Aging and the Spiritual Journey

Older adults need to feel included as vital assets in their congregation as they age. Though the spiritual journey will change over a lifetime, a need to feel loved, accepted and useful within their house of worship remains.

By The Rev. Dr. Richard H. Gentzler, Jr.
Older adults need to feel included as vital assets in their congregation as they age. Though the spiritual journey will change over a lifetime, a need to feel loved, accepted and useful within their house of worship remains.

BY THE REV. DR. RICHARD H. GENTZLER, JR.
Well-being for older adults involves something more than good physical health, financial security, and social support systems. Well-being for older adults also involves meaning and purpose. Feeling that they have outlived their usefulness, many older adults struggle to find meaning and purpose in their later years. What gives life meaning, of course, varies from person to person. For some older adults, meaning is expressed through relationships with others, or via their work and individual goals, or championing social causes. For many others, meaning is expressed in religious beliefs, values, and practices. The search for meaning is a spiritual journey.

The question of meaning in life addresses the need for spiritual direction and growth. Spirituality involves the process of understanding one’s life in relationship to meaning, purpose, and values and the connectedness one’s life has to God, to others, to the world, and to nature.

**Religion vs. Spirituality**

Traditionally, the words “religion” and “spiritual” meant the same thing. In more recent times, the word

“Listen to me, O house of Jacob,…even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.”

(Isaiah 46:3-4)
“religion” has come to be connected with a set of beliefs and rituals, sacred text, and connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions. The word “spiritual” is associated with the private realm of feelings and experiences. It may be absent of a set of beliefs and rituals. It is often understood as a greater power that is outside of the self, yet intimately connected with the sense of self and all that is. For some, it is the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose in life.

It’s all too easy to confuse the term “religion” with the much broader subject of “spirituality.” Religion and spirituality are separate but related concepts, with spirituality being the broader of the two. For many older adults, spirituality and participation in a religious organization or faith-based community may overlap. For example, sometimes seniors do not participate in church activities due to physical limitations, financial concerns, or transportation needs, yet they maintain a rich, private spiritual life through activities such as prayer and personal devotion.

Older Adults Perceive Spirituality Differently

Because spirituality is concerned with the deepest dimensions of all of life and is often expressed through our questions, hopes, dreams, fears, and loves, spirituality is ultimately a search for meaning. Older adults may search for God with greater intensity than younger people as a way of searching for meaning. Younger people may be more preoccupied with identity and relationships, job, family, and making a living. Older adults have both the time and the need at this point in their life to want to draw ever closer to God, and to grapple with the mysteries of life.

In coping with frailty, loss, and mortality, the faith of older adults can be fundamentally shaken. Regardless, continuing to develop spiritually is important to most people as they age. Spiritual maturity can be an important coping strategy to deal with the challenges of aging. Spiritual well-being is enhanced by participation in one’s faith community. For many older adults, spirituality and religious practice go hand in hand and may be thought of as “two sides of the same coin.” For this reason, we must not undervalue the importance of congregational worship and spiritual growth in the life of older adults.

Unfortunately, older adults have faith needs that may be overlooked by active, growing congregations. Churches that place a premium on faith formation with young people may not see the need for equipping older adults in a growing faith. In the Christian faith, we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ; this doesn't mean that we seek to make disciples of children, youth, and young adults only. Older adults need to experience a new (and renewed) relationship with God through Jesus Christ and to grow in faith maturity, too. An important question for faith community leaders is this: what strategies are you employing to further Christian discipleship among older adults in your community?

Churches Must Serve Older Adults

Religious change and different styles of worship and music can be bewildering for many older adults. Continuity can be very important for the well-being of older adults, and this includes their participation in church. Older adults need the presence of familiar religious symbols, hymns, and rituals to support their continuing identity as members of the church. While learning new rituals and hymns can be meaningful for older adults, it is also important to remember to include old hymns that were meaningful for older adults when they were young or new in the faith. To completely ignore singing some of the “old hymns” sends a clear message to older adults that their faith experience and their faith journey is not valued by the church of today. As a result, older adults may feel isolated within their own place of worship, and at odds with the pastoral staff and other church leadership.

Every person follows his or her own unique path of faith development. Age, experience, and cognitive development influence the expression of religious faith and level of faith maturity. Mature faith involves maximizing whatever level of faith is possible given one’s emotional and intellectual abilities. Yet, as we age, our spiritual well-being is tested and refined through a variety of experiences, such as the frequent experience of loss, illness and disability, death of loved ones, and changes in social position and economic conditions. Spiritual well-being affects and is affected by the older person’s physical, emotional, mental, and social-economic well-being. While the church is especially concerned about meeting spiritual needs, it cannot ignore these other realities.

Though the later years do bring more time for dwelling on God and the mysteries of life, older adults need help in their search for the deep meanings of life. The church needs to help each older person discover the resources that will enhance that person’s spiritual well-being and give new zest for living. The church should help older adults by supporting and reinforcing their spiritual well-being in a variety of ways.
God Loves Older People
The church must itself be a fellowship of people seeking God and God’s purposes, demonstrating the Christian way of life in all relationships, strengthening each other’s faith. We sing the song “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” and we know that he does, but older adults also need to know that Jesus loves them, too. Living in a society that devalues old age, older adults may grow to believe that God does not love them because they are old. Old age can bring doubts about God’s love and the Christian faith. The church must be intentional in assisting older adults in both a sense of life purpose and a sense of well-being in relation to God. Older adults need to know and claim God’s love.

Caring About Older Adults
The church must be a welcoming and inviting fellowship for people of all ages. Each house of worship must be careful with the language used in services so that it is not exclusive. While a church may pride itself on being a “family,” this language may mean something different for older adults, as well as single adults. In addition, if older adults only hear from the pulpit and in the pew the importance of children and young people, they will begin to devalue their own worth and faith experience. While the church is concerned about reaching all generations with God’s message of love and gift of salvation, the church must affirm the dignity and value of older adults in the community.

Making Contributions to Ministry
While the church needs and appreciates the financial contributions made by older adults (I wonder how many churches would need to close their church doors without the financial support of older adults), the church must also help equip and empower this same demographic for living out their Christian discipleship in other significant ways, even when health and physical strength decline. If older adults are regarded as a liability whose productive years are behind them, as is often the case in our society, congregational life and ministry will reflect these attitudes. Helping older adults recapture a vision for service is important. Enabling older adults to identify and develop their spiritual gifts is not only essential for their well-being, it is vital for both church and community.

Serving as Mentors and Role Models
Faithful aging involves opportunities for older adults to “give back” to future generations by sharing their faith, wisdom, experience, and resources with others. There is a sense in which old age really does bring with it a wide display of understanding, empathy, and diversity. A tolerance for others is often manifest in this age and faith situation, too. Sharing faith and wisdom can be a great encouragement and inspiration to youthful faith seekers and chronic doubters.

The church is also one of the few institutions where intergenerational learning and opportunities for serving can occur; yet, all too often, intentional intergenerational ministry is not being planned or carried out. As a result, younger generations are not being exposed to the faith and wisdom of older adults. And, likewise, older adults are not experiencing the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of young people.

Support Systems
Older adults experience many changes and transitions in life. Helping older adults cope with losses and the challenges of aging is an important ministry of the church. Older persons need to feel needed, and their faith is enriched through interaction with others in meaningful relationships that deal with relevant issues of their life. Being able to share with others who may be experiencing similar losses or changes in life are meaningful for all involved in the process. Ministry that helps meet the psycho-social and spiritual needs of older adults provides a valuable service that is essential to one’s continued growth in faith and trust in God.

The Rev. Dr. Richard “Rick” H. Gentzler, Jr. is director of ENCORE Ministries, a ministry of the Golden Cross Foundation of the Tennessee Conference, United Methodist Church. He also serves as the president of the board of directors for the Council on Aging of Middle Tennessee. As a much sought after speaker and teacher, Dr. Gentzler is an internationally recognized leader in the field of aging and older adult ministries. In 2013, he was selected by Governor Haslam to serve on the Governor’s Task Force on Aging for the state of Tennessee. He has written several books and hundreds of articles on aging and ministry and was recently a keynote presenter for the Fresh Horizon Conferences on Aging and Older Adult Ministries in Australia and New Zealand. He has been the recipient of several awards related to his work in aging and older adult ministries, including the “Outstanding Leadership in Older Adult Ministries Award” from the United Methodist Committee on Older Adult Ministries and the “Spirituality and Aging Award” from the National Council on Aging (NCOA) and National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA). He was also a presenter at the United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid, Spain.