

# Faith-based Caregiving

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It has been estimated that American seniors represent approximately 35 percent of the membership of most faith communities, and that half of all clergy ministry is directly related to this group of people. Clergy talk of pastoral work relevant to older adults as helping the elderly realize and appreciate their worth as persons in a culture that continually marginalizes the meaning and purpose of growing older. Throughout history, people have responded to the plight of age related problems by embracing religious faith. Faith provides hope in the midst of hopelessness. Faith provides meaning in the midst of meaninglessness. Faith, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, allows for God to come into believers' lives and to sovereignly orchestrate events in meaningful ways. A sense of purpose is gained, direction is given, and comfort is received.

Faith-based care-giving includes five essential aspects of ministry: assessment, networking, nurturing, advocacy, ministry in the time of suffering, and ministry to the dying. The purpose of assessment is to afford the faith community a base of information for effective ministry. The assessment allows the assessors to learn an individual's strengths, weaknesses and customary routines in selected areas of the older adult's life. This information forms the agenda for the individualized plan of care which the faith community employs in ministry.

Most faith communities including clergy do not possess the needed expertise to diagnose complex physical, mental and emotional problems. This does not mean that clergy are unaware of such problems, it only suggests that clergy do not have the necessary skills and training to treat these problems. Hence, it is at this stage of ministry that clergy need to consider "networking" with other care professionals to provide

congregational members or other individuals with the best possible care. Networking referrals may be made to physicians, psychologists, social workers, or sundry gerontological agencies and organizations.

Nurturing refers to a direct response of care to the needs of seniors within the context of the faith community. Although care and nurturing are inextricably related endeavors, they are also distinct in that each has its own unique foci. Care involves "caring" responses by the faith community to older persons in need. Nurturing is the activity of creating a caring environment that allows care to take place. Care and nurture for older persons occur when the unique needs of seniors are being responded to and met.

The Hebrew word "nabi" was the most rendered biblical name for "prophet." The prophets were advocates of good government, righteous behavior and social reform. Speaking in the name of God, the prophets pleaded the cases of the exploited widows, orphans, poor, and elderly. Faith-based care to older adults assumes responsibility for devising a comprehensive program that allows for all of the issues of life to be considered and consequently confronted in ministry. Faith-based care assumes the role of a 20th century prophet, advocating the rights of its aged flock. Examples of such include housing, health care, sundry basic needs, legal assistance, and economic concerns.

One must be careful in talking about older adults and loss that stereotyping is not done by portraying the elderly as sick, senile, and non-ambulatory. However, as Americans grow older they do become susceptible to various mental and physical impairments. Many older persons encounter loss as manifested in loss of family and friends, physical loss, mental loss, and economic loss. Such loss often

eventuates in depression and other forms of suffering.

Facing death is the final "loss" or event of old age. It is a constant reminder to the elderly of their fragility and their finitude. To live at all is to journey toward death. Efficient spiritual care aids older persons in subscribing meaning and purpose to the end of the journey. Creative pastoral care enables seniors to see their lives and their impending deaths as part of God's providential plan for creation. Older adults, aided by their respective faith communities are able to accept death as a natural and meaningful experience of the created order. In the biblical paradigm of trust, the older adult is encouraged to surrender herself/himself to the infinite love and mercy of God.

There is much to learn in becoming an effective faith community ministering to older adults. We must develop good listening skills, advocacy skills, referral skills, networking skills, counseling skills, and managing skills. All of this must be planned, practiced, and studied within a matrix of faith, grace, and love. In the final analysis, all people are to be treated as possessing intrinsic worth and created in the image of God.

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