

Old Age: Sabbath Of Life?

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Eleven years ago, I preached a sermon entitled "The Pepsi Generation" concerning the ministry of the church to the young. It was a good, appropriate sermon on a valid subject. So it came as a surprise when one of the older members of the congregation objected that all the emphasis was being placed on the young. This was perhaps the first time I had been forced to think seriously about the church's ministry to and with the old.

One thing after another is forcing today's society to take its elders seriously. The statistics alone compel our attention. A youth dominated society from the founding of our nation to the turn of the century, when only four persons in a hundred lived past 65 and there were only three million persons past the age of 65, has changed to quite a different society today when twenty-three million elder citizens comprise one of the largest minorities (over 20% of the population). This change has meant we are experiencing a revolution in attitudes toward the old. Demographers tell us that there will be nearly 29 million persons over 65 by the turn of the century, and we are realizing how ill-equipped our society is to deal with this fact.

Activists like Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, have sensitized us to the needs of the old and writers such as Robert Butler have graphically portrayed the shortcomings of our society in meeting those needs. "Agism" is coming to be known as a threat comparable to racism.

We are increasingly becoming aware that the so-called "golden years" have a dual potential: to be golden indeed or to be the very opposite. Poverty is an ever present threat to most older persons. It is estimated that one-third of those over sixty-five live in poverty and more would if they didn't live with someone else. And apart from poverty, too many find their "golden years" years of misery and self-pity.

As Maggie Kuhn has said, "The third age (after youth and middle age) can be an age of great bitterness, loneliness, frustration, isolation, or it can be an age of enormous freedom; liberation from all the structures and strictures that hemmed you in, from some of the responsibilities that kept you moored to certain kinds of jobs, liberation from some of the old mindsets and prejudices that narrowed our world." (Thesis Theological Cassettes, Pittsburg, Pa., 1973).

What then is the church's response to this challenge? Three approaches suggest themselves. First, the church can help people to grow old in a good way. Second, it can provide a climate for ministry to and with the old. And third, it has a word for the old to help them keep life in perspective.

I

It has long been said that the early childhood years are the most formative in a person's life. "The child is father to the man," we say and so it is. But it is

also true, that the man is father to the old man. The Christian faith with its promise of new life in Christ holds out the possibility that we can transcend who we are and thereby overcome those flaws in our childhood molding. Whether through explicit religious experience or through some form of therapy, we can change. For many, change is necessary if old age is to be an enjoyable and constructive part of life. For the older we get the more we become like we are. Character traits intensify and undesirable traits become more undesirable. There are warning signals which can be pointed out to persons in their adult years alerting them to work on these traits. Such warning signals include obsessions and compulsions, rigidities, seclusiveness and suspiciousness (being unable to trust or count on another person), eccentricity, narrowness of interest (putting all the personality eggs in one basket), poor adaptability, and social inadequacy (the inability to develop a broad range of acquaintances and several close friends).

Reuel Howe describes human life as a pilgrimage from birth to death and points out how life is in a constant tension between death and growth, between fear and trust. The person who would grow and live must take risks in trusting self, other people, the possibilities in a situation, exploring the unknown, and ultimately, God. When we give in to fear, Howe says, we dry up inside and become prematurely old. He says "Fear can cause us to withdraw from our own pilgrimage and from the living of our story." (R. L. Howe, *How to Stay Young While Growing Older*. Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1974.) It can lead to stagnation, which he equates with death.

Both in its message and its program, the church can point out the dangers of stagnating traits and provide opportunities for growth. For these all basically root in self-centeredness, and the Christian message is one of self-giving that calls its hearers to develop a broad range of interests and concerns. One who fully responds to the gospel has vision widened to take in the whole world. Some approaches to religion narrow one's outlook and encourage parochialism. But a true glimpse of God's love for the whole world and all that is in it must broaden one's vision. We are called beyond a concern for just our family, our job, our congregation, our denomination, or our nation. And the religious vision that does not do this must be questioned and reevaluated.

For the Christian, the basic answer to the self-centered life that leads to dreary self-centered old age is a living relationship with the one who showed once and for all what life and death devoted wholly to others can accomplish. For the testimony of the ages is that such a relationship changes people and turns them outward. We come to share his concern for the world, its people, and its problems. The church, then, is ideally composed of those who have met and known the Savior and been transformed into outward looking persons, more concerned for others than themselves. Such a community of faith will have a special concern and place for its elders. It can be a community with elders whose lives grow richer and broader as they grow older.

It will then rightfully hear and heed the words of the law, "You are to rise up before grey hairs, you are to honour old age and fear your God." (Leviticus 19:32: The Jerusalem Bible). Respect and honor for the elderly will continue to be a mark of the Christian community. For in this verse from the holiness code

of the monarchy of Judah, where a holy God demands holiness from his people, respect for old age and the fear of God are linked. Perhaps this had more force in a pre-literate society where old people were much rarer than today, and in great demand as bearers of tradition. Yet, the principle of honor and respect continues as well as the need for the old to preserve a continuity of family, church, and national tradition. The presence of all the media of communication do not eliminate the need for personal contact between the generations.

Indeed, modern suburban society may have just as few elders functionally present as ancient society. Families scatter and grandparents may be known only as people who come bearing gifts at Christmas time. One of the great opportunities for the church today is to facilitate cross-generational contact, an opportunity that is largely being passed by. One formal way this is being provided in some places is through foster grandparent programs. We must beware lest our age-group oriented programs perpetuate a lack of contact between generations.

The need for this was highlighted for me a few years ago in a local church renewal event when all ages were mixed into discussion groups of only three or four persons. At the conclusion one of the women, a leader in the church who had no children of her own, confessed, "That's the first time in years I have really talked with a young person." In providing such an opportunity, the church supported a healthy manner of growing old.

II

A part of the church's ministry with the elderly is to keep them involved and participating in the total life of the church. Much of the church's program is oriented toward children and youth and it is the parents of those children who often make up the prime leadership for much of the program. There is a tendency for those whose children are grown to step aside and let others take up the task—and the church all too often lets this happen. Then a point comes when the one who has stepped aside finds himself or herself relegated to a secondary status, put on the shelf.

The challenge to the church is to find a way to provide full involvement for both young and old, getting the young involved in a responsible way without pushing the old aside. One way this needs to be approached is to find new ways for older persons to be involved rather than continuing in the same leadership and teaching position for fifty years. Trying a new role or challenge is one way to continue to grow.

So the church's challenge is primarily ministry *with* the aged. Yet, there remains the challenge to minister to the special needs of the aged, with the aged by no means being excluded from the planning and delivery of this ministry.

Whole books have been written on the concrete aspects of ways the church can plan and carry out this ministry, including case studies and reports and of actual projects. One might suppose that increased government funding of programs for the aging would reduce the need for church sponsored programs, but this does not seem to be the case. Government funding may open up new possibilities for ministries by churches. In the church the writer served until recently,

a senior center has been operated for some seven years with the church providing space, utilities and janitor service, while the area agency on aging provides staff, program, and transportation.

One might categorize church programs for the aging in the following categories: traditional ministries, social action or the provision of services, and advocacy for social change.

Traditional ministries include preaching, education, counseling, and other religious support. These can become more important to the older person who is a part of the church although the belief that people become more religious as they get older is probably a myth. The challenge to the church is to make religious activities available at times and places that meet the needs of the seniors, whether in the community or confined to institutions. One example of how this was done is seen in the case where a poorly attended traditional Wednesday night prayer meeting patronized largely by older retired church members was moved to Wednesday morning. It was still poorly attended but it met a time need and reduced tensions on those who feared going out at night. It was an attempt to say "We care." Other such programs may include a ministry of providing recordings of services to shut-ins.

Those traditional ministries can also be enlarged to make special provision for the needs of the aged and the special contributions they can make to the life of the church. Groups for those recently bereaved, death and dying seminars, and other group opportunities may capitalize on the values of group life that have been previously applied primarily to younger people. Maggie Kuhn suggests that churches can enable old people to engage in a life-review process which will create "skill banks where all kinds of knowledge could be deposited and drawn upon for the benefit of our aging society." (D. Hessel, (ed.), *Maggie Kuhn on Aging*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977). In addition it would furnish personal emotional reinforcement. Every church needs to examine its total program to see that older members are included.

Social action through programs designed to meet specific problems of specific groups is the second major way the churches can meet the needs of the old. This kind of action seems less controversial in the life of a church than the third approach of advocacy for social change. Therefore, it is more widely practiced and includes such programs as meals on wheels, shut-in companion programs, telephone contact programs, senior centers, medical clinics, blood pressure screening and a multitude of others. Churches have been enormously effective in meeting many needs, not only of their own older members but of old people in the community at large through such ministries. Donald Clingan's pamphlet "Aging Persons in the Community of Faith" is especially helpful in guiding church and synagogue leaders in developing such programs.

Advocacy for social change is an old role for the churches, but seems new and threatening to many. Many of the good features of today's social order are results of such advocacy in ages past. One of the great opportunities for the church today is to challenge and oppose "agism" wherever it appears. Maggie Kuhn, a former church employee, defined agism as the "arbitrary discrimination against people on the basis of their chronological age." (Hessel, *op. cit.*) As the founder of Gray Panthers, she has been a prominent crusader against agism

and issues a clarion call to the churches to go beyond simple social ministries and to fight for the changes needed in our society to make old age dignified and rewarding. Here is a real challenge to the church to be prophetic in a world that has tired of prophets.

III

Finally, the church has a word to old people. That word is that God has given you extra years for a purpose. Those years are yours to enjoy but not just in a selfish way. They can be years of continued growth and expanded service. Rabbi Robert Katz of the Hebrew Union College has pointed out that Jewish tradition looks on old age as Sabbath of life, a time for rest, reflection and growth. He writes, "Nothing captures the essence of the theology of aging in Judaism as does the concept of aging as the Sabbath of the soul with its rich possibilities for self-realization." (Seward Hiltner, ed., *Toward A Theology of Aging*. Human Sciences Press, New York, 1975.)

Of course, it is up to society to help make possible such a use of old age. The more basic needs of persons must be met so they can devote themselves to higher things. Maslow's need hierarchy indicates that physiological, safety, social and esteem needs must be met before persons can go on to meet self-realization needs. If old age is to be a time of self-realization, then the other needs must have first been met so that the individual does not spend all his or her time in meeting these. The church is in a position to do much about meeting these needs or providing a climate in which they can be met. It would seem that while society as a whole is best placed to care for physiological and safety needs on a large scale, the church is uniquely situated and equipped to meet social and esteem needs, which is to a great extent what we have been discussing.

Freed to pursue self-realization, the elder can indeed find these years a time of liberation and opportunity. There can be a freedom to pursue new interests, develop new skills, make new friends or to realize the potential of old interests and skills. There can be time to help others and serve a community in a way there was never time for before.

If one keeps active and interested without the handicap of a closed mind, that person can find that old age does indeed provide a "Sabbath of the soul." A pre-eminent task for contemporary Christians is to proclaim and embody a gospel that makes such a Sabbath available to us all as we grow older. It will include a call away from self-absorption, an offer of cross generational community, specific experiences of nurture, and the claim that God allots time to all his people for a purpose.