical resources, can pray for the needs of others?
- Do we realize that Scripture study, at this time in life, can be deeper because of the rich life experiences of these eldering participants?
- Do homilies contain illustrations of the experiences of older people?
- How do we help people see their life holistically?
- Do we ritualize the transitions of life in this age? Is there a prayer, a blessing, for those beginning retirement? Can we create rituals to acknowledge and celebrate each decade of life? Is there a celebration of driving careers, planned on a regular basis for those who have given up their driver's licenses?
- Can we develop rituals for transitions which parishioners can celebrate in their homes?
- Are religious services televised and/or recorded?
- Since forgiveness is a need, do we plan reconciliation services, focusing on the healing of memories?
- How do we acknowledge the caregivers in our parishes? These are often the eldering ministering to other eldering.

- Have we ever matched up a young family with each older person in the parish, inviting the family to pray for their person, writing them a note of appreciation and care?
- Are older persons invited into all the ministries of the church, especially the liturgical ministries: ushers, readers, ministers of hospitality, etc.? (In reality, many older persons are already there; they have been their whole lives and don't slow down as they get mature in age.)
- Do we, within our parishes, offer opportunities, mentors and guides, for spiritual direction?

### **Continued education**

As previously mentioned, today's eldering person craves for continuing learning. There are no dividing lines (that would be a dualistic world); thus, we need to consider on-going religious learning as well as learning which, at first glance, might not be considered religious.

“Ideally, religion is coextensive with life. The so-called secular experiences of adults are pregnant with the possibility of religious meaning....

When adult religious education concentrates solely on topics perceived as sacred or holy, the implication is that a host of educational needs and interests arising out of daily life are trivial, a sort of second-class reality. What shapes a person's religious response, however, is the totality of his (her) experience and not simply that part of life experience perceived as sacred. Likewise, a person's religious response influences the manner in which he (she) experiences all of life and not just a segment of life designated as sacred.” (Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton in *The Religious Education of Adults*, Smyth & Helwys, 2002.)

“Since all experience has the potential for learning, the division between sacred and secular fades away. In viewing life's experiences as God-given, and our capacity to take note and organize those experiences into meaningful frameworks as a gift of grace, our journey of lifelong learning is at every moment a sacred one. Whether the experience and struggle to make meaning of it are painful or joyful, the whole process is sacred. Whether the learning event takes place within a religious context or outside of one, the moment is God-given. Lifelong learning and the faith journey are one and the same.” (Margaret Fisher Brillinger in *Adult Religious Education: A Journey of Faith Development*, Marie A. Gillen and Maurice C. Taylor, eds., Paulist Press, 1995.)

People in their eldering years understand this one-ness, or are seeking to, in unique ways. It is part of the aging process. Some things to think about and to do:

- In May 2010 an article in *U.S. Catholic* magazine advocated for Yellow Banana Schools of Theology in our churches. (“I don't buy green bananas. I may not still be here when they ripen and turn yellow.”) This proposal was precipitated by the realization that most congregations give much time, resources, and personnel to children, and some to adults, but very little to the eldering.

These Yellow Banana Schools would be an “endeavor powered by the urgency of age. The courses, like a ripe banana, should not only be short but also sweet. . . . Yellow not green! Short and interesting if not fun. The sweetener would be the choice of a dynamic, questioning facilitator to run the sessions instead of an answer-giving teacher or a dull, lecturing scholar. Most courses would run one session, seldom two, and never three. The curriculum would be determined mostly by the students themselves, because as we age, our felt needs increasingly become our real needs.”

- When beginning to think about on-going learning for the elderly, often we think of “expanding their religious knowledge,” using a catechism of sorts, or classes that are re-runs of doctrine and teachings. For most of the elderly, they already know all the dogma and doctrine they need to function as members of the church. They need fresh ideas. (I listened to an elderly woman once who thought I might think her odd because she wanted to explore more of what it meant to be a contemplative – and so did many of her friends. They were afraid to ask their church to help them.)

What the elderly do need is to be invited to optimistic, growth-filled, practical information regarding a maturing spirituality. They welcome how-to’s which enable them to stay active, energetic, involved and open to spiritual growth and change which will affect their entire life.

- Parishes are called to provide workshops, resources and support aimed at addressing all the realities of the eldering process: e.g. simplifying life; ways to share faith with grandchildren; caring for grandchildren; the transition of retirement; the transition to a new job; the empty-nest reality; marriage relationships in the older years; understanding wills, living wills, organ donations, official forms (Social Security, Medicare, etc.); managing transitions; nutrition and fitness; travel and leisure; discovering/developing artistic/creative expression; understanding and living with loss; the meaning of suffering; death and dying. One example of a series helping older adults determine their funeral plans can be explored at <http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Best-Practices.html>; see #13.
- One parish doesn’t have to do everything. Be a clearing house, a curator, by alerting older persons to the array of educational and service opportunities in your area.
- One of the interesting undertakings for on-going learning is taking place in California: Progressive Christians Uniting ([http://www.progressivechristiansuniting.org/PCU/Progressive\\_Christians\\_Uniting.html](http://www.progressivechristiansuniting.org/PCU/Progressive_Christians_Uniting.html)), founded by a 78-year old emeritus professor of theology. This endeavor has taken up issues and concerns that impact today’s society: economics, politics, social ethics, etc.
- Support groups can be developed in which older adults have a safe place for conversation regarding their various needs: e.g. caregiving, inevitable losses of older life, adjusting to “retirement,” widow/widower groups.
- Book clubs can be a place for deepening one’s understanding, and sharing experiences, of growing older. Books such as: *A Deepening Love Affair: God’s Gift in Later Years* by

Jane Thibault (Upper Room Press, 1993); *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr (Jossey-Bass, 2011); *The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully* by Joan Chittister (Bluebridge, 2010); *After 50: Spiritually Embracing Your Own Wisdom Years* by Robert Wicks (Paulist Press, 2009); *The Enduring Heart: Spirituality for the Long Haul* by Wilkie Au (Paulist Press, 2000); *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans* by Karl Pillemer, Ph.D. (Hudson Street Press, 2011).

- One of the very helpful activities for the maturing adult is a life review: a way to intensify gratitude. They may be expressed in a variety of ways: writing memoirs, previewing and assembling photo albums, taping memoirs, through art, creating memory gardens, developing family histories or genealogies, making trips to family homes or pilgrimages to locations of spiritual significance, autobiographies or life histories. To read about how one church invited/helped its elderly to compose a spiritual/life autobiography, see <http://store.pastoralplanning.com/iboplbeprfor.html>.
- In addition to life reviews, invite older adults to reflect on their legacy. What are they passing on to the 7<sup>th</sup> generation (a Native American tradition)? A reflective time to think about the following questions, and perhaps write them down for their families, can be very affirming:
  - What are four of the spiritual gifts God has given you?
  - To whom would you like to give these gifts?
  - What are four of the talents God has given you?
  - To whom would you like to leave these talents?
- Parish Nurse Programs not only provide numerous services for the eldering, but can also sponsor many educational opportunities related to health, safe living, transitions, etc.
- Richard P. Johnson in *Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults*. Twenty-Third Publications, 2007 suggests a program of mini-courses to be offered for the older adults, such as: The 12 Keys of Successful Aging, How to Find Peace and Purpose, A Faith-based Perspective of Sickness, A Holy Understanding of Wellness, Praying: the Heart of the Spiritual Journey.
- Connecting with another theme, the desire to serve, invite older adults to a process of learning leading toward a deepened commitment: [www.justfaith.org](http://www.justfaith.org).
- Some questions to ask ourselves:
  - Are educational opportunities offered during the day as well as the evening to accommodate some of the eldering who would prefer daytime schedules?
  - Do we regularly analyze the message that our programs give older adults: e.g. listing programs as “family-centered;” involving them as teachers or worship leaders; blend of old and new hymns; intergenerational seating; accessibility and clear signage at church?

- Do we use the potential of technology, in all its forms, so that the eldering (as well as harried younger members of our churches) can learn and participate from their homes? For instance,
  - your local phone company can arrange for a conference call. The teacher (at church) can use the church phone; people at home will participate via their phones.
  - link the older adults with online sessions of interest to them. (Of course, because they have varied interests and each person is unique, this will be a broad range of topics.) One possibility: “Autumn Blessings: Spirituality in the Second Half of Life” (<http://www.bc.edu/crossroads>).
- Some resources/organizations for help in providing programs/services:
  - The Alzheimers’s Association ([www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org))
  - The National Council on Aging ([www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org))
  - The National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys ([www.naela.org](http://www.naela.org))
  - Although it might be known by different names in various areas, every county in the country has an Area Agency on Aging (<http://www.n4a.org/>)
  - The National Alliance for Caregiving ([www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org))
  - Health Ministries Association ([www.hmassoc.org](http://www.hmassoc.org))
  - The Christian Association Serving Adult Ministries Network ([www.gocasa.org](http://www.gocasa.org))
  - Forum on Religion and Spirituality in Aging (<http://www.asaging.org/forum-religion-spirituality-and-aging-forsa>)
  - Senior Adult Ministry: ([www.senioradultministry.com](http://www.senioradultministry.com))
  - iTunes University: ([www.apple.com/education/itunes-u](http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u))
  - Duke University: [www.learnmore.duke.edu](http://www.learnmore.duke.edu)
  - TED talks ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com)) and RE-TED (<http://gnmforum.blogspot.com/search/label/RE-TED>)
  - Osher Lifelong Learning: (<http://nrc.northwestern.edu/>)
  - AARP: [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)
  - Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries Network: [www.poamn.org](http://www.poamn.org)

In summary, as in all faith formation, opportunities for the maturing population need to include various methods:

- Individualized: online opportunities, reading, videos, etc.
- Within home life: conversations, prayer and rituals, etc.
- In small groups: various topics; taking place in various locations (church, restaurants, libraries, homes, etc.)
- In large groups: retreats, workshops, speakers, etc.
- The life of the church: worship, service, ministry and leadership
- Within the community and world: opportunities offered by various civic, religious, educational organizations

## Opportunities to Serve

In addressing this facet of senior adult ministry, Donald R. Koepke (*Ministering to Older Adults: The Building Blocks*. The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005) entitles the chapter, “Call Me a Master, Not a *Senior* Citizen.” He contends, as does everyone working and researching in this field today, that “Human beings have a spiritual need to be involved in issues and people beyond themselves. Older adults, with their education and experience, provide for a wealth of needs within a community. However, their conflict of time and interest often forms a barrier to serving. There are ways to avoid these barriers ... Opportunities for older adults to serve are possible, no matter what their physical capabilities.”

Many experts challenge congregations to create compelling opportunities, for as a researcher at Peter Hart Associates commented in *The New Face of Retirement: An Ongoing Survey of American Attitudes on Aging* (August 2002; <http://www.civicengagement.org/agingsociety/links/newface.pdf>): “For this generation of older Americans, volunteerism is about something much more substantial and real than taking up time in their day ... it is about filling a need, their need to both make a difference and be involved.”

As we look at some opportunities in which today’s older adults participate, it is also helpful to remember that an ideal adult faith formation process is to invite/help people to reflection *after* the service: e.g.: Has my worldview changed? What happened to me because of this service? How will my life be different because I participated in this opportunity?

Some possibilities for service:

- The BOLD Adult Ministry (Being our Lord’s Delight) at Chapelwood United Methodist Church ([http://www.chapelwood.org/MinistryMaster.cfm?Ministry\\_ID=4](http://www.chapelwood.org/MinistryMaster.cfm?Ministry_ID=4)) has over 300 projects in which older adults can be involved, including Habitat for Humanity, missions trips, and elementary school mentors.
- Adopting a child/family in the parish.
- Developing a garden plot for older adults who enjoy gardening. Someone can do the heavy preparation of the garden, but provide tools for older persons to use in planting and tending the garden. Flowers from the garden can be used in church; produce from the garden can be used for an intergenerational meal and/or donated to homeless shelters.
- Quilting of prayer quilts for those who are ill; some to be raffled with proceeds for service causes.
- Providing transportation for those no longer able to drive.
- Being active in such programs as Befrienders Ministry (<http://www.befrienderministry.org/>) or Stephen Ministries (<http://www.stephenministries.org/>).

- Being involved in all the church ministries, especially visiting the homebound and those in hospitals.
- Tutoring after school.
- Becoming big brothers/big sisters to students in a school close to the church.
- Searching out the many ways the generations can be involved together. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot remarked: A bridging of the generations is crucial to “recognize the wisdom that people in the Third Chapter bring – their resilience, their wisdom, their patience, their skills – and what it is that people in the first chapter might offer – their cultural currency, their comfort with new ideas, their technological skills, their impatience and ambitiousness. We need to be in conversation with each other and know each other’s experiences and stories.”
- One example of bringing the generations together in service is exemplified at Grace Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX where they participate in Church Apartment Ministry (<http://www.churchapartmentministry.org/apartment/home.php>), in which the congregation maintains an apartment for families of patients coming for cancer treatment at the Texas Medical Center. The Encore 50+ Ministry coordinates this outreach; the young adults of the congregation do most of the cleaning and maintenance as well as helping the families move in. The older adults visit the families and patient, offer to bring them to church, and provide meals.
- Some helpful websites:
  - Action without Borders Idealist ([www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)): an interactive site where individuals and organizations can exchange resources
  - Christian Appalachian Project ([www.christianapp.org](http://www.christianapp.org)): an interdenominational organization that serves the needy in Appalachia
  - Corporation for National and Community Service ([www.getinvolved.gov](http://www.getinvolved.gov)): sponsors “Get Involved,” opportunities tailored to the skills and experience of those 55 and older
  - Peace Corps ([www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)): welcomes older Americans to give something back while seeing the world

### **Opportunities to Be Served**

A fourth part of parish ministry to the eldering is caring for their unique needs; those who have given all their lives now need to be served. Some services/responses that are meaningful:

- It is easy for older, homebound members to become disconnected from the parish. Churches need to do everything possible to know who their homebound and hospitalized members are, and have processes in place to include them (visits, phone calls, sending

notes, birthday/thinking of you cards and the church bulletin, placing their name on the parish's prayer list, TV programming of parish events, services provided, etc.)

- Parishioners who are sent forth from the Sunday liturgy to bring Eucharist to those unable to be present
- Providing companions to doctors, shopping for those who need assistance, organizing trips to help adults who can't get out on their own (the library, a movie, concert, festival, or day of prayer)
- Telephone reassurance programs for those who are homebound
- Grace Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX ([http://houstongrace.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=251&Itemid=280](http://houstongrace.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=251&Itemid=280)) ministers to the caregivers and those they serve. "The Gathering" is a day of care providing a few hours of fellowship for those who have had strokes, have dementia or Alzheimer's, and the frail elderly who are isolated from normal activities. It also gives a time of respite for their caregivers.
- StoryCorps (<http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps>) is an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives. The same could be done in our congregations, inviting the older members to share their stories, their gifts, and the wisdom of life. This could be preserved within the church library.
- The homebound and hospitalized can be invited to be a part of the ministry of prayer of the parish, praying for the needs of the community.
- Parishes becoming aware of how the needs of older adults are met in the community: public transportation, adult day care programs, assisted living and nursing facilities, meals on wheels, accessibility of public places. Share what is learned with the parish as well as continuing to search out ways to improve them.

### **Community-Building Events**

This is the area, perhaps, which first comes to mind when thinking of older adults. It is crucial. The need for relationships and interaction with others continues throughout life. What are the many ways our life of the parish, as well as our programs, provide for fulfilling and enjoyable social events?

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Half Ministries at Northshore Community Church, Kirkland, WA hosts the Baby Boomers Bash, designed to celebrate the Baby Boomers turning 60 and affirm people at this stage in life. (A glance at their website - <http://northshore.church/connect/2nd-half/> - illustrates the depth of their ministry to older adults.)

- In Marietta, GA, Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, through “Life After Fifty” provides a comprehensive ministry. One of its features is the Magnolia Ball for over 300 nursing home and assisted living residents and the homebound members of the church.
- Many parishes/older adults within the parish do a superb job of planning and hosting events: brunches, dinners, card parties, trips.
- Community building would also include inviting participants – in any gathering – to get to know one another better. For ideas, see:
  - [www.treegroup.info](http://www.treegroup.info)
  - [www.wholeperson.com](http://www.wholeperson.com)
  - <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/icebreaker-activities-for-adults.html>
  - <http://adulthood.about.com/od/icebreakers/tp/toptenicebreakers.htm>
  - <http://www.askives.com/funny-icebreaker-questions-for-adults.html>

As we reflect on all that can be done within these five areas, some might say, “Some of them do not relate to faith formation, they are not really a part of lifelong learning.” Yet, what is our definition of learning? Of formation? On-going formation is all-encompassing. All we do, all that we experience “teaches.” We are learning (positively or negatively) by everything that touches our lives.

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