

Re-imagining Older Adult Ministry:

By Nancy Gordon

I must confess that when I finished seminary working with older adults was not my first priority. But after five years in parish ministry I was invited to direct a program called “Growth Opportunities,” in order to create an environment within a retirement community where older adults could grow and flourish. Grow and flourish are not words that we normally put in the same sentence with older adults. Is this because we think of aging mostly in terms of decline, frailty, rigidity, resistance to change, loss of memory?

I often turned to Psalm 92 for a picture of what spiritually mature elders could look like. The Psalm says:

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and
full of sap,
showing that the LORD is upright
(Psalm 92: 12, 14-15a).*

I found that the images of flourishing, growing, producing fruit and being full of sap helped me to think about the older adults I served in new ways. These images helped to counter the many negative stereotypes of aging that are pervasively present in our culture. Being a visual learner it helped me to actually gather pictures of the images in the Psalm. I could hold up these images to older adults as antidotes to the stereotypes that they themselves believed. And they helped me to discern what it was that my team could be doing to encourage flourishing, growing,

producing fruit and being vitally alive (full of sap) in the lives of the residents in that community.

Flourish like a palm



This palm tree with its straight trunk and bright green fronds is obviously flourishing. But what do flourishing older adults look like and act like?



These pictures show older adults who are engaged in life and participating in activities that are meaningful to them. They are connected



to their communities and their families. They care about what is happening in the world. They are able to experience joy and express gratitude. And they can do all of these things, even if they aren't in the best of health or living in grand surroundings.



Grow like the cedars



A forest of growing evergreens is an impressive sight. In California we have Sequoias that are 2000 years old and up to 350 feet tall. And yet they continue to grow.



While the residents in my community often assured me that they had achieved all the physical

growth that they desired, they and I knew that there were areas of growth still open to them. They could grow in their faith and in their



relationship with God through spiritual practices and corporate worship and Bible study. They could learn to do new things, learn new technology, and stretch their minds. And they could



be creators—making music, art, and listening to and telling the story of their lives.

Produce Fruit



Have you ever noticed that it's often the older trees that produce the best and sweetest fruit? The possibilities for older adults to contribute the fruit of their gifts and

experiences are endless.

They can love and nourish grandchildren and children from the congregation and its environs. They can use their skills to contribute to the operation of non-profit service organizations. They can do acts of compassion and mercy such as visiting the very elderly and lonely, serving at a soup kitchen,



and walking with those experiencing grief. They can pray for their families, neighborhoods, congregation and the world. What is it about the way we think or organize ourselves that prevents the fruit of



faithful lives from being shared in our congregations?

Full of Sap (Vitaly Alive)

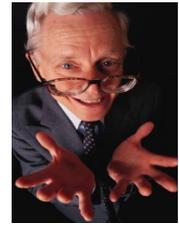


In northern climates when the sap starts running in the maple trees we know that the trees are alive and have survived another hard winter. Being full of sap is the Psalmist's way of saying that older adults are still vitaly alive.



When I think of the older adults I've known who I'd describe as "full of sap" I think of characteristics such as humor. They

didn't take themselves too seriously and could laugh at their own foibles and follies. They were spunky; they told you what they thought, sometimes whether you wanted to know or not. They were willing to join in group activities and to try to do things they hadn't done



before. As one 90 year old said to me, "Well I didn't win the pumpkin decorating contest this year. I'd never done it before. But I'm already thinking about next year."

While valuing and appreciating their past, they looked forward to the future.

As you think about older adult ministry in your setting, do the images of flourishing, growing, producing fruit, and being full of sap cast your ministry in a new light? How could you lift up examples of flourishing, growing, producing fruit and being fully alive in your congregation? What practices could you encourage that would result in these kinds of lives?

The Reverend Nancy Gordon serves as Director of California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging.