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Assimilation of the Elderly into the Parish

Douglas E. Fountain

Two assumptions made by leaders of the church are that, if a person is "religious," he will worship and that, as people get older, they tend to increase their church attendance, barring illness. The research described below challenges those long held beliefs and leads us to believe that there are other factors more powerful in determining church attendance.

Let us suppose that a man and his wife retire and move to Florida. For decades the church has had a central place in their lives. They may have been members of one congregation twenty, thirty, or even fifty years. Now they leave it. They grieve the loss of so many friends and relatives at one time. The relationships that death has not ended now are, for all intents and purposes, ended. They try to find a new church in Florida, but no matter how hard they try, it just is not "home" to them. They feel lost in the new surroundings. To make matters worse, age has taken its toll—they cannot see or hear or get around so well anymore. The familiar old *Lutheran Hymnal* has been replaced by *Lutheran Worship*. The pastor in the pulpit is a blur and they have trouble making out what he is saying. What was meant to be a meaningful religious experience has become a nightmare. So they stay home, watch television preachers, and read *Portals of Prayer*, *Guideposts*, or whatever they can find. Is it any wonder that this couple has dropped out of the church? This couple is suffering the effects of alienation within the social system known as the church.

Research Data

The total population of the author's sample was 108, of whom 70 were female and 38 were male. All were retired and between the ages of 65 and 94. Sixty people were Lutheran, 43 Roman Catholic, 3 Methodist, and 2 Presbyterian. The sample was drawn from three areas of the country, Florida, Michigan, and Indiana. The test instruments used were designed to examine four variables: church attendance, religiosity, alienation, and personal religious experience.

The results were conclusive. It does not matter how religious a person may be, what kind of positive experiences he may have had in church, or what his level of religiosity may be. If a person becomes alienated within the social system known as the church, church attendance will decrease drastically and may even stop. The tests that were administered have a very high degree of reliability and validity. The tests were statistically evaluated by computer, using Multiple Regression Analysis, Analysis of Variance, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and Chi-Square. The variables of alienation and church attendance were found to be negatively correlated at the 0.001 level of confidence. On the basis of the foregoing information, the following hypothesis can be accepted: Regardless of a person's religiosity or the person's positive religious experience, if the person becomes alienated within the social system known as the church, his or her church attendance will decrease and possibly even stop.

Barriers to Affiliation

As a group the elderly are prime candidates for alienation within the church. As the earlier example illustrated, there is no single, simple explanation why this is so. First, there are physical barriers. Ninety-eight percent of those tested indicated some type of physical impairment ranging from eyeglasses to blindness, walkers to wheelchairs, and hearing aids to total deafness. Seniors may have trouble seeing or hearing the pastors or even getting into a church building, and this often causes alienation.

Secondly, there are emotional barriers. People moving into a new community find they do not know anyone in the new church, the liturgy is different, and they feel out of place. They are alienated. This can happen even if they do not move as new members join the church, old friends die or move away, they are no longer asked to serve on committees, and a new pastor is called. Again alienation can set in and church will just feel "different" to them, and they slowly drop out.

Finally, the clergy also have to share the blame. Too often the pastor has the tragic idea that the senior adult is not important to his ministry or, even worse, he may see the elderly as a hindrance to ministry. He may feel that "older members cannot help me in my ministry, they cannot contribute financially to the congregation because of their fixed incomes, and their health prob-

lems will tie me down with hospital and shut-in calls. Why bother?" Someone with that kind of narrow perspective might not actively impede the membership of seniors, but he certainly is not going to work as hard at assimilating the elderly as he would younger people seeking membership in his congregation. This type of thinking reflects societal attitudes and standards that conflict with God's expectations. In earlier days our society looked to the senior for wisdom, knowledge, and leadership but now, when someone reaches the age of 65, we are ready to discard him as useless. On the part of society this attitude is irresponsible, but on the part of the church it is inexcusable.

Reduction of Alienation

Research strongly indicates that if we wish to increase church attendance among the elderly, methods must be found to decrease alienation. The two areas that need examination are the physical and emotional barriers to worship.

A. Physical Barriers.

For the sake of the physically impaired using wheelchairs, one should remove one or two pews in the front of the church. Having space up front for wheelchairs facilitates easy distribution of the Sacrament as well as making it easier for the impaired person to see and hear the service. This arrangement will also keep the narthex of the church clear for any emergencies and the orderly exit of members. If pew removal is not feasible, one should remove the cap-strip on the end of the pew so that when people are sliding into the pew they will not bruise their legs or buttocks. Bathroom facilities should also be easily accessible to people in wheelchairs. If you are involved in a building program, consider keeping everything on one level for easy access.

One should similarly reserve seating in the front of the sanctuary for those with eyesight impairments and equip their pews with sight-saving hymnals. Using contrasting colors for walls and floors can help those with depth-perception problems who have a hard time determining where the floor ends and the wall begins. Difficulty in depth perception will often cause a person to lose his balance, stumble, and fall.

For those with hearing impairments one should equip some pews with hearing devices. It is true that many of the elderly have hearing aids, but in a church equipped with an electronic organ the frequency that the organ emits often causes feedback in the hearing aid, resulting in a loud squeal in the ear.

For those who are incontinent there ought to be pews without padding. It also helps to carpet the aisles only, because no one wants to have an "accident" on carpeting.

Some churches have initiated drive-in worship, placing speakers in the parking lot so that people can stay in their cars and still worship. Others use local drive-in theaters for such a worship experience, and such services can make worship more comfortable for those with various impairments. These suggestions may seem expensive or unnecessary, but to minister to all of God's kingdom they may need to be done.

B. Emotional Barriers

When discussing the emotional barriers to worship, we first need to be concerned with the concept of bonding. Bonding is the process by which a person attaches to and makes a social connection with another person. It creates a unity that is difficult to eradicate. Alienation could be described as being "bondless" within a social organization. The following example illustrates this point. About twenty years ago a family moved from New York to Florida. The people claimed to be Presbyterian and were on the rolls of a congregation but seldom worshipped. Ten years later the wife's father retired and also moved to Florida. She began taking him to church occasionally, but over a ten-year period they often remarked that they never felt a part of the Florida congregation because no one ever spoke to them or made any friendly overtures. Two years ago the woman's father died. Another member of the church happened to see the funeral announcement in the Sunday bulletin and recognized the name as one which she knew from her hometown of Bellport, Long Island. This woman called the daughter of the deceased man and asked if she was from Bellport. As it turned out, these two women had grown up together, attended the same high school, and their sisters were best friends. The bond was set and the woman became very active in the congregation and still is today. The bond had existed between the two families for years, but in this case the bond was

reestablished in a new social context. The re-found friend introduced the woman to others in the congregation, and very soon she was an active, responsible church member.

Bonding can be a strong influence on the integration of new people, including seniors, into the parish. This can be accomplished by introducing new people in the church to members originally from the same area of the country. One might use a large pin map to locate the cities of origin of each member of the congregation. This can help reestablish bonds in a new social context. The bonds at first may be weak but they will strengthen in time. One can introduce a retired carpenter to other carpenters in the church. All of this will help integrate a new family. Groups can be formed based on areas of origin or other similarities of background and interest. Some churches use retired pastors to lead or coordinate such groups. These groups often engage in such things as dinners, trips, and Bible studies. And one must not underestimate the love and care which people have for their pastor; he can start a special Bible study for seniors only. The senior will come to cherish that hour or two spent with the pastor, and such activities integrate seniors into the congregation.

At the same time one can look to seniors as a valuable resource for church work, including calling on the sick, serving on the boards, and church maintenance. The senior is blessed with an abundance of time and is very often ready, willing, and able to assist in a variety of ways. An excellent example of this is a program in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod called the Laborers for Christ. This is a program in which retired persons use their skills for such projects as helping to construct new churches. The help given by these individuals can greatly reduce the cost of new church construction. The church is greatly benefited and the people are able to contribute in a very meaningful way to the proclamation of the Gospel. They are using their retirement to the glory of God in a very special way.

The entire congregation must see the senior members as a responsible, dynamic part of the church. The senior must also see himself in that light. One can use the sermon to sensitize members of the congregation to their responsibility to each other. One can use the liturgy to help the integration of new members. Today especially, with rapid and often complete liturgical changes being introduced in parishes, it is important to realize that such

change can alienate. One should delay the introduction of new hymnals if the parish has many retired persons coming to it.

Finally, one should consider investing in a video-cassette recorder to tape worship services for replay in nursing homes, hospitals, and the homes of shut-ins. Why should seniors be forced to "worship" with Schuller, Falwell, Angley, The 700 Club, and others incompatible with their own religious background?

Conclusion

The church should offer the same amount of care to seniors as it would to any other person or group. When Christ said, "Come unto Me all ye that are weak and heavy laden," He extended the invitation to all, not just those below the age of 65. If we can promote a sense of communion for seniors within the congregation, if we can make them feel a part of that fellowship, the initial obstacles to integration can be overcome. Then we can truly minister to our senior saints.

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