The Aging: Myths, Needs, Ministry

Dorothy Gish

Who are the elderly?

In this day when people are living longer and remaining more vigorous, we may well ask, "Who are the elderly?" I think that the best definition of old is "anybody five years older than I am." In the literature now we are seeing terms like "young old" meaning those from about 60 to 75 and "old old" meaning those over 75. In the United States today about 11.5% of the population is over 65; in fact the 1980 census showed that there were 32,194 people 100 or more years old. Everyday about 300 people turn 100. Nearly 10% of the world's total elders are in the United States even though we have only 5% of the world's population.

Given this significant portion of our population, it seems appropriate that we consider a biblical perspective as well as our society's view of aging. We will then examine some myths and realities related to aging, and conclude with specific suggestions for ministering to the elderly.

Biblical Perspective of the Aged

The elderly are portrayed as having beauty and wisdom in Proverbs 16:31, 20:29 and Job 12:12. They are given special roles according to Psalm 71:14-19, 92:12-15, Joel 2:28, Acts 2:14-21, I Timothy 5:17 and Titus 2:1-5. For those who walk the paths of righteousness as they age, there are special rewards and gifts of renewal according to Psalm 37:25-26, 90:14-27, 91:14-26, 103:1-5, 17-18 and Isaiah 46:3-4.

Leviticus 19:32 admonishes us to respect older people. Additionally, there are numerous admonitions to respect and care for one's parents. The importance of preparing for one's old age is highlighted in Psalm 90:12; Proverbs 3:1-2; 9:10-12; 22:6; Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, 13-14; and 1 Peter 3:9-12.

Basically the biblical view of aging is a positive one—in great contrast to our current American view.
**American Society's View of the Aged**

Our generation is clearly youth oriented. To be young is to be "in." To be old is to be over the hill. One's thirtieth birthday is a traumatic event. I know a professional woman who was so traumatized by her 27th birthday that she couldn't get out of bed. Last year in California I toured a mental health institution. When we came to the office of one of the staff members I was amazed to find black streamers hanging from the light, a black bow on his coffee cup and big bunch of black balloons in the corner. When I inquired about what great tragedy had occurred, I was informed that it was his 40th birthday.

One's importance in our society is measured by economic productivity, material possessions and accumulated wealth. When one becomes strictly a consumer and no long a producer, one's value decreases. Our society engages in planned obsolescence on many levels. At least part of this negative attitude arises from commonly accepted myths about aging.

**Current Myths About Aging**

1. *Senility is a natural result of aging.*

   Senility is a disease. Aging—or senescence, as it is called—is not. At least five different causes of senility have been identified: Alzheimer's disease, hydrocephalus (excess cerebrospinal fluid common in older people), poor brain nutrition (particularly lack of sufficient blood or oxygen), gland malfunction (most commonly thyroid disturbances) and depression. In contrast, aging is a natural process that begins at conception.

   The widespread belief that senility is a normal part of aging has often led people to mistake a reversible mental deterioration for the beginnings of senility. For example, it is common for an older person admitted to a hospital for a broken hip or heart attack to become confused. The confusion may be a result of the shock and/or a side effect of drugs, or simply result from the strangeness of the hospital routine. Even though the condition is reversible, the family, or even the physician, might assume that this is the beginning of senile dementia and send the person off to a nursing home.

   Being forgetful is also a normal part of life. Young people forget things, too. As a matter of fact, I recently ate dinner with a bright
young college freshman who could not remember the name of a person she had worked with all summer. But because we expect older people to forget, we notice and exaggerate it. Then they, just like people of all ages, have a way of living up to expectations.

2. Aging equals unproductivity.

Part of the problem is that we define productivity as being employed in activity for pay. That is why housewives and older people see themselves as less important than they really are. Older people have much to offer even if they are not gainfully employed. In other days, and even now in other societies, the old are valued members of the society. The church loses much because its older members are not valued and used to their full advantage.

All except two of the United States presidents in this century have been over 50. At 93 George Bernard Shaw wrote *Far-fetched Fables*. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Guggenheimer Museum when he was 90. And who hasn’t heard of Grandma Moses who began painting late in life is still doing so at 100?

3. Old people disengage from society.

The theory of disengagement says that people gradually withdraw from activities and positions as they age. It says they really want to be left alone in peace and quiet and have younger people carry the responsibilities they have shouldered long enough. However, most healthy old people do not want to sit back and take it easy. Disengagement is a myth because we take powerful roles away from older people and then say they are disengaging.

The “rocking chair syndrome” is often lived out by older adults because they feel that it is expected of them. When younger people perceive older people as “old and worn out,” they relate accordingly.

4. Old people are inflexible.

Perhaps the reason that the old often appear inflexible is because we have stripped them of so much power that they tend to cling rigidly to what little authority they have left. However, older people must often solve complex personal problems with fewer resources (money, job, strength) then they had when they were younger. One marvels at how well they manage. In fact, they are often more innovative than younger people, many of whom would be overwhelmed by the problems that are a steady diet of the elderly.
Older people often bring to mind and entertain many different pieces of information. This shows up when they wax eloquent with "a rich, evocative fluency that enables them to say the same thing in five different ways." Since one tends to become in old age what one was as a younger person, we find that younger adults who tolerate ambiguity and enjoy new experiences are more likely to be flexible and maintain their mental alertness in their older years.

5. Old people are asexual.

We indicate our attitudes about sexuality in older people when a 30 year old man makes a pass at a woman and we regard him normal; let a 70 year old man try it, however, and we classify him a "dirty old man."

Sexual interest may diminish somewhat with age but it does not disappear. There is a slowing process and thus sexual performance takes longer. In general, people who are sexually active in the middle years are able to maintain it physically into the 80's, provided health is maintained.

The Duke Longitudinal Study found that a number of both men and women had increasing incidence of sexual activity and interest as they grew older. A more recent study of 800 people aged 60-91 found that 36% said sex was better now than when they were younger. About 80% were sexually active on a weekly basis.²

6. Old people find learning difficult.

For years we had research that indicated intelligence declined with age. However, that was based on cross-sectional research and apparently measured cohort differences more than it measured intelligence. More recent longitudinal research shows that among people who remain emotionally and physically healthy (i.e. do not suffer from a disease that affects the brain, such as a stroke or Alzheimer's) intellectual growth can continue well into the 80's. This is particularly true of crystallized intelligence, a person's ability to use an accumulated body of general information to make judgments and solve problems. The research of John Horn at the University of Denver shows that crystallized intelligence continues to increase steadily throughout life, although in old age the increments become smaller.

The deficits that do occur in the healthy aged are in the nuisance range, e.g. inability to remember names or phone numbers as well as one used to. Countless intellectually vigorous lives have pro-
babily atrophied on the mistaken assumption that old age brings an unavoidable mental deterioration. The expectation of a decline becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

7. Old people are all alike.

With any given group, the time when members are most alike is at birth. From that moment on their experiences begin to diverge so that the older they become the more different they are. Human personality is unique, and in later life when personality reaches its fullest development, we see these differences most clearly.

Aging is not a single process but many. These begin at different ages for different people and progress at different rates. Chronological age is a poor predictor of the aging any individual may be experiencing. Some are old at 30 and others young at 70. The question "How old would you be, if you didn't know how old you are?" might be worth pondering.

Having debunked some of the prevalent myths about aging, let us look at what actually exists.

Real Needs of the Aging

1. Adjusting to the loss of significant roles

Children and the aged share a common characteristic: a lack of power. Children grow into power but the elderly who have once had it now must learn to be content without it.

Retirement for many brings the loss of significant roles as worker and wage earner. Circumstances surrounding retirement profoundly affect the reaction to it. Those who retire due to ill health do not usually enjoy retirement. Those who are forced to retire are not as satisfied as those who retire voluntarily.

Death of a marriage partner results in the loss of the role of spouse. Widowhood is an undesired and often unanticipated change with immediate negative physical and emotional effects on the surviving spouse. Loneliness is one of the most pervasive problems, and, for many widows, there are often economic problems as well.

2. Developing a satisfying use of time

When the time constraints and responsibilities imposed by the work world are removed, some find a new freedom to expend their energy in more rewarding pursuits. But some find it a severe loss and have difficulty envisioning new horizons or new uses for their
time. The end of regular work life means a great deal more freedom. A great many older people with untapped latent interests and abilities need help in developing them.

The mundane activities of life such as personal care, housekeeping, tinkering and puttering assume greater importance as one ages. They represent one’s continued ability to be independent in the face of age whereas earlier this ability is taken for granted. However, many vital adults are not satisfied with busy work. They need to find meaningful ways to keep active and creative.

3. Adjusting to the physical 3-S downgrade

The aging deal with declining physical strength. What one once did easily without thinking or effort now takes lots of both. Steps and heavy doors often become real barriers. Painful joints and decreased grip strength make it difficult to open pill bottles and other containers.

There is also a decline in sensory perception. I recently became aware of the diabolic plot of many manufacturers to put ingredients and dosage instructions in such fine print that they are not readable. When I teach a college class in gerontology my students often have difficulty identifying with the information on sensory decrement until they learn that hearing begins to decline at age 20!

Speed of response is the third area of decline. It takes longer for an older person to respond, making driving more hazardous. Slippery floors or other small things which may cause one to lose one’s balance now become more of a threat.

4. Adjusting to psychosocial changes

The older one gets the more friends, loved ones and cohorts one is likely to lose. The mother of one of my colleagues is now 102. She lives in a retirement village, but each year she has returned to her home congregation for their “Over-65 Weekend.” Last year she decided that she wouldn’t go because the third generation of friends she had made were now dead.

Independence and personal effectiveness are important foundations of adult identity. For older adults the main issue is to avoid losing independence and personal effectiveness—the sense that one has the capacity to control one’s own destiny to an acceptable extent—and to avoid having one’s resources drop below the level required for self-reliance.

Talking about the past isn’t harmful. The life-review is an impor
tant part of coming to grips with aging. Not only that, but younger persons can learn much from it if they will take time to listen. Perhaps one of the reasons so many older people talk about the past is the loss of the power they once had prompting them to resort to memories of that more powerful time.

5. *Coping with reduced income*

Sixteen percent of all elders in the United States are living at the poverty level and almost 40% more are near that level. Nearly one-third of those have been poor all their lives. Some lost their jobs after 45 and found it difficult or impossible to secure new employment. Poverty is much more likely to occur among single older people than among the married, with single older women especially vulnerable.

Even for the average person, retirement brings about a 40% decrease in income. While this is expected and usually adjusted to, it often demands lifestyle adjustments. Then, too, the longer the person lives, the more precarious their finances are apt to become. Persistent worry and anxiety about financial matters can be draining.

Reciprocity is important. Older people need to feel they are giving as well as receiving. For people who have made giving to the Lord’s work a part of their lives, it is embarrassing to have to reduce their giving particularly when many churches have increased pressure for giving to meet increased budgets.

6. *Maintaining satisfactory living arrangements*

About one-third of the elderly are widowed. The majority of the remaining two-thirds are living with a spouse. Most older people want to live in an independent household, and for many that is a realistic expectation, especially if in-home service is available. About 14% live in the home of a child and about 4% in an institution. For those who can afford it, retirement villages seem to be a good answer. The important thing is that the person involved feels they have the power to decide what their living arrangements will be.

Many older people fear crime. Mugging is the most frequent crime affecting the elderly. Con-games and misrepresented health care plans victimize many.

7. *Coming to terms with death*

Two-thirds of all deaths in the U.S. occur after age 65. Cardio-
Gish: The Aging

vascular disease and cancer account for 80% of those deaths and suicide rates are highest among older white males.

Although the probability of death becomes higher each year for the elderly, that increasing proximity often doesn’t produce fear. On the whole, older people tend to fear death less than the young. Poor health and disability are more dreaded than death.

The religious and those who have a purpose in life fear death less than those with no faith or for whom life has no meaning.

Now that we have reviewed some of the needs of the elderly, we are ready to consider how we can minister to them.

How to Minister to the Elderly

1. Teach what the Bible has to say about aging.

   We need a view of aging that is consistent with our Christian faith. Younger people need this to give them a proper perspective and older people need the sense of self-esteem it provides. We should, however, realize that this view runs counter to our culture’s view and will be constantly bombarded by it.

2. Examine what myths of aging you are overtly or subtly perpetuating.

   Myths and stereotypes are perpetuated because they contain some truth, but that small portion of the truth is made to seem like the whole truth. The sad thing is that these myths keep many older people from living up to their potential and being all they can be. You can stop these myths from being perpetuated, even subtly, from your pulpit.

3. Survey your congregation and community to find the elderly.

   The elderly are frequently not terribly visible. They often hesitate to ask for help. In fact it is often difficult to get them to talk about their needs. One good way to get around this is by asking them to identify the needs of other elderly people in their community.

4. Evaluate the “messages” they are getting at church.

   Many churches emphasize programs for adolescents and young families but lack outreach programs for older people. We should not give up the former, but neglecting programs for older people subtly tells them they are not as important as the young.

   When you have programs of interest to the elderly, when are they held? Frequently it is at night. With decreased visual acuity, many older people are hesitant to drive after dark. In addition, these are
usually people who have plenty of free time during the day.

What about the accessibility of your church? Must older people climb steps and push open heavy doors to get there? Once they are inside, are they exposed to drafty floors or other ventilation problems? How accessible are the bathrooms? Last year when I taught an introductory gerontology course, each student was required to find an elder mentor who was at least 66 years old. About half the students found that assignment extraordinarily frightening but by the end of the semester all said that it was rewarding. One young man sought out an older lady who used to come to his church. In the course of their developing friendship, he found that the medication she was taking caused her to have bladder problems which necessitated getting to the bathroom quickly at times. In their church the bathroom was located at the bottom of the stairs so she stayed home rather than face the embarrassment of having an accident.

It appears that most churches are quite willing to accept passively the participation of older people in church affairs. However, few actively solicit the participation of the elderly, particularly those who are ill, handicapped, or isolated.

5. Involve the elderly in important roles.

Senior Power is usually not well organized. Part of this may be due to the fact that older people are so diverse that their chronological age is not enough to bind them together. Oldsters can make a difference in their world by helping to change social conditions, but they often need someone to help get them mobilized.

Many churches tend to push older people out of positions of responsibility. In some churches one is no longer qualified to hold office after a certain age. Unfortunately this removal from leadership roles is a denial of worth to the spiritual community. It overlooks the increased wisdom of experience and availability of discretionary time on the part of older members. We need to find ways to keep older Christians meaningfully involved in the church.

Often the elderly are overlooked in evangelistic efforts. Again, I suspect that it is partly due to the myth that older people are set in their ways and won’t change. Actually, it is not unusual for older people without a strong faith to be searching for meaning. This is an outreach wide open to older Christians.

Another need that can well be filled by older people is that of
Gish: The Aging

grandparents for young children. Many young families live far from their extended family and seldom get to be with their grandparents. Even those who see grandparents more often can profit from foster grandparents. These early ties can be particularly beneficial as that young person enters adolescence.

6. Develop a wholistic life-span perspective.

I believe that it is not only good but necessary to have special programs and activities for particular segments of the congregation. My plea is to remember those at the end of the age spectrum. Additionally, I would recommend not making all your programs age-segregated. We need some intergenerational emphasis as well.

7. Evaluate your own attitude toward aging.

I suspect that one of the reasons many of us have problems with the elderly is because we haven’t come to grips with our own aging. Attitudes communicate themselves subtly and change slowly. We can, nevertheless, control our behavior and often attitude change follows. So, in closing, I offer you Ten Commandments for behavior with and toward the elderly.

Thou shalt:

I. maintain regular contact.
II. include in celebrations.
III. be imaginative in gift-giving.
IV. listen thoughtfully to reminiscences.
V. not gloss over worries and/or complaints.
VI. not embarrass or distress.
VII. not undermine self-regard or assurance.
VIII. be on their side.
IX. be empathetic.
X. not forget to laugh.

Remember that thou, too, shalt one day be old—God willing.

References: