

CSBQ Discussion paper

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SOME THOUGHTS AND IDEAS FOR MINISTRY TO AND WITH OLDER PEOPLE

Gleaned from various sources and from the experience of care-giving with the elderly.

The importance of senses

It is probably true that many of us don't fully appreciate the importance of our senses until we begin to lose them. We communicate through our senses, and communication becomes much more difficult when just one sense falters.

Loss of eyesight.

We often find people shattered by the loss of eyesight, especially when it happens suddenly, but also when it happens gradually (eg, macular deterioration, glaucoma, cataracts, total blindness). It can lead to confusion, restlessness, depression, and even a desire to die, as people can no longer do what they have become accustomed to doing all their lives. Some obvious ways to help those with loss of eyesight include reading to them from the newspaper, books, or correspondence they receive, bringing them 'hearer books' and Bible readings in the form of audio tapes.

Loss of hearing.

This is not as obvious as the loss of eyesight, but it troubles people more than we think. As hearing problems grow, sufferers gradually find that they are left out of conversations, feel ignored or even become suspicious that others are talking about them. To help them we need to speak clearly and a little more loudly, and not overlook them. Sometimes we should persuade them that the best thing to do is to get a hearing aid, and to admit that they have a hearing problem.

The sense of touch.

When other senses begin to fail, touch becomes more important. Yet touch is sometimes withdrawn when older people cannot maintain their accustomed levels of hygiene or when we have trouble carrying on a conversation with them. This is sad, because touch conveys care, affection, and sympathy – just what they need to experience.

Communication

Communication is important for all of us. Sometimes older people are overlooked. When they were younger and busier people, they may have had many friends with whom they talked. But when they leave the workforce, or friends and relatives move away or die, their circle of conversationalists shrinks. Keep in touch with older people. Visit them, write to them, phone them. Make sure they are kept up to date about what is happening in church, in the community, and among their relatives.

Sex and Gender

Older men and women often still like the company of those of the opposite sex. They like to test their ideas with them, hear their ideas and opinions, and mix with them as friends. Of course, it becomes a problem if, for instance, older men replace the failure of sexual expression with 'dirty jokes' or pornographic literature, or when men or women cease to respect each other. Living pure and decent lives and respecting members of the opposite sex is pleasing to God, whatever our ages. Healthy interaction between older men and

women can be fostered by arranging events and gatherings where men and women can be with and share ideas with one another, and where mutual respect can grow.

Financial worries

When a spouse dies, the one left behind, often a widow whose husband managed the family financial affairs, may feel distressed because they do not know how to handle money and property matters. They may need help in this area. Good advice is essential. A widow needs to know the state of her finances, and needs especially to be protected from financial predators who try to take advantage of trusting victims. If she does not have a reliable family member to assist with financial decisions, she may need help in finding a good advisor. Be careful about giving advice yourself, especially if you are not trained or experienced in this area.

Health and physical change

As we age, our bodies usually decline. We can't do what we used to do. There are more visits to the doctor, more medicines to take, and aches and pains remind us that life on earth is not unending. We need to help older people accept such changes, to prepare for less active lives, and eventually to die. It doesn't help to pretend that all is well when it is not. On the other hand, not every ache is a major problem. We can live more moderately and still praise God and enjoy sunshine and flowers, family and friends, and above all his grace and peace in Christ. Be there to help and comfort the ailing person, but also to encourage those who may too easily become sad about small things and fail to see the great blessings of God all around them.

Spiritual needs and problems

Older people feel compelled to look back and consider their past, and to look ahead to what the future holds. Looking back, they may remember past sins, faults, times when they hurt others, and patches in life where they rebelled against God. This is usually a good thing. It is sad to see some older people carry grudges, harbour bitterness toward others, and grow to be grumpy and resentful old men and women because they are unwilling to repent and accept forgiveness from God. If the older person holds to old sins and continues to rebel against God and to reject other people, that person is not ready to come into God's presence. We may need to do a lot of listening, ask searching questions, try to understand the hurts that may be behind it all, and quietly point the person to their Saviour. Sometimes you may decide that the best you can do is to be a friend and to invite the person to talk to their pastor or to a mature Christian whom they respect.

Help older Christians who look back and see their sins to also see God's grace. He took them into his family, probably as children, when they were baptised and came to faith in Jesus Christ. Hasn't God blessed them again and again! He is their Father, a Father who loves them passionately and in spite of all their faults.

For those who are discouraged and wonder whether their lives matter to God, you can assure them that they really matter to God:

1. God **wants them to be in this world**. He created them. He wants them to live.
2. God **does not want to lose them** either. That's why he sent his Son into the world – to offer himself for their sins, to save them for heaven.
3. God **is serious and active in their lives**. That is why he sends his Holy Spirit to them to change their hearts so they believe and become his children.

We are important to God, not because of what we have done, but because of what he has made us to be through faith in Christ.

For older people as for young people, spiritual exercise is important. As we need food and exercise to keep our bodies healthy, so we need spiritual food (God's Word and Holy Communion) and spiritual exercise (time to meditate, worship, praise and thank God) in order to keep spiritually healthy. Visits to older people are times also to read the Bible (especially when sight is failing) and to pray together.

A final tip for caregivers

Informal caregivers provide help to many older people. They are often family members of the persons cared for: husband/wife, children, or some relative who calls by to help on a regular basis. It often happens that the health and other needs of the caregivers are overlooked. They may be getting older themselves, and eventually have trouble keeping up with the demands made upon them. Sometimes burnout occurs.

Warning signs include: difficulty sleeping, chronic exhaustion, increasing health problems, losing temper, often weeping, a sense of hopelessness, despair and gloom.

We may have to help the caregiver:

- Keep in touch – caregivers may feel alone and overlooked.
- Give practical help. For older caregivers this may mean a visit, bringing a casserole around, doing some yard work and gardening for them, helping with shopping, having lunch together, providing respite.
- Put them in touch with community support services.
- Help them to decide whether it is time for the loved one to be moved to a nursing home. Don't push them, but help them to think it through and to make their own decisions. Be non-judgmental. They may feel guilty about placing their loved one in a nursing home, for instance.

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