

# Giving Goes Both Ways

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My mother said that growing old was not for ninnies. For 80 years, she was healthy and active and always doing something for others. Shortly after she turned 80, her body started turning on her. My mother was the most giving, loving person I ever hope to know. Her life and example shaped and solidified my life in love. Do you know what I regret most?

Don't think that I'll be saying I wish I had done more for her or that I wish I had told her how much I appreciated her or that I wish I had told her that I loved her. I am so grateful that I don't have any regrets like that! But let me tell you how I failed her. I deeply regret that I was never able to convince her to receive help as gladly as she gave help. I regret that I never quite got through to her that her life was a blessing – a unique, irreplaceable blessing—to us just because she was here. Long after I needed her to do things for me, I was blessed by her life just because she was my mother.

Spending her life helping others turned out to be a liability in the years when health declines put her in the position of being the one who needed to receive help. Why is receiving help so hard for givers? I wish I knew the answer to that question.

My regrets as a daughter are similar to a sadness I feel as a pastor—and the reason I am writing this article. It's the heartache of watching beloved seniors in our churches and community go through the same dynamics: reluctance to ask for help, the embarrassment of needing help and apologizing when someone genuinely wants to extend support. Can you help me change that? What can we do to encourage seniors to participate fully in the helping network available in faith communities?

As a pastor, I know that helping others is the essence of joy and fulfillment in life. For the faith community, offering help and support to those in difficult circumstances is the heart of expressing faith. It's an opportunity, not an obligation. It's a joy not a job. And, as every helper knows, the helper receives more than the recipient of the help. The struggles and needs of people are an opportunity for a faith community to express its highest values. There is so much practical help available through faith communities: pastors, parish nurses, support groups, educational programs, fellowship opportunities, Stephen Ministry relationships and a myriad of informal helping relationships. Is this a time in your life when you need special support? Don't deprive the faith community of the opportunity to make a difference!

Although we have many churches and denominations and faith traditions, we all share a common reverence for the gift of life. We all share the important, bedrock belief that our lives matter for who we are, not what we do. In a world that idolizes youth and self-sufficiency and achievement, faith communities stand out with their witness to the deeper meaning of life – the sacred worth of every

person. What a balm of blessing that can be for seniors struggling with the adjustments and new challenges of aging! Run, don't walk, to your faith community for the balance you need for living in today's world! (Ok, you can walk or ride – but by all means, don't miss the spiritual nourishment that faith communities can give!)

I can remember when my family got our first television. What a marvel it was! And now, the television is a constant companion for seniors. In many ways, that's good. But the sensationalist bent of the media has a down side. For someone watching television for long periods of time, the crime or high speed chase doesn't just happen once. The horrors of crime or car crashes or swindling happen over and over again as the media constantly replays the story. That affects the outlook of the viewer. How easy it is to be afraid of the world when television is the window! Again, the faith community is the balance. Our faith communities lift up what is good and honorable – the things that often go unspoken in the news. The faith focus on assurances – for this life and the next—are the antidote for fear. Again, please don't miss the balance the faith community has to offer!

Although it may sound strange, I have often said to people that this is a great day to have troubles – physical problems, emotional problems, relational problems and more. It is a great day to have troubles because there are so many resources available for help, support, education and comfort. While resources are not limited to the faith community, no other segment of society has such a strong network of varied resources to honor, share and support the struggles of aging. We have principles and passion, we have education and encouragement, we have fellowship and fun, we care and comfort, we have practical help and personal relationships—all of this is our great privilege to offer to each other. That's doubly true when we have a chance to offer back to people who have helped and nourished us through the years.

My mother's words have always been sure guides for my life. So I am certain that I will find her "old age is not for ninnies" statement to be true as my years go by. I hope that the challenges of age find me gladly seeking and receiving the many blessings of the faith community. I pray that I will be able to do as a pastor what I couldn't accomplish as a daughter: to convince a beloved senior that the faith community welcomes the opportunity to support, help and encourage through the challenges of aging.

Dr. Mary John Dye is Senior Pastor of Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church in Charlotte, NC. She is honored with the caregiving opportunities she has with her 85 year old father, also a United Methodist pastor, as well as the joys of being the mother of two young adult daughters and grandmother for one extraordinary two year old grandson. The congregation she serves is on the corner of Hawthorne Lane and 8th Street in Charlotte - 4 blocks down from Presbyterian Hospital – a church of heart and heritage.