

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends' meetings.*

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Spirituality & Aging: Creating a Pastoral Care Approach by George Schaefer

The topic of spirituality and aging is best approached from the perspective of a person's individual spiritual journey within the monthly meeting. We can imagine the comforting image of a quilt, a warm and varied fabric of support wherein persons can be met wherever they happen to be in considering their own aging.

Within such a fabric of support, pastoral care committees can offer meeting members the opportunity to discern how best to plan their lives as they grow older. An aging person needs clearness on many issues.

These may include:

- adjusting to retirement;
- living with physical challenges and diminishing health;
- coping with behavioral changes associated with memory loss and dementia in oneself and others;
- dealing with grief and bereavement over the death of peers and loved ones;
- balancing the challenges of independent and assisted living against personal care needs;
- facing the prospect of changing one's residence;
- maintaining relationships with family and care givers;
- facing decisions about end-of-life care and death.

As the Care and Aging Coordinator for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) of the Religious Society of Friends, I function as a support and resource on

issues of pastoral care and aging to Friends, their families and meeting communities. As a licensed social worker and a personal care administrator, I have worked to provide services to aging persons experiencing behavioral, health, and housing challenges. I have long felt a leading to lift up the importance of this ministry.

While Quaker retirement communities strive to make the experience of aging and dying a spiritual witness to "that of God" in each person, most Friends will not experience post-retirement in that way. Most will stay put, choosing to age in place, to live independently for as long as possible.

Relevant pastoral care committees, while not as focused as a Quaker retirement community, can prepare to help Friends address the challenges that the aging process presents.

Aging just sort of sneaks up on us. The inherent physical and emotional changes present challenges in understanding one's spiritual identity and role within the life of the meeting. For many, aging motivates a more conscious reflection on the inner life, a deeper spiritual journey. For others, aging brings anxiety, role confusion, sporadic participation and, sometimes, even withdrawal from meeting life.

A Sense of Continuity

Decisions about pastoral care for aging members are not just a matter of marshalling the right resources and coordinating the proper professional care. A sense of continuity within the



George Schaefer

faith community, as older persons report, is the most important component of a satisfying and fulfilling retirement for Friends who are disabled by aging and approaching death.

A strong sense of continuity can empower members to find greater fulfillment and contentment in their aging years. They are able to stay vitally connected to meaning, purpose and creativity in their inner lives and in the spiritual community.

Providing loving pastoral care mandates that we let go of entrenched notions of how we might help and remain open to the Divine Presence for guidance. This is our faith in practice. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the prospect of offering advice or giving care in complex physical and psychological situations.

Of course, situations requiring professional financial, psychological, medical, legal or other kinds of specialized help should be referred to competent professionals in the field.

The PYM Care and Aging program provides meetings with practical guidance, information and referral, assessment and advice, and pastoral care support. This program offers direct assistance to elder Friends at risk and helps to coordinate requests for aid from PYM's age-specific granting groups. We provide assistance with ministry, applications and emergency grants. We also organize pastoral care workshops on aging. (Check website www.pym.org for specifics.)

The Care & Aging Resources Project is a collection of public and private, professional and community aging resource materials. Later this spring, the project will launch a new website: quakeragingresources.org. These resources will provide guidance for meetings, pastoral care givers, individual members, and families. The project resources address emotional and behavioral well being, diminishing physical health, social needs, financial support, housing and aging-in-place concerns, end-of-life care and spiritual supports for the aging.

Adjusting to Retirement

Gerontologists describe "three threads" needed to weave a meaningful and satisfying retirement: community, competence and control. For many people, work lives helped meet those needs in both overt and subtle ways. In retirement, we should try to be proactive in staying productive and to choose activities that give meaning and satisfaction. We need to be much more intentional to maintain those three threads.

Pastoral care givers can help retired members to affirm their sense of competence and self worth by encouraging their greater involvement in volunteer activities. Some retired Friends will fulfill their needs by serving the meeting community. Others, who may feel their competence slipping, will try to exert control more firmly or may even withdraw from the life of the meeting.

We know that the components of creative retirement include:

- developing and deepening one's inner life through reflection and spiritual fellowship;
- engaging in creative practices and developing new interests, or those

that may have lain dormant;

- staying in relationship with activities and persons that make life meaningful.

Such pursuits can nourish and inform all of life's activities. The retired English professor who presents book reviews and author profiles at the local library, the retired horticulturalist who joins a community-access agricultural project, the person who hosts spiritual inquiry discussion groups, or the single person who relocates to an intergenerational cooperative housing community—these are just a few examples of creative living in retirement. The meeting or helpful Friends can become familiar with many other volunteer services and opportunities in the area and share these with the newly retired.

Coping with Decline

The drive for self-sufficiency and autonomy never ends. As we experience changing physical and mental abilities, our need for autonomy may

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produce feelings of frustration, bitterness and even anger. These feelings are often directed toward family and friends who are trying to assist the person affected by physical decline and chronic infirmity. It is important for helpers to recognize misplaced anger and to avoid taking offense.

Pastoral care givers can help elderly members explore the emotional and spiritual processes of acceptance, reconciliation and forgiveness by creating a non-anxious listening presence. Spiritual support to help disabled persons understand their loss of autonomy is always a welcome comfort.

Consciously considering the adaptations and assistance required to maintain healthy functioning while understanding the need for personal autonomy is a continuing balancing act. Care givers need to understand that persons with chronic disabilities negotiate this balance many times each day.

How can meetings respond to changing needs as an elder member experiences changes in condition? Using the depth of their relationship as a guide, pastoral care givers can help Friends address the effects of aging that may be difficult to talk about.

An assessment of a person's ability to live independently can be made by a representative from your local Office on Aging. These county-based government agencies can be found online and will provide information about various options and entitlements for in-home personal care and facility-based services.

Dependency is distressing at whatever age we find ourselves. Independence is perhaps the most noticeable loss and carries the greatest stigma as we age. While our ability to act autonomously may be the most obvious loss, we may also experience a deeper loss: an estrangement from ourselves, from who we thought we were and who we have become.

If the body can no longer be relied upon to accurately inform elders about the world, how can they experience their lives with meaning and continuity?

Loss of autonomy and the resultant physical

decline often precipitate a spiritual crisis. I've had older Friends express to me that they might not be Quakers anymore because they can no longer be actively engaged in the life of the meeting. This is understandable. They feel a lack of ability to express themselves and to witness to the testimonies.

Their lives may be far from simple now that they are physically dependent on others. They may feel frustrated and estranged from themselves. They may feel isolated from their faith community and not of an equal standing with younger members.

The presence of caring people from their meeting is vital as a Friend deeply explores questions of faith and practice in light of his or her dependency needs. Pastoral care givers may devise ways to keep aging members connected to the spiritual life of the meeting, such as:

- providing occasions for worship and fellowship at home;
- forming prayer partners, visiting care circles, etc;
- creating opportunities for older members to share their special gifts with the larger community;
- planning a whole-meeting retreat on aging issues and

how best to support elder members.

The meeting might also create a special team responsible for these initiatives within the pastoral care committee.

Behavioral Changes

For elders, and indeed all of us, coping with the behavioral changes associated with memory loss and dementia can be deeply troubling. Dementia is not a specific disease, but rather a group of related symptoms that cause changes in intellectual and social functioning. Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, neurological syndrome, which causes dementia.

And, while one symptom of dementia is memory loss, not all memory loss is a sign of dementia. Memory loss may be experienced as a fairly innocuous "senior moment" or as a confusing and somewhat frightening personal disorientation. Family and friends may not know how to communicate with a memory-impaired

person, to comfort them and to be present with them in familiar ways.

Many people have not been raised to recognize that our ability to function in the world is only temporary, that a time will come—more so now that we are living longer—when life's untoward events and the process of aging will affect our ability to function as fully independent beings. Offering a friendly smile, joining in present-moment conversation and validating their feelings with acceptance and empathy are the easiest ways to reduce their confusion and lift their spirits.

Intellectually, dementia affects both cognitive and psychological functioning. Memory loss and confusion are the most obvious warning signs of cognitive decline, but when such loss leads to disruptions in a person's daily routine and his or her ability to live independently, concerned Friends

as care givers should be on the alert for other symptoms.

These include marked changes in a person's ability to plan or solve problems associated with tasks previously easily accomplished. These changes may engender poor judgment regarding household and financial matters. Some may fall victim to a financial scam or unethical soliciting by suspicious or suspect charities.

Confusion, disorientation to time and place, may be sporadic in a person with early dementia. Subtle shifts in personality may appear more gradually. Increased irritability at being confused, or depression and anxiety related to cognitive loss may also be observed.

An important sign is when a person, with some initial symptoms of dementia, suddenly withdraws from the life of the meeting. A designated family member, professional advocate or medical care giver with experience or training in these matters may need to intervene and help facilitate needed medical or psychological tests and referrals.

This article has touched some sensitive and potentially painful spots as we consider aging and what may lie ahead. The Friends Testimony on Community charges us to be ready to reach out to those undergoing the changes and to be a comfort to them.

Pastoral care givers can offer aging members the gift of unity in the Spirit and the assurance that the meeting intends to accompany them as seekers on the journey. Elder members will gain courage to embrace aging if we remember to first seek that of God in ourselves and in others, knowing that we are of infinite value to each other and to creation.

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George Schaefer (MSW, LCSW) began his career serving persons in urban shelter systems. He previously was executive director of the Spirit of Gheel a Chester County, PA, mental health residential community based on methods developed in Gheel, Belgium. A licensed assisted living administrator, he consults with facilities on programs and practices. He currently directs the Care & Aging Program for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and has been a member of the Society of Friends for the past 30 years.

Questions for Reflection

1. As an aging member's condition changes, how do pastoral care givers learn of new conditions, new needs?
- 2.. What information is kept on file to provide information about elder members' circumstances, end-of life decisions, health issues, family contacts? Who is responsible for updating these files? What forms are available?
3. What changes might be made to the meeting committee structure to assure that aging members do not become isolated from the faith community? Does the meeting have a senior concerns committee?
4. How can the meeting recognize and utilize the gifts that older members offer?
5. How can the meeting ease the stresses of aging members living alone without transportation?
6. If aging members are unable to attend worship, how can pastoral caregivers nurture Friends' spiritual life at home ?

Others' Experience

Meetings Explore Ways to Nurture Aging Friends

Millville (PA) Friends Meeting

Millville Friends Meeting's Spiritual Care Committee became concerned about the needs of older members more than a decade ago. A Senior Concerns Committee grew out of those concerns and continues actively to assess and serve the needs of older members today.

The committee began by holding small group discussions with senior members to hear their concerns and learn what they would hope for from the meeting. This was followed by individual interviews with each of the 10 or so older people then in the meeting. The interviews began with, "What are your concerns today and what are your worries for tomorrow?"

The group created a Senior Concerns Inventory to use in the interviews. (See Resources, page 6.) The needs and hopes expressed were wide-ranging and included meeting jointly with family members to discuss plans for a possible period of disability; education about resources, long-term care facilities, living wills, durable power of attorney for health care; and helping assess older persons' homes for safety hazards and accessibility.

The meeting has continued to maintain a file of those surveys for reference. "It can be as simple as whether there is a pet in the house to care for," said one member, "or more serious issues like living wills."

Currently, two or three elder members have no local family and have no transportation. The meeting provides a sign-up sheet to make sure that the members can attend meeting for worship and other gatherings, so "they are welcomed and loved."

Older members who can no longer carry full committee work continue on committees bringing the skills and energy they have available. One beautiful aspect of the Millville plan is the buddy system. Every older member has a "buddy" who phones *every day* to check in. Often, two older members are buddies for one another. Every few months there is a special event for older members, often in the home of one of the older members.

The Senior Concerns Committee meets monthly and briefly reviews every senior's situation. A review may be just a 30-second check-in, but it provides an opportunity to be responsive if a special situation has come up. Along the way, the committee has included a nutritionist, a psychologist, an attorney and persons with skills in financial management so that these skills can be available for seniors planning for their futures.

At first, there was a natural reserve on the part of some older members about sharing personal information and about how it would be used. The meeting respects the responsibilities and wishes of family members. The committee observes strict confidentiality of its work and written records. Members speak to family members or others only with the authorization of the older person.

The work with seniors has fostered new approaches to caring for younger members of the meeting as well. Recently, the committee met to discuss how its mission might be expanded. Over the years the meeting has come to trust and value the work of the Senior Concerns Committee as a loving example of faith in practice.

Editor's note: The article above is a revised and updated version of one published in Pastoral Care Newsletter (September 1999) and in Grounded in God (pp. 298-307). Current information was provided by a member of the Millville Friends Meeting's Senior Concerns Committee. (See Resources, p. 6)

Middletown (PA) Meeting and Concord Quarter

On First Day mornings, the regular attenders of Middletown (PA) Monthly Meeting in Concord Quarter of PYM come together in silent worship, gathered and held in the Light, bound as a community of Love. As must happen, members die, or move away, or through age or illness can no longer be among us. We miss them.

About ten years ago, we two (David and Juliana Bates), as co-clerks of our pastoral care committee,

came to believe that the meeting should try to discern what Love would have us do together for living members who can no longer be an active part of meeting life.

We are making most progress informing ourselves and other meetings in Concord Quarter on local governmental, public, private, and Quaker resources for aging people.

Julie has long been concerned that, while a number of our older meeting members have been able to afford Quaker life care communities, many others cannot; nor are the latter of such limited means that they might qualify for subsidized housing or for the modest grants to needy aging Friends from funds overseen by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Such Friends are caught in the middle, facing the sharply rising costs of growing old. The two of us are in this in-between category.

In January 2009, our meeting hosted a session of Concord Quarterly Meeting, organized by Julie and entitled "Preparing for Aging," and featuring informative presentations by the director of a nearby Friends retirement home, a certified elder law attorney and financial planner, and the Care and Aging Coordinator for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

At this writing, our Concord Quarter, in concert with PYM was planning an all-day workshop, "Aging in the Light: A Day of information and Reflection on Issues of Aging." The effort indicates how our specific concern is now part of a deepening and growing movement. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) is currently organizing a resource guide to better meet the widely diverse needs of aging Friends.

Recently, Middletown Monthly Meeting has found it important to meet once a month after worship for a bag lunch devoted to worshipful fellowship and sharing among all ages. Living as we

Resources

- Pastoral Care Newsletter*, relevant articles:
Dealing with Aging, Vol. 3, March '96;
Preparing for Memorial Services, Vol. 6, September '98 and Vol. 16, January '09;
Ministry to Older People Experiencing Disabilities, Vol. 7, September '99;
Loneliness among Friends, Vol. 14, March '07;
End of Life Planning, Vol. 16, September '08.
(See masthead for back issues information.)
Grounded in God, Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting, Patricia McBee, editor, Quaker Press of FGC, 2002 (Ministry to Older People... Millville's Senior Concerns Inventory, p. 306)
Friends Journal: Quaker Thought and Life Today. Special issue on Aging and Life's End, July 2004
Jacob, Norma: *Growing Old: A View from Within*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #239, 1981.
Murphy, Carol: *Milestone 70*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #287, 1989
Care and Aging Resources Project (PYM) quakeragingresources.org (website due to launch May 2010.)
Friends Services for the Aging: <http://www.fsainfo.org/>

do at a distance from one another, we are finding these times bring us much closer to one another, and make us much more aware of one another's lives and circumstances. We are seeing how, bound together as a community of Love, we might help one another.

—David and Juliana Bates

Does your PCN hide in a notebook on a shelf? Why not share it with Friends?

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