Will You Care with Me? Congregational Responses with Impoverished Older Persons

Dennis R. Myers, Saleta Lawrence, & Van Jones

This article focuses on how social workers and congregations can respond to impoverishment and isolation that inhabit the daily lives of a devastating number of older persons. We raise awareness of assets and needs as they struggle with spiritual, relational, economic, and environmental vulnerability and highlight the importance of congregational awareness of key public and community resources. We specify the role that social workers play in creating and mediating resiliency-based transactions between vulnerable elders and congregational and community resources. We call attention to unique assets that energize congregational responsiveness and demonstrate how effective preparation, vision, attention to assets, care with congregational volunteers, awareness of barriers, and ministry design locate ministry at the point of greatest need and maximum impact. A four-dimensional model for design of congregational responses is proposed. We demonstrate how congregations can form strategic alliances to strengthen resiliency of older persons on the margins of community life.

ALONE AND IMPOVERISHED OLDER PERSONS FILL THE HIDDEN CORRIDORS of subsidized apartments, substandard housing, and low-end motel rooms of every street and rural route in America (Spillman, Biess, & MacDonald, 2012). They live in the crucible of increasing economic, health care, and community service scarcity (Komisar, Cubanski, Dawson, & Neumann, 2012; Achenbaum, Burnett, Cully, Dyer, & Naik, 2010). The weight of recession and cutbacks in health and human services press on their vulnerabilities with a fierceness that is unprecedented. Even in this context, researchers are documenting the resiliency of this population (Felten, 2000; Wells, 2010). The steadfast attempts of older persons to hold on to independence and hope are an opportunity for congregations

and social workers to walk along side of them in ways that recognize and build on the resiliency that sustains them.

Our aim is to equip congregations and social workers with tools to address both the impoverishment and isolation that inhabit the daily lives of vulnerable older persons. We think that paying attention to resiliency and related assets in this population increases the likelihood of meaningful help. We emphasize the important role that social workers play in creating and mediating resiliency-based transactions between the needs of vulnerable elders and the resources of congregations and community services that reach out to them. We also demonstrate how congregations can form strategic alliances with public and private service organizations to strengthen resiliency of older persons on the margins of community life.

A Profile of Vulnerability and Resilience

Older persons who survive and thrive (Tremethick, 1997) in the context of great need inhabit narratives that cannot be easily categorized. In fact, the trajectory of eighty and ninety years of life produces increasing individuality and complexity. However, even in the context of significant variability, there are sociodemographic indicators that inform responses to their marginality. We know, for example, that 10 percent of Americans age 65+ are in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). The percentage increases from 10 percent to 15.9 percent when the calculation includes unreimbursed medical expenses and other costs, including 49 percent who have financial resources below twice the poverty threshold (Short, 2011). Anderson (2011, p. 1) observes that

> For an individual 65 years and older in a one-person family unit, the 2010 weighted average poverty threshold was $10,458 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In June 2010, the average monthly retirement benefit from Social Security was $1,170, or $14,040 a year. Moreover, Social Security is the main source of cash income for 55% of older beneficiaries (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2010). These statistics portray older adults living very close to the poverty level.

In 2010, 18 percent of older African-American women and 18 percent of Hispanic women had incomes below poverty level, with unmarried women being at an even greater risk than their married counterparts (Komisar et al., 2012). While the emergence of a vital and healthy group of Baby Boomers is a source of celebration, the other side of the story is that large numbers of this age group are or will be impoverished, particularly as they outlive their dwindling retirement accounts (Butrica, Smith, & Iams, 2012).

Cassidy, Coverdale, Kunik, Naik, & Nair (2010) defined vulnerability as "the failure to engage in acts of self-care that adequately regulate safe and

independent living, or to take actions to prevent conditions or situations that adversely affect personal health and safety" (p. 615). These researchers observed older adults are vulnerable because of difficulties with personal care, self-neglect, medication management, and unsafe living environments. They can be found in homes that lack running water, air conditioning or heating, and, in some instances, inadequate flooring. Choi, Kim, & Asseff (2009, p.184) concluded that the neglect (self and community) that older persons experience is "a consequence of the victims' lack of economic resources to provide themselves with basic necessities…bare minimum coverage of an essential healthcare program(s) for the poor…and lack of other support services…, rather than individual and intrafamily risk factors per se." The troubling reality is that physical, social, and environmental vulnerabilities are often lost in the invisibility that marks these older persons. Teel (2010) laments:

> [W]e have segregated, isolated, and marginalized a large group of older citizens who should be treated like celebrities at this stage of their lives… the rest of us have forgotten our elders and relegated them to a lonely existence often invisible to the community at large. (p. 7)

Economic, social, and contextual vulnerability and invisibility can also contribute to an impoverishment of personhood and spirit. Opportunities to cultivate identity, faith, intimacy, and personal significance can be washed away by day-to-day survival negotiations. The case of Ms. Stuart poignantly illustrates the kind of inadequate day-to-day provision that this population faces and suggests how this reality could also diminish personhood and trust in God's provision.

> Ms. Stuart is a 69-year-old disabled African American woman who resides in a low-income area of a midsized city in Texas. She is single and lives in a rent house, spending much of her time alone. At the present time, a 19-year-old unemployed nephew lives with her. Ms. Stuart suffers from severe arthritis which renders her quite immobile and unable to cook for herself. She has been diagnosed with COPD and Glaucoma; she is anxious and depressed. She occasionally shows evidence of confusion. Shortly following a move to another rental in July, she found herself confronted with financial instability. She is vague about the reasons, but attempting to house her nephew must have placed some burden on her low-income budget. She received notice that her electricity and water was to be cut off due to non-payment. She was one month behind on her rent, and was having difficulty buying food. Her $700.00 monthly income does not allow for much leeway and once behind, it

> is difficult to catch up. Ms. Stuart has no transportation and neither does her nephew. She depends on friends for rides. Her main joy is attending church and her minister and his wife provide transportation each Sunday. Like many of her generation, the first thing one sees upon entering the house is a Bible. Ms. Stuart states she has always managed to take care of herself and considers herself a survivor.

Recognizing the personal, relational, and contextual challenges she faces is only a part of the story. Recent research (Lamond et al. 2009; Wells, 2010) as well as anecdotes of those who work directly with Ms. Stuart and the millions who share her struggle, point to remarkable stories of resilience and faith.

Older adults demonstrate greater resilience in response to difficult or challenging life experiences and they are better able to maintain a positive emotional state than younger adults (Zeiss, Cook, & Cantor, 2007). While the precise relationships between resilience and severe economic and psychosocial challenges are yet to be fully examined, researchers provide some helpful insights.

Living alone in relative social isolation and economic marginality complicate the capacity of older persons to age well (Wagnild, 2003; Lubben & Gironda, 2003; Wells, 2010). Resilience or positive adaptation to these and other challenging vulnerabilities (Feder, Nestler, & Charney, 2009) varies within the population and is related to subjective health status and quality of life (Connor, Davidson, & Lee, 2003). Lower levels of resiliency are associated with lower income (Hardy, Concato, & Gill, 2004) as well as compromised physical (Montross et al., 2006) and mental health (Lamond et al., 2009). Higher levels are associated with self-esteem and optimism (Lee, Brown, Mitchell, & Schiraldi, 2008), social support (Lubben & Gironda, 2003), thriving (Tremethick, 1997), religion and spirituality (Weaver, Flannelly, Markowitz, & Flannelly, 2005), and other intrapersonal and environmental facets. In fact, some researchers posit that adverse factors promote increased resilient responses (Richardson, 2002).

Fry (2000) reported that religiosity and spirituality explained more variance in an older person's sense of well-being than did sociodemographic variables, resources, health, and life events. For many older adults, spirituality helped them to define meaning in later life. Klaver & May (2006) observed that "… we shift the question from: How can we reduce vulnerability? To: How can we increase resilience?" (p. 1). They conclude that "To be vulnerable is to be unshielded, exposed, open. That is also the condition for change. We want to focus on these positive possibilities of vulnerability. Precondition is a robust resilience, a capacity to bounce back, to adapt, to have enough elasticity, flexibility, pliability, to incorporate or instigate change. Crux to all resilience is relationship" (Klaver & May, 2006, p. 2).

If resilience is a modifiable construct (Luther & Cicchetti, 2000), congregations and their community partners have an opportunity to reduce the spiritual, economic and environmental impoverishment; isolation; health decline; and loss of personhood that diminish resilience and, at the same time, energize the self-esteem, thriving, faith, and social support that increase it.

Public and Private Provision

Responding to the needs and resiliency of this group has never been as critical as it is now. Several streams of societal change merge and overtake those in this group in particular. Health care access is growing more difficult. The psychological and spiritual effects of loneliness and crumbling physical surroundings mount. A youth-valuing culture makes the invisibility and age ghettoization more acceptable. These elders can suffer quietly for days before their cries for help are heard. Some die alone without public awareness for days or weeks.

A considerable array of public, non-governmental, and religiously-affiliated organizations exists to respond to the vulnerabilities of this population group. The web of potential resources can be organized into these service categories: Case Management and Information and Referral; Food Security; Transportation; Housing; In-Home; Protective and Legal; Income; and Health Care. The major streams of federal and state funding flow into communities from these sources: Social Security Act (Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicare, and Medicaid); Older America Act (Area Agencies on Aging, Nutrition, and Senior Centers); United States Department of Agriculture (SNAP-Food Stamps); Community Development; and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (Housing).

Recent innovations in long-term care legislation and innovations are increasing opportunities to support older persons with health-related conditions being able to live at home. Examples are the controversial (unfunded) Community Living Assistance Services and Supports program (CLASS Act), Medicare waiver programs, Community Based Alternatives, Program for the All Inclusive Care of the Elderly (PACE); and the Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRC). Housing options include: Section 202: Supportive Housing for the Elderly Program; Housing Choice Vouchers; Section 8: Housing Choice Voucher Program (HVC); USDA Rural Housing Service (RHS): Section 514/516, Section 515, & Section 521 Programs; naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs); and NORC supportive services programs (SSPs) (Scharlach, Graham, and Lehning 2012). These innovations are driven by concerns over rising long-term care costs, aging of the Baby Boomer population, and growing commitment to aging in place.

Non-governmental (NGOs) and religiously affiliated programs comple-

ment and augment services in these categories. In some cases these organizations contract with federal programs to deliver services. An example is the nutrition programs, funded by the Older American Act, that tend to be delivered by NGOs. In addition, NGOs offer services that augment public provision such as guardianship, utility payments, and transportation. Congregations may have their own versions of home-delivered meals, home maintenance, and monitoring services.

An examination of this range of resources might lead one to conclude that ample federal, state, and non-governmental provision is available to address at least basic needs. There are, however, significant barriers to effective connections between public provision and utilization of resources. Low utilization patterns for food stamps (SNAP) by older potential recipients are a case in point. Anecdotal evidence reveals numerous factors that deter older potential recipients from applying for SNAP benefits, in spite of having significant need for them. Some potential recipients of SNAP are subjected to long waiting periods after applying, only to be rewarded with an inadequate $16/month benefit. Low levels of support and the need to continually reapply to receive a modest increment in support discourages participation. Unfounded fears present additional obstacles to applications for benefits, including distrust of government-related provisions, concerns about loss of home, and fears of being forced into a nursing home. Sometimes self-neglect, illiteracy, inability to locate key documents, and transportation to application sites also serve as deterrents. For others, the sense of "not wanting to take benefits from someone who needs it more" or that "I can do this on my own" are a source of pride for the older person.

Scarcity of funding across all categories of services is one of the most difficult to overcome. Legislative initiatives to address the national debt make these services prime candidates for cutbacks. Accessibility, awareness, and coordination also present major challenges. The complex eligibility provisions of every publically funded service present formidable barriers to accessing benefits. For example, the requirements and processes for applying for SSI benefits are as complex as the requirements for home purchase.

The opportunity to apply depends upon being aware that the potential resource may be available. One of the authors has considerable experience as an Adult Protective Service (APS) social worker. She observes that the awareness barrier affects applications for community services in two ways. For the older person, a lack of information on the availability of programs and services makes applying for them impossible. For the social worker, not knowing that the older person has a need that matches a community resource also means that potentially approved applications are never submitted.

Even if the older person successfully applies, care coordination (management) becomes essential in assisting this vulnerable group in navigating the complex array of services in a way that assures access and delivery of services in the right amount and at the right time. Some case coordination

is available through Older American Act and Medicaid-funded programs as well as NGOs that are often related to nutrition programs. The availability and effectiveness of this integrative service is severely limited by the availability and accessibility barriers we identified as well as the lack of adequate public funding of care coordination.

Congregational Responses

Complexity and scarcity on the provision side and uncertainty and inaccessibility on the applicant side reduce the likelihood of a successful transaction that yields beneficial and sustainable flow of resources. This failed transaction creates untold suffering for the impoverished older person. Congregations have historically stepped into this gap and their resources are needed more than ever. The impact of their involvement will be maximized by a prayerful and intentional response that fits the helping with the systemic and personal needs of older persons in their community with their resiliency and other assets and with the initiatives of community partners. In the remaining sections of the paper, we offer guidelines and models for how congregations can be more strategic and powerful as they deliver, mediate, and advocate for life-sustaining provision and well-being.

Congregations are uniquely equipped to offer a range of potential services that mirror the service categories addressed by public and NGO sources, focusing on meeting spiritual and religious involvement needs. For decades, many congregations have offered "shut-in" and home bound programs that may include home-delivered meals, food pantry, communion, religious education, and friendly visiting. Rural and community-dwelling persons benefit from congregational ministries that offer utility payments, home repair, caregiver support, transportation, and an occasional dental and health care clinic.

A remarkable example of congregational ministry to impoverished older persons is the Stephen Ministry, a church-facilitated internationally recognized organization started in 1975 and with now more than 11,000 participating congregations (http://www.stephenministries.org). It was created to train and equip churches to reach out to those in their community who are struggling or experiencing a life complication. Once congregational volunteers are trained in the Stephen Ministry system of addressing community needs, the laypersons of the church are then the "hands and feet of Christ" as they work with older adults, widows, those that have terminal illnesses, and a variety of other unique ministries to meet each person's need(s). The impact of the Stephen Ministry is that the community-dwelling older adult does not simply receive another community-based service; instead, the older adult receives a formal relationship with a caring, church-led individual who takes an active interest in the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of those in the program.

Several models involve partnerships among congregations and community networks. The Sherman Park program is offered by the Capitol Drive Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, (http://county.milwaukee.gov/ Aging7705/ConnectingCaringCommunities/Neighborhoods/Sherman-Park.htm) in partnership with the Sherman Park Interfaith Neighborhood Outreach Program. Vulnerable older persons in the neighborhood gather two days a week for educational enrichment, spiritual development, and recreational programming. The Newberg Friends Church, Newberg, Oregon (http://www.newbergfriends.org/outreach/community.html) joins with a coalition of faith communities, agencies, individuals and businesses who come together to address the unmet needs of vulnerable neighbors. The "Faith in Action" programs enlists volunteer caregivers to help older adults with light housework, gardening, minor home repairs, meal and library book delivery, transportation for appointments, and making friendly visits.

Congregational Capacity and the Social Work Perspective

The virtues and characteristics that inhabit most congregations equip them to be powerful responders to the vulnerability of older adults. Most of them are gracefully endowed as a source of energy, meaning, strength, support, partnership, belonging, belief, hope, and change for this overlooked group. Organizational assets include mission, theology of helping, an "outside of the walls" focus with capacity for corporate response, financial resources, and openness to innovation that makes temporal and eternal difference. Faith-motivated volunteers (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2008) and leaders who enlist, equip, and sustain them are the key asset to congregational responses that are accessible, integrated, continuous, innovative, trusted, and mission-driven. In reality, these congregants are faith-motivated servants (Garland, 2012), not volunteers in the traditional sense. These servant-partners are called to respond in love and sacrifice to others as God loves, ready to transform and be transformed in the encounter.

As with any other organization, ministry implementation must overcome barriers and limitations to ministry capacity, particularly the opportunities and challenges of dependence upon a cadre of uncompensated and often untrained servant-partners. There is the ever-present risk that the response of these congregants will be superficial and inconsistent. Those who lead and serve in the ministry may also function with low levels of personal accountability, lack of knowledge, and unrealistic expectations. For these and other reasons, in-depth preparation and follow-along are essential. Cultural tendencies to overlook individuality, devalue capacity, and overdo sympathy toward the very old will need deconstructing as these servants develop countercultural perspectives. Orientation begins with a strong emphasis on viewing the home of the older person as a sacred place, in spite of unsteady physical structures and dissonant environments that militate against this kind of sensibility.

The servant partner with the older person will need to be an asset-finder, just as attuned to what the older person desires to offer as to the ways the older person is in need of help. Deep listening and honoring spiritual and relational narratives are essential skills as is the capacity to allow what is heard to lead to the heartbeat of concern and readiness for help. These skills of engagement and sustainment will need to be complemented by access to information and consultation around the array of community services available and guidance on being an effective advocate. This level of perspective-changing, skill development, and ministry model design can be uniquely informed by social work professionals who have much to offer through orientation and preparation for servant-partners as well as guidance in effective ministry design.

One of the unique contributions of social work is that congregational ministry models can be effectively framed within the Strengths (Saleebey, 1996) and Ecological Perspectives (Germain and Gitterman, 1996). Paying attention to assets such as faith and faith practices, hope, sense of competency, and social support provides often overlooked resources for energizing resiliency and for promoting need-meeting. Whatever the intended outcome, all ministry models with this population group should be informed by these questions: What assets are present or potentially present that can be activated and/or enriched? How is resiliency being activated and/or empowered by the ministry?

The Ecological Perspective, like the Strengths Perspective, informs the development of ministry models that are responsive to the complex and inaccessible service arrangements that are intended to serve this population. This perspective calls for congregations to be intentional and strategic about creating and sustaining ministry arrangements that activate meaningful transactions between the assets and needs of the impoverished older person and congregational and community resources. In effect, the intention of the ministry model is to mediate effective matches or fit between older persons, servant-partners, and the congregation so that nurturing and growth flows across each relationship.

Congregational Ministry Design

Ministries that empower personal, spiritual, and relational resilience and revival for the older person, for servant-partners, and for the congregation enact the miracle of God's grace and provision through intentional design and engaged relationships. Effective preparation, vision, attention to assets, care with service partners, awareness of barriers, and ministry design help congregational leaders and servant-partners locate ministry at the point of greatest need and maximum impact. We recommend the following steps for leaders designing congregational ministries for impoverished older persons.

Prepare

Ministry model development begins with prayerful contemplation and deep awareness that forming mutually beneficial relationships with impoverished older persons aligns with the best work that God intends for the congregation. Committed leadership and social work guidance are essential elements. Vision for the project will be energized by an in-depth understanding and tuning into the real lives and stories of older persons who suffer at the doorstep of the congregation. Take time to visit with professionals at agencies such as Area Agency on Aging, Adult Protective Services, Meals on (and) Wheels, and Guardianship services. Conduct an environment scan to fully understand how the community is already responding and to identify how the transactions between the impoverished older person and the resource environment happen or fail to happen. Assess the nature and extent of the congregation's current response with an eye for recognizing what is going well. Look for creative ways for the congregation to hear the testimonies and stories of older persons and allow them to teach the congregation about resiliency in the face of overwhelming circumstances. It is these stories and the lives they represent that stir compassion and action. Create a picture of how resiliency and day-to-day life will be transformed by a ministry located at the place where the greatest needs connect with the most powerful provision.

Cast the Vision

An agreed upon and congregationally blessed vision for the ministry will go a long way in activating these capacities and minimizing the limitations of congregational engagement with impoverished older persons. The vision statement needs to energize the unique mission and giftedness of the congregation. Consider this congregationally based vision: Every older person facing challenges to their personhood and resiliency will have the opportunity to:

Deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ;

Experience intellectual, relational, and physical enrichment; and

Contribute to the mission and life of the congregation.

Focus on Assets

Investing time in identifying assets reveals paths to need-meeting and deeper responses to the challenges impoverished older persons face. This intentional search for what is left and not what is lost is counterintuitive in a culture that is blinded by false images of old, poor, and widowed. In Table 1, the reader sees a list of possible internal and external assets that may be present in the lives, congregations, and communities of impover-

ished older persons. This list is adapted from the developmental asset-based approach created and applied to youth by the Search Institute (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Sesma, 2004).

Table 1: Internal and External Assets of Impoverished Older Persons

Internal Assets	External Assets
Personhood • Sense of Purpose • Personal Effectiveness • Personal Responsibility • Imagination • Sense of Humor • Realistic Expectations • Resilience	Community • Validation • Safety • Provision • Monitoring/Checking • Access to Resources • Justice • Opportunities to Contribute • Variety • Educational Opportunities • Intergenerational Relations
Faithfulness • Hopefulness • Trust in God • Prayer • Forgiveness • Joyfulness • Calling	Congregation • Outreach • Visibility • Faith Development • Peer & Intergenerational Relations • Provision • Monitoring/Checking
Relationship Competency • Compassion • Acceptance • Open and Kind Communication • Limit Setting	Supportive Relationships • Practical Help • Presence • Affection • Effective/Frequent Connection with Family • Friend/Neighbor Support • Advocacy

Nourish Servant-Partners

Those who become the hands and feet of Jesus will flourish in this ministry to the extent that they embody virtues and gifts particularly suited for this work. Some of these characteristics will flow out of prepared hearts and inherent relational predispositions. Others will be activated by

orientation and training. There will be a significant need for those who are energized by the opportunity to walk into lives vacated by any other relational contact. Poverty is fundamentally relationally-based and the ministry rises and falls on the consistent presence of those willing to show up and stay. If the ministry is directed toward changes in current organizational or legislative policy, the need for effective relational skills will be turned toward advocacy and decision-maker education.

Key responders will also benefit from an unwavering search for how the older person is drawing on faith, hope, social support, and other internal and external resources to transcend the losses they encounter and how these assets can be engaged to enrich the flow of needed goods. These congregational servants will need to be the recipients of prayer support in order to deal with the harsh, sad, and seemingly hopeless contexts in which some older persons are enmeshed. Ironically, these helpers embody the very resiliency that characterizes the lives of those they serve. The harder realities of this ministry can be offset to some extent by congregational helpers who have a deep love for the older person and for hearing the narratives of their lives. Living into the role of learner and servant will go a long way in sustaining passion for this work. As the relationship evolves, helpers should be provided with opportunities to reflect on the ways this time is shaping and affecting their own faith and sense of significance. Guidelines on providing this kind of ministry and faith development interaction can be found in Myers, Wolfer, & Garland, (2008).

Overcome Engagement Barriers

Impoverished older persons and their families may resist initial efforts to reach out to them. It is important that this initial response be honored rather than taken as a rejection of the relationship that is proffered. Protective responses to offers of help and engagement make sense in the light of past experiences and the sense of vulnerability. Reasons for resistance to help in this population were outlined in an earlier section of the paper. Obviously, trust-building and the willingness to reframe initial rejection as a protective response is essential. The first step in what may be a lengthy engagement process is finding a mutually agreed upon way the servant-partner can demonstrate trustworthiness through attention to the most urgent concern of the older person.

Design Intentionally

There are many factors that determine the character of a congregation's response to the call to respond to this invisible and vulnerable population. One size does not fit all in this case. Each congregation embraces the unique heartbreak that motivates involvement and the pattern of giftedness

that energizes the capacity to act. We have emphasized the importance of situating ministry in the place of greatest benefit to the older person and resource transaction. For some congregations, this translates into actual resource provision such as transportation services or utility payment or large-print or audio Bible distribution. For others, the ministry is around care coordination or advocacy for increased funding for NGOs that provide in-home meals or for greater accessibility of SNAP benefits. The decision to renew a current ministry or launch a new one can be informed by careful and prayerful attention to these dimensions of model development:

Focus: Giving (Calling) and/or Receiving (Blessing)? Will the ministry focus on providing (giving) opportunities for vulnerable older persons to express their gifts and calling to serve others in meaningful ways? The giving-oriented ministry celebrates the assets and capacities that have been overlooked by congregations and community. The sense of competency and contribution the older person experiences nourish resiliency. Examples include prayer support for at-risk youth and enlistment in a neighborhood watch program. On the other hand, will the ministry focus on providing the older person (receiving) with resources that meet a need and build on the resiliency and assets that are present? Examples include a care coordination ministry, distance/in-home religious education, or a pet-feeding and grooming program.

Locus: Church and/or Community and/or World? Will the ministry serve the needs of impoverished elders that are members of the congregation, delivered within its physical location, or will the ministry serve persons who reside in the local community or even in the world? Will the services be delivered in a community location or in another country? Examples include a congregationally based food pantry or a community or country-based home renovation project.

Age: Specific and/or Generational? Will the ministry focus on a specific age cohort (Baby Boomers or the 85+ population)? Will the ministry include older persons, youth, and/or young adults as recipients of services? Will servant-partners include intergenerational teams? To what extent can intergenerational approaches be incorporated to bridge the traditional gap between age groups? Examples include youth and older persons collaborating on a congregational or community history project or youth providing lawn care for a physically challenged older person.

Delivery: Personal Relationship and/or Systems Relationship? Will the ministry be delivered face-to-face to the older person in a highly relational manner or will servant-partners be more engaged with those who can affect the lives of the older person through administrative or legislative changes and/or through providing increased resources? Examples include the in-home delivery of meals or organizing a petition drive to improve neighborhood lighting.

Collaboration: Solo and/or with Community Partners? Will the ministry be sponsored and resourced by the congregation alone or will the ministry collaborate with other congregations and/or community agencies? If the ministry involves service provision or policy changes, we recommend a collaborative approach. There are at least three possible models for productive relationships between a congregation and public and/or private, not-for-profit agency that serve the community.

Model 1: Congregation augments and resources a public or NGO community program.

For example, servant-partners in congregations provide meal delivery in a Meals and Wheels agency or serve as guardians in a guardianship program. Congregations can be a tremendous facilitator of awareness and access to available, but underutilized community services. Agencies depend upon families, neighbors, and congregations to alert them when an older person is struggling. Other examples of resources include the congregation opening its facilities to a community program, a Sunday School class agreeing to provide financial support, or a youth or adult group initiating an Adopt-An-Agency program. This model supports the idea that congregations can collaborate to support existing community initiatives and avoid duplication of already existing services.

Model 2: Community agency augments and resources a congregation's outreach and ministry.

Collaborative congregations provide services to fill gaps in the existing array of community provision. For example, NGO-sponsored home-delivered meals are not able to provide nutrition services every day of the week and/or on the weekend. Funding for emergency alert systems, pet food, and payment of utility expenses are all opportunities for congregationally initiated ministries. Agencies can be a source for training servant-partners as well as guidance in establishing a responsive program. Other resources include consultation on how to help older persons access services and sources for supplies and expertise for a congregation's home improvement project. This model supports the idea that congregational ministries can be energized by agencies that walk alongside and offer the benefit of experience in serving this population.

Model 3: Congregations and community agencies work together to support and sustain new initiatives.

For example, the collaboration can identify service gaps and jointly propose new or renovated programs. Other collaborative ventures include grant writing, legislative advocacy, and events to honor those who serve this population. This model acknowledges that concerns over a potential clash of the missions of congregations and communities can be overcome by creating alliances that lead to improved service delivery that benefits all older persons.

Application of Congregational Ministry Design

These guidelines can be applied to the case of Ms. Stuart, illustrating how they inform the selection, organization, and integration of a ministry plan most responsive to her presenting issues. Ms. Stuart was at the center of all decisions for initiatives taken to respond—this was care planning "with" her and not "for" her. A social worker providing client services at a Meals and Wheels program offered by a non-profit agency energized and mediated the delivery of care in servant-partnership with the pastor of her church. Both of these partners were committed to upholding Ms. Stuart's personhood and supporting the level of resilience she demonstrated in her current situation. Her assets included her long-standing membership in a small and stable congregation; friends that provide transportation; her motivation to support her nephew; the love and care offered by her pastor and his spouse; her resilient response to life challenges; and her trust in God. The response had both a giving and receiving focus. She was clearly in need of church and community services while she also had resources to offer. There was also an interest in clarifying and strengthening her relationship with her nephew.

Model #2 (Community agency augments and resources a congregation's outreach and ministry) was the approach that best captures the framework for the response to her. The goal was to select interventions approved by Ms. Stuart and, to the extent possible, offered by her congregation, supplemented by the Meals and Wheels program and other community resources. This placed the pastor as a key collaborator in this case, with the social worker serving a case manager role to include providing information and referrals to community services. There was an immediate need for utility and rental assistance, with numerous community resources available for one-time and immediate help with the utility vendors themselves or Salvation Army. Ms. Stuart was more comfortable with drawing on the financial resources of the church itself. The church's account for this kind of assistance was limited. With the permission of the pastor, the social worker arranged for a donation from a Sunday School class at an urban, more affluent church to supplement the account with enough funds to cover her utility and rental assistance needs for three months.

To supplement her nutrition needs, the social worker facilitated enrolling her in SNAP while the pastor was able to work out a plan with those who were willing to provide transportation to obtain food items. This resource was particularly helpful because the complexity of the SNAP application process was a deterrent to Ms. Stuart as was her inability to get to the grocery store. The pastor enlisted an accountant in the congregation to help her budget her limited monthly income and help with her bills and medical expenses. Ms. Stuart and her nephew meet with the pastor and social worker to clarify how these family members could support one another.

One outcome of the meeting was a referral of the nephew for employment counseling and enrollment in a local technological training institute. In return for being able to remain in the home, the nephew agreed to assist his aunt with home maintenance and some of her activities of daily living. Most importantly, Ms. Stuart agreed to participate in a prayer and encouragement ministry for congregants who were in the midst of caregiving with a loved one. While these interventions effectively address the presenting issues, there remains more case management to plan effectively for her future care.

We think that the investment of prayer, time, and expertise into intentional ministry design pays real and substantial dividends for the resiliency and quality of life of those who are at the heart of our shared concern. We realize that there are many moving parts to consider and that intentionality can appear to slow movement toward making a difference. The knowledge and competencies of social workers will be a strong asset in getting all of this right. Whatever the approach, the congregation is like none other in being a venue for encouraging faith development and practice among impoverished older persons. In the end, the offering of help is more likely to at least touch the hem of what God desires for these who both suffer and thrive.

Summary and Conclusions

Our intent is to raise awareness of the resiliency and needs present in the case of Ms. Stuart and the thousands of older persons who struggle with spiritual, relational, economic, and environmental impoverishment. We encourage congregations and the social workers that care about them to consider this question: How can my congregation enact vision and initiatives that resonate with God's working in the lives of vulnerable older persons? We call for more attention to the internal and external assets of this population as a path to energizing resiliency and promoting lasting and substantial helping. Dimensions of possible design options inform decisions about the purpose and character of congregational responses. We strongly recommend a collaborative approach to programmatic arrangements and suggest ways that beneficial partnerships can be formed. All of this commissioned by Christ's desire that love for God find its best expression in service to the least of these. ❖

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Dennis R. Myers, *Ph.D., LCSW, Kronzer Professor in Family Studies, Baylor University School of Social Work, One Bear Place #97320, Waco, Texas 76798-7320. Phone: (254) 710-6404. Email: Dennis_Myers@baylor.edu.*

Saleta Lawrence, *MSW, LMSW, Medical Hospice Social Worker. Phone: (972) 693-6554. Email: Saleta.Lawrence@gmail.com or Saleta.Lawrence@odsyhealth.com.*

Van Jones, *MSW, LCSW, Director of Client Services, Meals & Wheels, Waco, TX 76703. Phone: (254) 752-0316.*