

Dimensions of Older Adult Ministry



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Louisville, Kentucky

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to older adults everywhere with thanks for your wisdom in leading the church, your guidance of youth into the faith, your willingness to give time, talents, and money to meet the needs of those around you, your faithfulness to the church, and your serving as a model for living. May God continue to bless you.

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Foreword

Miriam Dunson

The issues in the field of older adult ministries are so broad, so massive, so diverse, and so very important that it is difficult to address all of them in one book, or in a series of books. We sought to address many of the most requested issues in a ten-book series, *Older Adult Issues Series*, published by Westminster John Knox Press (Geneva Press) in 1999. This series has met many needs and has been used widely in congregations. However, requests continue to pour into the Office of Older Adult Ministries, asking for resources on even more issues. This book is a result of those requests.

The purpose of this book is to engage persons in congregations in discussing these important issues as they are appropriate for their own situations. It is designed to be an information resource as well as a practical guide for those persons who have need in these particular areas of study.

The topics for the various chapters were chosen because they were the most requested. The authors were chosen because they seemed to be the most appropriate and most knowledgeable on those particular issues. Therefore we present this book, recognizing that “one size does not fit all.” Some of the chapters will speak to some congregations and other chapters will meet other needs in other places. Our hope is that the issues are important enough and presented in such a way that the various chapters can be used in congregational study groups for discussion and can be used to build programs and plan events that will touch particular needs of the participants. Each chapter includes discussion questions that can be helpful to leaders.

Richard L. Morgan has done most of the selecting of authors. He has organized the chapters and has read and edited most of the manuscripts. He has corresponded with and guided the writers and has led the way for this book to become a significant tool for congregations to use in their older adult programs and events. Deepest gratitude is due to Richard Morgan for his hard work and for his expertise in writing and editing, in choosing good writers, and in organizing the manuscripts.

We hope you will find this book to be a very effective tool in meeting the needs and utilizing the skills of older adults in your congregations.

Preface

There is little doubt that there is a need for help in ministering to older adults in the church. The twenty-first century has seen only the beginning of an “age wave,” a demographic revolution with increasing numbers of persons living longer and better than anyone could have imagined.

Recent years have witnessed the publication of numerous writings about aging and religion. Regrettably, many of these writings have been directed to professionals in the field and not to congregations.

In the latter months of 2001, Miriam Dunson and I envisioned a readable, user-friendly book that would be valuable to congregations in their ministry with older adults. This book is the result of that dream.

I would be amiss not to express deep appreciation to all the writers who volunteered their gifts to make this book possible. They were chosen because of their special work and interest in ministry with older persons. Without the dedication of their time and talents this book could not have been written. Appreciation is also due to Greg Cohen, associate for older adult ministries for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for helping to revive the publication of this book, and to Martha S. Gilliss, associate for curriculum development for adults, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for serving as its general editor. From the very beginning this has been a cooperative effort by many people.

We face incredible challenges in older adult ministry in the mainline churches and synagogues in America. The percentage of older persons in our global society is growing and expected to nearly double between 1990 and 2030. Soon churches and synagogues will have to respond to the imminent retirement of the large boomer generation, as seventy-eight million more people will retire. The writers hope that this anthology will help minister to this population, realizing it is an awesome task. But we must begin!

Look ahead. You are not expected
to complete the task. Neither are
you permitted to lay it down.
—*The Talmud*

I trust that this book will inform, inspire, and empower each
reader to be proactive about ministry to and with God's people.

—*Richard L. Morgan, Contributing Editor*

In God's Time: Aging as People of God



Donovan Drake

Genesis 1—A Time for Creating

In the beginning, before God was busy creating the heavens and the earth, the sun, the moon, the hippopotamus, the beetle, the sponge, and the human race, God created time. The result of this earliest of creative acts is that in all the glory and wonder “Eden saw play.” Eden also knew that its days were numbered. “There was evening and there was morning, the first day.” Gone! “There was evening and there was morning, the second day.” Gone! The third day . . . gone! This numbering hardly seems a concern of the rock, the tree, and my old cat lying belly up on the living room floor. It does, however, concern me and those of us who remember the garden, notice the gray, feel the newest ache and wonder, “Where has all the time gone?”

While we manage perhaps too well the domination and subjugation of most of creation, it is the creation of time that succeeds in having power and dominion over us. As much as we try to hide the gray, fix the face, or remedy the aches, time has the power to keep counting off our days. Time has the power to call into question the meaning of our existence.

How do we understand this powerful creative force? How as people of God can we understand the process of aging? This chapter will examine through story and reflection how our culture and theological tradition make sense of the aging process.

Going for Broke—Aging as Surviving

A grieving heart with the power of attorney sat in the office of a stockbroker. It was nearing Christmas. Helen's eldest son, Andrew, was seeing through on his mother's last wish.

Not long ago Helen had been priding herself on her ability to drive herself to the hairdressers, to the supermarket, and to church for both Sunday worship and Wednesday night meetings.

Now she was in a hospital room some three miles away in the intensive care unit as the result of two months of a slow spiral downward. It was unlike her to give up. Earlier she had had heart surgery and lung surgery, and both times she surprised the doctors by her tenacious ability to recover and live an independent life.

Since a stroke in September Helen had had to rely on her family for a timely washcloth, a readjustment of pillows, a cup of ice water. Covers on. Covers off. Mixed with Helen's sense of helplessness was her sense of guilt for taking so much of her family's time.

"Momma! Shh!"

While Helen could not do things for herself, she could *think*, and what she thought about was a wish—a wish to assuage the guilt. Gifts were to be purchased for Christmas: for grandchildren, great-grandchildren, the church, and other loves of her life. The wish required Andrew, who had her power of attorney, to sell some stock. "You'll see to it! Right?"

"Yes, Momma."

Andrew loved his mother and hated the dilemma of not wanting to see his mother suffer and not wanting to have her die.

By November Helen had contracted pneumonia and by December was on life support. Helen had a living will, but the difficulty for the family was that they had seen their mother come back from debilitating surgeries many times. Mom was a fighter. Maybe if the doctors could clear up the pneumonia she could get off the machine and regain her strength.

Remembering his mother's wish, Andrew broke away from the hospital. It was a crazy wish to think that a big Christmas would somehow make up for the loss of a mother. Andrew, however, made his way to the broker's office partly to make good on a promise and partly as a diversion from decisions that he would have to make the next day.

The broker called him into his office with the words “How is your mother doing?”

“Ummm. Not well, she’s on a machine right now, but we haven’t given up hope,” came the reply.

The broker and Andrew reviewed stocks to be sold, and as Andrew was ready to leave, the broker offered him some monetary advice: “I want to remind you—if you can keep your mother alive until January first, the new tax laws will kick in and there will be a huge tax advantage for the estate.”

Stunned silence followed Andrew out of the office and back to the hospital.

The next day, with Andrew’s permission, a nurse disconnected the machines and then invited Helen’s family into the room. “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .” These words came from Andrew’s lips, and gradually the words grew louder as daughter-in-law and grandson picked up the cadence. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever” (Psalm 23:1, 6 RSV).

Reflection

Our growing old is, in one sense, a testimony to our survival skills. Every day that we add to our life bears testimony to our ability to survive disease, environment, and our genetic flaws. We are now a nation of people who spend billions of dollars a year and a great deal of our time on trying to live as long as possible. Our days testify to the task at hand as they are filled with brisk walks, bottled water, and cholesterol-lowering oatmeal. Protection is purchased in airbags, sunscreen, air filters, and smoke detectors. We want to survive! Surely this is the wisdom of the proverb to “not forget my teaching, . . . for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you” (Proverbs 3:1–2).

While aging is a testimony to our survival skills, aging comes with a curse that over time loses what it so skillfully acquired. Lost one by one are the driver’s license, the ability to dress oneself, the ability to get up stairs.

In the preceding story Helen lived independently for most of her adult life. A stroke made her totally dependent. The meaning of life had boiled down to surviving—surviving not as a means to enjoy life but now the only alternative to death. Rather than have a life

devoid of meaning, Helen tried to use her time in any way that would give meaning. Helen's "wish" might be construed as an opportunity to still mean something to others in her world.

The broker's view of life was one void of feeling. Life has nothing to do with love, friendship, faith, or memory. Life whittled down to a monetary moment. "Can she survive until January first?" While crass, the motivation, it seems, is again to give life purpose. If a machine is keeping her alive, why not have a purpose for that way of existence?

Even though Helen had a living will, Andrew and his family wrestled with guilt, feeling that in agreeing to disconnect the machine they were in some way defying their mother's fighting spirit.

Ultimately for Andrew and the rest of the family the meaning of life was not found in terms of aging as mere survival, but in terms of a God who finds a way into the sterile environment of an intensive care unit and offers to each day and age both love and comfort.

Blessed Assurance—Aging as Blessing

All the houses on South Park Drive are designed to capture attention. Long driveways are bordered by perfect grass that leads to white pillars, bricks, and bay windows—but they are no match for Beverly's home. Built before prestige rolled in, Beverly's home is a cottage. Painted quietly pink behind an agonizingly twisted dogwood tree, it is enough to hold attention, and so is Beverly.

Imagine a stout woman, cane in hand, climbing a sidewalked hill. She is dressed in a tweed sports coat and a stocking cap that mirrors the colors from a roll of Lifesavers and covers her cropped gray hair. Aqua sweatpants are tucked into a pair of black leather high-tops.

She is passed on both sides by crisp walking suits with headbands and Raybans. They walk for health, for conversation, and to wave at passing motorists. She walks because if she does not move, the traffic piles up: She will worry. She will worry about worrying. What will happen tomorrow? How will she get up in the morning? Then, for a moment, she worries about whether or not she will get up in the morning. If she is not concentrating, will her heart make another beat?

On a bad day Beverly is anxious, so she moves and her life moves, she writes poetry, she paints watercolor portraits of members of the A.M.E. Zion church, and she takes long drives in her truck.

She travels down country roads, stops haphazardly, walking onto the porches of strangers and asking directions, telling stories, and accepting their invitations to dinner.

I had an invitation to visit Beverly.

“Come in! Come in!” she greeted me, and I entered her living room. It was a room splashed by paintings in bright colors, all created by her hand, except for the large portrait of John, her deceased husband.

“John, we have a visitor,” she said to the painting. Her next words were, “Do you think I’m odd?”

“Are you talking to your husband or me?” I inquired. (I know Beverly well enough to know that she enjoys being noticed for her eccentricities.)

She laughed and we sat down. “Oh, Donovan! It’s young John. I’m just worried,” she said. “My son John, who’s a psychologist in Charlotte, was recently diagnosed with lymphoma. Do you know, I called him yesterday, and he said to me, ‘Mother, I need for all of your friends to quit praying for me and to start praying for my cancer. I’m getting so sweet I can’t stand myself!’ He sounds just like his father, oh dear.” She said this with a slight laugh and then added, “I don’t know what I would do without him. It’s hard, you know. We must pray for a miracle.”

As a pastor I pray for miracles. I pray for miracles to stop a disease from coursing through the veins of good people. This disease, I have seen, drags its prey for months or a tortuous year until finally it makes a mistake. It kills and in so doing takes its own life. I pray for miracles. I know nothing more to do.

Three months later John died. I sat with Beverly, not knowing what to say. I simply sat. I did not know God on that day. What I did know was that cancer had taken too many fine people—people who were gentle and kind and loved. I know that God is too selective in his miracles, and there are days when I feel weak and it threatens my faith.

The Sunday morning after John’s death came. I got up in the pulpit and preached a sermon that will not be remembered. The truth that morning sat on the back row, for there was a woman who had watched her husband die, and who had prayed countless prayers and wept over her son. In spite of it all, there was a woman who sang a song on a Sunday morning and came to worship God.

Faith is as strong as it is fragile, and I am amazed.

Reflection

Scattered about our Scripture is the thought that old age is a blessing of God, a reward for righteous living. An example of this is found in the Ten Commandments. “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). Proverbial wisdom tells us: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life” (Proverbs 9:10–11).

While it is easy to attribute all good things to God, one needs only the eyes of Job to look around and see that “the tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure” (Job 12:6). Observation says there are plenty of tyrants who live long lives and far too many of the innocent who have lives that are cut tragically short. The death of Jesus is the most compelling of examples.

The Bible is then at odds with itself—but then so are we. As one gerontologist, Robert Kastenbaum, put it, “While reaching a good old age has been a common hope, being old has rarely been anyone’s ambition.”¹

For Beverly aging is a blessing. Aging brings forth the surprise of mixed paint on a pallet, a new road, and the laughter of grandchildren. But for Beverly with the blessings of age also come new fears, new worries, and painful losses. She endures the pain and celebrates the joys. The dark colors and the light colors are often at odds with one another and yet, says the painter, “working together to say something beautiful.”

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:28, 38).

Saintly Ambition—Aging toward Victory over Death

Sadie Webb lived on the last road in western North Carolina, and then some. Her mailbox introduced me to her gravel drive, which lingered through the smell of tall pines, a display of black-eyed Susans, and the front porch to a smile. “Oh, come in! Sit down! Would you like some tea?”

"Yes, thank you," I said.

Glasses rattled in the kitchen while I surveyed the pictures that crowded her walls. I already knew some things about Sadie. I had been cautioned by a few in our congregation to wear orange on my visit. Apparently Sadie was a deadeye with a rifle. She was ninety years old and capable of picking off a gray squirrel on a rainy day from one hundred yards. It was not that Sadie despised squirrels. It was that the garden needed a fighting chance.

The garden was her joy. Photographs testified to it. Old black-and-whites washed into color snapshots were along a wall and even on the television console. The garden is shown growing in the background and Sadie, Robert, and their two daughters growing up in the foreground.

"Janet lives in Hickory and Carol lives in Alabama," she said, handing me a large glass of iced tea. "I hope you like it sweet."

I do not, but my mother had instilled in me to respond in silence and a nod. "Here's my husband, Robert. He passed away five years ago on October 12. He had gone out to the shed, and you know it wasn't like him not to come in for lunch. So I went out to the shed, and he was on the ground, and I knew.

"He flew an airplane, and when we were courting he buzzed my home. The next day when he came to the door, my father told him if he did it again, he'd shoot him down. It never happened again."

I laughed. I had been her pastor for ten minutes, but Sadie was comfortable. She was in control of the conversation.

"Janet is the oldest. She married a real estate agent in Hickory. They don't have any children. Carol doesn't have any children, either. I don't understand these girls. Carol is remarried and her new husband flies a plane, too. I guess she's a lot like her mother after all. That girl wants me to fly down with her husband to Alabama in his little Cessna for a few weeks. I don't know . . ." Sadie paused.

She moved over to her recliner. "Where are my manners? Have a seat." She slowly lowered herself into the chair, but then gave up on the last five inches. "Ever since my treatments I haven't been able to get around very well. I have cancer, you know." She waited for me to respond.

I had been told by the women of the church, who were the most reliable source for information, that Sadie had cancer of the liver and had been taking chemotherapy for the last year. The chemo had made Sadie's hair fall out, and on a good day she wore a white wig;

on a bad day she just tied on a bandana. I caught her on a good day.

“I heard that you had cancer. I was wondering . . .” She cut me off. “Preacher,” she said, “what do you suppose heaven is like?” A question, I have come to find, that a pastor will have to field about twenty-seven times a year. This was my first time out. I had just graduated from seminary. I had my Christology down pat, but what was heaven like? I had no answer. I offered silence.

In that silence rose the face of my second-grade Sunday school teacher. I remember clearly his description of the hereafter—a city with streets of gold and pearly gates. In the second grade the only city I was familiar with was Sioux City, Iowa, a town that was filled with meatpacking plants and grain elevators. So for a good part of my life heaven was Sioux City, but cleaner. It was not the answer I thought Sadie was looking for. I also knew the silence had gone on long enough. After all, I was ordained. I said, “I think heaven will be a place that is better than your most favorite thought, and it will last forever.”

As it turned out Sadie wanted Sioux City. “Do you suppose we’ll live in houses?” she said. “The Bible says we’ll live in houses. Do you think people will be able to recognize other people?”

I thought less and replied, “Yes.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to see a good many of them.” She sipped her tea. “I don’t know, I don’t think I’ll be going,” she said.

It was then I remembered a seminary professor saying, “When you get old enough to see death over your shoulder, heaven becomes something you doubt or something you believe in with all your heart, and even then you have your doubts.”

My heart reached out to this dear lady. My words ran to reassure. “Sadie,” I said, “my goodness, you love God. I know you do! God certainly loves you. You’re one of the saints in the church! Everyone I know has told me about how you were always the last one out of the church on Sunday morning because you’d make sure the place was clean before you left. You brought up your daughters in the church. Of course you’re going to heaven!”

“Heaven?” Sadie exclaimed. “I know I’m going to heaven! I was talking about Alabama!”

I visited Sadie every week or two until she died in the fall of that year. A gardener is good at timing things. I will remember that when

I visited her, at first I was greeted at her door. Then, in her last days, I was greeted near her bed—but always with a smile and an hour's worth of conversation. She would talk, and I would listen. Before I would leave I would always remind her that she was going to heaven. We would laugh and share a wink. Sadie I will remember because she smiled, because she loved a garden, and because heaven, for her, is a lot easier to get into than a Cessna.

Reflection

“Now the gardener is the one who has seen everything ruined so many times that (even as his pain increases with each loss) he comprehends—truly knows—that where there was a garden once, it can be again, or where there never was [one], there yet can be a garden.”²

Our aging journey toward death is a conversation in which we can all relate and contribute, but most of us choose to fill our traveling years with conversation about the scenery rather than the final destination. Ultimately it is disease, tragedy, and old age that are the triggers that cause us to speak of what it means to die.

From a scientific view death is merely the end of life. The heart and mind stop functioning. Decay. We leave on this earth a residue.

While science provides the facts, our faith provides a mystery. “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

A mystery in which instead of leaving a residue, body and soul are resurrected and celebrated. How is this possible? In this world we can only wonder!

Sadie wondered, “What do you suppose heaven is like?”

Our fear is that heaven will be less pleasing than the memories that decorate the walls: the photographs of a tanned husband standing beside his plane, daughters dressed in Easter's best that day when the garden was more dazzling than expected. Our fear is that there is a certain worn comfort that life has given that heaven cannot replicate.

Our Scriptures are well aware of our fears, and instead of offering details into the afterworld they offer comfort. Jesus imparts these words to his disciples:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a

place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:2–3).

Our future is like our past and our present. Time after time, in this age and the next, God is with us. It is what Sadie took comfort in, and so can we.

Genesis 1—A New Creation

In the beginning Eden knew that its days were numbered. We do, too, and we can choose to accept the fact of our aging with fear, changing hair color, face-lifts, and trembling, or we can choose to embrace this wonder of creation that allows us to love God, glorify God, enjoy God, at any age and in any age. Time will tell, and so can we!

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways were you created to survive? What does it mean to live a long life? Would you want to live to be 100?
2. List twenty things you have that help you live in your day-to-day life. If those things were narrowed down to ten, what things would you keep and what would you give up? What if you had to narrow them down to three?
3. List ten ways that aging has been a blessing. List ten ways it has been a curse.
4. Can you think of ways in which the good and the bad in your life have worked together for good?
5. What are your feelings about death?
6. Does old age prepare someone for dying? Why or why not?
7. What are some words that describe heaven for you?
8. In Sadie's story in what ways might redemption be considered a positive blessing?

Notes

1. Robert Kastenbaum, "Exist and Existence," *Aging, Death and the Completion of Being*, ed. David D. Van Tassel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), p. 77.
2. Henry Mitchell, *The Essential Earthman: Henry Mitchell on Gardening* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 3.