

# SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 1 • 2009



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Elder Mistreatment and the Church: Potential Roles for Helping Professionals and Congregations

Quality of Life and Compassion Satisfaction/Fatigue and Burnout in Child Welfare Workers: A Study of the Child Welfare Workers in Community Based Care Organizations in Central Florida

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ISSN 0737-5778

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*Social Work and Christianity* (SWC) is a refereed journal published by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) to support and encourage the growth of social workers in the ethical integration of Christian faith and professional practice. SWC welcomes articles, shorter contributions, book reviews, and letters which deal with issues related to the integration of faith and professional social work practice and other professional concerns which have relevance to Christianity.

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A N I N T E R N A T I O N A L J O U R N A L

SPRING 2009

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 1

ISSN 0737-5778

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Social Work and Christianity is published quarterly by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work, 21 Turkey Roost Rd., Sandy Hook, Connecticut 06482. Periodicals postage at Newtown, CT and additional mailing offices.

ISSN 0737-5778

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to NACSW, PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404.

# Hnau What? C. S. Lewis on What It Means to Be a Person

David A. Sherwood

*Social work values make strong claims about the value and dignity of each person as well as affirmations of the obligation to seek social justice. Are secular modern or post-modern conceptualizations of the nature of personhood robust enough to support such values? This article explores this question, drawing on the writings of C. S. Lewis and sociologist Christian Smith. It concludes that a strong understanding of personhood involves rationality, moral order beyond personal preference, social construction, or utilitarian power, and, ultimately, trust in and obedience to God. A person's value and dignity derive from purposive creation in the image of God, not the possession of particular faculties or appearance.*

**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PERSON? THIS IS ONE OF THE CENTRAL moral questions of our age, certainly so for the profession of social work. Bioethics is particularly engaged with this question. What is human life? When does it begin and end? Does human life have any intrinsic value, dignity, or rights to be protected? Are there any boundaries regarding the manipulation of genetic material, cloning, or embryos? Social workers speak in strong terms about “human rights” and “civil rights” as though there were a secure, generally accepted basis for them to stand on. But is this true? The conversation often seems to ignore the fact that different worldviews lead to widely divergent answers to the question, “What is a person?” or, “What does it mean to be a person?” Most secular modern or post-modern conceptualizations of the nature of personhood are not robust enough to support the notions of human rights and civil rights we tend to assume.

C. S. Lewis understood well that the idea of moral obligation is

not supported by all worldviews and understandings of what it means to be a person. He understood that if persons are simply the chance result of materialist processes in a random and meaningless universe, all bets are off regarding our ability to claim any intrinsic value, dignity, or rights as humans. He also understood that what we call “postmodern” notions of radically subjective and “located” narratives of meaning offer no better hope for preserving the value of persons. He explored these issues many places in his writings over the years in books as diverse as *Out of the Silent Planet* and *The Abolition of Man*.

I am going to take the opportunity to combine my love for social work and human helping with my long-time love of Lewis. I want to use some of his material from *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first book of his “science fiction” trilogy to explore the meaning of personhood. I think it sheds useful light on social work values and the dignity and worth of persons.

### **He Is, After All, Human**

*Out of the Silent Planet* begins with the shanghaiing of Ransom, the philologist. Out on an extending walking tour, Ransom has sought shelter for the night and has interrupted a kidnapping. Two men had been in the process of taking a mentally retarded country boy with them to Mars as an offering, as they believe, to powerful beings there. One was Weston, the genius caught up in the myth of scientific progress and, ironically, the perpetuation of the human species (serving, as he saw it, a great cause). The other was Divine, the more calculating hedonistic utilitarian. Their primary victim gone, Weston and Divine wind up drugging Ransom and taking him instead. We gain some insight into their beliefs about what it means to be a person by the conversation Ransom wakes up to.

Weston has been resisting the substitution of Ransom for the boy based on a sort of sense of values, partly because Ransom has some qualities that the boy did not. “‘The boy was ideal,’ said Weston sulkily. ‘Incapable of serving humanity and only too likely to propagate idiocy. He was the sort of boy who in a civilized community would be automatically handed over to a state laboratory for experimental purposes’” (1962, p. 19).

Devine is more utilitarian. The boy was more likely to be missed by Scotland Yard than a professor on a long school holiday walk. He said, “This busybody, on the other hand, will not be missed for months,

and even then no one will know where he was when he disappeared. He came alone. He left no address. He has no family. And finally he has poked his nose into the whole affair of his own accord” (p. 19).

Even yet, Weston has some reluctance, saying, “Well, I confess I don’t like it. He is, after all, human. The boy was really almost a—a preparation. Still, he’s only an individual, and probably a quite useless one. We’re risking our own lives too. In a great cause” (p. 19).

We see in this little exchange some glimpse of how beliefs affect behavior, how worldviews shape morality. Weston imagined himself to be serving the “great cause” of scientific progress and the evolutionary success of the human gene pool. Actual persons could easily be sacrificed in the service of this “great cause” of abstract humanity, and some persons have more value than others. Devine, brilliant in his own way, takes a much shorter and hard-headed view. The only thing that matters is his personal survival and success, measured by power and prosperity. Persons have no intrinsic value and no rights sustained by moral obligation. When Weston consoles himself with the thought, “I dare say, he would consent if he could be made to understand,” Devine simply replies, “Take his feet and I’ll take his head” (p. 19).

### **Hnau What? Ransom’s Martian Education**

Upon their Martian landing, as Weston and Devine prepare to deliver their human specimen to six tall, spindly, and flimsy things (sorns, we soon learn), they are interrupted by a Martian beast and Ransom makes his getaway. After spending some time in fearful flight from both his captors and the sorns, Ransom has a strange epiphany, one that perhaps only a philologist could understand. From his hiding place, he saw another Martian creature emerge from the water, six or seven feet tall and looking like a cross between a penguin, a seal, an otter, and a stoat. The creature opened its mouth and began to make noises, and the text records, “a lifetime of linguistic study assured Ransom almost at once that these were articulate noises. The creature was *talking*. It had a language.”

Suffice it to say that Ransom makes friends with this hross, learns its language, and learns that there are at least three distinct kinds of creatures on Malacandra (as they call Mars) that he must recognize as “persons” or “human,” though none of them look like the men and women of earth. There are the hrossa, the sorns (or seroni), and the pfiltriggi, each with unique characteristics or abilities.

Ransom's hrossa mentors undertake to help him understand that personhood, or humanity, or being "*hnau*" (in their language) does not correlate with looking like earthlings. So what is the distinction between *hnau* and other creatures, such as *hnakra*, the dangerous aquatic animal? And between *hnau* and higher beings, such as Oyarsa (the Malacandran planetary angel), Melildil the Young (the Son of God), and the Old One (God)?

### **Rationality**

Ransom's first lesson was that being *hnau* was not the same as being "man." These Malacandran creatures were undeniably "other." It was impossible to think of the hross as mankind, Ransom reflects, "But starting from the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have—glossy coat, liquid eye, sweet breath and whitest teeth—and added to all these, as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason" (p. 58). "Sweet reason" is not limited to creatures that look like us.

Although each kind of *hnau* is rational, each kind makes a unique contribution to rationality. This is something that Ransom learns later when he meets his first sorns, who explain the unique attributes of each kind of *hnau* on Malacandra and are curious to learn what the human contributions might be.

The sorns were struck by the fact that earth had only one kind of *hnau*. "[T]hey thought this must have far-reaching effects in the narrowing of sympathies and even of thought. 'Your thought must be at the mercy of your blood,' said the old *sorn*. 'For you cannot compare it with thought that floats on a different blood'" (p. 103). Ransom ultimately discovers that, although each kind of *hnau* on Malacandra has its own language, they all have learned the speech of the hrossa. When he asks why, wondering if the hrossa once ruled the others, the answer given by the *pfifltrigg* is "I do not understand. They are our great speakers and singers. They have more words and better" (p. 114).

### **Moral Order**

*Hnau* apprehend moral truth that is obligatorily binding, not just personally or culturally preferable. Ransom muses, "On Malacandra, apparently, three distinct species had reached rationality, and none of



them had yet exterminated the other. It concerned him intensely to find out which was the real master” (p. 69). He is taught that the *hnau* on Malacandra are ruled not by each other but by spiritual beings and the moral order that originates ultimately from the Old One. Ransom quickly finds himself embarrassed to say too much about human *hnau*, because it becomes evident that they have somehow become “bent” and are clearly morally inferior to the creatures on Malacandra. Of course, Ransom’s embarrassment is evidence that humans are *hnau*, even though bent, since he has some apprehension of the moral order and that humans have violated it.

Malacandrans know that it is wrong to kill other *hnau* and cannot imagine that any *hnau* would do it. It is a most difficult moment for Ransom when he must tell his hross friend that he must hide from Weston and Devine because they have already killed another hross. “Why would they kill him?” the hross asked. “They would not know that he was *hnau*. I have told you that there is only one kind of *hnau* in our world. They would think he was a beast. If they thought that, they would kill him for pleasure, or in fear, or (he hesitated) because they were hungry. But I must tell you the truth, Whin. They would kill even a *hnau*, knowing it to be *hnau*, if they thought its death would serve them” (p. 82).

### **Belief, Trust, and Obedience to God**

The moral order is not a utilitarian one, nor is it subjective or socially constructed (though it is adapted to each kind of *hnau*). Being *hnau* involves belief, trust, and, rightfully, obedience to God. Whin’s explanation of the trouble they are having is that they have not been promptly obedient to the *eldil* who had told them Ransom must be taken to Oyarsa. When Ransom fears that if he leaves, the rest of the hrossa will think he has run away because he was afraid to face them after Hyoi’s death, Whin says, “It is not a question of thinking but of what an *eldil* says. This is cub’s talk” (p. 83). At that point, Ransom chooses faithful obedience, regardless of his feelings and questions. Almost immediately the fears and doubts awake with a vengeance, but he is able to keep going. The text records, “Now, in the clear light of an accepted duty, he felt fear indeed, but with it a sober sense of confidence in himself and in the world, and even an element of pleasure. It was the difference between a landsman in a sinking ship and a horseman

on a bolting horse: either may be killed, but the horseman is an agent as well as a patient” (pp. 86-87).

Ransom later finds himself having to answer honestly embarrassing questions about humans from the sorns about astonishing (to them) aspects of human history, such as war, slavery, and prostitution. “He had decided from the outset that he would be quite frank, for he now felt that it would be not *knau*, and also that it would be unavailing, to do otherwise” (p. 102). He understands that *hnau*-ness is related to virtue and character. The sorns respond to his revelations by realizing human isolation from and rejection of spiritual order. “It is because they have no Oyarsa,” said one of the pupils. ‘It is because every one of them wants to be a little Oyarsa himself,’ said Augray. ‘They cannot help it,’ said the old *sorn*. ‘There must be rule, yet how can creatures rule themselves? Beasts must be ruled by *hnau* and *hnau* by *eldila* and *eldila* by Maleldil. These creatures have no *eldila*. They are like one trying to lift himself by his own hair...” (p. 102).

When Ransom is finally in the presence of the Oyarsa of Malcandra, he learns the bitter truth that Thulcandra (earth) is the “Silent Planet,” quarantined from the rest of the planets. The Oyarsa says, “it was not always so. Once we knew the Oyarsa of your world—he was brighter and greater than I—and then we did not call it Thulcandra. It is the longest of all stories and the bitterest. He became bent. That was before any life came on your world. Those were the Bent Years of which we still speak in the heavens, when he was not yet bound to Thulcandra but free like us. It was in his mind to spoil other words besides his own... There was great war, and we drove him back out of the heavens and bound him in the air of his own world as Maleldil taught us. There doubtless he lies to this hour, and we know no more of that planet: it is silent. We think that Maleldil would not give it up utterly to the Bent One, and there are stories among us that He has taken strange counsel and dared terrible things, wrestling with the Bent One in Thulcandra. But of this we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into” (pp. 120-121).

When Ransom has to explain the bent designs of Weston and Devine, the Oyarsa wonders if they are wounded in their brains but concludes, “If you were my own people I would kill them now, Ransom, and you soon; for they are bent beyond hope, and you, when you have grown a little braver, will be ready to go to Maleldil. But my authority is over my own world. It is a terrible thing to kill some else’s *hnau* (p. 123).

## **Hnau are Both Rational Animals and Spirit**

Ransom gets to experience the honoring of the three dead *hnau*, learning that *hnau* are not only rational animals; they are spiritual beings as well. Ten of the *hrossa* begin to sing. The text records:

To everyman, in his acquaintance with a new art, there comes a moment when that which before was meaningless first lifts, as it were, one corner of the curtain that hides its mystery, and reveals, in a burst of delight which later and fuller understandings can hardly ever equal, one glimpse of the indefinite possibilities within. For Ransom, this moment had now come in his understanding of Malacandrian song. Now first he saw that its rhythms were based on a different blood from ours, on a heart that beat more quickly, and a fiercer internal heat. Through his knowledge of the creatures and his love for them he began, ever so little, to hear it with their ears. A sense of great masses moving at visionary speeds, of giants dancing, of eternal sorrows eternally consoled, of he knew not what and yet what he had always known, awoke in him with the very first bars of the deep-mouthed dirge, and bowed down his spirit as if the gate of heaven had opened before him.

“Let it go hence,” they sang. “Let it go hence, dissolve and be no body. Drop it, release it, drop it gently, as a stone is loosed from the fingers drooping over a still pool. Let it go down, sink, fall away. Once below the surface there are no divisions, no layers in the water yielding all the way down; all one and all unwounded is that element. Send it voyaging were it will not come again. Let it go down; the *hnau* rises from it. This is the second life, the other beginning. Open, oh coloured world, without weight, without shore. You are second and better; this was first and feeble. Once the worlds were hot within and brought forth life, but only the pale plants, the dark plants. We see their children when they grow to-day, out of the sun’s light in the sad places. After, the heaven made grow another kind on worlds: the high climbers,

the bright-haired forests, cheeks of flowers. First were the darker, then the brighter. First was the worlds' blood, then the suns' brood" (pp. 131-132).

Then, as the song ended, Oyarsa said, "Let us scatter the movements which were their bodies. So will Maleldil scatter all worlds when the first and feeble is worn" (p. 132).

### **We Can't Have It Both Ways: If Values Aren't Real, Persons Have No Inherent Value**

Most modern and postmodern accounts of what it means to be a person are not robust enough to support the meaning and values that their proponents seem to claim, yet they would find the account portrayed by Lewis to be quaint, if not laughable. Social work tends to hold either modernist materialist or postmodern subjectivist explanations of human nature and values, yet at the same time proclaims the inherent dignity and worth of each person as one of its core values. You really can't have it both ways.

As Lewis pointed out in *The Abolition of Man*, if human beliefs and behavior are only the result of environment and conditioning and values are only personal preferences, the jig is up. Nature has the last laugh. We may think we are extending our control by developing ways to make human beings whatever we want, but in the end it is nature, not humans, that will have won.

After we have "seen through" all the values and the motivations, the remaining motivations can only be the ones that can't be seen through—whatever itch, desire, or lust we happen to be experiencing at the moment. As Lewis says, "In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful" (p. 35).

Yet, in spite of our philosophies, we human beings continue to speak and act as though persons were more than products and values more than preferences. I know that it is true for me. Values and meaning have always been very important to me. I remember responding to a question on a scholarship application when I was a senior in high school that I was particularly interested in values and ethics. As a relatively

thoughtful boy, I realized early on that not all understandings of the nature of the universe and the nature of persons are compatible with persons having inherent dignity and value, or with the words “love” and “justice” having any morally obligatory power. I understood the abyss of absurdity, meaninglessness, solipsism, and raw power that yawned before me and that it just could be true.

When I encountered C. S. Lewis’s writings as a freshman or sophomore in college, his theme of ultimately real values immediately resonated deeply with me. I understood it when he said that we can’t have it both ways. We may ultimately live in a purely materialistic and naturalistic universe, and our experience of that universe may ultimately be only radically subjective and bounded by cultural conditions. But if so, we must be honest and realistic enough to kiss love and justice goodbye.

Yet, bent as we are, human beings steadfastly persist in seeking some real meaning to love and justice. Notions and theories about human nature and behavior that ignore our empirically verifiable tendencies to shape ourselves, our behavior, and our communities based on beliefs and values are fatally reductionist. On one level, there will be new evidence every day that love is only lust, if we ignore the “inside” knowledge we have regarding human motivation and behavior. Lust may be there alright, but it is hardly ever the only thing. So, in spite of the considerable difficulties of believing in God and believing that morality is rooted in something really true about the universe and that it imposes real imperatives on me, I have always found the difficulties of believing that there is no God and that values have no real meaning even greater. This is what Elton Trueblood called the principle of “comparative difficulties” (1957, p. 13). In *Mere Christianity* (1960, pp. 45-46), Lewis described his struggles with this.

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. Of course I

could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies.

That sounds right to me. Competing worldviews all have their difficulties and their prices. Love and justice *could* be only private fancies. But, finally, I find that very hard to believe.

### **Moral, Believing, and Spiritual Animals**

Social work and the field of behavioral and social sciences have favored theories of human nature and behavior that explain away or “see through” morality, spirituality, and religion—from Freud’s psychoanalysis (*The Future of an Illusion*), through Skinner’s behavioral determinism (*Beyond Dignity and Freedom*), to Wilson’s sociobiology or evolutionary psychology (“The Biological Basis of Morality,” 1998). Peter Singer (1996), the Princeton University bioethicist, is a prime example of how these kinds of ideas have consequences. On the basis of his materialist and utilitarian assumptions, he argues that humans have no more innate value than any other animal and that any “right to life” they might have is tied to their capacities of self-awareness and agency, their capacities to anticipate the future, to make choices, and to take action based on that awareness. On this basis he justifies infanticide for those creatures which, upon proper testing, do not show themselves to have the potential for full development of these capacities, and euthanasia for those creatures which, for whatever reason, have lost the exercise of those capacities.

However, other voices are beginning to be raised which take a more holistic approach to understanding what it means to be a person. A prime example would be Christian Smith, professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame. He has written a courageous (in the light of the academic culture) and ground-breaking work by telling the old, old story that Lewis tells in *Out of the Silent Planet* in the language of contemporary social sciences.

In his book, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003), Smith argues that there is no way to be human except

through moral order. He says, “One of the central and fundamental motivations for human action is to act out and sustain moral order, which helps constitute, directs, and makes significant human life itself. Human persons nearly universally live in social worlds that are thickly webbed with moral assumptions, beliefs, commitments, and obligations” (p. 8). He argues that until this is recognized and built into sociological and psychological theories and analysis our understanding of human action and culture will be impoverished and inadequate (p. 11).

And by this, he does not mean that “moral” is another way of saying personal preferences, self-interested, utilitarian behavior, or internalized socialization. He argues that science itself is, like all institutions, a set of practices that developed out of and expresses a distinct moral order comprising particular historical narratives, traditions, and worldviews that it cannot “prove.” “Science as we know it can only ever proceed by first placing faith in a set of unprovable cosmological, metaphysical, and epistemological assumptions and commitments...Nothing human, not even science, escapes moral order” (p. 25). Smith argues that moral order is external to and objectively existent for human actors, but it finds imperfect expression in human actors (pp. 27-27).

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, which require an amazing faith in the ability of genes to stimulate behavior that perpetuates the genes but not necessarily the carrier of the genes, do not provide a plausible account of actual human behavior. The logical conclusion of this explanation eliminates any shred of belief in human morality—freedom, dignity, choice, rights, and responsibility. Smith, like Lewis, observes:

When human morality is redefined entirely in relation to reproductive fitness—so that morality is no longer driven by natural law or the will of God or self-evident inherent moral values—then we lose any real standard to judge actions. Genetic survival and extinction in a competitive environment is all that is. Beyond that we can have nothing evaluative to say about which genes successfully reproduce or how they do it. Indeed, we no longer even possess standards for value judgments about what constitutes progress in evolution. It is finally of no more value that humans survive than do bacteria (p. 37).

I happen to believe, with good reason, that Smith's thinking has been directly influenced by the writings of C. S. Lewis. His office was across the hall from me once upon a time when he was a newly minted Ph.D. and we both taught at Gordon College. Now he is a one of the most widely published and important sociologists of religion of our time. Lewis did not claim originality for his ideas and Smith is radical only for being willing to publicly bring the old ideas to the contemporary academic arena. He is skilled in the tools and language of the academic guild and a remarkably capable thinker and writer who may be disagreed with, but cannot simply be ignored. I hope I have said enough about what he has written to stimulate your interest in reading more of what he has written. Academia needs more such voices.

Ideas and beliefs have consequences. What we believe about what it means to be a person will profoundly affect the way we treat people. Weston and Devine showed that very clearly. As Ransom learned, a person is not simply someone who looks or thinks like me. A robust and sustainable understanding of personhood involves rationality, moral order beyond personal preference, social construction, or utilitarian power, and, ultimately, trust in and obedience to God. A person's value and dignity derive from purposive creation in the image of God, not the possession of particular faculties or appearance.

A person has inherent dignity and value. *Hnau* are moral, believing animals, no matter where they are found or what they look like. They understand that they are accountable to a moral order that is transcendent and real. ❖

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**Note:** A version of this paper was presented at the C. S. Lewis Oxbridge Conference, Oxford, England, July 28, 2005.

**Key Words:** person, personhood, human, dignity, value, ethics, social work, C. S. Lewis

# Elder Mistreatment and the Church: Potential Roles for Helping Professionals and Congregations

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*Elder abuse takes many forms. It can be as simple as not responding to reasonable needs or borrowing money without any intent to pay it back. It can also involve actual violence. The malicious violence that pervades other forms of family violence is much less common when we speak of elder abuse. Elder abuse often falls in the cracks between informal and formal systems as it more often reflects something that caregivers fail to do, rather than specific acts of aggression. As such, the extended informal system of persons outside the immediate family is uncertain as to how to address their suspicions and the formal system does not learn about it until it is a crisis. Congregations and clergy walk the fine line between informal and formal systems every day. Clergy as persons who get to know their congregants may be in a position to know about an elder abuse, long before any other formal system is alerted, even physicians. As such, clergy can be on the front line for intervention and change, particularly when they have the support from a social worker. In this article the authors articulate models that reflect some of the challenges faced by clergy and ways that, when there is the support of a social worker either from the congregation or from a local agency, the abuse can be addressed with the context of a caring congregation.*

**S**OCIAL WORKERS, CLERGY, AND CONGREGATIONS NEED TO WORK together to address the challenges presented by elder abuse in our society. “It is believed that faith leaders may, in fact, encoun-

ter cases of elder abuse more frequently than other service providers” (Podnieks & Wilson, 2004, p. 82). Yet clergy were among the least likely to “refer abuse or neglect cases to outside agencies” (Podnieks & Wilson, 2004, p. 59). Paradoxically, that does not mean that they are not involved. Like most of the activities of the pastor, their role is that of the “role related helper” (Ellor, 2004, p. 19) as first defined in the informal helping literature by Froland, Pancoast, Chapman & Kimboko (1981). Studies have demonstrated that faith communities can work to address and even prevent elder abuse (Brozowski & Hall, 2004; Montoya, 1997). However, when faced with complicated situations, clergy and congregations often need to partner with social workers. Consider the following case from the authors’ case files.

Connie Snyder is a 74-year-old woman living in a middle-class suburb in a large metropolitan area. Her husband died ten years ago. Connie has two sons and one daughter, Mary, age 46, who lives nearby, while Mark, age 48, and Alan, age 51, live out of state. Recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, Connie has had increasing difficulty caring for herself and taking care of her home. Last year a neighbor noticed Connie standing at the mailbox at the end of the street. When the neighbor went to check on her, it became apparent that Connie didn’t remember where she lived. The neighbor took Connie home and contacted Mary.

While Mark and Alan are married with families, Mary has never been married. After the three siblings talked by phone, Mary agreed to quit her job as a dancer in a night club and move in to help care for their mom. At first Mark and Alan took comfort in the fact that Mary was there to take care of her. Mary seemed to drive Connie to church and Bible study for her usual meetings. She did all of the grocery shopping and seemed to care for the home in ways that Connie had previously been unable to do. Eight months after moving in, however, Alan, who kept track of his mother’s finances for her, started to notice a pattern of withdrawals from Connie’s bank account. Every day, Connie withdrew \$400 from her account, which is the limit she could withdraw from an ATM. Since his mother was a frugal person, he started asking questions. When he would ask his mother about the withdrawals, she denied that she had made them, but clearly did not remember. When Alan asked Mary about them, at first she denied any knowledge of them, but then suggested that she was helping her to pay her bills. As the ATM withdrawals persisted, Alan pushed harder to find out what was going on. At that point Mary stopped answering the phone.

At Christmas, approximately four months after the start of the ATM withdrawals, Mark and Alan arranged to visit their mother and sister. When they arrived and knocked on the door Mary came, but would not let them into the house. They persisted in knocking and finally their mother came to the door. At first she did not seem to know them, but then started yelling at them that they were not going to put her into a nursing home, so they could just go away. After several attempts to gain entrance and talk with their sister, Mark and Alan began to talk with neighbors and other friends in the community and at their Lutheran church to try to determine what was happening. One neighbor noted that the only time she sees Connie is when Mary drives her mother somewhere. However, she sees Mary from time to time with a new boyfriend that seemed to be unemployed and yet able to take Mary to a lot of nice restaurants and pay cash, at least that was the rumor. When the neighbor did see Connie and Mary together, however, she noted that they seem to be doing fine. Although she offers, they never seem to want to stop and talk with her, which Connie always used to do.

When the brothers began to inquire at church they found out that Mary had been taking her mother to services, but that she had recently stopped attending. The pastor noted that he was aware that Connie seemed to be “falling rapidly into senility” and he felt badly about that. He was also aware of a situation about three months ago when Connie last came to Bible study. Evidently Connie had been a Bible study leader for many years and one of the sharpest Bible students in the church. However, on this day during a study of the book of Exodus, she insisted that Moses was the son of God. The members complained about Connie to the pastor, as she was disruptive to their study. She stopped coming on her own, however, so the pastor did not do anything about it. He also noted that on another occasion when Mary had brought her mother to church, Mary had allowed Connie to put money in the collection plate, but then persons sitting around them said that Mary took the money back out and put it in her own purse. There was also a rumor that Mary had also started taking out more than just her mother’s contributions. When the pastor tried to talk to Mary about it, Mary just turned and walked away. He commented that Connie and her husband had been the principle donors of the church organ and he did not want anyone to think badly of their family. The pastor noted that he was not sure what he should do.

### **A Growing Concern**

The case of Connie and her daughter, Mary, is just one from the authors' case files. Each case of elder abuse is unique, often astonishing even the seasoned professional who works with them each day. Reports of abuse are most often submitted by family members (20% of the time), by hospital staff (17.3% of the time), and law enforcement (11.3% of the time) (Tatara, Kuzmeskus, Duckhorn and Bivens, 1998). Clergy are mandatory reporters in 7 states and encouraged to report in 22 states (Teaster, 2003, p. 56). However, according to Tatara et al., churches are included in the "other" category that accounts for 15.1% of reports. The best available data sources suggest that "between 1 and 2 million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depend for care or protection" (National Research Council Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect, 2003, p. 1). No one group of caring persons can solve this problem alone; it takes a community of caring lay and professional leaders to even try to start to make a difference.

When mistreatment occurs, evidence suggests a large percentage of cases involve people in caretaking relationships (Fisher & Regan, 2006; Fulmer et al., 2005; Hwalek, Neale, Goodrich, & Quinn, 1996; Kosberg, 1988). As the aging of America continues, the number of elderly entering into some type of caretaking relationship will increase. At the same time, the incidence of elder mistreatment is also projected to grow (NRC, 2003). In this article, we examine elder mistreatment as it occurs in the caretaking relationship. We then review the literature as to the role of clergy and churches as members of the community team to prevent abuse. We conclude by offering possible models that can facilitate the role of the church and clergy with the support of local social workers and their agencies.

### **Elder Mistreatment and the Church**

Currently, no universally accepted definition of elder mistreatment exists. Different statutory definitions for elder mistreatment occur across the United States. Although every state has some form of reporting requirements, Adult Protective Services (APS) reporting mandates and definitions vary widely from state to state (Teaster, 2003). Furthermore, perceptions of what constitutes elder mistreatment vary among different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Moon, 2000). In fact, the National

Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute on Aging (NIA) still seek research proposals to develop an understanding of elder mistreatment to assist the federal government to establish social policy that is useful across different community settings. Instead of having a single definition, elder mistreatment is a broad concept that can take different forms, including physical or psychological abuse, active or passive neglect, sexual abuse, or financial exploitation (Quinn and Tomita, 1997, pp. 48-49). Unlike other contexts where family violence occurs, elder abuse often takes the form of a passive action or a non-action, rather than a concrete incident or action. The one common factor is the presence of some type of a caretaking relationship. The NRC (2003) specifies, "The nature of the relationship between the elder and the perpetrator lies at the heart of common understanding of the concept of mistreatment" (p. 40).

But what is it about the nature of the caretaking relationship that makes elder mistreatment possible? An analysis of the NRC (2003) definition of elder mistreatment offers some clues.

Elder mistreatment is defined in this report to refer to (a) intentional actions that cause harm or create a serious risk of harm (whether or not harm is intended) to a vulnerable elder by a caregiver or other person who stands in a trust relationship to the elder or (b) failure by a caregiver to satisfy the elder's basic needs or to protect the elderly from harm (p. 40).

The definition suggests three factors that create the possibility for elder mistreatment to occur: (1) an elderly person is physically, emotionally or cognitively impaired. These impairments leave them vulnerable to chronic dependency. (2) a caretaker with a relationship that should be based on trust with the elderly person. (3) "being isolated from external supports through health limitations or residing in rural areas" (Brozowski & Hall, 2004, p. 77).

### **1. An Elderly Person Vulnerable to Chronic Dependency**

At any given time, a majority of the 35 million Americans over the age of 65 are in relatively good health. They are able to work, manage their households (e.g., prepare meals, clean, manage money), and take care of their activities of daily living (ADLs) such as bathing, dressing, moving out of beds and chairs, toileting and eating (Kart & Kinney, 2001, p.

106). At some point, however, many older persons experience diminished health capacities that limit their ability for self-care and self-protection. This is especially the case for persons ages 85 and older (Larsson, 2007; Hooyman & Kiyak, 2002). Elder mistreatment becomes possible when people reach the point of being unable to care for themselves, making them vulnerable to those providing support (NRC, 2003).

Vulnerability for the elderly is a multi-faceted construct that can take different forms. Either by the normal aging processes or the onset of illness, people can experience cognitive impairment, depression, or physical problems that limit daily activities (Fulmer et al., 2005). Although the symptoms causing vulnerability for the elderly are varied, the consequences of needing ongoing support are the same, namely chronic dependency.

The link between vulnerability, chronic dependency, and elder mistreatment is well documented in the literature. Kosberg (1988) identifies elderly persons who are of advanced age, experience severe physical or mental impairments, and dependent on others for care as being “high risk” for abuse or neglect. In a study of over 2000 people in Boston, the pioneering study by Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) found that elderly persons in poor health and being cared for by someone in the home were 3 to 4 times as likely to be abused than older adults who are healthy and independent. These conclusions were affirmed by a more recent study of older adults in Sweden (Larsson, 2007). More recently, Fisher and Regan (2006) found that older women needing ongoing care were highly susceptible to a variety of forms of mistreatment by different perpetrators, with a notable proportion experiencing multiple forms of abuse and neglect. Fulmer and colleagues report that elders who are more limited by health challenges are clearly at greater risk of being mistreated by their caregivers (2005).

It is important to distinguish between the need for episodic help and the need for ongoing support. Quinn and Tomita (1997) describe the difference:

Most people understand that older adults may need some assistance. But being largely dependent over long periods of time, perhaps years, is not looked upon favorably either by old people or those who must care for them. On the contrary, such dependency is often viewed with fear, dread, disrespect, shame, and disapproval (p. 15).

Although no one is at fault, the eventual need to have ongoing assistance can create chronic dependency, a circumstance that neither elderly persons nor caretakers want, and a circumstance that increases the risk of elder mistreatment.

## **2. A Caretaker with a Trusting Relationship**

As people get older, the potential need for assistance with activities of daily living increases. When needs arise, spouses and family members provide a majority (80-90%) of the care (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In fact, older adults have a hierarchal preference for assistance; they prefer their spouses to provide support, followed by their children, particularly daughters, extended family members, friends, and then neighbors (Van Tilburg, 1998). Most spouses and family caretakers have a loving and trusting relationship with the older adult in need of care. During times of crisis and hardship, they are able to show great compassion and respect as they respond to the needs for assistance. In the same way, elderly family members are usually able to express gratitude and appreciation for the extra support.

Depending on the illnesses involved, the shift from being independent and able to care for one's own needs to that of the person who needs help from others is a transition of control. Particularly in western society, we are accustomed to the rugged individualism passed down for generations. When health challenges seem to take over one's life, the older adults simply can't do for themselves. Thus, there is a shift of from independence and self-control to dependence and the control of others. This shift is clear in the family dynamic when those who are in the caretaking role begin to realize the weight of the dependence of the impaired older adult. Referred to as caretaker burden, this weighty challenge often starts out with well meaning family members trying to do the best they can (Lowder, Buzney, & Buzo, 2005). However, families usually have many other burdens and challenges in their lives; thus caregiving for a spouse or older family member is an additional challenge. Depending on the weight of that challenge in light of all the other challenges, the caregiver(s) need to determine their options. From the perspective of abuse, the most dangerous concern is when there is high stress and low perceived options. The resulting frustration can be very unsafe. Lowder et al. (2005) suggest that this is a balancing act, between dependency and independence of the older adult, between the



needs of the older adult and their own children and most of all to find time for their own needs.

It is one thing to provide transportation to doctor's appointments or provide meals and companionship. It is another thing for caretakers to help older persons who need 24-hour care, may wander, become violent, or become incontinent, particularly if they know that the persons they are caring for are not going to get any better. In addition, caretakers face the reality of having to balance, and in some cases forgo, other parts of their lives. The changing interactions create relationship dynamics that are conducive to the possibility of elder mistreatment (Pillemer & Suito, 1992). This describes the caregiver stress model, which suggests that "perpetrators are well meaning, but at increased risk to victimizing due to the difficulties and challenges of care giving" (Mellor & Brownell, 2006, p. 44). In recent literature, this model has been modified to include the understanding that even under significant stress, there must be certain predispositions for the caregiver to move from being a caring individual to a person who would abuse a senior. These include the nature of the life long relationship between caregiver and older adult, some personality traits, and outside influences such as a spouse or boy friend that activate latent tendencies toward abuse (Mellor & Brownell, 2006, p. 44).

### **3. The Isolation of Caregiving**

At first glance, it may appear that isolation would not be an issue in the caretaking relationship. After all, no one is actually alone. For outside casual observers, there may be a false sense that elderly persons and their trusted caretakers have each other. How can there be isolation? The misconception about isolation in the caretaking relationship is also evident in how elder mistreatment is defined and examined in the literature. The NRC (2003) and other recent studies (Brownell, 2006; Jayawardena & Liao, 2006; Popa, Branch, Brown, & Schonfeld, 2006; VandeWeerd & Paveza, 2006; Wolf & Li, 1999) view mistreatment as something that occurs and can be prevented from within the relationship between a caretaker as the perpetrator and the elderly person as a victim. However, increasing literature suggests that caregivers, particularly spouses of persons with dementia, are at risk of being every bit as isolated as the seniors for whom they are caring (Sherman & Boss, 2007, p. 258). If the caregiver and care receiver experience isolation, and isolation is a primary antecedent of elder mistreatment, it cannot be prevented from within

the relationship. Over an extended period of progressive vulnerability and increasing dependency, it may happen that the relationship exists secluded from other support systems, even from other family support. In essence, elderly persons and their caretakers may become shut-ins to the outside world (Mellor & Brownell 2006, p. 44).

The isolation of the caregiver and care receiver relationship is a challenge since when there is no one to turn to, there are also no people who can help the person talk through their concerns. "Social isolation and having no one to talk to may contribute to decreased self-esteem and increased frustration" (Quinn & Tomita, 1997, p. 230) for caregivers of older adults. The isolation also suggests a lack of real supervision or someone who regularly checks in to make sure that everything is going well. Quinn and Tomita go on to suggest that a task for practitioners is to help caretakers develop social contacts that can minimize feelings of isolation (1997). In any relationship where one person is truly vulnerable, social isolation of the caregiver leaves the vulnerable senior at greater risk for abuse.

### **Summary of the Issues**

In summary, more elderly persons are going to have a need for assistance and increasing numbers of spouses and family members are going to engage in caretaking relationships. Older adults prefer spouses and family members as the first option for providing care. Initially, and with admirable intentions, many spouses and family members are able to provide assistance with patience and consideration. As the needs of older adults become more pervasive, such as in cases where the impaired person suffers from dementia, they eventually require ongoing attention. The combination of having elderly people vulnerable to chronic dependence, their care being provided by trusted family members, and their caretaking relationships without someone who can check in or even supervise the situation creates dynamics of greater vulnerability for elder mistreatment to occur.

### **Social Workers, Clergy, and Congregations Working Together: Role of Congregations**

The research has consistently demonstrated the vital role that clergy and congregations play in the lives of older adults (Veroff, et. al, 1981;

Ellor & Coates, 1985; Sheehan, 1989; Podnieks & Wilson, 2004; Cnaan, et al, 2002; Ellor, 2004). Religious congregations are both the focus of faith and meaning and often the primary source of community as well as social services for many older adults. In the case of elder abuse, congregations are informal social services that have the capacity to both identify the abused senior as well as intervene. Informal social services are those agencies or institutions whose primary goals do not necessarily reflect providing social services as first defined by Froland, et al. (1981).

Churches are informal service providers. Even if a specific congregation has opened a formal social service, congregations are in business to facilitate the worship of God. From a Christian perspective, this often includes supporting the needs of humanity. Frequently, the pastor is the gatekeeper to the work of the church in the community, but is often not the one who will actually do the work (Ellor, 2004). Given the variety of needs that a pastor can see in her or his community, one of the ways that pastors select which projects to take on is whether or not lay leaders can be identified to actually provide the service. Clergy, when asked what was the greatest barrier to providing services for older adults, identified “a lack of lay leadership” as the primary reason (Tobin, et. al., 1986). New clergy often learn very quickly that they can’t do everything that their ideals might identify as needed.

When working with churches, social workers need to recognize that, while the pastor is often the gatekeeper, the person in the church to find and work with will most likely be a lay person. This makes it more complicated from the outside to identify and get to the right person, but it is often critical for sustained response. Social workers also need to understand that very few community groups warm up quickly to a person who wants to exert their authority as an expert and tell them how they should respond. As a local Adult Protective Services social worker tells the story, she sent out a mailing to all 200 of the local churches to let them know that she was the community resource person and that she would like to come to their congregation or community group to let them know about elder abuse and how they should respond to it. She did not receive a single contact from any of the churches. Informal services tend to respond best when their expertise is acknowledged and when social services come alongside to support them, rather than trying to tell them what to do. When a congregation identifies a problem in the community, they are more likely to welcome an agency that comes alongside to offer support and even expertise as partners helping to address the problem.

## Ways to identify abuse

One of the challenges faced by many clergy and the members of their congregations is the actual identification of abuse. Frequently, seniors are brought to the attention of pastors by parishioners who are relatively certain they know the definition of abuse and are ready to condemn someone for doing it. However, thoughtful pastors want to be sure that they know what they are talking about before they simply jump in. In a world of electronic bank transfers and long distance caregiving, it isn't always easy to identify when an older adult is being abused. There are times when it seems quite clear and others when it may be a matter of perspective. For example, at what point is the adult child simply claiming his or her inheritance and at what point are they stealing from the surviving parent? It seems somewhat clearer in the Biblical story of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32) that the prodigal son has claimed his inheritance prior to the death of his father. But what if you are working with someone whose inheritance is from his mother who is deceased, or so they claim? Are they stealing from their father? Another example is the older adult who has visible bruises on an arm or even forehead. When asked, the senior notes how clumsy they are. Falls are common among the frail elderly, so did he or she fall or were they pushed? In the context of the church, there seems to be a reluctance to push suspicions too far when there is an appropriate explanation. The hard questions may be seen as "rocking the boat" or may offend a key member of the congregation.

Brandl, et al., (2007) suggest that a social worker or member of the church can identify elder abuse using three indicators:

- The victim says that they are being hurt. Sometimes it is hard to believe that a senior has been hurt. She or he may have dementia and thus be unreliable as a witness. In other cases, the person being accused may be known to the congregation and thus beyond suspicion. Yet, careful investigation may still yield concrete evidence of an abuse.
- There are times when the victim does not directly say that she or he has been abused; however, they will drop hints, or in the case of a person in advanced dementia, she or he may unexplainably shy away from a specific individual. This category may include visible injuries that don't seem to match the story given. It may also include explanations that simply don't seem feasible given

other information available, such as a long lost uncle gave the money to mother to give to me, so I am claiming it.

- There are many different profiles of the abuser, but their own behaviors may also be evaluated. The perpetrator may have threatened or intimidated the senior. The key is found in the consistency of the story or explanation (pp. 62-63).

There are clearly times, for example in the case of dementia, where the expertise of a physician or social worker who can perform medical and/or mental status tests will be required. At these times, the professionals can come alongside of the pastors in their effort to determine if abuse has occurred. At the heart of the Brandl assessment, a criterion is the breach of the trust relationship between the senior and the caregiver. The seniors themselves may be trying to cover up the problem which will then make it even harder to identify. Frequently, the first time the pastor will turn to a social worker, possibly someone who is also a member of the congregation, is to help to identify if there is a problem.

### **Intervention Models**

More than one approach is useful when working with a congregation or pastor to address elder abuse. The distinction between the various options greatly depends the following three variables. First, what is the goal for the program or for the activity? If the goal is prevention, then education makes sense. If the goal is specific intervention with a family, then some combination of services and even legal action is necessary. Second, both the church and the social worker need to be careful as to legal status of the context or request. If laws have been broken, or if a mandatory reporter has heard or seen something that warrants a report, the laws need to be followed. As noted above, in seven states both clergy and social workers are mandatory reporters. In most states, however, clergy are not mandatory reporters of illegal actions in the context of elder abuse, but they are encouraged to report what they know. This may put the pastor into the ethical conflict of the confessional. In any event, the legal status of the situation or actions observed needs to be factored into the decision as to how to proceed. Finally, both the congregation and the social worker need to be conscious of the nature of the resources available. In some cases, for example, where suspected elder abuse takes place in terms of money, it is possible that an alternative guardian for

the estate who can manage the money would be appropriate or even a money management program. However, in rural and some urban areas these services may not be available. Not every congregation or social agency is equipped to handle elder abuse. The local office of Adult Protective Services is an important resource to facilitate any intervention or program planned by clergy or a social worker.

### **Educational Programs**

When the goals for intervention are preventive in nature, an educational event may be the right answer. Few churches have all of the resources needed to work with cases of elder abuse. However, the more that is known and understood about it, the more that other people can help identify problems and guide families away from situations that may be fertile areas for abuse. Situations where caregivers are over stretched or burned out and where alcohol or drugs are involved may be conditions where abuse is more likely to take place. In congregations or communities where these conditions exist, one approach is to hold community education sessions. Topics that have successfully been used include the nature of abuse, the nature of caregiver burnout, resources for caregivers, caregiver stress, and legal issues in caregiving.

### **Setting up a support team**

A common suggestion is to set up a support team, especially when there is an isolated dyad caregiving situation. Cason (2002), for instance, writes of developing a team to provide care. She suggests building a team of people with a set care plan that defines the needs and the roles of each person. Such a team might include the pastor of a church, an Adult Protective Services (APS) Worker, and a local social service agency. In the case of Connie noted above, this was the approach used. The family approached a local social worker for help. The social worker brought an APS worker into the discussion. It was determined after several efforts to talk with Mary and Connie that there was enough fear of the daughter, Mary, that for APS to do their assessment successfully they needed to find a way of meeting with Connie without Mary present. The pastor, as a member of the team was able to invite Connie to an event at the church, which he provided transportation for. In doing so, APS was able to interview Mary without any concern for Connie. Connie was then

returned to the home and interviewed by the APS worker. The trust Connie had in her pastor made this intervention possible.

### **Public Service Intervention Programs**

Another model for supporting the caretaking relationship is for the state to provide additional support. In most states, government social services and adult protective service departments attempt to assist caregivers with the support they need. The reality is that well-meaning social workers and other government providers are usually too overwhelmed by large caseloads and shortages in funding to provide the external support needed to address the isolation created in the dyad caretaking relationship (Quinn, 2005). Moreover, the limitations inherent in state supported services (e.g., eligibility criteria and productivity standards for professional staff) make the scope of support better suited for a safety net of formalized care such as case management, adult protective services, and public guardianship—services which are essential, but not necessarily effective in preventing elder mistreatment (Quinn, 2005).

### **Programs that Work with Congregations**

A third approach offers a unique alternative where congregations play a larger role in preventing and addressing elder abuse. The expanded role of congregations, however, may not work in every setting. Though we agree with the basic premises, and even agree that a team of family, friends, and professionals is generally ideal, there are times when implementing such comprehensive teams on a wide scale basis may not work as well. Will there be enough people who want and are able to participate on such teams to the extent that the structure of the trusting caretaking relationship expands? In some cases, what can happen is that the dyad caretaking relationship will remain the primary structure, with other persons or systems, such as home health or a nursing home involved in caregiving roles.

Instead of a comprehensive team or the formalized support of government services, a third alternative would offer a middle ground where trusting caretaker relationships are re-defined as consisting of three parties, with members of congregations participating as the third party. For caretaking relationships to be re-defined, each person or group needs to be perceived as fundamental and essential to the relationship.

Therefore, the added person or group needs to be limited in number so that enough rapport and comfort can develop to create trusting relationships. At the same time, the additional members need to have enough emotional distance to provide accountability. For example, simply adding Mary's boyfriend as a third party, since he seems to be receiving financial gain in the current context and also seems to lack concern for Connie's welfare, would be inappropriate. In addition, the re-defined triad caretaking relationships will also need to be linked to outside resources. With assistance from helping professionals, religious congregations are aptly suited for joining caretaking relationships.

Several factors make it possible for congregations to become involved in caretaking relationships as the third party. First, congregations are already the primary preference for older adults seeking support outside the family (Ellor, 2004; Stuckey, 1997). As caretaking situations extend over time, the ties with clergy and laypeople are usually the last relationships that remain. Second, congregations are often viewed as extensions of the local community-based informal support systems, namely spouses, families, and neighbors. In fact, as people participate in congregations, their activities often build and reinforce lifelong friendships (Sherr, Shields, King, & Curran, 2005). Third, congregations can serve as a meeting point linking the elderly to needed services in the community. In a study of their willingness to use social services, Tirrito and Spencer-Amado (2000) found that a large majority of older adults would be more willing to use formalized social services if they were provided in places of worship. Finally, a large majority of the elderly attends religious congregations on a regular basis (The Association of Religious Data Archives, 2006). Thus, the senior already has a relationship with at least some members of the congregation. In cases like that of Connie where dementia is involved, Connie may be able to recognize and even trust her pastor or a member of her congregation, while a person from a social service agency who is a stranger may be challenged when trying to establish a new relationship. Of all the groups of people that could participate in serving the elderly, congregations seem to offer the possibility of affecting the greatest number of caretaking relationships.

### **Setting up Congregation Caretaking Partnerships (CCP)**

Expanding caretaking relationships to include members of congregations involves empowering the membership of churches to intentionally provide ongoing support for one another. We suggest that there are five



components to building effective caretaking partnerships: bring groups of elderly together on a continuing basis; educate about the realities of elder mistreatment; discussions about support; have access to pastoral or church leadership; and cultivate partnerships with helping professionals.

### **Bring Groups of Elderly Together on a Continuing Basis**

The process of developing caretaking partnerships begins well before there are needs for ongoing support. People need time to develop enough trust to get intimately involved in caring for each other. We recommend creating groups of 10-12 people that meet at least once a week (Toseland & Rivas, 2004). Many congregations already have groups that meet on a continuing basis for pastoral support. Sometimes they are groups of deacons; at other times they may be Stephen Ministers, a congregationally based program to support pastoral ministry, Befrienders, a congregationally based support group dedicated to preventing suicide, or other group that has some modest training and clear concern for the well-being of the members of the congregation. From this group a third person can take a traditional advocacy role in the caregiving relationship between the senior and their caregiver.

### **Educate about the Realities of Elder Mistreatment**

Groups of deacons and/or Stephen Ministers, Befrienders, or others need to be informed as to the concerns, emotional and legal, involved in supporting a family where elder abuse has been suspected or even reported. Educational groups, offered by a social worker and possibly co-led by the pastor or other personnel from the church, need to present information about caretaking and elder mistreatment. The purposes of presenting this information are threefold. First, educate group members. The elderly need information on how to identify abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and how to report a possible incident of mistreatment. Second, make the group aware of the potential for mistreatment when spouses and/or family members provide caretaking in isolation. The elderly need to understand that even with the best of intentions, when spouses and/or family members are providing ongoing support on their own and become burned out, mistreatment is more likely to occur than in families where adequate support is available. Third, discuss how the group can help minimize the risk of elder mistreatment by creating caretaking partner-

ships with each other. When someone in the group develops a need for ongoing support, the group will plan on joining spouses and/or family members in providing and monitoring assistance.

### **Have Access to Pastoral or Church Leadership**

Caretaking partnerships are going to need access to additional people and resources in the congregation and community. To that end, pastors and key church leaders and/or community social work consultants are essential for partnerships to stay connected with the rest of their congregations as well as to local social services. Their support can occur in different ways, but the “message of support” needs to be the same, namely, that the groups know that someone in church leadership is specifically invested in assisting them. One option is to have a church leader included in the membership of the group. This is already embedded into groups of Stephen’s Ministers, Befrienders, and many of the other pastoral support approaches. As participants, their role is to serve as a representative and a link to the rest of the congregation. As a representative, the pastor or church leader will serve as a spokesperson to keep the other leaders informed. They will also link the needs for assistance and support in the partnership to creating opportunities for other members of the congregation to serve.

Another option is for the partnership to function on its own without direct participation of a pastor or church leader in every group. Instead, one or two people from the group can meet with a pastor or church leader each week to discuss the needs of the caregivers as well as to brainstorm alternative resources that may be available or could be created in the community. The meetings may be brief or more involved depending on what is occurring with the caretaking needs of each group member. Either way, we suggest preserving a set meeting time to create a culture of the group linking to the rest of the congregation and the congregation staying connected to the group through a pastor or church leader.

### **Cultivate Partnerships with Helping Professionals**

Partnerships may need to identify key personnel in a few agencies likely to, at some point, become involved in elder care in order to have the resources available that can be needed to support the caregivers. In some cases, the pastors or other members of the congregation may directly or

indirectly know of a helping professional at one of these agencies. Other groups may have members who know of a social worker, a counselor, a nurse, or a doctor who would have knowledge of and access to other helping professionals. If no one in the group or the congregation has ties to a helping professional, then one of the members could call an agency that provides services to the elderly and request to speak with a social worker.

After someone makes initial contact with the caregiver, ask to schedule a meeting where a few members of the group can come and share about the caretaking partnership. The purposes of the meeting are to cultivate relationships, build interest, and identify other professionals who might be important for the group to know. During the meeting, see if the group can get contact information for other relevant professionals in the community who may already be involved. Most importantly, the meeting will begin setting a precedent that publicly communicates that the entire group plans to be involved in the caretaking needs for each other. Then, when someone in the group comes in contact with the caregiver for service or support, helping professionals won't be surprised or curious as to why other people who are not spouses or family members are so intimately involved in providing care. HIPPA regulations make this type of sharing of information more challenging. Initially, legal assistance may be needed to draw up appropriate release forms to support the type of communication needed.

### **Recommendations for Helping Professionals**

The realities of an aging population create challenges for everyone involved in providing care for the elderly. Helping professionals experience the challenges in their practice with increasing caseloads, difficulties coordinating the services they wish to provide with the realities of what is available, and balancing the dichotomy of providing high quality care and efficient service. Working with local congregations offers an alternative approach that involves community and often trusted resources for caregivers. We recommend the following roles for social workers interested in building effective triad caretaking relationships within congregations.

- **Initiate Conversation.** Make congregations in the community aware that there are helping professionals available to work with them to create partnerships. Assure pastors and church leaders

that social work and congregational partnerships are a way to bring together helping professionals to assist older members, while honoring and promoting their religious autonomy.

- **Create Opportunities to Present Information.** Offer to present workshops at congregations on caretaking for older members. In addition, ask to be a guest speaker for church groups for older congregants. Many churches have gatherings on Sunday evenings or during the week, where they welcome opportunities to hear from guest speakers. This is especially true with regard to topics intended to enhance social functioning and provide opportunities for ministry—both provided through creating and participating in congregational partnerships.
- **Provide Consultation.** Once partnerships are developed between social workers and a local congregation, the role of the social worker will become one of a professional consultant, offering information as needed. Care should be taken however, to insure that the social worker is educating the members of the congregational support group, deacons, or Stephen Ministers, making them aware of the issues and readying them for the information offered. Moving too quickly or finding some members not clear as to the approach offered by any professional working to walk alongside of a congregational group can result in the group wishing to terminate their work in a sensitive area like elder abuse.

### Conclusion

The challenge presented by the aging of America's population is not just in areas of providing basic services. Rather it reflects the need to do so with the needs of the senior truly at the center of the relationship. Congregations and social workers can be effective partners in both preventing and intervening in cases of elder abuse. In some cases it may mean offering to support a pastor who has identified a situation that raises the concern of elder abuse. In other cases it may mean facilitating activities such as educational sessions to help prevent elder abuse. Finally, there are times when supporting either an existing group (deacons, pastoral care groups such as Stephen Ministers or Befrienders), or developing a group that can actively provide a third partner to support both the caregiver and the senior in need can be important ways to prevent elder abuse. ❖

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The authors are grateful to Daphne Paul, MSW, for her assistance and support.

**Keywords:** elderly, congregations, caretaking, abuse, neglect, mistreatment, clergy, parish nurse