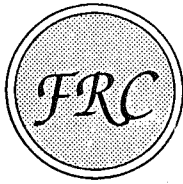


PASTORAL CARE NEWSLETTER

PUBLISHED BY THE FAMILY RELATIONS COMMITTEE
OF PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING



*For Overseers, Members of Ministry and Counsel, and others involved
in pastoral care and counseling*

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Dealing With Aging

by Phyllis A. Sanders



Phyllis Sanders

Those of us who are involved in pastoral care in Friends meetings and churches need to begin to talk about the process of growing older. Many Friends want their meeting to be a place where they can share their concerns about aging. It is important for Overseers to seek opportunities to initiate such conversations.

In my years of working with issues of aging on radio and television, I often ended my shows with two short phrases that were like a theme song: "If we're lucky, we'll grow older. So if we're smart, we'll plan for it." It can be helpful to emphasize that we are, in fact, able to have an effect on what our growing older is going to be like (although of course there are some things over which we have no control).

Having a good older age begins now. It begins as we look into ourselves and ask "Is this the kind of person that I want to be, and continue on that way?" That's what I think we need to say to young people. As my mother used to say, "What you are today is what you're going to be tomorrow." You've heard the saying that your face will be the map of your life. My mother used to say that too, and I would say, "Yes, sure, Mother." But I didn't really understand back then.

Some things change; some things stay the same

People can be reassured when they realize that the aging process involves a continuation of what is familiar and known. When we grow older, we don't come to the top of a mountain and suddenly go falling off the other side. We don't become a different person. But people imagine that "the other side of the mountain" -- or "old" -- will be some different place, and they say "I don't want to get there. I'm happy where I am now, I don't want to be looking to that time when I'm going to get there." For many people part of this also involves a fear of dying.

There's a tendency to be afraid of change. We want things the way we always had them, living in the place we like, with the people we like to be with. But when we get older, we may no longer be in the place we like, with the people we like, doing what we like to do. But there's something comforting that I have discovered, and that is that even if all these unwelcome changes take place, they'll only be changes on the outside. The important things don't change; they're on the inside.

Older people often have problems getting around; we may be physically limited in what we can do. But even so, since each of us really is the same person we were when we were younger, we can recognize that we are carrying the person who experienced the most exciting time in our life, at age 16, 30, 55, 65 or whenever. We claim that young person as part of our identity. But then we take a long look in the mirror, and say "Oops! Is this me?"

What it means to be a particular age

It might be interesting to have a discussion in the meeting about what it means to each of us to be the age we are. I've been struck by the fact that every time a person moves or meets a new group of people, he or she has the experience of being only partially known, based on his or her age at that particular time. When I moved to Chappaqua, New York, I was in my 50's. I would say to myself, "What people see is a woman in her 50's, but I'm more than that. At one time I was a 30 year old woman, and a 35 year old woman. But all that people see is this outer shell." We all want people to see beyond the outer shell.

The older you get, the harder it is to climb back over the years that you've

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passed. In other words, if we start meeting people at age 65, 75, or 85, how in the world can we cover all the years of living in a new friendship or in anything else? So we often find that the friends we make in our older years don't have the same depth as the earlier relationships did. Even so, these new friendships provide an opportunity to start out on the basis of shared interests. It's not that my children know yours, but that we know each other, and we're in the same general situation.

All of us are affected by the myths and stereotypes about aging in our culture. We look at older people with their wrinkles and physical problems, and at some unconscious level we may think, "They are where we might be some day." We're not sure that that is what we really want to be, so we feel uncertain. Overseers need to find ways to help Friends overcome this uncertainty.

When I was doing my television show and interviewing older people about growing older, I would ask them, "Would you like to be 22 again? Or 25?" "Oh no, no," they would reply. Yet there is an image that somehow older people are just longing to become a wonderful young person. This is just a myth, an illusion. When we remember the things that didn't go right in our 20's, we recognize that there are some good things about being at a different stage.

Discrimination

Our society is rife with discrimination -- race discrimination, sex discrimination, and age discrimination as well. An example of sex discrimination is a situation in which I, as a woman, am talking to some people, and I make a contribution that I think is worthwhile. But nobody says anything. Then a minute later somebody else -- a man -- says the same thing I said, and everybody says "Gee, that's a great idea!" And I think, "Wait a minute. Where were they when I said the same thing?" This subtle, unconscious discrimination is something that at some point we women began to be very aware of. What it really meant was that nobody listened to us as women.

Activities Sponsored by the Family Relations Committee

- The next **Marriage Enrichment Weekend**, under the leadership of Brad Sheeks and Pat McBee, will take place May 31 - June 2, 1996, in Cape May, NJ. For more information call 215-349-6959.
- **Parenting Creatively** is an eight-week discussion series on integrating Quaker values in family life. Contact Harriet Heath at 610-649-7037 to schedule a series in your meeting.

Additional Resources

- A list of practical suggestions for modifying the home environment of a person with physical disabilities was developed by Sue Heath of Moorestown Meeting. If interested, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Steve Gulick at Family Relations Committee, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.
- The Committee on Aging of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting provides information about options for retirement living, financial assistance, access to health care and community services, and challenges or problems encountered with aging. For information or to schedule a workshop or conference call Betsy Balderston at 215-241-7226.
- Please tell us about the experience of your meeting or church in providing pastoral care for older members and attenders.



PENDLE HILL

A QUAKER CENTER FOR STUDY AND CONTEMPLATION

Spring Workshops

Drawing and Meditation:

New Perspectives

Michael McGrath

March 22-24

The Gospel of Thomas

Anne Thomas

April 26-28

Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power

(For women 65 and older)

Elizabeth Watson

April 29-May 3

Simplicity:

A Meditation and a Lifestyle

Ruah Swennerfelt

May 24-26

For more information on these and other programs contact Irené Ramsay at (800) 742-3150 or (610) 566-4507
338 Plush Mill Road · Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086

The Friends Counseling Service

All counselors are active Friends. Contact any counselor listed below, or call 215-988-0140.

Henry Beck, Ph.D.

Bala Cynwyd, PA
(215) 664-5443

Ray Bentman, M.Ed.

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 985-1314

Annie Burrows, M.A.

Kennett Square/Phila. PA
(610) 444-1824

Terence Carroll, ACSW

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 473-2600

Teresa A. Glatthorn, M.A.

Hatboro, PA
(215) 672-6627

John L. Hall, M.A.

Chester Springs, PA
(610) 458-9060

Harriet Heath, Ph.D.

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(215) 849-0598

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Judith Owens, M.A.

Voorhees, NJ
(609) 435-2121

Judith Robinson

Bryn Mawr/Downington
610-269-4661

Karin Sannwald, ACSW

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James J. Saxon, Ph.D.

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(215) 428-0315

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(215) 399-1977

Fran Van Allen, M.A.

Philadelphia/Media, PA
(610) 358-3212

Lindley M. Winston, M.D.

West Chester, PA
610-431-3955

Madeline Ziesel, M.A.

Holland, PA
215-322-2586

One Meeting's Ideas for Supporting Older Members

Several years ago, Overseers at Haddonfield Meeting noticed that a few of their older members had stopped attending meeting for worship on a regular basis. Through sensitive conversations, Overseers discovered that the older Friends were staying away because of physical problems. Overseers then implemented a series of solutions so that each of the older Friends felt comfortable returning to meeting. Shortly thereafter, attenders at a special Adult First Day School discussion came up with a list of suggestions for ways of supporting older members, which follows in a slightly edited form:

- Pay more attention to the spiritual wisdom of older members, perhaps through systematic sharing of values, beliefs and life histories. Work to eliminate prejudice against older people, particularly the infirm aged.
- Know elders well enough to be able to touch, to know when a hug would be welcome. NEVER talk to an aged person as though she or he were a child! (And reconsider the way we talk to children!) Respect the autonomy and dignity of private people. Consult with elders before doing things to or for them.
- Provide comfortable seating with footstools during meeting for worship. Provide transportation to meeting for worship, committee meetings, social gatherings and Quarterly and Yearly Meeting events. (A taxi fund may be needed if no one is conveniently situated to drive).
- Use larger type for the newsletter and meeting list. Also, improve the quality of information shared about meeting events and meeting people, in light of the specific needs of older people.
- Keep in touch with those who are homebound through cards, notes, phone calls and visits. Offer homebound persons the opportunity to worship in their homes with a small group. Hold committee meetings and some social gatherings in the homes of the homebound. (This may involve help with preparing a room or refreshments.)
- Consider various kinds of practical support. Help with the task of clearing out a house, especially before moving. Provide coordination of gifts of food during periods of illness or bereavement, taking dietary restrictions into account. Provide readers for those with limited eyesight. Speak clearly when visiting with those who have hearing problems. Develop a list of services needed by older members, and a list of meeting people who are can do specific simple home repairs or other services. Offer to set up clearness committees for those who are trying to decide whether or where to move.
- Support those called to minister to the aged in whatever ways are necessary. These Friends might be released from committee work, given financial compensation for travel, provided with emotional and spiritual support and public recognition.

Some additional ideas offered by members of the Family Relations Committee

- Younger people need to recognize that older people have fears -- fear of developing Alzheimer's Disease or some other incapacitating condition, fear of being dependent on children or other loved ones. As an older Friend put it, "If younger people are going to know us, they need to recognize that we have fears."
- Meetings should emphasize not only the importance of having a valid will, but also the importance of making one's wishes known regarding life support systems, organ donation, what to do with one's remains, and preferences about a memorial service. The meeting and the children or other next of kin should have copies of instructions.
- Overseers can help when children are estranged from, or angry with, aging relatives, or when relatives disagree with each other (and possibly with the older person's wishes) about what is best.

The same thing can happen to older people. People can be very polite, just as they are with women. They're listening but they aren't listening. What they don't realize is that older people are really not stupid (although people think that when you get older you get stupid, but they miss the boat). Older folks say to themselves "Ah, I get the message. It's not what I wanted to hear, but I can see what's happening here."

It helps when an older person is a very visible part of the meeting. In my situation, the fact that I was doing something very public in my broadcasting work made it a lot easier for me to gain people's attention when I said something. But very few older people are so visible. There are some older people you can hardly see. They just sort of move in and out. It's the older people who seem to be disappearing in the woodwork that meetings need to be most concerned about.

The importance of a sense of community

An interesting aspect of my broadcasting work was the opportunity to interview three professors of gerontology who conducted a long-term research project about aging in different cultures. The goal of the research was to find out what makes for a satisfactory old age. What they concluded was that older people are happiest when they are surrounded by people and places they know, and when they are in a setting in which they are known. Then if they become less active, people around them remember when they used to be active, and that gives them a sense of belonging and a feeling of being remembered.

Friends meetings provide something vitally important when they create a sense of continuity with the earlier stages of one's life. People in our meeting are "the people who knew me when."

Some practical suggestions

I have come to recognize that as people grow older, they may have good reason to fear that the time may come when nobody will remember them, or what they

have done. When you can't walk as fast, and you can't do as many things as you once could, you say to yourself, "Yes, but I once was. I would hope people would remember that I once was."

It's essential that Friends think of ways to affirm older members, being sensitive to the particular individual. People react differently to public acknowledgments. Some Friends would love to be asked to tell stories about the projects and activities of the meeting through the years; others simply want to know that they are remembered. What matters is that the older Friends recognize that we are thinking of them, and that we value what they have done. What is being said to each individual is: "We value you. You are still in our mind. You are still that person who has done all those things."

I know of meetings that have invited older people to come in and talk about their special interests. Everybody has some kind of interest. Give the person an opportunity to share it, and then be sure that it is acknowledged. Some people don't talk; they just "do." It is especially important to acknowledge these behind-the-scenes contributions like flower arranging, cooking, or property maintenance. People whose gifts are more artistic or mechanical often don't get much recognition.

I'm thinking of an older Friend in my meeting who is limited now, but was once very active. I remember one time when I went to visit her and her husband, and she brought out their wedding album. We had a delightful time. It isn't always easy to know how to affirm a person who is very limited physically, and no longer active. Don't underestimate the importance of sitting with the older Friend and talking to him or her about the past, with updates on what is currently going on in the meeting.

There's no one approach that always works in visiting older people. The important thing is to provide a friendly, warm environment where the person can feel comfortable sharing. It helps to know the person's family and to seek ways to involve the family in any problem-solving

that needs to be done, if that seems comfortable to the older person.

I am really very fortunate; at age 76, I don't have any trouble with my sight or hearing, and I don't have Alzheimer's Disease. I use a cane and I use a scooter; I can live with that. I know of many other people who have a whole range of problems, including problems with hearing, eyesight and remembering. I have a very good friend here at Medford Leas, and I'll say "Let's have dinner together here, tomorrow night," and she says "Phyllis, you know I'll forget it."

Two of the most common problems of aging are problems with hearing and seeing. If people don't hear well they feel left out of conversations, and if they don't see well they miss some of the things that others can see.

Be sure that people can hear you. If they don't hear you, they may not want to say they don't, because they don't want to look stupid. They may worry that if they say "What?" people will talk too loudly, or yell. Unfortunately, some people do yell when they are with someone who is hard of hearing, but that's not the right approach. What you should do is lean forward and speak slowly, and look them straight in the face. Those are little techniques that ought to be passed on to meeting members.

It seems to me that transportation, which becomes an increasing problem for older people, should be the business of the meeting. Transportation assistance could be a larger buddy system for checking on older Friends. Many meetings have a "friendly overseer" system to provide contact not only with older members, but with members and attenders of all ages.

Special activities for older people can be planned (figure out a way to assist with transportation). We forget that in the olden days it was the sewing, quilting and cooking groups that tied women together. And men had their ties as well.

All types of intergenerational programs are also possible. People who are

home-bound or living in nursing homes can be visited by kindergartners, elementary and junior high school kids. Programs involving dialogue between young and old are a good idea. Younger people can ask "What was it like when you were growing up?" or "What did the meeting do then?" Or "What was society like?" People of all ages can be asked "What are some of our concerns now?" In our meeting we asked some older members to describe what it feels like to grow older, and to share what they would like to have members of the meeting know about aging. A very simple, broad conversation can be of real value to the entire meeting. Overseers might also want to invite someone who has experience working with older people to come and talk about aging. But don't overlook the wisdom among your own members -- of all ages.

Any type of program that opens up discussion about the process of growing older can be a real benefit to the meeting. It's an important way to build community in a world that too often separates old and young.

Phyllis A. Sanders is a member and former overseer at Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting. Having begun a career in broadcasting at age 52, she worked as a commentator, producer and host of television programs on aging in New York City and Philadelphia. Her half-hour program "Growing Older With Style" was featured on WCAU-TV in Philadelphia.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How can we become more open in talking about issues of aging that we face as individuals and as a meeting?
2. What are we doing to help older members feel acknowledged and remembered?
3. How can we reach out to those whose poor hearing affects their participation in worship? What aids have we provided for hearing impaired Friends?
4. What provisions have we made for the special needs of people who have mobility problems? Are handrails, ramps, and straight-backed chairs readily available?