

MAKING OLD AGE THE GOLD STAGE

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There are many misconceptions, myths, and stereotypes about old age. Some of them include the idea that older folk have lost much of their intellectual ability, have no valuable contribution to make to society, have a low sense of self-esteem because they have retired, have little or no money, have limited ability to travel, and have lost the ability to enjoy most of life. Old age is something to be dreaded and avoided as long as possible. Retirement should be delayed until there is no recourse.¹ Old age is a boring age with little to do. Old age is a time when all enjoyable activities end—especially with reference to sex. Old age is a time when life has passed you by, leaving you with little or no choice. Old folk have no value and can make no contribution to society—including the church.² These culturally-taught values and beliefs have a strong negative effect upon the thinking processes of older adults. They tend to accept these ideas, thereby making them become self-fulfilling prophecies. Sally Thomason declares, “To dispel myths and see new realities about old age requires that we throw out many of the entrenched expectations and ideas that for years we have accepted without question. We must learn to recognize destructive *habits* of thought.”³ People of all ages need to rethink and discover what old age truly is, not just base their thinking based upon views that have been repeated and accepted for too many years. Several years ago,

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¹In contemporary America old people are classified and accepted as a problem. Martin E. Marty, “Cultural Antecedents to Contemporary American Attitudes toward Aging,” in William M. Clements, ed., *Ministry with the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1989), 56.

²David P. Gallagher, *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century: Step-by-step Strategies for Reaching People over 50* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 9.

³Sally Palmer Thomason, *The Living Spirit of the Crone: Turning Aging Inside Out* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 7.

David Moberg offered this sobering assessment about prejudices against aging:

Ageism, discrimination against the aging, is evident in nearly all areas of public life, including even religious institutions. Gerontophobia (Bunzel, 1969, 1972, 1973) is widespread, for people of all ages have a tendency to fear aging and to dislike the aged. Lack of respect for those who are elderly, viewing their knowledge and experience as out of date and irrelevant, is indigenous in contemporary society. Achievement tends to be measured by work; those who are retired are interpreted as no longer worthy of respect. Even religious institutions are oriented toward the future and thus remove a sense of security from many elderly people. As a result of these and other forms of discrimination and prejudice, society exacts a heavy toll of "spiritual fatigue" (Kowberle, 1969) among the aging. A sense of uselessness and rejection, inner emptiness and boredom, loneliness and fear emerges. The resolution of these needs constitutes a major spiritual task for contemporary society.⁴

This description may be somewhat old, but it is not all that far off from commonly held opinions today about aging. Unfortunately, this attitude seems more and more to be the accepted dictum here in Korea as well. There certainly seems to be a fear of aging and the apparent loss of significance and value.

However, the reality is not as bleak as people think. Old age should be and can be a time of celebration of life, of accomplishment, of friendship. It is a time when people are finally free to do the things they have put off doing. It is a time when they can participate in activities they enjoy and choose not to participate in activities they do not enjoy. It is a time when they are free to travel, to go back to school, to become more involved in church-related activities for which they once had little time. It is a time for volunteerism, for using one's training and skills for the benefit of others rather than for making money. It is a time for some who have been overly active out of necessity to now begin to live a more quiet life that they may have preferred. It is a time when they can do as they choose, with no one to tell them what they can or cannot do—if they have planned well for this time and have adequate finances to allow such choices. It is, in reality, possible for this to be the best time in all of life. It is possible for old age to be the gold stage. It may be a time for others to regret that they have not better cared for their

⁴David O. Moberg, "Spiritual Well-Being in Late Life," in *Late Life: Communities and Environmental Policy*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1974), 261.

bodies and for this stage of life because they did not expect to live long enough and need to be healthy enough to actually have the possibility to enjoy old age.⁵ Interestingly, some folk experience an “age-denying” period when they struggle with resistance, resignation, relaxation, recreation, relocation, reinvention, and renewal.⁶ These folk are the ones who may more likely fit the misconceptions of old age because they are poorly prepared and unable to take advantage of all of their free time, which may run into decades rather than years. Of course, there will always be some who are unable to enjoy old age because of health reasons, some caused by genetics, some caused by bad living, some caused by unexpected accidents or tragedies. Thomason indicates that the “huge challenge” for this group of people will always be to find “meaning and value” in their lives.⁷

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD AGE

There are numerous characteristics that are relevant to the proper understanding of old age. One cannot understand old age without considering such things as age and aging, physical ability, mental ability, and the various struggles faced.

Age and Aging

Age and aging is a natural part of the process of development in life that is “not to be conquered or denied but understood, so that humans can creatively live this phase of life to the fullest, rather than be defined by limiting cultural stereotypes.”⁸ Aging is not to be endured but to be lived. No one stays the same from birth to death. Aging of the body begins at birth and ends at death. There are no exceptions. Some people seem to age more slowly and more gracefully than others, but they still are aging.⁹ The aging process is determined by genetics and

⁵A. L. Vischer, *On Growing Old* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 9.

⁶Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *Designing an Older Adult Ministry* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), 12-13.

⁷Thomason, 121.

⁸*Ibid.*, 96.

⁹Deborah V. Gross, *Beyond the Gold Watch: Living in Retirement* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 31-33. Refer also to *Focus on the Family Complete Guide to Caring for Aging Loved Ones: The Official Book of the*

by environment. Persons have no control over their genetics. However, they do have some control over their environment and what they choose to do within that environment. Taking care of their bodies and actively using their mental powers can slow down the aging process somewhat. It is far more common to see people that have sped up the process, however, by foolish living. Thus, older adults need to understand that “the influence of genetics shrinks proportionately as one gets older, while social and physical habits become increasingly integral to one’s health—both mental and physical.”¹⁰ Since social and physical activities are of greater importance as adults grow older, they must continue to be active in these areas of their lives. One of the significant realizations for those caught up in the aging process is that they come to realize that “old age matters” and that there is no reason to “despair for lost youth.”¹¹ Once they realize this truth, they can begin to find good in the aging process, not just the bad. Another significant discovery is that there is no such thing as a “typical” older adult: “Aging is an individual experience; people differ not only in their attributes and behaviors but also in the way they change over time.”¹² Since people change in different ways at different rates, the aging process is not easily categorized according to age. Aging may vary in manner and pace but will impact the physical and mental areas of each person.

Physical Ability

Physical ability begins to decline much earlier than mental ability. Physical skills begin to deteriorate or slow down in the thirties or forties.¹³ Through healthy life choices, one may actually retain physical skills longer. However, ultimately, muscles begin to lose their tone and strength so that physical skills begin to diminish until it becomes readily apparent that the aging process has begun to change persons

Focus on the Family Physician Resource Council (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2002), 90.

¹⁰Thomason, 76.

¹¹Ibid., 120.

¹²Ibid., 75.

¹³Tillman R. Smith, *In Favor of Growing Older: Guidelines and Practical Suggestions for Planning Your Retirement Career* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1981), 50.

from youthful persons into older adults. For instance, my older brother has retained his athletic skills and physical abilities into his late 60s, whereas I retained mine only until the late 40s. Obviously, he has taken much better care of his body than I have. His job in the FBI required strength and condition and was tested every year. My job required more mental activity as a teacher and a preacher. Yet, he is going through the aging process just as surely as I am. Quite typically, however, older adults see remarkable decline in reflexes and skill levels as they hit their 30s or 40s.¹⁴ They become noticeably slower and weaker in their 50s and discover “new muscles” in their 60s because of the pains associated with physical activities. As they mature into their 70s, adults tend to become slower in speech, in thought, in activity. Physical ability remains, but in a diminished capacity. Skills that demand quick-twitch muscle response are no longer appropriate for this age group. Yet, these folk are able to perform significant physical activities, but ones that are more age-appropriate. I am aware of many people that have maintained some physical ability into their 80s and 90s, although a significant number of folk who live into the 90s may be limited in activity. I remember one church member who, although in her 80s, attended church camp every summer for two weeks with children and youth. Her physical ability was slowing down, but the speed of her physical activity did not negatively affect her ability to work in such an activity-filled environment.

Mental Ability

Mental ability, in and of itself, does not decrease during the aging process. However, the speed of mental ability does slow down. It takes longer to think through complex processes, but the ability to think is in no way diminished.¹⁵ This continued ability assumes that there are no physical or mental problems that have affected the thinking processes. Many times, persons in the gold stage of life have their mental processes affected by medications prescribed by doctors for a variety of illnesses. It is not uncommon for persons to be taking numerous

¹⁴Vischer, 31. Vischer cites research indicating that people begin feeling old when they are in their forties.

¹⁵Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 4-5.

medications, some of which may tend to overmedicate or even interact negatively, and thereby dramatically affect the thinking processes. Since people tend to think that older folk do not have clear thinking ability, they do not consider the effects of overmedication to be a medical problem, but an aging problem. It is imperative that younger people be taught that older folk still should retain mental abilities into the later years of life, that it is indicative of some potentially serious problem when the mental ability is seriously diminished: “New learning is possible at any age, but the false notion that no new learning takes place after a certain age discourages older people from cultivating new skills or even attempting something new.”¹⁶ However, older people can learn; and both younger and older folk need to realize this truth.

Since mental capacity is not diminished, older people can learn. For instance, my 86-year-old mother has developed skills in using a computer and sends e-mail letters to me every day. She began using the computer in her late 70s. One of our first graduates from Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology began work on his master’s degree in Christian education when he was seventy years old.¹⁷ It is not uncommon for retired people to be re-invigorated by pursuit of further education in their later years of life. They can still learn just as well as when they were young. They simply need more time to process and synthesize information. Of course, as people get older, the stress of doing much homework, writing papers, and taking exams can have a more profound effect—e.g., causing serious bodily or mental harm—than it might have on younger folk. Nevertheless, the older generation is a largely untapped resource for students in the present education environment with fewer young folk reaching college or seminary age.

The Struggles of Old Age

One thing that is certain about the struggles of old age is that “aging encompasses the whole person—the body, mind, and spirit.”¹⁸ I will discuss more about the spiritual aspect of aging in a later section of this paper. In spite of the longer life expectancy, the advances in

¹⁶Thomason, 9.

¹⁷Mr. Lee, Won-Bok received his Master of Arts Degree in Christian Education in 2001.

¹⁸Thomason, 123.

medical science, and the improved condition of folk in the later years of life, one of the realities of old age is that the physical body does deteriorate and lose some of its ability to fight off disease. The body does become more fragile and susceptible to injury. A fall that would do no harm to a child might cause serious injury to an older person—even leading to permanent physical limitation or, in worse case scenarios, paralysis, or death. It does become more difficult to sit down or get up. It does become more difficult to eat without making a mess. Using the bathroom can be a genuine adventure. Changing clothes takes longer than when younger. Driving skills diminish as sight may be impaired, dexterity is impeded, and judgment slows down. Physical diseases such as diabetes or high blood pressure may develop in the later years and cause potential devastating physical changes for some.¹⁹ Such medical problems may lead to a stroke that can be debilitating to the thinking processes, affecting thought, speech, and coordination. Persons may also have to face deteriorating mental ability. Although the actual number is smaller than young adults assume, some older folk do develop senility, dementia, or even Alzheimer's disease. More commonly, older folk may lose mental agility because of medication, even overmedication.²⁰

Although many older folk will have a reasonably good life and be able to do those things they were used to doing when younger and employed, some people in their golden years will face economical crisis. This can be one of the greatest burdens of the gold stage. Many persons do not prepare economically for retirement years. Some think they will not live long after retirement. Others think they have enough money saved up or have a sufficient retirement pension to survive well. For whatever reason, many folk must face the older years with so little income that they will struggle to survive. They may have to choose between buying food and heating their home. They may be unable to afford needed medicine and thus be at increased risk for heart attack or stroke. They may be unable to afford going to the hospital or getting

¹⁹Barbara Deane, *Caring for Your Aging Parents: When Love Is Not Enough* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1989), 184-85. For further discussion on this matter, see also Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 3-9.

²⁰Gross, 106-14. Gross discusses the various effects of medications, medical problems, memory problems, depression, and others. See also Deane, 40, 181-83.

adequate medical care. Quite naturally, they will be less able to purchase a car or even new clothes. This is a reality for some folk.²¹

There is another struggle of old age that may be as bad as all others for some folk. Those who have debilitating medical conditions or lack of funds may quickly lose social contact with their friends, their support group. Unable to go or to be with other people can lead to a real sense of isolation and loneliness.²² This is very painful for those who have always been gregarious in nature or very active in nature (hunting, fishing, camping, traveling). People that have been active in church and no longer can participate in person feel a genuine sense of loss that may lead to serious complications, such as depression.

It is imperative that we understand these problems as a very real part of the later years of life for some folk. Although people in the gold stage may not face serious problems in all of these areas, they may face one or more of them. It may be that most adults will face these situations to some extent as they advance through the stages of old age. Although Thomason has many valuable insights about old age, she believes that older adults should turn their thoughts inward and find unique qualities that will offset or delay the negative aspects of aging.²³ However, a Christian theologian or educator would say the way to prepare for and deal with old age is not to look within oneself, but to look up to God and find in Him and His Word guidance that makes for successful living of the golden years of life.

THE STAGES (PHASES) OF OLD AGE

In 1964, Neugarten and Weinstein classified the senior adult years into three categories: "young-old" (55-65), "middle-old" (65-75), and "old-old" (over 75).²⁴ Years later in 1988, Atchley updated the ages of these categories: "young-old" (60-74), "middle-old" (75-84), and "old-

²¹Vischer, 138-57.

²²Oswald J. Sanders, *Your Best Years: Staying Young While Growing Old* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 98-102. Sanders discusses problems such as boredom and self-preoccupation. He also offers suggestions for how to deal with these problems. See also Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 69-83.

²³Thomason, 94-104.

²⁴B. L. Neugarten and K. Weinstein, "The Changing American Grandparent," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, no. 26, 199-204.

old” (over 84).²⁵ However, I do not consider age as the best way to categorize the stages or phases of old age. Neither do I think any older person would be satisfied with those categories. I believe the stages of old age should be identified in the following way: active (doubly active both physically and mentally), active/passive (active in one but not the other), and passive (doubly passive both physically and mentally). These stages may be more phases than they are stages and may be represented in every age category listed by the persons above. They describe the experiences most of older adults will experience if they live long enough lives. Typically, they are experienced in the order presented, not in a reverse order, etc., and thus may be presumed to be developmental in nature. However, because of medical problems or other circumstances beyond their control, some older adults may enter the gold stage already active/passive or even passive. It is possible that they cannot experience the first phase or the first two phases because of these circumstances. Should some marvel of science (or a miracle from God) repair or remove the barrier to normal activity, the person would then proceed through the three phases in the expected order. Typical healthy adults will go through these three phases in the order presented.

Active (Doubly Active—
Physically and Mentally)

Persons having no major barrier to active life will be doubly active, both physically and mentally, in the early years of the gold stage. Although it is true that some folk will choose to live a disengaged, or sedentary, life, it may be that some of them would fit more appropriately in the next category because of a mental deficiency in the ability to establish relationships, etc. It must be acknowledge that some folk simply prefer privacy in their lifestyle. However, most folk who are physically and mentally capable of living active lives will choose to do so. People that are doubly active will keep up close contact with friends, remain active in church and other organizations of interest, travel, and continue to do/begin to do a host of other activities. These people see the golden years as an opportunity to do many things they had little or no time to do when a part of the working culture. Some

²⁵R. C. Atchley, *Social Forces and Aging* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988).

will go back to school—most for personal satisfaction rather than to get a degree. Some will begin second careers, some will become short-term missionaries, some will become social activists, and some will become writers. The possibilities are endless as long as the person has physical and mental health and the financial freedom to afford these various activities.

Some persons will maintain this active lifestyle until their death. This will be particularly true of those who may die as a result of an accident or because of a fatal heart attack. Such folk do not live long enough to experience the normal process experienced through longevity. Yet, a few persons will continue to be active even into their eighties or nineties. I had one church member who attended church, played golf, and attended meetings until he died “unexpectedly” in his mid-nineties. Nevertheless, most folk who begin the gold stage doubly active will eventually progress through one or both of the remaining phases. The natural process is for this person doubly blessed in activity to be affected by the aging process at some point and become limited in either physical or mental ability. Such change leads to the second phase of the gold stage, which is active/passive.

Active/Passive (Active in One but Not the Other)

Persons that experience limitation in physical or mental ability, but not both, move into this second stage or phase of the gold stage and begin the struggle with the aging process. Through forty years of ministry as a pastor and as an education minister, I saw many persons experience the transition from the first phase to this second phase. Some folk will be affected by mental problems that limit their activity. These people will frequently be confined to their home or to an institution where extended care can be given. It is very sad to see vibrant Christian people become incapable of normal thought and be less than they once were. What a tragedy to see such persons be unable to communicate logically or coherently because of a foggy cloud that has blanketed their minds! However, most folk experience the problem of physical limitation. Perhaps an accident or a stroke or disease limits their body’s ability to function normally. Whatever the cause, many people are unable to participate in usual activities because of the inability to travel. Their minds may be keen but their bodies keep them from being active. They may even be confined to a wheelchair or a bed.

Those persons that can sit in a wheelchair may actually regain some level of activity. As time passes, however, such folk struggle to remain active because of the continuing struggle and decline. Thus, many people have to “participate” in church services by watching them on television or by video. They may have to communicate with their friends by telephone or by computer. Going out with their friends for a meal or just for a visit may become very painful and time-consuming, if possible at all. Those confined to an institution have to rely on their friends coming to see them, since they cannot travel outside on their own. These people oftentimes find themselves growing more and more isolated from the world, the church, and their friends. They depend upon others to remember them and continue to make them a part of their life. However, as time passes and friends “forget” to visit, they begin to lose touch with reality as their minds become more and more lonely and depressed. Isolation sets in and, unfortunately, mental limitations can occur from lack of contact with others. Oftentimes, these isolated individuals retreat into a world of make-believe or into the past. They may actually carry on conversations with people whose presence is imagined but seems quite real. The result is a doubly passive life, both physically and mentally. This is the phase that every person fears and dreads, for no one wants to experience it.

Passive (Doubly Passive—Physically and Mentally)

Unfortunately, some persons that live many years in the gold stage will ultimately tend to enter this final stage/phase of old age. Even faithful Christian ministers are not exempt from experiencing this circumstance at the end of their life here on earth. I remember visiting one elderly preacher in a nursing home and finding him lying undressed on his bed. Here was a man of God who taught the importance of living a pure, godly life but was unable to clearly demonstrate that in his old age. It is quite possible that such a person, a man of God, may curse caretakers. Of course, I realized that he was unaware of his condition and not responsible for his actions before God. However, his condition reflects the possibility that faces us all—i.e., that we may live long enough to go through such a time in our own lives. No one knows what the future holds for us. To be unable to be active both physically and mentally leaves a person’s life in disarray that is beyond control. I am grateful to God that few people actually go through this phase of old

age. The adult has returned to the condition of being like a baby in that he or she is unable to participate in taking care of himself or herself. There is little about it that can be called the gold stage, except maybe for the fact that such a condition may evoke works of grace and mercy from others and cause them to grow closer to God. Similarly, Jesus said to Peter, "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). Perhaps in Peter's case this happened to him because of the choice of others to imprison him; but, in the case of most of older folk who experience this passive phase, there is no choice at all.

MAKING OLD AGE THE GOLD STAGE

The key to having a successful old age is to strive to make these years the gold stage, not just to endure them. This striving requires effort in the following areas: physically, mentally, socially, politically, and religiously. Keeping active in these areas will enable a person to experience old age as the gold stage. An older Duke longitudinal study involving only men revealed that they had "almost no overall reduction during a 10-year period in activities or life satisfaction. Two-fifths . . . showed less than an 8 percent change in activities, and one-fifth actually showed increases of 8 percent or more in activities. It was concluded that while many of the aged may disengage or reduce activities in some areas, the majority tend to compensate by increasing activities in other areas."²⁶ I believe that both men and women tend to keep about the same level of activity in the senior years as they did in the years prior to reaching retirement age, even though they may change the types of activities in which they are involved. Thomason writes,

The choices people make, the responsibility they assume for their own well-being, the way they live—how they avoid illness, what they eat and drink, their daily activities, their exercise patterns, their relationships, their mental stimulation, the

²⁶Erdman Palmore and George L. Maddox, "Sociological Aspects of Aging," in *Behavior and Adaptation in Late Life*, 2nd ed. Ewald W. Busse and Eric Pfeiffer (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), 46.

routines they establish, the challenges they undertake—are the essential components for aging successfully.²⁷

The choices persons make will determine the quality of life that will more likely be available to them in the golden years. Naturally, this means persons should begin making proper choices before they reach old age so that lifestyle choices do not change significantly during the aging process. Havighurst confirms that “people should maintain the activities and attitudes of middle age as long as possible and then find substitutes for the activities which they must give up—for work when they are forced to retire, for clubs and associations, for friends and loved ones whom they lose by death.”²⁸ Older adults should be encouraged by Christian leaders to remain active, not accept the commonly held view that they should become less active once they reach the retirement years. Thomason emphatically declares, “New assumptions about aging must be learned by people of *all* ages. The challenge for older people is to recognize destructive cultural patterns that shape our view of aging and consciously make new choices that bring coherence to our lives as we grow old.”²⁹ People in old age must change their perceptions of old age if they are to experience it as the gold stage. Misconceptions, myths, and faulty assumptions must be unlearned if they are to be successful.

Staying Active Physically

Older adults must remain physically active if they are going to discover old age as the gold stage. They must be involved in activities that keep the body physically as fit as possible. They should be engaged in a daily regimen of exercises that promote flexibility, strength, and stamina. Older people should not simply sit in a rocking chair on their porch, their patio, or their balcony and watch the world go by. They need to proactively keep themselves in good physical condition so that they may be a part of the world as it marches steadily on through each new year. One of the hindrances to staying active is that some older

²⁷Thomason, 122.

²⁸Robert J. Havighurst, “Successful Aging,” in *Processes of Aging: Social and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Richard H. Williams, Clark Tibbitts, and Wilma Donahue, 2 vols (New York: Atherton Press, 1963), 309.

²⁹Thomason, 96.

adults have developed a false perception of themselves: “When identity is largely derived by measuring oneself against generalized cultural and societal expectations or norms, real problems arise. On the one hand, it is very hard to like one-self when defined as a societal problem; on the other, it may lead to a denial of reality, where an aging person psychologically denies identification with his or her age cohort.”³⁰ Such persons are reluctant to stay active physically and be a part of a social group, unless it is a younger group with which they prefer to identify. Some older folk adopt society’s prejudices against old age. If societal expectations or false personal conceptions of what it means to be an older person cause them to become less active upon retirement or to feel pressured to be less active, then older adults will not likely experience old age as the gold stage. Rather, they will discover life to be unacceptable and uninviting. They may choose to withdraw physically or die mentally. Either of these choices is to waste the final years of life.

Staying Active Mentally

If older adults choose to die mentally, or to withdraw physically, they will discover that they lose their thinking and learning capacity. It is not the natural order of things for that to happen. Rather, it is natural for thinking processes to continue unabated into the older years of life. I often speak of becoming forgetting as a result of my aging, whereas I actually have often been forgetful throughout life for a variety of reasons. The reality is that older adults are capable of continuing to learn and can serve as marvelous teachers of other age groups, not just their own age group. Universities and seminaries are discovering that numerous older adults are interested in studying once they have the time to do so. Some of these folk never had the opportunity to study when they were younger. In their retirement years, they do not have to worry about money, jobs, or any other similar barriers to being able to attend school. Therefore, they can commit full attention to their studies; and these studies enhance their lives and add joy to their everyday existence. The myth that adults cannot learn will be quickly dispelled as more and more of them earn degrees during these more mature years

³⁰Ibid., 74.

of life. Staying active mentally does not necessarily mean returning to school. It can mean joining a book-reading club, a Bible-study group, etc. Older adults need to stay mentally active in order for old age to become the gold stage.

Staying Active Socially

I have observed on several occasions that older men gather in parks and a variety of other locations where they can sit and talk. No doubt they do a lot of reminiscing, but they talk about many other subjects as well. At church, older men oftentimes gather around the dining room to drink coffee or to eat; but they do so primarily to be together for fellowship. Older women are also highly social, and “ajumahs” are not the only ones that enjoy the fellowship of others with similar concerns. Women need time to socialize, particularly because women are more likely than men to be left basically alone because of the death of a spouse. Women typically marry men that are older than they are. Furthermore, women live longer than men. Thus, many more women than men experience the later years of life. Widows will have great difficulty in finding a spouse, whereas widowers will have numerous opportunities. Thus, a woman will need to learn to take care of her own needs if her spouse was a handyman. Some women have developed these handyman skills and can teach other women how to help themselves. Otherwise, they will need to depend upon a younger family member or someone outside of the family to help them. If women are not active socially, they will find it much more difficult to meet life needs as they arise.

Senior centers are social gathering points in the United States. Many people go there because the food is cheap and there are numerous activities, but mostly these places provide opportunities to be with others and socialize. Bingo parlors, held in community centers or churches, are also popular places for socializing (in between games, of course). Most of older folk need these times of fellowship, or they will grow old much quicker. Unfortunately, these opportunities actually serve to segregate the ages and may hinder older adults from fully enjoying the gold stage: “Our cultural institutionalization of aging has not only created a separation of the ages; at a personal level it has

created a two-edged sword against the old, undermining self-esteem and discouraging socialization.³¹ Society provides numerous places for older adults to be together, but it does not provide many opportunities for them to be with other age groups. The result of this segregation is that adults feel less valued and, far worse, less valuable. If their families do not encourage their integration through participation in multi-generational activities, these adults will continue to be largely separated from other age groups. They will miss out on staying informed about what different age groups are thinking/facing and will be more likely to become further isolated from the world around them.

Staying Active Politically

In spite of the statement of a Korean politician that persons over sixty should stay home and not vote in a previous presidential election, the reality is that the older adults must remain thoroughly engaged in politics to insure that their needs and what interests them are not being overlooked by elected officials. With the graying of civilization in many parts of the world, older adults are gaining newfound influence because they tend to vote as block for those who cater to their needs. What politicians do or say affects them and their lives very personally. Thus, they need to stay abreast of what is going on in the local, national, and international arenas. They need to speak out about what matters to them, what they believe to be true, and what they have worked and even fought to bring into being. They have invested their lives in what exists, and they have a right to have input into what is going on around them. AARP has become so fixed in American culture that it no longer identifies itself by its full name, or is it easily discovered on the internet. This organization is an organized political action arm for older adults. I personally have been a member for the past three years, and I believe that senior adults must remain engaged politically to protect those things that are important to them.

Staying Active Religiously

Although staying active physically, mentally, socially, and politically are all vital to good health, older adults need to remain

³¹Ibid.

actively religiously more than in all of the other areas. It is in the area of religious activity that older adults find the single most important benefit to maintaining a positive outlook that will enable them to experience old age as the gold stage. Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver describe a variety of religious activities that are beneficial to those who practice them:

Religious behaviors such as prayer, reading the Bible, or having a strong faith in God appeared to protect both younger and older medically ill patients against the emotional stresses of hospitalization and acute illness. This effect was particularly noticeable in older men who were physically disabled. The finding persisted even after we controlled for the effects of fifteen other health and social variables. More important from a medical standpoint, severe depression (major depressive disorder) was also less common among religious copers.³²

Religious activities have a favorable impact on mental health, particularly in combating emotional stress and depression when one faces changes, especially those caused by illness. These are two of the primary problems faced by older adults, whether facing illness or the aging process in general. Based upon the studies of Koenig and Weaver, it is obvious that prayer and Bible reading based upon a dynamic faith have strong positive value. They added that religious coping is the only factor that has this positive effect upon depression:

Perhaps the most exciting discovery was made in the second phase of our study, when we followed 200 patients for an average of six months after hospital discharge. We found that patients were much less likely than other patients to become depressed over time. In fact, religious coping was the only factor out of many other health and social variables that independently predicted lower depression scores six months later.... Religious coping either prevented depression from developing or helped it resolve more quickly.³³

Staying active religiously has not only mental benefits, but also it has eternal benefits as well. Activities such as praying and reading the Bible prepare older adults for the events that will come in their lives, particularly to be prepared for the next life. Fortunately, most of older adults can remain actively in their personal religious life even if they are unable to remain active in their physical, social, or political life. As

³²Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver, *Counseling Troubled Older Adults: A Handbook for Pastors and Religious Caregivers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 25.

³³Ibid.

long as they have some mental acuity, they will be able to benefit from remaining religiously active.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

In my Educational Ministry of the Church class offered last semester (Spring 2007), not one student out of forty-three enrolled in the class expressed any interest in a presentation on older adult ministry. It was shocking to me that no one was particularly interested in that subject, especially since Korea is the fastest aging society in the world.³⁴ With the dramatic increase of older adults, the church needs to begin preparing now to minister to this growing segment of society. Yet, no one seems overly concerned about this concern. The awareness and concern must begin with the clergy: “Clergy who have higher levels of knowledge about older persons are more likely to have church programs designed for seniors in their congregations. Experienced clergy strongly advocate for required seminary courses in gerontology and indicate a high interest in continuing education, particularly in counseling older adults and their families.”³⁵ Clergy must begin now to train and demand that seminarians be trained to meet the needs of the growing number of older adults in the churches. Churches beginning new programs for senior adults can find much in print that will help guide them through the process.³⁶ Let us examine several areas in which the church needs to be prepared to minister with older adults in order to make old age the gold stage.

Providing Spiritual Guidance

I have argued previously that “any ministry with senior adults must be predicated upon an assessment of the level of spiritual formation achieved by the participants. Only through many personal contacts and

³⁴According to the Korean Bureau of Statistics (2006), the elderly over sixty-five will constitute over 10% of the population in 2010, over 15% in 2020, over 20% in 2026, and over 25% in 2030.

³⁵Koenig and Weaver, *Counseling Troubled Older Adults*, 20.

³⁶For a very practical guidebook, see David P. Gallagher, *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century*, chapter 2.

much time spent together will such assessment be possible.”³⁷ Nevertheless, there are numerous “major psychological and spiritual needs of older adults” that we must generally “be aware of and understand”: “a need for meaning and purpose,” “a need for a sense of usefulness,” “a need for vision,” “a need for hope,” “a need for support in coping with loss and change,” “a need to adapt to increasing dependency,” “a need to transcend difficult circumstances,” “a need for personal dignity,” “a need to express feelings,” “a need to be thankful,” “a need for continuity with the past,” “a need to accept and prepare for death and dying,” “a need to be certain that God exists,” “a need to believe that God is on their side,” “a need to experience God’s presence,” “a need to experience God’s unconditional love,” “a need to pray alone, with others, and for others,” “a need to read and be inspired by Scripture,” “a need to worship God, individually and corporately,” “a need to love and serve God,” “a need for fellowship with others,” “a need to love and serve others,” “a need to confess and be forgiven,” “a need to forgive others,” and “a need to cope with the death of loved ones.”³⁸ Although the authors acknowledge this list of twenty-five needs does not list them in the order of importance, they emphasize strongly that “pastors be aware of these needs, understand how they are met, and realize their psychological and spiritual consequences in order to organize and teach others how to address these needs.”³⁹ Gentzler lists the adult needs under an acronym, S.E.N.I.O.R.S.: S (Spirituality) E (Education) N (Nutrition and Health) I (Intergenerational Opportunities) O (Outreach/Services) R (Recreation) S (Social Activities).⁴⁰ He also adds the following list of needs as presented by Elbert C. Cole and the Central United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Missouri: (1) life maintenance needs, (2) life enrichment needs, (3) life reorganization needs, and (4) life celebration needs.⁴¹ He provides a list of programs and projects that might be developed to meet adult needs. He lists these under twenty-four categories with more than one hundred suggestions and indicates that there are “hundreds

³⁷Glenn A. Jent, “Spirituality and Senior Adults,” *Torch Trinity Journal* 4, no. 1 (November 2001): 15.

³⁸Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 231-32.

³⁹Ibid., 232.

⁴⁰Gentzler, 47-48.

⁴¹Ibid., 48-49.

and thousands of possibilities.”⁴² These lists of needs and possible programs exemplify how needful older adults are. They demonstrate that the role of pastors and caregivers is extremely important in the church’s ministry to older adults. These caregivers need to be sensitive to the needs of fellow church members, but this is particularly true for older ones. It is vitally important that the church provide various opportunities for older adults to continue to learn and mature in their faith: “Programs, Bible studies, activities should all reflect the spiritual needs of each senior adult and seek to minister to them in the light of those needs. Senior adults are keenly interested in studies about heaven and hell, prophecy, the end times, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the Book of Revelation.”⁴³ These subjects become more important as these persons face death and consider other matters related to the end times. If they cannot attend church because of age-related or health issues, they continue to express interest by listening to Bible sermons and Bible classes through the radio and television. I can remember my father listening intently to Bible preachers and teachers on the radio right up until the year he died. I recommend highly that teachers of senior adults heed Robert Havighurst’s advice: “1. Introduce new methods slowly. The personality of your group should guide you in this matter. 2. Choose methods appropriate for the group, the lesson, and the location. 3. Choose methods that tap the experience and gifts of the group. 4. Choose methods that help fulfill goals. Never select an activity because it ‘fills time.’”⁴⁴ These suggestions reflect the trend of adult learning to be a little slower as older adults age but that they remain able to learn.

Although they tend to learn and think more slowly, they still ask serious questions that require serious answers. The questions become more serious as persons age. A person whose spouse has just died or who is suffering from crippling arthritis may ask, “What purpose and meaning does my life have now?” A disabled person may cry out, “What use am I to anybody now?” These questions are painful ones that demand an answer. Ministers face these questions from older

⁴²Ibid., 54-56.

⁴³Jent, 15.

⁴⁴Robert J. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1948, 1972), 231.

members or members of their families and must be able to give answers that are “reasonable, believable, and effective.”⁴⁵ Answers given should be biblical and seek to accomplish the following: “(1) helping the older person develop a strong faith and a deeper personal relationship, (2) helping the individual identify the gift or talent (no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential) that God has given them at this particular time in their life that can be utilized to serve God, (3) helping that person use that gift on a daily basis to serve God and others.”⁴⁶ Ministers should help older adults to find ways to continue to have value in the life and ministry of the church. These people are not simply to receive ministry; rather, they are to be involved in ministry. Every member of the family of God is to remain a minister until death. There is no exception. Richard Kalish reminds us that “the majority of both popular and professional opinion supports the idea not only that involvement and activity are helpful in successful aging but that they may even help in maintaining survival itself.”⁴⁷ Thus, churches and ministers can aid the viability of senior adults by encouraging them to be active in the life and ministry of the church.

Should an older adult have deep, emotional needs, ministers need to be sure that they are well trained personally and that they have trained other caregivers to recognize those needs so that they can meet the needs they are capable of meeting and can recognize when to refer:

If commitment to religious beliefs and activities based in the Judeo-Christian tradition produces greater well-being and lower levels of depression and anxiety in later life, then religious bodies are crucial resources that will increasingly be relied upon to help meet emotional needs.... It certainly underscores the need for pastors and other religious caregivers to learn (1) how to competently recognize emotional and psychiatric disturbances in later life, (2) how to train members in their church to provide emotional support to these persons, (3) what local and national resources are available to assist the elderly, and (4) when to refer persons to professionals for assistance.⁴⁸

Without proper training in counseling, ministers and caregivers will miss significant opportunities to make a difference in the lives of some

⁴⁵Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 27.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁷Richard A. Kalish, *Late Adulthood: Perspectives on Human Development* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1975), 64.

⁴⁸Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 26.

of their older members. It is imperative that God's precious people that laid the foundation for the present church generation not be overlooked or ignored in the ministry goals of the church. Youth are important to the church. Children are important to the church. Older adults should also be important to the church. All should be involved in the ministry goals and financial expenditures of the church.

Providing Ministry Opportunities

Churches and ministerial staffs try to provide programs and activities for children and youth. They seek to get them involved in some kind of ministry activity. Similarly, churches and ministers must also provide the same things for older adults; for they "are vital human beings with gifts and abilities, still growing in their understanding of life and its responsibilities."⁴⁹ Pastors may minister to congregants in a variety of ways, but two ways are most important—especially in light of the idea of helping older adults to be/remain active in the life and ministry of the church:

First, by proclaiming a message that challenges and deepens congregants' faith and relationship with God ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind"). This relationship and commitment to God can be the source that energizes people to lead the highest possible quality of life imbued with meaning, purpose, and usefulness. Second, by proclaiming the love of God and providing an example of the second great commandment ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself"). In this step, the pastor directs, inspires, and commissions congregants to identify their gifts or talents and then use those gifts or talents to serve others.⁵⁰

Significantly, effective pastors must do what they desire to do—i.e., preach in such a way that they empower congregants, in this case older adults, to discover their gifts so that they may be able to lead a useful, meaningful life.

No one is exempted from responsibility to minister as a part of the church family. Gentzler proposes eleven types of ministry possibilities "by older adults for older people," nine possibilities "by older adults for others in the church," and seven ministries "by older adults for others in

⁴⁹Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit, *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Adult Education* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 226.

⁵⁰Koenig and Weaver, *Counseling Troubled Older Adults*, 31.

the community.”⁵¹ The same principle that every member is to be involved in ministry also holds true for the disabled senior adults: “Church members who are severely disabled, physically ill, in nursing homes, or hospitalized should be given special assignments by their group leader or pastor. These assignments typically involve praying for specific needs of other members of the congregation.”⁵² Every church member is to be a minister. True pastors will seek to insure that older adults find ways to implement their gifts in the life and ministry of the church. Such pastors will be in growing demand as the population ages.

Providing Other Opportunities

Just as the church is obligated to meet the needs of all of its members, even so the church has a responsibility not only to meet spiritual needs but also to meet other needs as well. Hence, the church must be involved in meeting social needs and rendering financial assistance to seniors when needed. The church should have a variety of programs that provide opportunities for older adults to have fellowship. Gentzler’s list of programs and ministry possibilities mentioned above include several activities that would enhance social opportunities for older adults. The church also needs to include multi-generational activities that will be beneficial to both the older and younger generations. Such programs should be culturally relevant and socially sensitive. These programs should include activities that are enjoyable and meaningful for young and old alike. The church needs to provide social opportunities that promote love, understanding, and respect for all age groups. The church may need to provide finances for these programs, as some older adults may be financially challenged. It would be shameful for the church to expect every adult to pay an equal amount of money for participation in church activities, and taking up an offering at programs for older adults may evince feelings of shame on the part of those that cannot give. Some may even give when they cannot afford to do so. Thus, churches can meet this need by handling the expenses upfront. If a program is not seen as having value because of being free, the church may provide scholarships and prizes that

⁵¹Gentzler, 50-52.

⁵²Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 235.

offset any expense on the part of the participants. The important thing is to encourage all to participate.

CONCLUSION

The church must recognize the growing number of older adults that are filling the pews and begin now to minister to and with them. Churches need to be aware of the needs and the desires of this growing age group and begin to tap into their ministry skills, not just their ministry needs/demands. God's people need to be a blessing to God's people first before they try to be a blessing to those who are not God's people. In so doing, we will fulfill the command of our Lord: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). If we love and value those who have preceded us in the faith, then we shall present a positive image before the world. Let us never forget that older adults are persons, too. We must value them.

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