

Now Is the Time:

The Church's Challenge for Older Adult Ministry



Princeton Theological Seminary
Older Adult Ministry Consultation
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PREFACE

This is a summary of a 56-page report, “Now is the Time: The Church’s Challenge for Older Adult Ministry,” which resulted from recommendations by a group of experts in older adult ministry and aging that included seminary and university professors, administrators, theologians, social workers, program staff, physicians, clergy, nurses, and volunteers. The goal of this two-day *Consultation* at Princeton Theological Seminary was to address the physical, spiritual, social, and economic needs of our nation’s growing aging population. As the *Consultation* unfolded, the decision was to focus on local congregations and pastors, that is, the work of seminaries, judicatories, etc. is in service to the congregation. The *Consultation* created its own network of experts in older adult ministry who are available to help you. Please contact Abigail Rian Evans at abigail.evans@ptsem.edu (tel. 609-497-7972) for further conversation (or Janice Miller, assistant, at janice.miller@ptsem.edu for copies of the complete report). The complete report includes theological foundations for older adult ministry in the congregation, a history of gerontology in seminary education, a section on seminaries as change agents, judicatories/regional church bodies as resources, partnerships with community agencies, professional, and trade associations, and effective older adult ministry programs and resources, as well as several appendices.

We invite you, the reader, to respond to our report with suggestions and information about your interest and involvement in older adult ministry. This report only has value as it is implemented by older adults and those who minister with them.

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PREAMBLE: A Call to Action

It is with some urgency that we call the church to recognize the needs and contributions of older adults to society and especially to faith communities. The demographics form part of this sense of urgency. The fastest growing age group in congregations is the over sixty-five members. In 2004, twelve percent of all Americans were sixty-five and over, and by 2030 there will be seventy-one million American older adults accounting for roughly twenty percent of the U.S. population.¹ Currently, one-half of the members of the members of the historical and ecumenical churches (Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, UCC, Lutherans, etc.) are age sixty-four and older.²

Faith communities need to recognize both the gifts and strengths of older adults as well as the challenges they face. Recognizing the diversity among older adults is key, giving voice to both healthy older adults and the frail elderly, not treating them in a monolithic fashion. Diversity that occurs throughout life continues yet new challenges emerge. The church is uniquely positioned to respond to these challenges since it is the most diverse social institution in this country and is disproportionately affected by the new demographics.

In recognition of this reality and the need to reach untapped resources, including older adults in faith communities, the intention of the Princeton Theological Seminary *Consultation on Older Adult Ministries* was to develop strategies to equip pastors, seminaries, and program staff to create effective ministries to, with, and from the older adult population. A large number of successful projects devoted to the well-being of elderly and frequently needy individuals were reviewed. Programs varied depending upon the local resources, personnel, and goals. Important questions that guided the *Consultation* conversation were:

- How do we motivate the church (seminary students, faculty, ministers, congregations, and judicatories) to see this as a priority?

¹ <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/censusandstatistics/a/olderstats.htm>, accessed 4/25/07; "The State of Aging and Health in America 2007," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and The Merck Company Foundation, 2007.

² Information provided by Henry Simmons, Professor, Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, VA.

- How do we discern the spiritual, communal, emotional, financial, and physical needs of an older adult population as a basis for shaping an older adult ministry?
- How do we engage older adults as partners to discern their needs and the types of programs and strategies that will help them?
- What types of preparation, seminary as well as continuing education, do ministers need in order to provide vision, innovation, and leadership in the development of these ministries?

In our deliberations we acknowledged the resistance to learning about aging. This resistance stems from fear of our own aging and dying, false ideas of self-preservation in the parish, and avoidance stemming from residual guilt of neglecting this ministry. This resistance to aging has both a positive and negative side. It is a resistance from healthy people who do not want to be defined by their aging, and older people who want to live in an intergenerational world, not in an older adult program ghetto. The “older adult ministry” label may be restrictive; referring to programs for life transitions may be more appropriate.

All too often, churches are using outdated models for senior ministry. Now that there are aging baby boomers and a huge cohort of people entering their sixties, we need to rethink older adult ministry in profound, dramatic ways. Since action will probably take place on a congregational level, we therefore need to draw upon the experience of veteran pastors who can champion the cause of older adult ministries. Clergy are often closer to the aging community than other professionals in our society and have many stories to tell. They can tell the world the good news about aging, counteracting the negative stereotypes.

If congregations are going to be involved, they need to become knowledgeable about models of older adult ministry and develop programs to meet their needs. If these ministries are to work, they will need resources, dedication, gifts, and finances. This ministry needs to be a priority and to focus on how the church can minister to her own people and community. There is the need to

keep seniors integrated as opposed to separated, that is, intergenerational, knowledge-based activities.

Local congregations should start small as Bill O’Hanlon points out in *Do One Thing Differently*.³ Zero in on crucial social needs like family caregiving and advance directives, and address these issues at a grassroots level. Families get burned out and need respite, for example, from the care of a family member with Alzheimer’s; therefore care teams can be effective in a church.

Pastoral leadership is vitally important in teaching congregations to accept change. Some churches are pushing older adults out in favor of younger people, which is a disturbing trend. The converse is also true with older adults keeping out the younger for fear of change, that is, the dying church. Very real generational differences make church members wary and suspicious; churches die if they do not stay open to what God is doing today.

It is important for new pastors to be trained to be “bridgers” between generations. Chaplains often do not get adequate training in the journey of aging, although they are taught skills of pastoral care in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Pastors and churches need to understand how to intervene in elder care; for example, to persuade older adults to give up driving when it becomes physically necessary to do so. There is a natural connection between parish nursing (faith community nurse) and older adult ministry which can help detect health problems. There are hidden health problems such as misuse of prescription drugs, smoking, obesity, elder abuse, and self-neglect.

To train future and current pastors, graduates who are doing the work of older adult ministry can speak at seminaries. Offering continuing education one-day events on campus for lay leaders and pastors can generate real interest in this ministry; granting certifications and providing scholarships will be attractive to leaders in local churches. Pastoral care courses are also a means to train pastors to help people handle life transitions at any age.

³ Bill O’Hanlon, *Do One Thing Differently: Ten Simple Ways to Change Your Life* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2000).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Consultation on Older Adult Ministry & Aging* at Princeton Theological Seminary held March 15-17, 2007 included thirty-one invited experts, themselves representing an age range of thirty to eighty-five, in the fields of aging and older adult ministry from California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, DC. They represented clergy, agencies, judicatories, seminaries, physicians, researchers, and program staff. The goal of the *Consultation* was to develop a series of recommendations and strategies for seminaries, associations, judicatories, pastors, and congregations to address the impact of the rapidly growing older adult population. Although this *Consultation* was principally directed to Christian constituents, we were blessed with the participation of Rabbi Dayle Friedman, director of Hiddur, which reaffirmed for us the importance of interfaith work in this crucial ministry. (Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism, established in 2003, is a transdenominational effort to change the culture of aging in the North American Jewish community.)

The *Consultation* utilized a working group model consisting of four small groups, each with a writer and a facilitator, that developed recommendations approved in plenary based on previously identified questions. Highlights of these recommendations and priorities were:

- Local churches are the centers for older adult ministry and, therefore, pastoral leadership is vital to successful older adult programs. Consequently, strategies for older adult ministry developed within seminaries, judicatories, regional bodies, and associations need to serve as primary resources to local pastors and congregations.
- Seminaries can focus on older adult ministry and aging issues through faculty development, continuing education courses leading to a certificate in older adult ministry, specialized curriculum, teleconferences, expanded resources in gerontology, and student awards in older adult ministry.
- Seminaries, judicatories, and congregations can explore partnerships with community service agencies, professional and trade associations, and retirement and assisted living

communities to complement and expand their effectiveness such as those who have exemplary aging ministries already in place.

- A new faculty association can be formed for those interested in older adult ministry to support and resource each other. Regional ecumenical and interdisciplinary consultations based on the *Princeton Older Adult Ministry Consultation* model can be organized around the country. Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota could take a leadership role in this area due to their creative work in aging courses and projects.

This *Consultation*, with the theme “Keeping Life’s Zest,” is part of the third phase of the Princeton Theological Seminary Older Adult Ministry Initiative (OAM) begun in Fall 2004. This OAM project was initiated by Princeton Theological Seminary professors in pastoral theology Dr. Donald Capps and Dr. Abigail Rian Evans, with vision and support from Princeton Theological Seminary Board of Trustees members Jane Wright and David Watermulder, former President Thomas Gillespie, and current President Iain Torrance. The first phase involved fundraising, research, and speeches on older adult and aging concerns at churches around the country. Two focus groups convened at Princeton Theological Seminary, one including professionals in the field, and the other including students, provided recommendations to this Initiative. A comprehensive bibliography of resources was created in June 2005. In addition, field trips were taken by Evans to church-based older adult ministry programs across the country and research by Jan Jacewicz and Jane Brady resulted in two older adult ministry models directories.

The second phase included the development of a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) course, “Pastoral Care Ministry with Older Adults,” co-taught by Capps and Evans in the Fall 2005, and a Continuing Education seminar on older adult ministries taught by Princeton Theological Seminary Professor Emerita Freda Gardner in Spring 2006 at Princeton Theological Seminary.

The third phase included the *Consultation on Older Adult Ministry & Aging*. An upcoming October 29, 2007 Princeton Theological Seminary Continuing Education Workshop, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner: Older Adult Ministry in the Congregation,” taught by Don Koepke

and Jane Brady, will test out the *Consultation* recommendations with pastors, lay leaders, and some judicatory staff. A Fall 2007 issue of the newsletter *Aging & Spirituality* published by the Society of Aging will be devoted to the *Consultation*.