

Adult Ministry: Challenge and Response

This was delivered at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, by Dr. Walter A. Maier II., Professor, May 1, 2002. Subject: The increasing challenge of older adult ministry to which the Christian Church is alerted by current demographic studies--a challenge which the Church, guided by the divine Word, will desire to meet in the coming years.

Sermon Text: 12 The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree.
He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
13 Those who are planted in the house of the Lord
Shall flourish in the courts of our God.
14 They shall still bear fruit in old age;
They shall be fresh and flourishing,
15 To declare that the Lord is upright;
He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him. -- *Psalm 92, NKJV*

Today is the first day of nationally designated "Older Adult Month," the month of May. Besides our countrymen generally, we here at the seminary in particular may consider with profit some of the facts and projections pertaining to the elderly of our population which current demographic studies have made available. Among these items are the following:

- We in the United States are in the middle of what has been variously referred to as an "age wave," or a "senior surge," or "the graying of America." There are twice as many older adults in our country today as there were 30 years ago, and during the first quarter of this 21st century our nation's older population is expected to grow by an additional 78%, while our young population, interestingly, by only 1%. In our day seniors outnumber teenagers for the first time in history.
- By the year 2020, more than 20% of the U.S. population -- 1 in 5 persons -- it is estimated, will be over the age of 65. By 2040, this percentage will have grown to 25% -- 1 in 4 persons; by 2050, to 33%, 1 in 3 persons.
- Average age expectancy in this country is now 76, and climbing. The years after retirement already represent nearly one-quarter of many people's entire life.

Now, as far as our local churches are concerned, it may be observed:

- That the number of older adults in our congregations as in our communities is doubtless going to continue increasing dramatically. Pastors may serve congregations where 1/3 to 1/2 of the membership will be over 65. 40% to 50% of regular worshippers at churches may be older adults.
- In the next 20 years, it is expected that there will be a 74% increase in the number of people in our LC-MS churches over the age of 50, but only a 1% increase of people under 50.

Obviously, all these developments have important implications for us, for our churches and pastors. One effect a reckoning with these statistics and projections has already had is this: today a small but growing number of LC-MS congregations are calling an associate pastor -- not as traditionally, to conduct a youth ministry, but --to reach out to older members.

In view of the ever growing number of older adults with whom we shall be concerned, it will be well for us Lutheran Christians to review what the Bible, which contains many allusions to old age, has to say about persons who have attained advanced years. First of all (1.), we ought remember that, as far as God's people are concerned, old age is presented in the Scriptures as a blessing of the Lord, a reward for righteous living.

Moses advised ancient Israel (Deut. 5:33): "Walk in all the which the Lord your God commanded you that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land." God spoke to Solomon and said (1 Kings 3:14): "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments . . . then I will lengthen your days." Solomon, later echoing this instruction of the Lord, declared (Prov. 16:31): "A hoary head is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life." The Psalmist (Ps. 91) speaks of God's care for the believer and cites these words of the Lord (v. 15b-16): "Because he [the child of God] has set his love upon Me [the Lord], therefore I will deliver him . . . and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him my salvation." And there are many more passages to this effect.

In the next place (2.), the Bible teaches that God's people who have attained old age are to be held in honor by fellow believers. Through Moses God instructed the Israelites (Lev. 19:32a): "You shall rise before the grey headed and honor the presence of an old man and fear your God: I am the Lord." As far as New Testament pastoral practice is concerned, Paul writes to Timothy (1 Timothy 5:1-3): "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father . . . the older women as mothers . . . Honor [godly] widows." One reason for gladly carrying out the divine directive to honor the elderly is suggested by this observation of ancient Job (Job 12:12): "Wisdom is with the aged and understanding in length of days." The counsel of wisdom the aged can provide -- wisdom gained by long experience in the world and with the faithfulness of God -- is valuable also today and should be utilized with benefit in the church's education of younger members of the family of God and in the conduct of congregational affairs.

Thirdly (3.), the Biblical directives for godly living, and Biblical promises of blessing of all kinds throughout a lifetime for obedience to God, pertain equally to older adults as to younger and to children. God's commandments and promises are for all ages and for all stages of life. Thus, older adults like all Christians need daily to repent of their sins and, turning to the Gospel, receive forgiveness through faith in the Lord Jesus and his sin-atonement work. Older adults like other Christians need to recognize the ultimate purpose of God's saving activity in their behalf, namely, that they glorify Him in their lives by doing his will, as St. Paul makes clear in the words (2 Cor. 5:15): "He [Christ] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again." And again, (Tit. 2:14): "Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ . . . gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself His own special people, zealous for good works." All of God's people, including the elderly, are to be "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord," as the apostle writes at the end of the great resurrection chapter of the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 15 (v. 58). No let up or retirement or exemption from this responsibility and privilege for older adults.

Psalm 92, verses 12-15, which we have set at the head of our meditation, show that spiritual productivity is the Lord's expectation regarding the godly, young and old alike: "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree. He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the Lord is upright: He is my Rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him." The reference in verse 12 is to the flourishing of the date-palm, the stately prince among the trees of the Palestinian plain, which when it has attained full size bears from three to four, and in some instances even as many as six, hundred pounds of fruit, its perennial verdure constantly renewing itself from the root -- a picture of life in the midst of the world of death. Mentioned side by side with the palm is the cedar, the prince of the trees of the mountain (here Mount Lebanon in the north), known for its graceful, lofty growth and the intensity of its vegetative strength as well as for the perfume which it exhales. These trees portray the spiritual strength and fruitfulness of the godly person, fresh and flourishing spiritually yet in old age, who is eager to declare to all who will listen that the Lord is upright and righteous in all his ways; that, faithful to his Word of Old Testament Gospel promise, He sent his Son Jesus Christ the Righteous as expiation for human sin, so that He [the Father] might grant full pardon for every transgression to us believers and, as the Holy God, keep every one of his pledges of blessing to all who serve Him. With the Psalmist, the elderly follower of the

Savior, therefore, joyfully exults: "He [God] is my Rock ," that is, a strong, never-failing, Deliverer in the time of every trouble, a sure and steadfast Guide for every path He would have me to walk all my days on earth, and absolute, divine Guarantor of my eternal life with Him in heaven.

In the New Testament, John Chapter 15, Jesus offers the portrait of the vine and its branches. He says: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, [and that is by faith] bears much fruit . . . By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples" (vv. 5 and 8). In other words, by virtue of our baptismally established union with Christ, and our spiritual death and resurrection with Him in this sacred washing, He empowers every believer -- including every brother and sister of advanced age -- with the ability to bear abundant spiritual fruit, the fruit of good works of heart and hand and voice that please God.

Fourthly (4.), we know from the divine Word that older, retired believers are fellow members of the body of Christ. As such, they have been given by God, corporately, a variety of special spiritual gifts, and a veritable plenitude of talents and skills. Besides this, most have an abundance of residual energy and much free time. The church must see in the elderly thus endowed -- and must teach these brothers and sisters in Christ to realize that they possess -- a magnificent, rich potential for service in God's Kingdom. This reservoir of capability must be tapped and employed and deployed in the various and sundry avenues of church service open to Christians, if we are to please the Lord and meet the stupendous challenges in the work of outreach and edification He has placed before us in the opening years of this new millennium. Our church and pastors must give studied attention to the deliberate design of intentional ministry to, for, with, and by our senior church members. These members' assistance and participation in the functioning of the congregation in the areas of worship, witness, nurture, service, fellowship, and stewardship must be enlisted and cultivated. And certainly you students, our future pastors, will be in a position to spearhead the church's advance in involving the elderly, the fastest growing segment of U.S. and of American church population, ever more effectively in all phases of the church's life and its ministry to Christ, congregation, community, and country in the years ahead.

We can be grateful, indeed, today to our seminary administration and to the local Lutheran Foundation, who are jointly sponsoring a presentation by the Reverend Walter Schoedel of Saint Louis, an active promoter of Lutheran Senior Service in our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, at this morning's general convocation in Sihler Auditorium and also presentations by Pastor Schoedel and other speakers at sectional meetings in several campus locations this afternoon -- all of which offerings will serve to alert, inform, and inspire us here at the seminary, as well as the representatives of many greater Fort Wayne area Lutheran churches visiting us today, in the matter of carrying out our responsibility of helping to meet the challenges of the senior surge in our nation and our church at this time!

May the Lord of the Church bless all our dedicated people's and pastors' future endeavors in the promotion of older adult ministry here in this county and, indeed, also in our mission fields abroad! In Jesus' name we ask it! Amen.

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