

The Wisdom of Elders Within the Body of Christ

My story of becoming “Annie”

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Introduction

My sophomore year, I attended the Lenten soup suppers at Trinity Lutheran Church on a weekly basis. On one of those Wednesdays I sat at a table with a woman named Hildur Swenson.



We talked all through dinner, and we continued chatting while we waited for the service to begin. We talked about many things, including her years as a teacher in Saint Peter and her time spent out on a farm outside of town. She asked me about where I was from and what I planned on doing with my life. It was the beginning of something *beautiful*...it was the beginning of a *friendship*.¹

Throughout this paper I will discuss a very special relationship that I have formed with a man named Robert Esbjornson who I interviewed while working on this paper.

¹ Since this day in 2002, Hildur and I have become close friends and have shared many hours together. Hildur was the inspiration for this project. My love for her is indescribable.

What I thought would be one interview turned into multiple visits, with wonderful conversations. I will tell the story of the magic that unfolded as we allowed ourselves time to spend in each other's presence. It is my story of becoming "Annie."

Was it only by our own efforts that Hildur and Mr. Esbjornson and I were able to form this bond? Does the church foster relationships between the young and the old? Does the church purposefully seek out wisdom in the elders of its community? What wisdom do our elders actually possess? Do elders feel they are an important part of a community committed to rejoicing in the grace of God? Is the church active in supporting them, and does life in the church provide elders with opportunities to offer their gifts in return, to the benefit of the community? These are the important questions that I will address in this paper.

A brief look at the life of the elderly in the church today suggests that the role of the elderly has become less respected and valued in the church than in years past. The church needs to take time to evaluate its role in utilizing the wisdom of the elderly and in cherishing their spiritual maturity.

A look into the letters of Paul in the New Testament reveals his vision of the Church as a "body"—the Body of Christ. The vision is one of unity, love, cooperation, interdependence, and mutual appreciation and valuing of all of the body's members. *Part One* of this paper will discuss 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul reflects upon the importance of acknowledging that each person has been gifted by the Spirit and that *all* are necessary in the formation of the body. There is never a time when one part should be considered more important than the next. Through the discussion of Paul's letters we see the possibility that his vision holds for the church today and in the future.

In our society today much emphasis is placed upon looking and feeling younger. Youth is seen as the preferred stage of life, and old age is seen as something to be avoided. Does the church reflect this same reality? How can we ensure that the church embraces a vision such as Paul's that is committed to the equal importance of the contributions of each and every member of the body (church)? These questions will be addressed in *Part Two*.

It is *not* my mission to somehow prove that the church is doing a poor job in relation to ministry with the elderly. My goal, however, *is* to show some ways in which the church can reform itself and make changes that will result in improved congregational life that is inclusive of people of all ages and that flourishes because of the presence of the elderly.

My process for examining these issues has included in-depth conversations with church staff and elderly persons from four different congregations in Saint Peter, Minnesota. I have gained valuable insight from these times of firsthand sharing with people who "live" these issues on a daily basis. I will discuss this personal, firsthand research. I will also discuss my research into a variety of scholarly writings on the issues that face elderly people and conclusions that some of these scholars have reached, based upon many years of study. Within the scope of this paper I will not be able to cover all of the ways in which the church might more actively embrace the gifts of the elderly, but I will offer a number of suggestions, which I regard as significant. In the time and space I have allotted to talk about these issues, I have been able to highlight what I have found to be the most important need, which is for younger members of the community of faith to actively value and support the elderly by *listening* to them. The elderly have a gift that

often goes unnoticed: that is the gift of their personal faith stories. These stories often sit like an undiscovered gold mine amidst congregations, when they might be tapped to strengthen their communities of faith. Also, and perhaps more significantly, listening is important to older adults because they often find themselves in need of a way to reflect upon their life experiences, and “to make sense of it all.”

Many people agree that the church, at large, is failing to do everything it could be doing to embrace the gift that older people can be to their communities. My research and reflection on this issue will hopefully trigger new conversation in the Saint Peter community that may inspire local churches to make active efforts to improve ministry with and among the elderly. I believe it is imperative that churches recognize that ministry with the elderly can be improved in many ways and that they take direct action to make improvements. More specifically, my hope would be that such action would lead toward the hearing of the stories of the elderly. We will look at specific ways in which the church can address this goal.

It is crucial that the church recognizes the problem society has with age segregation, remember the vision that Paul has for the church, and take specific action to stand on the vision. It is by the grace of God that we all live, and it is by the grace of God that I pursue this challenge to improve the lives of the elderly and to enhance our recognition and appreciation of the elderly as important contributors within our communities of faith.

PART ONE:

A Biblical Vision of the Body of Christ, Inclusive of All!

“This is part of what a family is all about, not just love, but letting others know there’s someone who is watching out for them. It’s what I missed so much when my mother died—what I call your ‘spiritual security’—knowing that your family will be there watching out for you. Nothing else will give you that.”

– Morrie Schwartz

The Apostle Paul's Vision of the Body

One of the most influential people in the original vision of the church was the apostle Paul. During his lifetime he evolved from persecutor of Christians to faithful follower of Christ. It is reasonable to suggest that only a person with his personal history could have spread the Gospel and impacted the formation of the Church in the way that Paul did. The Church as the Body of Christ directly reflects Paul's vision and influence, and the Church continues to benefit from Paul's teaching and advice as delivered in his letters to the churches and canonized in the New Testament. The 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians is a particularly significant source of Paul's advice when it comes to our understanding of the Church as a body.² We shall now look at this passage for ways in which it may help us examine our understanding of the place of elders in the church, based upon scripture. I believe 1 Corinthians 12 sheds light on both the problem and some solutions to the problem that I propose to address in this paper.

We read in 1 Corinthians 12: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service but the same God works all of them in all (men)." The verses continue by describing the different gifts that people have and how all contribute equally to the common good. For example, verse 8 says, "To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit." By incorporating into the life of the church different people with different gifts, a community of faith will find that each part contributes to forming a whole. Paul writes, in Ephesians 4: 11-12, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to

² All of my Biblical reflections are with the use of *The Holy Bible*. New International Version. Michigan: Zondervan, 1989.

prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."

Those verses point even more directly to the importance of acknowledging the gifts of each and every person in a community and ensuring that all the gifts are being used so that "the body of Christ may be built up."³

Paul also describes all the baptized believers as "the body"; i.e., each believer is a part, and each part is important to the formation of the body. If we are to comprise a complete and whole body of Christ, we must ensure that each part of the body is able to contribute its share. In 1 Corinthians 12:14, Paul says, "Now the body is not made up of one part but many."

Paul asks a series of questions that perfectly explain the idea that if the whole body were just "an eye," it would have no sense of hearing; or if it were just "an ear," it would not have the sense of smell. And so we remember, again, that the body is made up not of one part but of many.

Paul then calls upon us to ask ourselves, if one part says it doesn't belong to the body, does it stop being a part of the body? His answer is, "no." In fact, the church *is* a body. It is a baptismal body that is bound to the life we find in Christ. It is up to the church, however, to be certain that it is functioning to its greatest capacity.

It is with special concern for the elderly that we should read verse 22, which says, "On the contrary [contrary to the idea of the head's saying to the feet, "I don't need you"], those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable..." As I will discuss in the next section, while it is important that we recognize and acknowledge that elderly persons are often seen as weak in some ways, they are at the same time

³ I should also stress that Paul mentions this subject of unity of the body, and concern for all parts in nearly all of his letters including Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians.

indispensable parts of the body. In *Part Three*, I will mention specific gifts that older members possess that the church needs to utilize and appreciate for the sake of its own wholeness. Verse 25 says, “There should be no division in the body, but its parts should have equal concern for each other.” The church should function in a way that allows each member to be seen and experienced as valuable.

PART TWO: THE NEED TO REFORM CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

“Here is what I mean by building your own little sub-culture,” Morrie said. “I don’t mean you disregard every rule of your community. I don’t go around naked, for example. I don’t run through red lights. The little things, I can obey. But the big things—how we think, what we value—those you choose yourself. You can’t let anyone—or any society—determine those for you.”

-Morrie Schwartz

**The Church Now: the Problem, the Opportunity
and the Obligation**

Societal Problem

As we work our way further into the twentieth century, the population of older adults will be on the rise. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the oldest people, 85 and older, are the fastest growing segment of the population. By 2030, nearly 20 percent of the population will be 65 or older.⁴ The church needs to be conscious of the fact that the percentage of elderly in the church will also rise, likely in direct proportion to the general population. This fact alone is enough to get the church thinking about the needs that will have to be addressed as this shift occurs.

Add to the population shift the reality that we are living in a culture that doesn't respect and value the elderly nearly as much as it might (or should). In *Aging to Sage-ing* by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, they highlight this point rather eloquently:

"Everywhere you look, old age suffers from a bad reputation. Because of negative images and expectations shared by our culture, people enter the country called "old age" with fear and trembling. Feeling betrayed by their bodies and defeated by life, they believe they're condemned to lives of decreasing self-esteem and respect. As citizens of this oppressed nation, they expect to suffer from reduced vigor, enjoyment, and social usefulness."⁵

So often we are concerned with how "sad" old age is and we try to help the elderly who are "suffering." Henri Nouwen, in his book *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life*, says, "We might start thinking that becoming old is the same as becoming a problem, that aging is a sad human fate that nobody can escape and should be avoided at all cost, that growing towards the end of the life cycle is a

⁴ These data are taken from the 2004 Nobel Conference handout, and are taken from an article courtesy of *The Quest for Immortality* by A.J.S. Rayl.

⁵ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman and Miller, Ronald. *From Aging to Sage-ing: A profound new vision of growing older*. New York: Warner Books, Inc, 1995, 12.

morbid reality that should only be acknowledged when the signs can no longer be denied."⁶ The *problem* is not that people grow older and thereby become a burden. The *problem* is that we have forgotten what a blessing elders can be. The *problem* is that we aren't embracing the elderly as an equal part of our communities and our world.

Laura Carstenson, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Stanford University, spoke at the Nobel Conference at Gustavus Adolphus College.⁷ As she began her talk, she addressed all of the college students in the room and said, "Those of you that are in your twenties and you are hearing day in and day out that these are the best days of your life—that's wrong! It gets better!" Larry Meyer, a 72-year-old, agrees with Carstenson in the book *What's Worth Knowing* by Wendy Lustbader.⁸ Meyer is quoted as saying, "Young people think they have it over us old people, but they've got it backwards. They run faster and have more hair, but that's about all the advantages right there. In my opinion—and my friends agree—life gets easier every year. By now, we've figured out who we are. We've stopped comparing ourselves to everyone else. Best of all, we laugh at ourselves."

Our culture tends to lift up the virtues of being young. Anyone who finds wrinkles forming on his or her face is supposed to buy cream that will stop those dreadful things from forming. If cream doesn't do it, no worries! Feel free to visit your local reconstructive surgeon, who can transform your skin with a facelift, tuck in that flabby belly, or do anything else that will make you feel as if you are ten years younger. Flip

⁶ Nouwen, Henri and Gaffney, Walter. *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life*. New York: Double Day, 1990, 17.

⁷ Carstenson, Laura. *Motivation, Emotion and Aging*. (Lecture, Gustavus Adolphus College Nobel Conference, Saint Peter, MN, October 6, 2004).

⁸ Lustbader, Wendy. *What's Worth Knowing*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Penguin, 2001, 234.

through the TV channels and you will find multiple “reality” shows that focus on the goal of transforming our bodies to their youthful state. “Reality” is not telling ourselves that we should be who we *were*; it should be rejoicing in who we *are*. At each point in our lives we should be rejoicing in what is happening to us *now* so that life continues to shape and mold us into who we are.

If it is true that life gets better as you get older, why has our society shifted to this idea that life gets worse with every candle on the cake? Not only is there a sense that our bodies need to look and feel young, but our culture also pushes people aside when they appear to have contributed all that they can. Elderly persons often choose (or we encourage them) to move into senior citizen complexes and nursing homes where interaction with a variety of people is severely limited. Instead of having neighborhoods occupied by young couples with children and retired older people living next door, we have an increasing incidence of age-segregated communities. For example, in Saint Peter there is a senior condominium complex called Heritage Meadows, which exists solely for the purpose of providing housing for senior citizens and the elderly. The complex is located on the far end of town with a cornfield to the east and the hospital to the west. Could we possibly separate them any more from the rest of the community? Admittedly, many older persons enjoy these types of residences because they have people their own age around with whom to socialize, but there is a problem with this type of housing option. The younger people in Saint Peter have little to no contact with the people who live at Heritage Meadows.

In many other cultures, the elderly remain in the family home, contribute to family life according to their ability, have the opportunity to share the wisdom of their

life experience, and may be cared for by their family in the case of infirmity. In *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion*, Anne Wimberly mentions, “In the black African heritage, older adults in communities are accorded high status. Older people are revered, cared for, and regarded as indispensable resources.”⁹ Other cultures have placed importance upon keeping the elderly in the home. The whole family lives together; family members take care of one another, and see one another “through thick and thin.”

Here in the United States, both the elderly and the young have fallen into the habit of being comfortable with staying separate. I have spent precious hours during these last few months with Robert Esbjornson, whom I will mention many times in this paper as “Mr. Esbjornson.”¹⁰ He is a retired professor who lives in Heritage Meadows in Saint Peter. He was a parish pastor for five years of his life, and then he served as a professor at Gustavus Adolphus College from 1950 to 1983. Mr. Esbjornson once told me that the downside of living in Heritage Meadows is that the majority of the time residents see only people who are in the same stage of life as themselves. They end up talking about their “aches and pains” all the time because that is the thing they all have in common. They don’t have enough exposure to people of other generations, which would give their stories and experiences so much added meaning and significance.

Ecclesial Problem

⁹ Kimble, Melvin, and McFadden, Susan. *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook, Volume 2*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, 104-105.

¹⁰ Robert Esbjornson (retired Gustavus Professor), in discussion with the author, October, 2004.

My concern here is to take a look at the church. Are there parallels between the problems in society and the church? Is the church also a culture of youth? Does the church recognize growing older as a positive thing? Does the church have age-segregated communities?

A recognizable trend in many congregations today is the practice of having the children leave the sanctuary during the sermon. The pastor does a children's sermon, and then all the little ones file out of the worship space and join a Sunday school teacher to sing songs or play with toys or have a "kids service." In choosing such a practice for its worship life, the church seems to be saying that we need to segregate ourselves during worship according to "age-appropriate" activities. Mr. Esbjornson and I have visited about some of the practices in congregational life that segregate parishioners by age groups. Mr. Esbjornson loves to see a church peopled by the full range of human age, and so do I. Think about how remarkable it can be to look around a sanctuary and see a mother cradling her baby, a teenage boy admiring the girl in the next pew, and an elderly couple attentive to the sermon. There is something powerful going on when a diverse community gathers together for communion and worship and shares an experience of true communion with one another, across all (possible) segregating boundaries, including those of age.

Earlier this fall, I worshipped one Sunday morning at Saint Peter Claver, a Roman Catholic parish in Saint Paul, Minnesota. There was constant noise surrounding me during the entire service, even during the communion. There were children running in the aisle from time to time, a few coughing jags, and the lull of whispers throughout the entire sanctuary (even during the sermon). What I experienced there was a community of

people, bound together by the power of the Gospel, each person continuing to be *who he/she is* while participating in an experience of worship and genuine community—and having a wonderful time! What I experienced was Paul’s vision in action. Every part of the body was participating in the experience of worship and the sanctuary was vibrant with energy.¹¹

Congregations often do gather all of their members together for events, but much of the time separate groups of people spend time together, to the exclusion of others. For example, in the Saint Peter churches there are older adult groups with names like the “Prime Timers” and the “Amazing Greys.” Then there are the youth groups and younger adult groups that meet separately as well. All too often these groups create an atmosphere of separateness, and significant opportunities may be missed. Resulting losses may go unnoticed. My main purpose in this paper is to consider what we might be missing when we engage excessively in this kind of age segregation and to consider what we need to do to address the problem.

Another practice that I have found to be quite prevalent in the churches of Saint Peter and in churches everywhere is a move towards contemporary worship services. Churches often have one service that is traditional and one that is contemporary. Older people frequently choose to worship at the services that are traditional, and younger people might tend to go to the services that are more contemporary. It makes sense and is not surprising that older people often would prefer to go to a traditional service of worship. Often, eyesight is failing and trying to learn new hymns is difficult. Also, older people have become accustomed to a form of worship that is “the way it has always

¹¹ In Part Four I will address the issue that many older people have problems with hearing, and this kind of environment may not comfortably cater to those problems. I will provide direct solutions to this problem.

been.” Older people often tend to appreciate what feels familiar and friendly to them, and it may be difficult for them to embrace changes in the form and content of a worship service. A move to a contemporary worship is a big change. At the same time, many younger people find traditional services dry and boring. In a society that is changing so rapidly, younger people often feel as though the church should move and change "with the times" in an effort to make worship more exciting and inviting.

So, with these preferences in mind, many churches find that the logical solution is to offer two separate worship services. What typically happens, however, is that the majority of the elders will choose to worship at the traditional service, and they are slipping out of the church just as the younger people are making their way in! A well-intended effort to respond to the preferences and needs of all members results in segregating the membership into age groups and reducing the opportunities for sharing and interaction among those of different ages, even at regular services of worship! We must look at this problem and look for solutions that will unite rather than divide “the body.”

When elders are separated from others in the community, whether it is by the initiatives of the others or by the initiatives of the elders themselves, a congregation may easily find itself “forgetting” its role and responsibility in serving the needs of the elderly when those needs exist and enriching its own community life by tapping into the rich storehouse of gifts that the elderly have to offer and share. The Church has a fundamental responsibility to serve the needs of the elderly and to empower the elderly in their service to the community and the world. Through the many hours I have spent in the churches of Saint Peter and in conversation with the elder members of those churches,

I have come to see that the problem is a lost sense of understanding the importance of listening to elders. In pausing between busy moments in my day to visit with these people, I gained an amazing appreciation for their wisdom. What I have found is that when connections are made between elders and others in their communities, everyone flourishes and benefits.

How Does the Church Match Up With Paul's Vision?

The church must realize that it is dynamic, not static. In other words, the church has evolved and changed throughout its existence, and this is its nature. The church is to reflect the life of Jesus, who came to live as a human being in this world in order to show the world true life and true love. Life and love are not static; they are dynamic. The church has changed dramatically over time, and the church must continue to change in order to continually breathe new life into the community of faith. Paul's vision for the "unity of the body" is one that is inclusive of all. However, his main point is not simply that all are *included*, but that each person's gifts are recognized and used. A *person* may have an eye that works as intended; but if he puts an eye patch over it, the function of the eye goes to waste. In a similar way, a *church* may have many elderly members who are gifted as God intended; but if those persons, with all their gifts, are not fully embraced in the life of the community, those gifts are wasted. The "body" (community) does not reflect the unity that Paul envisions.

As a part of my "hands on" research in Saint Peter, I have visited with a number of ministers who serve a variety of congregations in town. I conclude, from these interviews and conversations, that congregational life in most of these

churches does not “measure up” if we examine it alongside of Paul’s vision of the “unity of the body.”¹² When I asked about the ways in which the elderly participate in the community, contribute to the community, and are served in the community, I heard some interesting responses. Many of the churches have seniors groups that provide occasions for older members of the congregation to fellowship with one another. Such groups are wonderful and may be much appreciated, but, as I have suggested before, I believe more is needed in order to maximize the value of seniors in congregational life.

VINE is an amazing program that is taking place in Saint Peter. It is strongly connected to the churches in Saint Peter because they are the main means through which it finds its volunteers. VINE connects elders in the community with younger people who are willing to volunteer their time to help with basic needs. VINE was originally formed in Mankato, and the program in Saint Peter started a year and a half ago. In a year’s time, VINE has utilized approximately 50 volunteers, and the program has served over 100 people. Tim Benner works part time in the office that Trinity Lutheran has made available for him for the purpose of working on the program.¹³

Benner told me about a woman named Leona, 77, who had a young woman volunteer to come to her home and help with chores. The most wonderful part about the arrangement was that the woman would bring her 2-year-old son along. While the volunteer worked on getting household chores done, such as laundry and dishes, Leona would play with the little boy. Leona felt so blessed by this amazing connection that she

¹² I spoke with the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, a layperson from Sunrise Assemblies of God, the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, and the pastor of First Lutheran Church.

¹³ Tim Benner (Program Coordinator for VINE), in discussion with author, May 2004.

turned around and volunteered herself! She now spends many hours reading to Hildur Swenson, a 96-year-old with macular degeneration.

There are many other stories of people who have been served through this program in amazing ways. The problem is that funding for this program may run out. Until June of 2005, a donor will cover half of the budget, and the rest of the money comes from donations and fundraisers. Benner is paid part time (30 hours a week) to keep the program running. If funding runs out, the program will no longer be able to function. I would like to revisit this subject in *Part Three*, and I would like to express my encouragement to the churches of Saint Peter to connect themselves more directly with this program so that it can continue to do amazing things, as it does now.

In my interviews, I was pleased to learn that nearly all of the Saint Peter congregations have some sort of mentoring program that matches an elder of the community with a child. This is one of the most important ministries that can happen within a church; and in the last section of my paper, I will discuss specific ways in which the church may expand these programs to meet additional needs for elders and for the life of a congregation.

PART THREE: LOOKING TO THE ELDERS FOR NEW LIFE

“I want someone to hear my story. Will you?”
—Morrie Schwartz

I leave my world for a bit, and step into a story. It is the story of a life, expressed in words that breathe their messages and meanings right into the reader's soul. The story is called Tuesdays With Morrie, and it tells us of the life of Morrie Schwartz. This story first came into my life in my high school years. My dad and I would curl up on our living room couch with a cup of coffee and Tuesdays With Morrie in hand. We read, out loud, the tale of a young man named Mitch Albom and his experience with his old, respected professor Morrie who was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Lou Gehrig's disease, an illness that affected his neurological system and eventually lead to his death. It is through listening to Morrie that I began to realize that meaning in life could be found through embracing those who have experienced life in ways that I have not. I believe it to be true that if we take the time to listen to those, like Morrie, who have experienced many years of life, we will find a great wealth of knowledge and wisdom. It is here that I set out on a goal to show, more specifically, a vision for the church; a vision that will lead to a community that embraces the value of the elderly and allows them to share their wisdom to the fullest.

Wisdom and Age: Breaking Down the Dividing Wall

Life is full of experiences that mold and shape us each day of our lives. We grow from dependent babies, to curious toddlers, to rebellious teenagers, to working adults, and finally to a mature stage of late life. Through interacting with people in the later stages of life, and through reading works of scholars and writers who have studied the miraculous process of aging, I have come to realize that it is in these precious years of late life that true meaning comes into clearer focus, and a clearer understanding of our place in life becomes more apparent to us. Older adults exhibit the behavior of taking time to contemplate and discover purpose, reason, and meaning; they also begin to reflect true wisdom. This wisdom is of great value to the communities surrounding the elderly, but it sometimes goes unrecognized and unappreciated.

I must take a moment to clarify that age doesn't necessarily guarantee wisdom. Also, wisdom may be exhibited in the lives of the young. In *Affirmative Aging*, Robert Carlson reminds the reader of these phenomena by quoting Ecclesiastes 4:13: "Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king."¹⁴ Carlson goes on to say that wisdom and age do not increase in direct proportion to each other, but wisdom usually requires a good measure of life experience for its growth. With that said, it is my intention to focus on the wisdom of the elderly.

Let us recognize that there are different kinds of wisdom. The Bible offers wonderful examples of different kinds of wisdom in the practical wisdom of the Proverbs and in the theoretical wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Proverbs offers practical wisdom such as,

¹⁴ Lukens, *Affirmative Aging*, 59.

“Lazy hands make man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.”¹⁵ Ecclesiastes expresses much more introspective and meditative wisdom. For example, Ecclesiastes 3:12, made famous by the Birds, says, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...”¹⁶ While one person may seek to understand *how* we are to live in this world, another person may seek to understand *why* we live in this world. When speaking of wisdom, it is important to remember that people perceive “wisdom” in differing ways. Nevertheless, each perception is valuable and should be recognized. In this paper, I will present my perceptions with regard to several aspects of the wisdom of the elderly. My hope is that we will discover how this wisdom can enrich church communities.

The journey of coming to a place in life where a person has gained enough wisdom to clearly see the world might be compared to the journey of climbing a mountain. Scaling a mountain presents you with a variety of challenges: trudging up ridges, crossing creeks over fallen logs, and winding your way up what may seem to be a never-ending path. Sometimes you even come to a point that you think is the pinnacle, and you think you are at the end, when really you have much farther to go before reaching the peak. Then there comes that moment when you finally set foot on the peak and can look back at all the paths traveled and all the challenges met. In that moment you can see what brought you to point where you are and the reasons for your being there. Our lives follow paths similar to those of the mountain climber. We wind around the curves of different careers, navigate the rough-water streams of rejection or persecution, and pull ourselves over the roughest ridges of decision-making that we

¹⁵ Zondervan, Proverbs 10:4.

¹⁶ Zondervan, 3:1-2.

haven't even anticipated. What might the church gain if we take the time to reflect upon the wisdom of those who are closer to the peak? It is vitally important that we take the time to reflect upon the wisdom of the elderly and to formulate a pathway for embracing and actively valuing that wisdom in our church communities.

Wise and Diverse Ways

If we equate reaching a significant vantage point along our journey in life with wisdom, what does that mean? In visiting with elders in the Saint Peter community, and in reading the works of scholars and writers who have studied older adults, I came to see many ways in which age has made people wise. Not all elderly persons have attained the wisdom that I will speak of here, but the following discoveries that I will discuss may demonstrate to the church the ultimate importance of listening to, acknowledging, and embracing the elderly, to the goal that they might continue living life to the fullest with outlets for ongoing reflection (on their lives) to the very end of earthly life.

Asking Questions: finding God and ourselves in the questions

In Lynn W. Huber's article entitled *Aging as Pilgrimage: Spiritual Potentials of Late Life*, she quotes some of Richard Rohr's findings in which he lists characteristics of wise people.¹⁷ Rohr says a wise person is one who not only sees the "gray areas" in life, but also perceives that there are blacks and whites that exist in painful coexistence. Rohr finds that one characteristic of a wise person is the ability to live between two apparent opposites. In this model, we have an illustration of how a person who sees two (or more)

¹⁷ Kimble and McFadden, *Aging, Spirituality and Religion*, 14.

separate and clear answers to a dilemma finds it possible to be comfortable living in the middle until enlightenment comes. Much of the time, younger persons feel they must stand definitely on one view of the truth or the other. For example, I think of a time when I was sitting with friends over coffee and we were discussing every controversial issue we could think of. There is always the option, in such a conversation, to support one side of an issue. For example, a person might believe that abortion is morally wrong, so under no circumstances would it be right for a woman to have an abortion. An older person, Rohr observes, might more typically be able to jump into the conversation and offer the possibility that it may be necessary to *live* in the questions, without fully answering them.

There are two things we need to be reminded of when we seek true wisdom. The first is that the nature of true wisdom knows that life can pose questions for which we may be able to search out answers. Second, there exists the possibility that our questions are simply unanswerable. A person of wisdom will (likely) know when to let go of the questions all together. An elderly man by the name of Frank Bonekamp, whose story is told in *What's Worth Knowing* by Wendy Lustbader, came to the conclusion that it is not our place to know the answers.¹⁸ He had a very painful form of multiple sclerosis, and he tells of being up late one night asking God questions about why he had to suffer so much. After much struggle, he finally came to realize that his questions didn't need answers. When he arrived at this place in his mind and heart, he felt an overwhelming sense of peace.

Mr. Esbjornson and I talked one day about this issue of searching for answers. He said, "Yes! When you have a sense of demanding an answer, you don't get one. You

¹⁸ Lustbader, *What's Worth Knowing*, 80.

must have a sense of patience. That is a trait of a wise person. Sometimes we will have to wait forever for answers. Maybe heaven will be a continuation of the search!”

A poet by the name of Rainer Maria Rilke gives encouragement to those of us who have not yet mastered this ability to live with the questions. He writes,

“Have patience with everything that is unresolved in your heart and...try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them... Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”¹⁹

Compassion and Forgiveness

Another characteristic of a person of wisdom, says Rohr, is the ability to live in compassion and forgiveness and to find it unnecessary to shame other people. A wise person understands that all of us are caught by sin and need forgiveness; therefore, it is essential that all of us are prepared to forgive others for what they have done towards us. Rohr’s finding coincides with Paul’s view in Colossians 3:13, where we read, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”²⁰

What’s Worth Knowing by Wendy Lustbader eloquently captures the wisdom of a woman named Edeine French, who at 84 years old has a fabulous way of viewing forgiveness and compassion.²¹ She says that when people fight or squabble, often neither person is listening to the other. What results in such a situation is that the disagreement escalates because each person rises up in anger to defend his or her side of the story.

¹⁹ Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, reissued 1993, 35.

²⁰ Zondervan, NIV, Col. 3:13.

²¹ Lustbader, *What’s Worth Knowing*, 106.

French says, “But if one of you is able to stop and give the other some compassion, really try to see the other person’s hurt, the steam goes right out of the fight.” Years of age often bring the realization that we all see life in different ways, and we need to see one another with eyes of compassion. If we are willing to be compassionate, we will live with and experience joy rather than anger and frustration. When we stop to recognize the struggles of another, our hearts can begin to see something new in the situation, and we are able to be understanding.

Living here and now

Huber also mentions that a distinctive characteristic of “wisdom people,” as she calls them, is that they are comfortable living in the here and now. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch recalls attending Wimbledon and being knocked over by a British photographer who didn’t apologize and just went on his way. Mitch had paused for a moment after that remembering something Morrie had said to him years ago. Morrie said, “So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they’re busy doing things they think are important. This is because they’re chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning in your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.”²² Mitch concluded that the photographer fit Morrie’s description of someone who isn’t focused in the here and now.

²² Albom, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, 43.

Laura Carstenson²³ did a study on a theoretical postulate stating that “perceived constraints on time” motivates people to “pursue emotionally meaningful goals.” She explained that our motivations change when we know that there is only a certain amount of time we have left. Younger people are preparing for the future, so their goals include expanding their horizons and acquiring knowledge. Older people tend to focus on the present, so their goals include deepening relationships, living in the moment, and savoring life. The thing that she found interesting was that when she would do experiments with younger people and cause the persons to believe they were constrained in the perceived time they had, the results would look similar to the results with older people. For example, she would ask, “What if the world were to end tomorrow and you knew it?” These types of time restraints cause a change of motivations in anyone of any age. It is interesting to consider that the more time a younger person would spend with an older person, the more the younger one will begin to reflect changes in motivations and behaviors that more closely resemble those of the older person—the tendency to live in the moment and savor life as an older person does.

Basil Pennington, a Cistercian monk, wrote an article called *Long on the Journey* in a book called *Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth*.²⁴ His article reflected upon the “gift of time” that is given to those in their later years of life. Responsibilities that people once had fade away, and suddenly people are left with lots of time for things that life never afforded them time for in the past. He writes that his favorite moments at this point in his life are the moments spent sitting in his recliner. He loves that he can sit

²³ Carstenson, Laura. *Motivation, Emotion and Aging*. (Lecture, Gustavus Adolphus College, Nobel Conference, October 6, 2004.)

²⁴ Weaver, Andrew; Koenig, Harold and Roe, Phyllis. *Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth*. Abingdon Press, 1998. 29.

down with a friend, with nothing to do but be. Just be. Being with one another, embracing the moment they have to sit and enjoy time as it passes by. He says, “I sense that this is a bit of a beginning of the joy of eternal life, just being with friends with nothing else to do.”²⁵ This is one of the most important aspects of wisdom. Having the ability to *sit* and *be* is one of the blessings that many don’t learn to embrace until they are older.

Pennington continues by saying that above the pleasure of sitting with his friends, he loves to sit with his Friend of Friends, the Lord. At times he finds himself walking down memory lane, or just basking in the awareness that he can share all his love and pain with God. He tells of his afternoons spent reading the Bible and how a conversation begins between himself and God. Sometimes he reads passages of scripture that speak to him in ways they never have before. Sometimes he finds himself spending an hour on one paragraph, one phrase, or one word. How awe-inspiring it is to have Pennington as an example of someone who sits and listens to what God has to say to him. This is not to say that young people don’t do this as well, but it seems especially common in the lives of older people because they have more time to spend doing such things.

Mr. Esbjornson, whom I mentioned earlier, spends many of his days in his apartment with time to let his heart and mind search inward.²⁶ He once shared with me, “It can be frightening to dive into your inner being! You get tired and want to go get a beer!” He later said that he doesn’t actually like beer; and despite the fact that it can be scary, he still searches inward to discover his innermost person.

²⁵ Weaver, *Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth*, 30.

²⁶ Robert Esbjornson, in discussion with the author, October 2004.

Unnecessary Pursuit of “Stuff”

In his book, *The Virtues of Aging*, Jimmy Carter recognizes that, “most older people, once we are reasonably comfortable and secure, are inclined to want gratifying experiences rather than more belongings.”²⁷

I love to think about a time when I was in Juarez, Mexico, on a mission trip to build a house for a family there. The home was for a couple who had a set of twin girls. Also in the neighborhood lived the woman’s parents, cousins and grandmother. I vividly remember watching the whole family sitting near our worksite one day, having the time of their lives. They just sat in conversation or laughed at the little twins doing silly things. I remember noticing that they had nothing material in their hands. If any of them was holding anything, it was another person. As Morrie says in *Tuesdays With Morrie*, “You can’t substitute material things for love or for gentleness or for tenderness or for a sense of comradeship.”²⁸

In *What’s Worth Knowing*, Irma Delehanty, age 72, speaks of how her family lost everything in the depression.²⁹ Everything, that is, except each other. She says that in these days people seek wealth and success, but her family knew that the only thing they needed in life was to be with each other.

Another woman in *What’s Worth Knowing* is Maxine Dougherty, age 81. Maxine speaks of memories similar to those of Irma when she reflects back to when she was a child.³⁰ Maxine recalls that her mother told her repeatedly that buying new things wouldn’t bring her happiness. Despite her mother’s wise advice, Maxine would

²⁷ Carter, Jimmy. *The Virtues of Aging*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998, 94.

²⁸ Albom, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, 125.

²⁹ Lustbader, *What’s Worth Knowing*, 10.

³⁰ Lustbader, *What’s Worth Knowing*, 20.

frequently go out to the store to buy new shoes or a new dress. Now, looking back, she is able to say, “I can tell you now my mother was right, but it took me so many years and so much money down the drain before I stopped trying to prove her wrong. You just don’t find happiness through buying things—not for long anyway.”

While some may discover the unimportance of material possessions earlier in life, many come to that awareness only in the wisdom of their later years.

Love

One of my professors once told me that in the last years of her life, her mother became fond of saying, “All that really matters is love.”³¹ Of all the topics I mention here, this one is extremely marvelous to me. It is also most marvelous to the apostle Paul when he continues to talk about the way that the body should function in 1 Corinthians 13. He says, “And now I will show you the most excellent way,” and he continues to say that if he has many abilities or even faith to move mountains, but not love, he is nothing.

Last fall my good friend and mentor, Virginia, passed away. I remember walking into the hospital room just days before she died and seeing her lying on the bed. Her frail body, now weighing only 85 pounds, was unrecognizable to me. My mom came into the room behind me and walked up to the bed and began saying things to her about how much we loved her and valued her place in our lives. Virginia could respond with only a whisper, as her weak eyelids would open for brief seconds. Although she looked so weak at the time, all I saw was her strength. For the last years of her life she was the strongest woman I knew. She was always concerned about the wellbeing of others. She was

³¹ My professor told me this during a time in my life when I needed to hear the simplest message. How true it is.

always working to find every way she could to make the lives of other people better. Selling purses made in Tanzania and giving full profit to the people who made them, raising money for the homeless, bringing birthday gifts to the children at church, and the list goes on. Her heart was one of rare beauty and her love lives on in the hearts of all of those whose lives she touched. She was not afraid to let God move in her and make of her a light of love for the world.

I have a strong recollection of my grandmother sitting across from me at her dining room table and telling me that we are “just supposed to love people. That’s all. Just love them.” Any time I mention any controversial issue, my grandmother never takes a stand because she knows that God, not she, is the judge. If you were to ask her whom she voted for in the presidential election, I guarantee she wouldn’t tell you! She would never want to bring up such an issue—straying away from conflict in favor of harmony. She wants the people around her to be happy. Max Lucado, in his devotional book called *Grace for the Moment*, writes, “No occasion justifies hatred; no injustice warrants bitterness. I choose love. Today I will love God and what God loves.”³² I have never in my life heard my grandmother say an unkind word to anyone. Never once! She is a woman with a heart of gold. *She knows how to choose love.*

I once asked my grandma how she felt about homosexuality in relation to the scriptures. We talked a little bit about the accusation that homosexuality is a sin. I asked her, “Grandma, do you think that homosexuality is wrong?” She paused and looked away for at least thirty seconds before saying, “I don’t know.” She went on to say that we will never have the answers to questions like these. We will never fully know what

³² Lucado, Max. *Grace For the Moment*. Tennessee: J. Countryman, 2000, 11.

God intends, and we will never fully understand His will for our lives. We just need to treat all people with dignity and love.

Virginia was what I would term an “activist.” Her love was visible and loud. My grandma, on the other hand, has a love that is quiet and humble. The way in which my grandmother finds she is best able to share her love and compassion for the world is by praying. She is a “prayer warrior.” Inside her small condominium home, she spends hours in prayer putting before God the persons she feels need the touch of God in their lives.

There is something profound and beautiful about the hearts of these women who have used their lives in service to others, and in love for others. Also, there is something about their ages that makes their actions particularly significant. Time had given Virginia the ability to weigh situations and to make ethical judgments about the way people in this world are treated. She was given the gift to take action on those convictions. My grandmother is blessed with time in her old age to be the prayer warrior that she is. Both are powerful statements of love and kindness in this world and reflect the wisdom of maturity.

PART FOUR: VALUING ELDERS

“He nodded toward the window with the sunshine streaming in. “You see that? You can go out there, outside, anytime. You can run up and down the block and go crazy. I can’t do that. I can’t go out. I can’t run. I can’t be out there without fear of getting sick. But you know what? I appreciate that window more than you do...I look out that window everyday. I notice change in the trees, how strong the wind is blowing. It’s as if I can see time actually passing through that windowpane. Because I know my time is almost done, I am drawn to nature like I’m seeing it for the first time.”

-Morrie Schwartz

Becoming more truly ourselves as we age: The Elder As Guide

Having spent a significant amount of time talking about what wisdom *is*, let us now talk about how wisdom that we experience in the lives of our elders is valuable to the communities within which they are involved.

The more years we live, the more experiences we have that open our eyes to how we can achieve our vocation, or becoming who God intends us to be. The truth is, we become more ourselves as we get older. If we take the time to listen to the people who have years of life experience, we will find a wealth of wisdom. We will find people with insight on how they came to discover who they are, and people who can lead us on our own journey of discovering who *we* are. A person may have to experience more of life himself or herself in order to more fully understand the wisdom that elders have to share. But, those who have seen more years have “been there and done that.” It can be comforting for one “in the midst of it” to have someone around and available who has passed through similar times, and/or similar experiences. At the same time, it is also wonderful for an elder to have someone with whom to share his or her story.

We need to remind ourselves, on an ongoing basis, of the “problem” our society has in valuing youth rather than age and experience. The church, unquestioningly, reflects our society in its response to the youth culture. The church needs to counter this trend in order to be more inclusive in its view of the Body of Christ.

Don Holdstrom,³³ the pastor at First Lutheran in Saint Peter, agreed with this idea (of the mutual benefit of sharing across generational lines) and stressed the importance of seeing elders as guides for others in the context of the church community. He

³³ Don Holdstrom (Pastor at First Lutheran Church), in discussion with author, October 2004.

emphasized this by saying that older people have experienced more. They have experienced being Christians in this world. Many of the struggles that people in the church community face are situations or challenges that older people have faced in their lives. In a process of growth and development as individuals and communities in this world, we are in dire need of people to counsel us and guide our paths. We need people who have been in many different places, have done many different things and have gained insights on life in many ways. In *Affirmative Aging*, Robert Carlson says, “Wisdom is not something we attain by our strenuous efforts or our high intelligence...both in the synagogue and the early church, wisdom is associated with age.”³⁴ Life experiences allow people to gain insights and gain wisdom. The wisdom of the elderly is no doubt something that the church should actively tap into. Many older adults don’t realize the riches they have in themselves. Perhaps they have allowed the youth-centered culture to convince them that they are no longer useful. We need to be more purposeful in seeking out the riches of our elders.

A perfect example of the importance of active elders in the church community is revealed in a story told by Stanley Hauerwas in his book *Resident Aliens*.³⁵ He tells of a congregation that just received a new pastor and was having their first Christian Education Committee meeting with the new pastor. The pastor presented an idea to have a day-care center at the church. He explained that it would benefit the congregation by putting the building to use, it may recruit new members, and it would serve the people in the community because it is getting harder and harder to put food on the table with only one spouse/parent working. Gladys, an older woman present at the meeting, spoke up

³⁴ Carlson, *Affirmative Aging*, 59.

³⁵ Hauerwas, Stanley and Willimon, William. *Resident Aliens*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, 118-119.

and said that she didn't believe it to be true that the people in the neighborhood of the church have a hard time putting food on the table. Sure, they may not have enough money to get a new VCR or a new car, but they aren't the ones who have problems surviving. The people who need the kind of service the pastor was talking about providing are the people on the other side of town who don't even have a means of getting their children to the day-care. Gladys also mentioned that the day-care center would do little more than promote the value that it's okay for families to put importance upon making more money rather than upon spending more time with each other. The pastor responded to Gladys' comments by saying, "Gladys, with questions like the ones you are raising, we just might become a church after all."

Faith-Stories of the Elders

One of the most important reasons for having a church is to share our faith with each other. Paul called the Church to be a unified body wherein we may find strength, support, and the realization that the body is many parts. The church should be a place where all can come and share their stories. Many churches make the opportunity available for confirmation youth to share their "faith stories" with the congregation. The community asks the confirmand, "How has your faith changed and developed up to this time in your life?" The confirmand is then given the opportunity to stand before the church family and share his or her story. Why are we not constantly asking this question of *all* the members in our church bodies? More interestingly, should we not be inviting the people who have spent much more time on the road of faith to share their stories?

Audrey Mott, a 77 year old who lives in Saint Peter, shared her story with me one day.³⁶ She told me about how her father knew a lot about the Bible but he told her that it was a "cloak to cover up sins." One aunt of hers was a "spiritual" who talked to the dead, and her other aunt was a gypsy who told fortunes. She talked about how her mother took her to church when she was younger, but she didn't get much out of it. She felt as if the church just told her what to do, and that it wasn't about her faith. She continued to go to church; but it wasn't until she was 52, after reading the Bible straight through twice, that she had an experience that changed her faith dramatically. She was walking home from work one day and she fell down on the floor weeping. She had finally figured out in her heart that Christ had died for her, and she was ready to stand before God and say that she believed.

Audrey is one of many elders who has a story to share and wants people to listen. Every story is unique and valuable to anyone who will take the time to listen. Just think how powerful it would be for Audrey to get up in front of her entire congregation and share her story with them. What an impact it would make on those who are just beginning their walk of faith.

³⁶ Audrey Mott (resident in Saint Peter), in discussion with author, October 2004.

PART FIVE: Intergenerational Ministry Strategies

“The fact is, there is no foundation, no secure ground, upon which people may stand today if it isn’t the family. It’s become quite clear to me as I’ve been sick. If you don’t have the support and love and caring and concern that you get from a family, you don’t have much at all. Love is supremely important. As our great poet Auden said, ‘Love each other or perish.’ ”

-Morrie Schwartz

Intergenerational Ministry: A Benefit for All

Now that we have discussed the many ways in which the elderly are valuable to the community, let us also directly address the ways that the church can support the elderly during this important time in their lives. It is here that we ask what we can do for the elderly. The remarkable answer we will find is that as we form modes of helping our elders receive what they need, we gain much in return. In the following pages, I will present a variety of ministry ideas to inspire congregations to embrace the elderly as a valuable asset, and, as importantly, to recognize that the elderly need the support of the community of faith, as well.

One of the problems that we must address is the rising number of large congregations that assume that the key to a healthy congregation must be *small groups*. Large congregations typically have multiple services with hundreds of people attending each service. People often don't know one another unless they attend the same service or belong to the same small group. An unintended consequence seems to be that those who form these small groups do so around the idea that those in the group will bond around those who are the same as they. This clearly eliminates most possible connections between various age groups and among those with diverse points of view. This phenomenon just feeds into the same problem that we experience in our culture: people are often segregated by age marital status or common interests. As we continue on now to think about intergenerational ministry, let us remember that it is these types of problems that we are addressing.

Strategies for Intergenerational Flourishing

Mentoring

In *Ministry With the Aging*, William Clements lays out wonderful congregational designs for ministry.³⁷ One such design is by Melvin Kimble. His design stresses that elders can be positive models for those who are growing older. He says that often a problem results when too few young people interact with older people. There is a need for structured opportunities to guarantee significant interaction between the young and the old.

There are multiple churches in Saint Peter that have programs in place to connect the elderly with the younger members of their churches. One such program is a mentoring program. This type of program connects each child of the congregation with an elderly member of the church. This allows for connections to be made when the elderly member attends Sunday school with the child or the child visits the older member at home. Mr. Esbjornson recalled a time when he sat in on a 2nd grade Sunday school class and told them stories that connected with the lesson for the day. A few weeks later they all came to his home and rushed in, happy to see him, climbing on his lap and telling him stories. He recalled the moment with such joy, and even giggled at the thought of it.

When I was a child there was a woman at my church named Agnes. She was a stout woman with gray hair and pure white skin. All of her dresses that she wore to church had two pockets in the front, located in just the right spot for her hands to slip easily into those pockets. All the kids knew that if you looked up at her and said even

³⁷ Clements, William. *Ministry With the Aging*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, 217.

just a word to her, she would slowly reach into her pocket, you would hear the crinkle of wrappers, and then she would smile as she revealed a Werther's Originals toffee candy. In the simplicity of a moment like that, she left a mark on my heart. What a fabulous place the church is for bringing together people from all different stages in life. An environment is created where we can perceive the value of taking a moment to look at one another and see the joy that can stem from simply being together and sharing what we have with one another.

My lunch with Mel

I was lucky enough to eat lunch with Melvin Kimble (or, "Mel" as he requested I call him), when he was at Gustavus for the Nobel Conference.³⁸ He is a Luther Seminary Professor who has done years of studying on aging. I was walking through the campus center one evening when I saw him from a distance. I recognized him from the cover of his book, *Aging, Spirituality and Religion*. I cautiously walked up to him, introduced myself, and began telling him about my thesis. I told him that I would be attending a luncheon that he would be attending and I wondered if I might sit with him. With a big smile, he said with enthusiasm that he would love if I would seek him out. The conversation had over lunch the next day was enriching and inspiring. We sat with enchanted ears, listening to one another's life stories. What happened that day between Mel and me that day *was* intergenerational ministry! Instead of just talking about it, we experienced it unfolding right then and there!

Members of the Lutheran church are very familiar with the idea of the "communion of saints." When talking about intergenerational ministry, it is interesting to

³⁸ Melvin Kimble (professor at Luther Seminary), in discussion with author, October 2004.

think about the concept in the context of the communion of saints. Not only are we to be in communion with those of all ages on this earth, but also we are to pray with all the saints, living and dead. We need to recognize the blessing it can be to share our lives with those who know, and live out, the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ.

Caring Community Congregation

The “Caring Community Congregation” model, developed through the Lake Edge--Caring Community Ministry in Madison, WI is a great example of creating families through the church.³⁹ The ministry seeks to create bonds between elders and young singles or couples who both live without family nearby. The vision is to form “surrogate families” where all of those involved may support each other and form relationships that imitate those within a traditional family. This idea is truly an example of commitment to connecting people of different generations and giving them an opportunity to minister to one another. The church is surely a "family" as a whole body, but the church can work to form smaller "families" as well. What a beautiful vision!

Shared Housing

Another idea that churches might look into is the concept of shared housing.⁴⁰ So often elders live in homes where they have far more room than they need. Younger people are often in need of housing that they can afford. An example of this is my dad! After thirty-three years of living away from his parents, he moved into the upstairs of

³⁹ Otterness, Omar and Mundahl, Thomas. *Ministry With Older Adults in the Church*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 30.

⁴⁰ Otterness and Mundahl, *Ministry With Older Adults in the Church*, 31.

their house. Now that he is living there, he can take care of things around the house, drive my grandpa to dialysis, and frequently share meals with his mother and father. Both my dad and my grandparents benefit financially, but it is also a wonderful opportunity for them to share in the blessing of living out the Gospel together. My dad can serve as a listening ear as my grandparents try to process their life journeys, and he can benefit from the wisdom of their years.

Elderly-Friendly Committees in the Church

All churches have committees developed to serve congregational needs in different ways. A congregation in Saint Peter has made an intentional move to get older adults involved on church committees. As a matter of fact, they have even made it a point to get at least one elderly member on each committee. In addition to having specific committees that deal with the issues of elderly members, it is important for churches to remember that the presence of the elderly is needed in *every* committee.

Thinking about the many ways in which elders have experienced the world--and the church--over their lives, gives the church motivation to make them an integral part of the ongoing life of the church. Most churches, including the churches in Saint Peter, have annual congregational meetings where all members of the church are asked to participate in discussing issues with the congregation is currently dealing. Some of these issues would be: the status of the church budget, the needs of the members, electing church council members, and any other concerns that people desire to address. An annual meeting is a wonderful opportunity for a congregation to be intentional in seeing that its membership is represented by all age groups. Attendance should ideally reflect

what the make-up of year-round committee meetings should look like. It is important to value all members of a community. When putting together a church council, a youth and family ministry committee, a worship committee, an education committee, or a stewardship committee; it is important to purposefully include people from every stage of life to offer different perspectives.

Worship and the Elderly

Hildur Swenson is a good friend of mine who lives in Saint Peter and attends Trinity Lutheran church. In the past years her vision has gradually failed from the effects of macular degeneration. She has trouble reading, writing, and performing other tasks that require accurate vision. When I attend worship services with her, I often catch her looking at the text in the worship books or the bulletin and pretending to be able to see what it says. I once mentioned to her that it would be helpful for the congregation to provide a bulletin with large print for people who cannot read the smaller print. She smiled, and with enthusiasm pronounced, “That would be wonderful!”

Audrey Mott, a woman to whom I referred earlier, also has macular degeneration. When I asked her how bad her eyesight is, she said, "I can't see your face right now." We were sitting on the same couch! As we continued talking, she recalled a time when she was in a nursing home and she would sit in the hall with a friend of hers and play a game of who could see an approaching person first. They would yell out when they could see feet and then legs emerge. She said watching people walk down the hall towards her is like seeing people come out of a fog. Imagine how this affects the experience of worship! This is just one of many examples of ways in which church congregations

would want to be aware of the needs of elders. The goal would be to have older adults fully engaged in the worship experience, both *gaining from* and *contributing to* the celebration of the sacraments. In order to meet that goal, the congregation must make sure that it is gaining a direct understanding from its elders of their specific needs.

From my interviews and visits with elderly persons, I conclude that the church, in general, should cater to a greater degree to the hearing needs of the elderly. Earlier in my paper I mentioned the energy that can come from a congregation where all worshippers are present for the entire service at the same time. Often, churches send the children out during the sermon as well as during the communion. If we are to change this, allowing for the children to be a part of the whole service, we need to also be aware of the needs of worshippers who have hearing problems. I see two really advantageous options that are available to most congregations to remedy this problem. Many churches have cry rooms in the back of the sanctuary that allow the children and their parents to be a part of the service, while eliminating the distractions of noise from the rest of the worship space. Another option—perhaps the preferable option—would be to have headsets for the elderly people who have diminished hearing capacity. This accommodation opens up the opportunity to keep the entire body of the church present for the entire worship service.

In *Part Two*, I mentioned the problem that I see resulting when churches develop multiple styles of worship to cater to the young and the old. The church conveniently holds on to its traditions by keeping a traditional service and adds in the spice of modern culture by having a contemporary service. I also mentioned the practice of sending the children out of the sanctuary just before the sermon so they may experience their own service or teaching, presumably at their own age level. My concern is that this practice

has the consequence of separating the generations in the worship experience. Now, let us consider what we might do to remedy this problem!

A rather simple solution would be a blended worship, including aspects of both traditional *and* contemporary worship in the same service. For example, a single service could include singing a traditional song like *All Glory, Laud, and Honor* and the contemporary version of *Shine, Jesus, Shine*. By including both old and new songs, the church demonstrates its commitment to honoring the desire of the older members to enjoy and share their traditions; and the young have their opportunity to share their new discoveries. Another example of creating an atmosphere for sharing across generational lines is to take songs, lyrics, or liturgical elements that are familiar to older generations and set them to more modern tunes. What if the choir did *Amazing Grace* hip-hop style? The possibilities are endless!

Worship planning in many, if not most, congregations is separated from planning for youth ministry and for seniors' ministry. The regular weekly worship setting is loaded with possible ways to enjoy intergenerational ministry. But too often the various committees do not talk and plan together, to take advantage of these opportunities. Just think what could happen if the worship planners, youth directors, and seniors' leaders would intentionally meet on a regular basis to explore, plan, and implement intergenerational events! Goals could be set to hold such events at regular monthly or bimonthly increments. Occasions could be provided for persons of all ages to tell "faith-stories" in the context of a variety of kinds of events. Elders would have the opportunity to share their wisdom and experience. At the same time, elderly persons who are actively

involved with younger people often are invigorated, and they find themselves feeling new energy and discovering new outlooks on life.

Vine

In Part Two I discussed the amazing service that was begun in Saint Peter called VINE: Faith in Action. I briefly mentioned that the churches in Saint Peter might well be more directly involved with this program. Currently, the program is able to function because of a grant from a donor, which will run out in June of 2005. At that time it will have to seek other funding in order to keep its coordinator, Tim Benner. His hope is that the benefits of the program will be recognized and that people will support it when it no longer has the corporate source of funding. I have shared the amazing stories of Leona (last name) and Hildur Swenson who have experienced, firsthand, the immense blessing of this organization in their lives. These are only two of many who have experienced the benefits of this organization. My hope is that funding will be provided that will sustain this valuable program into the future years.

Listening

I saved this section for the end because I consider it to be the most important ministry we can do *with* and *for* the elderly. It simply, yet profoundly, calls the church to listen.

I have spent multiple afternoons with Robert Esbjornson since I started this project. One day and we had a wonderful conversation in the comfort of his apartment. As we spoke, it became apparent to me that he had lived a life rich in education and

teaching. I fumbled for words while trying to ask him about his view on the connection between wisdom and aging. Before I could finish getting a question out, he knew exactly what he wanted to say. He told me that he has an immense body of knowledge in his head. Part of wisdom, he told me, is to select what the “pattern” is in his life. He explained that he has been attempting to write an autobiography, but it has not been an easy task. The problem is that he has so much going on in his head; so many memories, stories, and experiences; which he can’t seem to get out. What he has done to try to remedy this problem is that he has created a fictional person named “Annie.” Annie comes to visit and sits and asks him questions about his life and just listens. I looked at him and said, “Mr. Esbjornson, that is kind of sad that you have to make her up. I always love to hear the stories people have to tell. Why don’t you call me when you need someone to talk with?” He smiled and said warmly, “Yes, *you* can be my Annie.”

There are so many people like Mr. Esbjornson who have come to a later part of life and just want something as simple as someone visiting them and listening to their stories. As Morrie Schwartz asks, “I want someone to hear my story. Will you?” Churches have a wonderful opportunity to take specific action that allows the elderly to share with their congregations the wisdom they have acquired.

In his article, *Ministry with the Aging*, Mel Kimble includes research done by Robert Butler who has done extensive clinical observations and work with the aging.⁴¹ Butler puts forth the theory that reminiscence is critical for a life-review process that should occur before death. If a person has a way of reviewing life experiences (i.e., talking with people who want to ask questions and listen), the past can “reintegrate” into the present and create a way of giving one’s life new significance and meaning.

⁴¹ Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 214.

In the same article, *Ministry with the Aging*, Mel wrote that one of the most significant ministries that can occur with the elderly is listening to them.⁴² It is very important for elders to have people excited about listening to them. I mentioned Robert Esbjornson and his character, “Annie,” that he created for the purpose of having someone to talk to about his life. Ever since that first day when I visited with him, he has referred to me as his “Annie.” Every time he does that, it reminds me of the important role the church can take to ensure that older adults have the connections they need in order to be engaged in the life-review process.

When an elder is listened to and feels heard, the listener gains appreciation and respect for the elder, and the elder may also acquire a new way of viewing his or her involvement in and contributions to the surrounding community. Crossing generational lines through intentional listening can bridge the gap that may exist between the attitudes and values of one generation and the next generation. As cited in *Ministry With Older Adults in the Church*, a handbook published by the Center for Aging, Religion, and Spirituality at Luther Seminary: communication between generations creates a more vibrant foundation for mutual support of young and old in times of great need.⁴³ It also serve as a biblically grounded model for the church, of family life in God’s intention, and as a way of demonstrating that the church is committed to the Gospel’s mandate of love and compassion for all people.

⁴² Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 215.

⁴³ Otterness and Mundahl, *Ministry With Older Adults in the Church*, 29.

Conclusion

Over time the church has brought people from all walks of life together. Members of the church experience the life-giving breath of God, in community with one another. The church has an amazing opportunity to recognize the importance of the vision that the apostle Paul left for the church. The Body of Christ is a single unit made up of many parts. If the church is to live out the mission that it has been given, it must have concern for all its parts. It must not succumb to the ways of society; rather, it must transform itself in the new life of the Holy Spirit, given daily for the fulfillment of the body.

The church must take full advantage of the blessings that are bestowed upon the church in the wisdom of its elders. Elders can instruct and guide the people of the church in lessons of compassion and forgiveness, contentment in material things, patience to live here and now, and they may ignite us with inspiration to live our lives in love. The church should also be certain that it is providing services that fulfill the needs of the elderly. The rest of the body must open its ears and eyes to the legacy the elderly have to leave for us. They want to share their stories. We must listen. Most importantly, the church needs to connect all generations together, creating unity of the body. The Church must ensure that it is creating space and place and time for the stories of the elderly to be heard. The Church has a unique calling and mission to be a model for the rest of the world in valuing all parts that compose the body.

In the *Listening* section I began to tell you about my time with Mr. Esbjornson and the title of “Annie” that I have now been given. He had created a fictional person named Annie so that he would have someone to be with him through a process of writing stories about his life. I stepped into his life and became his “Annie.” Since that time the two of us have been blessed to see our story unfold to even greater depth. On a recent afternoon we were sitting in his apartment talking about where we want to go from here. The thesis is done. We are done talking about it. And yet it seems we are not done with *each other*. So, we asked our selves, what will we do? We decided that I will come every Thursday afternoon and ask him questions that have “piqued my curiosity” about his life. He needs someone to listen; I need someone to listen to. We will sit and experience the story of our life together as it unfolds. As Mr. Esbjornson always says, we do not know where the story will lead. We cannot control where it will go. However, the story will lead us to new discoveries about who we are, who we were, and who we are to be.

It is here that I finish this outpouring of my heart and of the hearts of those who have joined me in the journey of this project. I would like to leave you with the words of Mitch Albom, the man who revealed the story of *his* Tuesday’s with Morrie Schwartz:

“Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back. Some times it is only in your head. Sometimes is it right alongside their beds.

“The last class of my old professor’s life took place once a week, in his home, by a window in his study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink flowers. The class met on Tuesdays. No books were required. The subject was the meaning of life. It was taught from experience.

The teaching goes on.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Albom, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, 192.

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