



Social Statements

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

AGING AND THE OLDER ADULT

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Life is a gift of God, and aging is a natural part of living.

More positive attitudes toward the aging process and toward older adults are a profound need today. Men and women 65 years of age and over now constitute one-tenth of the population of Canada and the United States. A vast number of older adults are able and willing to function effectively throughout their lives, serving their congregations and communities, and adding their strength in the struggle to achieve justice for all.

AGING: PREJUDICE AND INJUSTICE

Too often negative attitudes within our society place unnecessary restrictions upon the freedom of the elderly. Frequently the media portray older adults as tottering, forgetful, slow-witted and helpless. Prejudicial attitudes result in injustice toward a large number of older people and deprive society of their talent, experience and wisdom. They are forced too readily into retirement, often eased out of responsible leadership positions in the church and community, too frequently "protected" from making life-affecting decisions, and in some instances made the objects of service activities that other well-meaning persons plan and administer.

People in our work-oriented society tend to view personal dignity largely in terms of occupational performance. As a consequence, loss of occupation or retirement frequently results in the loss of one's sense of dignity. While acknowledging the many problems that arise from unemployment or retirement, this church nevertheless affirms that human dignity has a far deeper foundation than work or status.

THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS

God's love for all persons is creative and unconditional. Human beings have dignity not because they have achieved success or the esteem of the world, but because they are made in the image of God. They are given the capacity to relate to God in responsible freedom.

However, in sinful rebellion against God, old and young alike frequently act unreasonably and irresponsibly toward each other. As one consequence, older

adults often become the undeserving victims of prejudice and discrimination in the callous abuse of their dignity and rights.

The Christian faith looks at all of human existence, its joy and its suffering, in the light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It takes seriously both life and death, declares God's promise that the sting of death is overcome by the resurrection of Christ, and testifies that forgiveness and new life are granted to the faithful in daily and eternal fellowship with God. This Christian view of the aging process gives reason for joy and hope at every stage.

By God's action in Holy Baptism, we are commissioned to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (Ephesians 4:1). This calling — vocation — empowers us to live for others by faithfully serving our neighbors in love and justice. We receive varieties of gifts, which the Holy Spirit enables us to use in building up the body of Christ in witness and service in the world.

Older members of the church have skills, wisdom, and experience to share in exercising the universal priesthood of the baptized. The Spirit helps us to discern the special gifts and needs of the elderly, along with the related opportunities and obligations of Christians in society.

A chief way in which God deals with the human condition in society is to provide all people with civil authority in order to advance the well-being and to secure equal opportunity for the full development of all citizens. Persons are given reason and conscience to help them determine and seek what is just. For older adults, government shares in this responsibility with the elderly themselves, the family, the church, religious and voluntary organizations, business firms, labor unions and other social institutions and structures.

AGENDA FOR ACTION

This church affirms the God-given dignity of human beings of all ages. It emphasizes their right and responsibility to make important decisions and to choose ways in which to participate in the family, the church, and the community. It sees them as individual persons, each different from others in background, life experiences, talents, interests, and present circumstances.

This church understands that many older adults continue to learn, to be open to new ideas, to enjoy a wide variety of interpersonal relationships, including their sexuality, and to engage in constructive activity. But this church also acknowledges that it should respond with sensitivity and skill to the special needs of those who are ill, handicapped, lonely and discouraged.

This church sets forth the following agenda for purposeful action:

FAMILIES

Human beings, whatever their age, are to be viewed not as individuals in isolation from one another, but as persons in community. One basic expression of community is the family. In a time when "family" is frequently viewed in two-generational terms — father, mother, and their children — older members often find themselves

set apart from the extended family group, treated as outsiders or invited guests, and deprived of the warm acceptance they cherish.

Whether or not there are severe problems in such areas as income and health, older adults may be even more distressed by a sense of alienation from life, especially if it involves unsatisfactory relationships with the younger generations. This tendency to alienation is often associated with such factors as family mobility, differing opinions regarding the rearing of children, and the smaller size of living accommodations. Tensions may be increased by the effect the disabilities of older persons may have on younger relatives, by difficult decisions that families must make, by lack of effective communication, or by feelings of inadequacy and guilt on both sides.

It is essential to the well-being of all that older men and women be given honor and loving respect, and that in this spirit they be acknowledged as full members of their own families, even if geographically separated, living in an institutional setting, or mentally or physically incapacitated. Every effort must be made to foster wholesome exchange of ideas, sensitive understanding, and mutual communication and helpfulness among generations.

CONGREGATIONS

This church should seek older women and men, as it seeks other persons, both as members and as full participants in all dimensions of parish life. Older members are called to share in worship, learning, witness, service and support according to their personal abilities and interests. The congregation is potentially well qualified to engage persons of all ages in activities and relationships which encourage understanding and fellowship across generational lines.

The congregation as a community of faith has unrivaled opportunity to assist people, including older men and women, when they experience changes in living arrangements, loss of social esteem or physical capacity, and illness. This is especially true when Christians face the death of spouse, other family members or friends, and ultimately their own death. Through its ministry of Word and sacrament, its educational ministry, its supportive fellowship and spiritual nurture, the congregation can help persons cope with such experiences.

The congregation, recognizing that both the positive and negative attitudes of society are found among kinfolk, should strengthen and provide resources to the family as it relates to its older members. It should help the family to cultivate love and respect and a sense of mutual responsibility across the generations, and to be a constructive healing force in all its relationships. The congregation should show equal concern for older persons who are isolated or alienated. Such men and women often have greater needs than do those with a supportive family. It is necessary, therefore, that they be provided with or alerted to alternate supportive relationships, including the congregation's own role as an "extended family."

In seeking to help older adults with their social and material needs, the congregation should concentrate on encouraging the community to provide essential services. Within this larger setting it can either offer or join with others in offering supportive programs. These may include visiting, telephone reassurance, home health care, chore service, transportation assistance, congregate meals or

meals delivered in homes, financial help to meet special needs, senior center activities, and guidance to its people in using community resources. The congregation should make every effort to assure that its buildings afford easy access and free mobility for all persons, and, wherever advisable and feasible, make those buildings available for community programs.

In whatever is done, older women and men ought to carry an important share of responsibility for planning and operating programs. Every effort should be made to respect their dignity, and to remember that bedridden as well as healthy persons wish to be accepted members of society and are often capable of enriching or rendering service to others.

SYNODS

This church should advance the well-being of older adults by:

- 1) assisting congregations in their ministries with the elderly, using the skills and leadership of educational and social service agencies and institutions wherever feasible;
- 2) maintaining supportive relationships with church-related agencies and institutions that are engaged in this field;
- 3) advocating with provincial/state and local governments concerning the rights and needs of older persons;
- 4) advocating with provincial/state and local governments on behalf of church-related agencies and institutions to encourage the establishment of adequate levels of reimbursement for covered services provided by said agencies and institutions to eligible recipients;
- 5) availing themselves of and referring congregations and individuals to the resources of governmental and nongovernmental organizations working with the elderly, and cooperating with such organizations in mutual endeavor;
- 6) conducting training workshops for persons involved in ministry with older persons; and
- 7) providing guidance and leadership for programs, workshops and seminars on the aging process, avoidable factors that accelerate aging, attitudes toward older adults, and pre-retirement planning.

Each synod should assign responsibility for these tasks to a specific program unit, new or existing, and include older men and women in its planning and leadership.

SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES AND INSTITUTIONS

This church should affirm the ministries of social service agencies and institutions related to it which work with older adults. As it requires these agencies and institutions to meet the highest standards of health, safety, and service, this church encourages them in their efforts:

- 1) to assist synods to support area congregations in carrying out their ministries with older adults;

- 2) to design programs which assist older adults to continue to be integral members of society;
- 3) to provide supportive services — physical, emotional, social, spiritual — which enable older men and women to maintain independent living arrangements as long as feasible;
- 4) to provide services which protect older adults from abuse and exploitation, whether physical, emotional or economic;
- 5) to provide supportive services which enable ill or disabled older persons to receive sensitive care in the homes of their families, or in other residential settings;
- 6) to improve the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the elderly in institutionalized/specialized care;
- 7) to develop institutional living arrangements and programs that affirm the sexuality of older adults;
- 8) to place buildings in geographical locations and make structural provisions that assure maximum access to all persons;
- 9) to serve and employ low income older persons whenever possible;
- 10) to advocate public policies and regulations that assure that church-related and other voluntary agencies or institutions are not made the objects of discrimination when they endeavor to obtain public funds in return for services they provide to the community; and
- 11) to use academic resources in gerontology and other disciplines to help with these tasks.

HIGHER EDUCATION

This church encourages the colleges, universities, and campus ministries related to it in their efforts:

- 1) to motivate and equip faculty and students to see education as a lifelong process;
- 2) to extend opportunities for middle-aged and older persons to participate in formal educational programs;
- 3) to sponsor courses, seminars, and intergenerational activities regarding older adults and aging which involve faculty, students, alumni and the general public;
- 4) to enable the participation of faculty and students in church and community programs working with the elderly;
- 5) to assist in training personnel for agencies and institutions which render direct services to older persons; and
- 6) to use academic resources in gerontology to help with these tasks.

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES

This church encourages theological seminaries in their efforts:

- 1) to equip pastors and other professional leaders with information and skills with regard to aging;
- 2) to extend opportunities for middle-aged and older persons to participate in formal education programs;
- 3) to sponsor seminars, workshops, and related activities which foster constructive attitudes among faculty, students, alumni and the general public toward older persons and aging;
- 4) to enable the participation of faculty and students in church and community programs working with the elderly; and
- 5) to use academic resources in gerontology and other disciplines to help with these tasks.

RETIREMENT POLICIES OF THIS CHURCH

This church, in dealing with older adults, should be concerned to practice the best stewardship of human resources in its own employment and retirement policies.

PUBLIC POLICY

This church, both through the daily lives of its members and through its corporate actions, seeks changes in society toward a more positive image of aging and greater justice for the elderly. It views this endeavor as part of the promotion of justice for all people, and recognizes that many older adults are ready to serve as leaders and participants.

Therefore, this church declares itself in support of the following public policy goals:

- 1) Adequate income for all older persons, derived from an effective combination of personal resources, pension plans, continuing income from work, and government social insurance and income support programs.
- 2) Food policies and programs (including nutrition education) which benefit the elderly, especially the poor, the homebound, and the isolated.
- 3) Action and funding to help secure adequate housing of sufficient variety to offer alternatives in living arrangements for older adults, including those without the ability to pay the full costs.
- 4) A comprehensive health care program ensuring equity in access to services and facilities and freedom from fear of catastrophic medical costs; a program funded through fair and equitable means, with risks spread over the entire population.*
- 5) Responsible government fiscal policies which recognize the impact which inflation has upon the elderly, and which seek to contain inflation by providing more efficient delivery of human services and by moderating federal spending

for programs not directly related to human services.

- 6) Elimination or avoidance of injurious age discrimination in employment and retirement practices in government, business, and industry.
- 7) Exploration of ways by which business and other types of organizations may use the experience and counsel of older adults, and may develop more effective programs that prepare workers for retirement.
- 8) Structural provisions in public buildings that assure easy access and free mobility for infirm and handicapped persons, large numbers of whom are elderly.
- 9) Supportive services which enable persons to maintain independent living in their communities as long as feasible; and skilled care in institutions, including hospices, for all who require it, provided in ways that respect the dignity of the individual in the right of self-determination with regard to his or her own person so that family and community ties may be continued.
- 10) Legal assistance and law enforcement which protect the rights and provide for the safety of older men and women.
- 11) Educational programs, under private and public auspices, available to people of all ages.
- 12) Cultivation of constructive attitudes toward aging and the older adult in areas such as the communications media and educational institutions.
- 13) Encouragement of cultural institutions and programs to recognize older adults as part of their constituency — as volunteers, paid professionals, and audiences.

*Canada has such a program.

CONCLUSION

All persons have worth and dignity because they are created in God's image. This church calls upon its members and all elements of its corporate life to embody this truth in all their relationships, especially — in the context of this statement — those affecting older adults.