

Disabilities in Aging

As we grow older, we find that we gradually develop disabilities. In the church they may escape the awareness of others and often are dismissed as an inevitable part of growing old.

People adopt **mechanisms for coping** with the gradual accumulation of disabilities. One of these is reducing activity and involvement. Sometimes a disability is observed by others even before the individual notices (or cares to admit). In other cases, the disability is intentionally well-hidden, and even close friends and family members are not fully aware of the severity of limitations.

How Can the Church Minister?

Although physical, mental and spiritual losses as we age can be depressing, the church has tremendous **potential for healing ministry** that prevents much of the pain and alienation these losses can cause. Rather than allowing the disabilities of aging to marginalize elder members in our churches, the church can respond with expressions of care that may actually prevent the progression of disability and improve quality of life.

Our bodies (and minds) are temples of the holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). The care and keeping of these temples is also the charge of the church. A large portion of Jesus' ministry was devoted to healing disabilities that were physical, mental and spiritual. He mandates his disciples to continue his healing ministry, saying, "They will do even greater things, because I am going to the Father" (Jn14:12).

So in addition to prayer for healing and faith, what are specifics that congregations can do to prevent or support disabilities?

Education, Support and Diligence

A faith community nurse* (also known as parish nurse) or other person recognized by the congregation and committed to confidentiality can be an ideal resource when members are reluctant to divulge personal health concerns. Some churches appoint a member of the church for such a role; others employ a nurse from outside the congregation.

Accurate healthcare information can help persons age well. Congregations can advocate for reliable sources of information. To be most effective, such education needs a facilitator, ideally a faith community nurse who is aware of aging members' needs and concerned for preventive health education.

But education about disabilities is not enough. Most of us know a lot more about our health issues than we have the will to implement. Having **the will to care for ourselves** as we age is a major need of many older persons, especially if we feel over-

whelmed by the incurability of a condition. It is at this point that the concern and support of the church, its members, and programs can make a significant difference. Support makes improved self-care possible.

Support groups are one of the most effective ways to help persons cope with increasing disability, and churches are ideally positioned to provide them. Many persons living with increasing disability find help and healing in sharing with others facing similar concerns. In the church, such support from peers is enhanced by shared commitment to spiritual values. Support groups may focus on sharing experiences or on education about diet, exercise, stress management, or other pertinent topics.

One of the vulnerable populations often overlooked are caregivers, who may neglect their own health in seeking to meet the needs of their loved one. **Support groups for caregivers** prove to be more effective than education on caregiving or counseling for increasing caregiver health and well-being.

Hearing loss in the lives of people who have much to offer in the life of the church often curtails the potential ministry offered by fellowship and worship. It can be vastly discouraging to attend church events but miss out on much of what is said. Churches can help by giving diligent attention to providing improved technology such as assistive listening devices, high quality sound systems, captioning, sermon manuscripts on paper or tablet device, sound-dampening materials in fellowship areas, etc.

Similarly, **diminished vision or mobility** may create barriers to participation that can be minimized by assistive equipment. ADNet would be pleased to discuss possibilities with your congregation's leaders.

A Healing Witness

When our healthcare system is no longer able to meet the needs of aging persons for whom disability is undermining quality of life and living, the churches' mission of healing and wholeness in a broken world can not only witness of the risen Christ to the world, but can also can embody his healing presence.

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*Visit www.churchhealthcenter.org/fcnhome to learn more about Faith Community Nursing.

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