

Encouraging Persons on Their Spiritual Pilgrimage: The Integral Role of Communities of Faith

Marty Richards, MSW, LICSW
October 6, 2015

Communities of faith are
“Elder Rich.” Elders are
resources as well as
people who could benefit
from connections, service
opportunities, and
support.

Communities of faith have the potential to be places of “bonding, caring, and mission” (Vanier 1992) for elders on spiritual journeys.

Faith communities may be
where elders can
experience “personhood”
and freedom to be
themselves in their
strength and vulnerability.

Communities of faith can be where people come to understand who they are as beloved children of God or a Higher Power, and where they “fit” in the greater universe.

Goal

Reflect on elders' concerns of body, mind, and spirit, and consider ways the faith community is uniquely suited to assist persons on their journey of getting older.

Goal

Explore ways that faith communities might engage with elders on their spiritual pilgrimage.

Goal

Offer ideas for connecting elders within the faith community by building circles of support to accompany them in their journey.

Challenges of body
mind and spirit of
people as they age

It is not possible to truly address the spiritual needs of persons on their life journey without first addressing basic human needs.

Worship space and other areas of faith communities need to be accessible to those with mobility, vision, hearing, and mental challenges. Accessibility is also important in Individual interactions.

Challenges

- Might begin early in life and continue to adulthood
- May appear in later years
- Can be acknowledged and grappled with in the faith community

Challenges

- Health concerns
- Mentation changes
- Caregiving and receiving
- Myriad losses and grief
- End of life issues

CareSharing:

Person receiving care +
Person giving care =
Care partners

“We do not serve the weak or the broken. What we serve is the wholeness of each other and the wholeness in life.”

Rachel Naomi Remen (2002)

The many losses experienced in the later years undergird much of what elders experience along their spiritual path. Concerns about end of life loom large.

Challenges

- Interdependence
- Giving and receiving help
- Myriad transitions
- “Retirement” roles
- Renewed sense of vocation or calling/finding a new one

A major question for consideration: Is it always more blessed to give than to receive? How do people experience “interdependence.”

*“Independence is knowing
when to ask for help.”*

7 Stages of Transitions

- Releasing
- Resisting
- Reclaiming
- Revelation

7 Stages of Transitions

- Crossing points
- Risking
- Releasing

● From Margory Zoet Bankson (2011)

Challenges

- Meaning and purpose
- Intergenerational connections
- Legacy leaving (money, possessions and values)
- “Community” building

***How do you know when
you know who you are?***

Dr. Conrad Bergendorf @ 100+

Concerns about leaving a legacy are huge issues for those who are aging.

Legacy can refer to the “stuff” and the “spiritual” aspects of leaving something to another generation.

Building “community”
within a congregation or
group to encourage
individual journeys is
challenging and
rewarding.

Exploring Challenges on the Journey

- Focus attention from the pulpit about aging journey issues (body, mind, and spirit).
 - Spiritual leaders might address concerns through written/verbal information.

Exploring Challenges

- Offer Bible and sacred texts studies that speak to particular needs of elders.
 - Ask elders for studies they would like.
 - Psalms can be especially helpful.

Exploring Challenges

- Provide sensitive pastoral care to those on the aging journey.
 - Supplied by clergy or other spiritual leaders, or by trained lay members, (e.g.) Stephen Ministers or Eucharistic Ministers.
 - Offer spiritual direction.

Pastoral Care Concerns

- Finding meaning and purpose
- Dealing with loss and grief
- Facing suffering
- Going forward in transitions
- “Reframing” relationships as health changes
- Coping with care partnering

Exploring Challenges

- Be inclusive to those with dementia and their carers in worship and programming.
 - Work to end stigma.
 - Become “dementia friendly.”
 - Build on spiritual “gifts” that those with dementia bring.

Exploring Challenges

- Encourage those seeking service opportunities.
 - Explore “vocation in the later years.”
 - Examine “volunteering’s” value.

Exploring Challenges

- Inspire continued learning through relevant adult education classes.
 - Ask for input from elders about concerns and needs.
 - Use language carefully to advertise the classes.

Exploring Challenges

- Assist persons to leave a spiritual legacy for other generations.
 - Encourage ethical wills/ spiritual wills/as ways of getting values to paper.
 - Provide chances to mentor.

Exploring Challenges

- Offer assistance through support groups.
 - Issues might include: losses, caregiving, grandparenting, or coping with physical/emotional changes.
 - Partner with community groups for offerings.

Exploring Challenges

- Celebrate rituals for transitions and special events.
 - Adapt worship rituals to make them accessible to all.
 - Use opportunities to ritualize passages.
 - Devise new ceremonies.

Exploring Challenges

- Use creative arts for connecting to the soul of those on their spiritual path.
 - Music, visual arts, writing and journaling may get through to the spirit when words do not.

Exploring Challenges

- Emphasize “wellness” and “fitness” in getting older.
 - Offer classes.
 - Model behaviors at food events.
 - Offer walking groups.
 - Include all ages.

Of most importance is
that faith communities
offer to those on a
spiritual pilgrimage in later
life listening and
accompaniment in
respectful understanding
and support.