

Committee on Ministry with Older Adults
Report for the 229th Diocesan Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey

All-knowing and all-loving God, whose own dear Son was greeted and blessed by the aged prophets Anna and Simeon: Keep us ever mindful of the wisdom and gifts of older adults in our midst; enable us to continually grow in love of you and service to one another throughout our span of years; and, in times of diminishment and loss, provide us with compassionate caregivers. Fill young and old alike with your Holy Spirit, that, as a community of faith, we may all share in the accomplishment of your work in the world, and together reflect the fullness of your image from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

The Episcopal Church's web site reports: "More than one in three Episcopalians is over the age of 65, and another 41% of Episcopalians are between the ages of 45 to 64. That means three of every four members of the Episcopal Church are age 45 or older. In terms of economic stressors alone (retirement age, technology gaps, social services, Social Security, and Medicare), the impact of this demographic group on local congregations is profound."

A resolution passed at the General Convention in 2003 led to the establishment of the Task Force for Older Adult Ministries whose work was reaffirmed in 2012. Resolution D004 of the Episcopal Church's 2009 General Convention created the Older Adult Ministries Task Force, citing such facts as (1) one in every eight Americans is age 65 or older, (2) over one in four of those age 65 and older live alone, and (3) within 10 years, the age 85+ population will increase by 40%. It charged the task force with developing "a comprehensive plan to raise awareness and address the emerging crisis in health, caregiving, and faith issues which cross generational and economic lines with emphasis on support of congregational, diocesan, and provincial programs for older adult ministry." The group was challenged to find answers to the following set of questions:

- How do we recognize, honor, and utilize the experience, wisdom, and gifts of "older" adults?
- How do we develop ministries that integrate and weave multiple generations together spiritually?
- How do we cultivate Christ's message of hope and service for older adults, families, and their caregivers?
- How do we examine, explore, and create innovative and contemporary liturgical, spiritual, and service ministries by, with, and for all generations in the Body of Christ?"²

Clearly, the Church has entered a new age in the 21st century for which it is largely unprepared, with the fastest growing segments of the population being octogenarians and centenarians.³ The growing number of older adults as well as an aging population present the Church with challenges as well as unparalleled opportunities for learning, for service, for advocacy, for evangelism, and for theological reflection. The Church has a unique treasure in its biblical witness which emphasizes the "moral and spiritual growth of those seeking to become mature in wisdom," and actually celebrates age, with "some 175 references to elders."⁴ The gospels show us how Jesus chose to associate with those most scorned by their societies; the

¹ Diocese of Los Angeles [http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Collect_and_Prayers.doc]

² www.episcopalchurch.org/page/older-adult-ministries

³ Dr. Marie Bernard, "Older Adults Health," Resources for Congregations, p. 2. www.episcopalchurch.org.

⁴ James M. Houston & Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors*

Church can assume a powerful and needed countercultural role in witnessing that age is to be regarded as a gift and not exclusively as a burden.

On August 7, 2012, a group came together for a luncheon hosted by The Evergreens, to begin a discussion about the desirability of the Diocese of New Jersey developing a ministry related to older adults and their families and what such a program might look like. Participants included: Mildred Albasi, The Rev. Jane T. Brady, Ruth Dunn, The Rev. Doug Halvorsen, the Rev. Martin Lavengood, Kathy Murray, The Rev. Jayne Oasin, The Rev. Canon John Sosnowski, The Rev. Sharon Sutton, Dcn., Herb Thomas, Canon Connie White.

Some initial areas suggested by the commitments and interests of participants present included:

- A liturgical gathering, such as Evensong, to begin the public phase of our ministry. [The Diocese of Newark has developed a very well attended annual Evensong which honors the contributions of older adults who are nominated by their parishes and accompanied by their rectors.]
- Contributions to lifelong Christian formation through programs related to such areas as the spirituality of aging, changing ideas around the doctrine of vocation, spiritual maturity; stewardship; death and dying and end of life issues. Encourage a focus on older adults in seminary and education for the diaconate and Ministry Institute.
- Guidance around the new health care laws and services; accessing government services; advocacy.
- Aid and encouragement to churches to enable them to become more accessible for and inclusive of older adults; development of intentional intergenerational programs
- Development of/training for pastoral care teams at the parish level; support for families and other caregivers of older adults; special support for seniors in the event of disasters.
- Building on the outstanding resource we have in the Diocese of New Jersey of The Evergreens – a continuing care retirement community begun under its auspices. This institution has no doubt a unique ability to bring together panels of experts and to offer hospitality for programs and seminars.

We are very grateful to have received the blessing, endorsement, and guidance of The Right Revd George E. Cuncell, D.D., The Revd Canon John Sosnowski, Canon to the Ordinary, and Canon Connie White, co-chair of The Ministry Institute. In February 2013 Bishop Cuncell created the Committee for Ministry with Older Adults, named the Revd Jane T. Brady and the Revd Jayne Oasin as co-chairs and the Revd Canon John Sosnowski as Diocesan staff liaison, sent invitations to potential committee members, and set Saturday, September 28, 2013, 3 p.m. for an Evensong at Trinity Cathedral which will honor older adults from our parishes. We seek to compile and share resources with parishes and individuals, develop programs that will be of interest to older adults and their families and caregivers, recognize and raise up the contributions of older adults to the life of parishes and our diocese, and also share our concerns and resources related to older adults within the existing structures of the Diocese of New Jersey.

We pray that the Diocese of New Jersey, as we develop a strong program building on its legacy of care for older adults, will also become a resource to the larger church. We are committed to making this happen and seek your prayers and suggestions as we begin.

Respectfully submitted,

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