

Caring as Honoring

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Congregations are “soul communities,” in which young and old are soul-mates, bound together as an extended family of God, who love, support, and sustain one another. They should assure that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and worthy recipients of care. How do we make this biblical vision concrete in our lives?

A common concern among my close friends, colleagues, and students is how best to care for aging relatives. Sometimes they are concerned for loved ones whose physical health or mental capacities have declined to the point where they can no longer live independently, and wrenching decisions need to be made regarding what to do. They talk about the admixture of feelings, demands, and stresses they’ve experienced when moving a loved one to a nursing home or caring for them in their homes. Still others speak of anxieties prompted by health care providers who, on behalf of dying loved ones, seek end-of-life decisions such as whether to continue extraordinary measures to prolong life. In expressing these concerns, we invariably share stories that disclose not simply our interest as family members for the care of the oldest among us, but the nature and meaning of that care.

The nature and meaning of caring for senior adults goes beyond these personal stories. Mainline denominations, in particular, see the “graying” of congregations and, in some instances, conflict arising in regard to honor-

ing the presence and guidance of senior adult members while, at the same time, tending to needs of the young to lead. Moreover, at the societal level, the reality is that senior adults comprise the fastest growing part of the population in the United States. Because of medical and scientific advances and improved healthcare over the previous century, people are living longer. The fastest growing group of senior adults is the eighty-five plus group.

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It is also true that the overall increased health of senior adults today has resulted in their remaining actively involved in the affairs of life longer. Through their longevity, senior adults are continuing on as lively contributors to everyday life in community, valuable wisdom-givers in church and

family life, and resources for the historical grounding of our young. Indeed, increasing numbers of grandparents are now raising the children of their offspring. Yet it is also true that the older a person becomes, the more apt she or he is to experience health challenges. Senior adults in minority groups are even more likely than white seniors to be at risk for impoverished conditions and poor social, physical, and psychological health.

Whether in our families, faith communities, or society at large, caring for the oldest among us is important. We are called by God and instructed in Scripture to honor our elders, especially our parents, as a means of assuring our own longevity (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Ephesians 6:1-3). We are also to show respect and care for widows, our own kin, and all elders (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:1-8). The Bible reminds us that older adults are assets to the community, gifts of God, and witnesses to God's blessings through their presence and participation in community (Psalm 92:12-15); and the elderly Anna, in the Gospel of Luke, calls our attention to the older adult as exemplar of faithful worship, the personal life of devotion, and spiritual wisdom (Luke 2:36-38).

Honor-bestowing care is due the oldest among us by virtue of their longevity and because of our commitment to uphold the biblical injunction to honor them. But, more than this, caring as honoring is predicated on our deep knowing that all of humankind was created by God in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). God's act of creation affirmed human life and value. In God's act of creation, life was given as gift. And as gift, human life is to be

nourished, cared for, and developed. The value assigned by God is not based on age. Indeed, the grounds for honor-bestowing caring are found in the richness of the metaphor “image of God.” When we see clearly this image in our elders, we likewise understand caring as honoring to be a journey of God’s people, the young and old together. The journey of the young with the elders is in preparation for their own continuing journey. It is the whole community’s learning from and responding to senior adults as persons of worth. It is our “sensitivity to the dual role of senior adults as doers and receivers in the life of the community.”¹

But how do we move from biblical theological understandings to making caring as honoring concrete in our lives?

ARRIVING AT MEANINGS OF CARING AS HONORING

I invite students in my older adult ministries classes to reflect on prominent older adults with whom they related in their years of growing to adulthood and on the impact of these adults in their lives. I also ask them to consider any connection between this impact and their attitudes toward and role in caring for and honoring older adults. Often class members confess that, over the years, they have not called to mind or articulated how special their parents and other elders had been to them. Some of them admit that, in all truthfulness, much of what they have achieved in life has come from the support, encouragement, and inspiration of their parents or other adults. In other instances, individuals tell of caring for sick and terminally ill older relatives, and of being reminded during this period of care-giving of care given to them in times of illness and distress. For still others, the death of a parent or revered elder prompted a flood of recollections. They recall that parents were not always as they wished them to be; there were difficult times, disagreements, disappointments, and the hard seasons of family life. But ultimately, these class members center on what they learned from their parents that has guided their own life patterns and decisions. Often there surface memories of revered guidance by older mentors in school, church, or community.

Invariably, in the process of remembering, and even struggling with the memories, my students arrive at a point of saying unequivocally, as one put it, “We *must* give back to our elders within and beyond our blood kin. We *must* care for and honor them because of the life God gave them and has given us through them, the wisdom shared by them, the needs they have for care, and the opportunity we still have to learn from their lives.” What I have gleaned from this process of remembering is that, for Christians, care that is honor-bestowing moves beyond our internalization of the scriptural mandates to our personally acknowledging the significance of the lives of older persons in general and those around us in specific. Grasping the significance of our elders can come as we reflect on and give voice to our stories of the intertwining of their lives with our own. The signifi-

cance of older adults also becomes clear as we hold within us and keep ever before us the image of them as God's creations, as living beings in whom God breathed life and through whom God's creation of ongoing life—our lives—is made possible. In them we see the image of God as well as reflections of the unfolding of human life.

But, our youth-oriented culture makes it difficult for us to appreciate the significance of our elders. For that reason, we may need to be quite intentional about creating opportunities to reflect together on the older adults in our lives and what they have meant to us. Indeed, a prerequisite to our arriving at meanings of caring as honoring senior adults may well be our resisting the prevailing youth orientation which tends to isolate youth from the larger intergenerational context that includes older adults. Resistance entails overcoming "our propensity to view aging and being old as unacceptable," Temba Mafico observes, and instead "looking at aging and older adulthood as indispensable to the life of the community."² This overcoming requires recapturing generational ties through which younger generations not only see elders as models of their own journey ahead, but also see what is needed to improve and sustain the quality of life for present and future senior adults.³

Thus, three activities are important in arriving at personal meanings of caring as honoring beyond the internalization of scriptural guides: we need to come to full awareness of the significance of older adults in our lives, to resist the youth orientation that separates the generations, and to recapture generational ties. These three activities are integrally tied together. One cannot exist without the other. And, none can exist without heartfelt comprehension of the scriptural guides to caring as honoring.

CONGREGATIONS AS SOUL COMMUNITIES

In *Honoring African American Elders: A Ministry in the Soul Community*, I place great emphasis on the idea of the congregation as a soul community. This idea builds on the understanding that all people, young and old alike, share a common identity from God in whose image we are created; and it conveys our vitality as God's people, which comes from our hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12-13). Because of this shared identity, we are soul-mates bound together as an extended family of God; and, in response to this connectedness, we maintain a communal space for "soul care" where all are loved, supported, and sustained. As such, the soul community is the congregational family who intends for honor-bestowing care to take place. The community assures that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and receivers of care.⁴

The soul community is the Christian congregation whose *heart* is centered on validating the role of *senior adults as resourceful contributors* in its ongoing life. "I want to be able to contribute something of what I have

learned through this life of mine,” one senior adult said. “As a senior in the church, I would like the church to regard me as useful. I would also like it to provide and support ways for me to remain active and involved as long as I am able.”⁵ To the extent that the soul community validates the role of senior adults as resourceful contributors, we carry out the call of caring as honoring.

A pastor told me about an eighty-year-old woman of his church who, when the invitation to Christian discipleship was given one Sunday, walked to the altar and said: “I want to give my life to Christ. Oh, yes, I know I did the same thing years ago and that I’ve been a member of this church pretty near all my life. But, I want to do it again right now, today.” The pastor was somewhat baffled by this renewed confession of faith from someone who, from his observation, had been a model Christian and a consistent, powerful spiritual guide for him in his pastoral journey. “I don’t know how long my life will be,” she told the pastor in a follow-up conversation. “But, I know that as long as I live, God has something for me to do. I have just come to new realization that this is so. I wanted God to know that I know it and that my hope is squarely in God’s being with me every step of the way until I go home to be with God.” On further reflection, the pastor concluded, “You know what? My member’s commitment of faith and hope was the most moving testament to me and every age and stage represented in that service. She was the epitome of the wise elder who helped us to know that we are all on a life-long journey; and our fullest embrace of the sojourn depends on our seeing that the road God has set us on continues. It depends on our making a commitment to continue all the way to the journey’s end.”

We need to become aware of the significance of older adults in our lives, resist the youth orientation of our culture that separates the generations, and recapture generational ties. These activities are integrally tied together, and cannot occur without heartfelt comprehension of the scriptural guides to caring as honoring.

This story helps us to understand the soul community’s role in caring as honoring. Specifically, the soul community is the Christian congregation whose *heart* extends to validating the roles of our *elders as exemplars of the faith* and as *repositories of wisdom*. Our validation of these roles constitutes a form of caring as honoring.

However, the *heart* of the soul community must also reach out to senior adults whose physical presence in the gathered congregation is no longer possible, and validate their role as *worthy recipients of care*. This act of caring as honoring is particularly needed with home-bound elders, whose comments are often punctuated by a sense of sadness at the loss of connectedness and by desires for the presence of people from the congregation in

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which they were active members at one time. The intentional reaching out to care for the oldest among us who cannot come to us recognizes, as well, that our attention and help tends to lessen or cease as senior adults' involvement in congregations wanes due to debilitating health.⁶

Beyond the soul community's validation of roles of senior adults, the *heart* of this community's caring as honoring is demonstrated by intentional efforts to contribute to the well-being of older adults. Caring as honoring is "soul care" that follows the model of Jesus' ministry in responding to people's concrete experiences and conditions in ways that lead to their well-being. It includes paying attention and contributing to seven interrelated dimensions of our elders' well-being.

The spiritual well-being of senior adults is sustained by sufficient and meaningful opportunities for worship, study, and service in which to affirm and deepen their relationship with God, self, others, and all things. Honor-bestowing care that contributes to this aspect of elders' well-being is pivotal to their overall well-being; it takes seriously their desire to express, explore, and even struggle with the beliefs, values, meanings, and commitments that give purpose and hope to the last years of life.

Honor-bestowing care provides for *the social well-being of senior adults* by tending to their positive connectedness with their past and other people as well as their experience of dignity and comfort in their living environment. Focus on this aspect of their well-being encompasses creating opportunities through which senior adults recall and make peace with the past. As they affirm their connectedness with God and others, they can arrive at a wise understanding of the significance of who they are in community and whose they are in God, and can celebrate this self-knowledge.⁷

Honor-bestowing care contributes to *the mental well-being of senior adults* by encouraging them to experience themselves as valued creations of God. This care includes assuring their access to activities that help them deal

constructively with change, crisis, and loss. This aspect of well-being is enhanced when there are opportunities for senior adults to engage their creative and problem-solving abilities, to confront past and present life issues, to deal head-on with life's ambiguities and tensions, and to trust the unfolding of their lives.⁸

The physical well-being of senior adults is addressed by offering access to health care, information about care of self and others, and caring responses during times of illness, disability, and end-of-life circumstances. Focus on this aspect of well-being acknowledges the reality that many elders have deficits in health care coverage, lack transportation to health care facilities, and may be reluctant even to seek care out of fear of poor or inattentive treatment. It also takes into account that health promotion and attention to self-care makes possible senior adults' resourceful participation on their own behalf and their ability to enter into resourceful participation with others.

Honor-bestowing care contributes to *the work and economic well-being of senior adults* through ensuring, at minimum, the basic supplies needed for living, tending to their access to economic resources and their ability to sustain themselves and those for whom they may be responsible (as in the case, for example, of grandparents raising grandchildren), and fostering a continued sense of vocation that fulfills God's purpose for their lives.

We care for *the recreational well-being of senior adults* through intentional efforts to provide or recommend accessible and safe places to play, to engage in bodily revitalization and personal enrichment. This care recognizes that joyful *play*, alone and with others, builds up the self, enhances the self's sense of aliveness, contributes to stress management, and contributes to a positive and hope-filled life perspective.

Honor-bestowing care assists *the environmental well-being of senior adults* through efforts that result in access-friendly spaces within the church. It educates about and advocates public policies focused on safe and clean living environments, and care of God's created natural environment, our earth home.⁹

This holistic paradigm provides suggestions for the soul community's honor-bestowing care process. Yet, implementing it requires that we emphasize a view of time that allows soul relationality to emerge and are willing to build a network of care.

CREATING TIME AND BUILDING NETWORKS

As the reality of our fast-paced, technological, and productivity-driven world seeps into our everyday living, it distorts the priorities our churches and we, as individuals, choose. This can minimize or forestall the attention that needs to be given to the older generation, and undermine our caring as honoring. We need to reconceive time so that our emphasis is on *relational time*.¹⁰

Relational time is intentionally structured to be a deeply felt, receptive, and responsive presence with senior adults. We give their presence priority and choose to reach out to them as well as responding to their reaching out to us. A key quality of *relational time* is *being present* with senior adults through conversation. This quality is demonstrated in congregational life by the openness with which church leaders, young laity, and senior adults

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receive one another in group meetings and by the care taken to work through ways of sharing responsibility. Yet, when elders can no longer be fully involved in the life of the congregation and become infirm and separated from the gathered congregation, *being present* with them conversationally entails a different sort of quality. What becomes pivotally important is listening to and sharing

the stories of life’s journey, engaging in moral discourse where it is called for, and participating with them and family members in discerning answers to difficult life and death questions.

Regardless of the situation, fulfilling *relational time* requires the willingness to listen. It always has an improvisatory quality, as the family of God creates an environment for elders to improvise, or proceed on the journey faithfully and imaginatively, as that old spiritual says, “to see what the end will be.” In this way, *relational time* becomes *sacred time* wherein, together, the people of God surrender to God a certain degree of control, and welcome our unfolding life as a gift from God.

A relational orientation to time also understands that churches must become network builders, connecting senior adults with resources churches cannot provide, but are available in the wider community. Being a network builder means that we forge links with public groups that provide assistance, support, and guidance to enhance the well-being of senior adults. When we create time to build a functioning network, we enable our congregations to carry out “soul care” in a fuller manner. Through the cooperative relationships we forge with public agencies, we help make known God’s presence through us. In this way, we extend and bring fullness to our caring as honoring.¹¹

NOTES

1 Quoting from p. 6 of Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "What Honoring Elders Means: A Call to Reenvision the Church and the Soul Community," in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders: A Ministry in the Soul Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc., 1997), 3-17.

2 Quoting from p. 22 of Temba L. J. Mafico, "Tapping Our Roots: African and Biblical Teachings About Elders," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 19-33.
3 Wimberly, 13.

4 See my "The Church as a Soul Community," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 35-53.

5 Quoted on p. 64 in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "Creating an Honor-Bestowing Elder Ministry," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 55-71.

6 The tendency on the part of churches to withdraw over a period of time from elders whose involvement decreases because of debilitating health is well documented in a number of studies, including L. Chadiha, E. Proctor, N. Morrow-Howell, O.K. Darkwa, and P. Dore, "Religiosity and Church-based Assistance Among Chronically Ill African American and White Elderly," *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 10(9) (1996), 17-36.

7 See Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Edward P. Wimberly, "Wisdom Formation in Middle and Late Adulthood," in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 125-139.

8 *Ibid.*, 129.

9 Howard Clinebell offers a comprehensive catalogue of dimensions of well-being in *Anchoring Your Well-Being: A Guide for Congregational Leaders* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997). I summarize differing aspects of the holistic paradigm in "Creating an Honor-Bestowing Elder Ministry," 64-66; and "The Role of Black Faith Communities in Fostering Health," in Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor, eds., *Health Issues in the Black Community*, second edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001), 129-150.

10 For an exploration of time, see Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "Creating Time," *Circuit Rider* (January/February 2002), 16-17.

11 For a fuller exploration of network-building, see Anne Streaty Wimberly, "Building a Helping Network," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 125-136.



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