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CONGREGATIONAL & SOCIAL WORK RESPONSES TO OLDER ADULT VULNERABILITY

Social Work and Congregations: A Timely Alliance for the Age of Aging

Dennis R. Myers & James Ellor

Six articles, practice note, and a book review offer new insights and approaches for collaborative social work, congregational, and religiously-affiliated organizational impact on the personal, relational, and spiritual well-being of persons 55+.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY HIGHLIGHTS innovative responses of social workers, religiously-affiliated organizations, (RAOs) and congregations to the revolutionary improvements in mortality that mark our times. We are all very familiar with the ways dramatic increases in life expectancy are radically transforming economic, institutional, relational, and congregational life. James Lubben, leading scholar in social gerontology with an active research agenda examining social support networks among older populations, equates the force of this longevity epoch to the transformative impact of the Industrial Revolution (Oslin, 2013). The average years lived by a person increased from forty-seven in 1900 to seventy-seven in 2000, and the proportion of persons surviving from birth to old age (sixty-five) increased from 39

percent to 86 percent during the twentieth century (National Center for Health Statistics 2002, No. 33). Current life expectancy in the US is 78.49, ranked 51th among the nations of the world—the highest ranked country is Monaco (84.36 years) and the shortest life expectancy is Chad at 48.69 years. Persons who live to be 65, have life expectancies that reach into the mid-eighties. (CIA World Factbook, 2012)

In 1982/1983, *Social Work & Christianity* published special issues on values in social work practice, including attention to concerns related to aging, guest-edited by James Ellor and Sheldon Tobin, out of a conference at the University of Chicago (Ellor & Tobin, 1982; Ellor & Tobin, 1983). Since that time, the journal has consistently provided a forum for authors to deliver articles, practice notes, and book reviews informing colleagues committed to the well-being of the older population. The forecasts about the impact of the 55+ population made thirty years ago are now becoming an ever-present reality. The predicted longevity epoch is reshaping the nature of our social institutions and our relationships at a pace that outruns capacity to respond. Congregations, like every other societal institution, are being transformed by the 55+ population group. Our profession and the congregations we serve are faced with complex and contradictory questions: What does it mean to be in a society increasingly populated by exceptionally healthy, competent, and resilient 60, 70, 80, 90, or even 100 year old persons who are seeking new definitions for what it means to be 55+.

Conversely, how should we respond to the inevitable care demands of an exponentially increasing 55+ population of exceptionally vulnerable persons due to illness, loneliness, and poverty? Quality of life suffers as economic support programs, health care systems, and family caregiving resources are marginalized in the press of increasing need. The aging of the Baby Boomer population widens the gap between need and resource, heightening the urgency for more coordinated, responsive, and innovative approaches to care. What are the implications of these compelling realities for ministry and professional practice? After thirty years, it seems entirely appropriate to offer a sequel to the first special issue that calls attention to the unique ways that social workers and congregations are responding to the challenges as well as the opportunities of this new “compelling reality.”

Fortunately, helpful trends have emerged over the past thirty years that collectively energize the responses of social work, congregations, and religiously-affiliated organizations to the opportunities and challenges of revolutionary improvements in life expectancy and mortality. Congregations, like the social workers that serve them, are uniquely gifted and located to engage the possibilities and vulnerabilities of the 55+ population. Significant numbers of persons in these age cohorts demonstrate active engagement in a faith life and report trust in their congregational affiliations “Boomer ministries” are growing as congregations transform their approaches to ministry with/by/for this age group. Most Christian

congregations enact, to some degree, the Biblical covenant to honor parents and care for the widow as a basis for serving older adults. Spiritual care, homebound services, activity offerings, transportation, and nursing home worship and visitation programming give form to the Biblical principle. In addition, many congregations embrace a missional concern that reaches out to nonmembers as well as members. Older persons in local and global settings are benefitting from new attention to ministry that takes them beyond the walls of the local congregation. A growing cadre of active adults age 55+ seeking fulfillment through service in community ministry venues enrich capacity to walk along side vulnerable adults.

Social work involvement with congregations and RAOs is stimulated by the significant attention spirituality and gerontological social work are receiving in educational programs as well as from CSWE, NACSW, and NASW. Over the past thirty years, spirituality and religious concerns are emerging and valid areas for scholarship and competency recognition. Infusion of gerontological content and specialized internship training now characterize most accredited social work education programs due, in large measure, to gifted leadership and transformative support by the Hartford Foundation. NASW recently launched a new initiative to support the work of social workers in residential long-term care facilities. Gerontological social work is a high demand area in workforce projections and educational preparation for practice with older persons is a priority within the profession. Congregational social work as a career path as well as internships in congregations serving older adults are signs on the horizon of the growing attention to the social work and congregation relationship.

This special issue of *Social Work & Christianity* highlights innovative responses of congregations and to personal, relational, and/or spiritual assets and vulnerabilities of the 55+ population and the role or potential role of social work in the design, delivery, and/or evaluation of these congregational programs. Public and private initiatives to address the urgency of increasing vulnerability must include congregations and RAOs in the mix of service arrangements. Routine approaches to ministry with/for/by the 55+ population will not activate the potential of congregations and RAOs to be a significant resource in the new calculus for addressing the aspirations and struggle of the 55+ population. More than ever, the ministry of religious organizations, in collaboration with social work, needs vision, leadership, and practical models to live into their great potential to significantly enrich life and reduce vulnerability.

In this volume, you will find articles, practice notes, and a book review that offer guidance for social workers and religious leaders committed to collaborative approaches for enriching the lives of persons 55+. Each contribution informs a unique aspect of this new arena of social work practice and, taken together, provide pathways for navigating this uncharted territory.

James Ellor (*Religion and Spirituality among Older Adults in Light of DSM V*) provides a historic and conceptual platform for the engagement of

social work with persons 55+ in the context of religious organizations. He carefully defines and critically reviews religion, spiritual well-being, and spirituality, concepts at the core of social work practice this setting. The author demonstrates how the new DSM-5 diagnostic manual incorporates these ideas, legitimizing the importance of these concepts for professional practice.

Derrel R. Watkins provides a review of a seminal work written by J. M. Houston & Michael Parker (*A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors*) in the area of congregation ministry with the 55+ population. Watkins applauds the ground-breaking contribution of this work to initiatives aimed at improving the responsiveness of congregations to the 55+ age group.

Dennis Myers, Terry Wolfer, and Michael Sherr (*Faith-Outcomes for Older Adult Volunteers in Religious Congregations*) focus on 55+ congregational volunteers, highlighting their contributory roles and documenting the ways that engagement in community ministry impacts faith. Their study provides ideas for activating and sustaining involvement by active older persons seeking meaningful ministry opportunities.

Jay Poole, John Rife, Fran Pearson, Lelia Moore, Antonia Monk Reeves, and Wayne Moore (*Innovative Social Work Field Education in Congregational and Community-based Settings Serving Persons Fifty Five+: An Interdisciplinary Training Initiative for BSW and MSW Students*) examine the efficacy of the Congregational Social Work Education Initiative (CSWEI), an innovative professional education program to deliver practice competencies within the context of RAOs and in collaboration with nurse practitioners. This internship-based model prescribes how aging-related placements can effectively prepare future social workers for congregational and RAO involvement with persons 55+.

Michael Parker, Linda Dunn, Steven MacCall, John Goetz, Nan Park, Allison X. Li, Samantha Ousley, Regina Harrell, Hugh Lee, Elizabeth Grant, Chris Spencer, Shadi Martin, Doaa Ahmed Khalifa, and Harold G. Koenig (*Helping to Create an Age-Friendly City: A Town and Gown community Engagement Project*) report on an ambitious, multi-year project to test how aging-related human service organizations and congregations can join resources in creating more age-friendly communities. The model provided will help equip social workers and congregations committed to the creation of responsive and supportive communities.

Eun-Kyoung Othelia Lee and Choi Hee An (*Faith-Based Community Support for Korean American Older Adults*) conduct in-depth interviews with 55+ immigrant Korean community members to examine the saliency of congregational involvement. The intention is to empower social workers and congregational leaders to effectively minister to this often overlooked group. The authors recognize the critical importance of research and model-building at the intersect of ethnicity and social work with persons 55+ in congregations.

Dennis Myers, Saleta Lawrence, and Van Jones (Will You Care with Me? Congregational Responses with Impoverished Older Persons) direct attention to impoverished and isolated older persons in community dwellings. The authors propose an asset-based, four-dimensional model for designing interventions with this vulnerable population that builds on the resilience of the 55+ person and encourages the development of strategic alliances to address their needs.

Adria E. Navarro, Maria Siciliano, and Tiffany Saucer (Evolving Pastoral Care: A Congregants' Transportation Ministry) provide a blue print for ministries aimed at addressing transportation barriers faced by the 55+ population. The authors report on formation and implementation of the Senior Transportation Ministry (STM), providing enough detail to inform its replication.

The central theme across the contents of this special issue is that social workers have much to offer congregations in their quest to be the blessing they are commissioned to be, just as the congregations have much to offer social workers who are concerned about the well-being and marginality of persons 55+. The synergy between the two is a potent place to build congregationally-based innovations like the ones selected for this special edition as well as the ones that will be needed in the future. ❖

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