


Editorial

Jane Kuepfer and Andy Brubacher Kaethler

Interest in the theme of spirituality and aging is strong. Church leaders, seminaries and theological schools, secular universities, continuous care facilities, publishers, non-profit organizations, and even governments realize that the wellbeing of the growing elderly segment of our population includes a spiritual dimension and requires attention to spiritual health.

The average human life span has increased dramatically in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With persons now regularly living into

their eighties and nineties, and with the percentage of the total population in the later stages of life approaching equality with the percentage of the population in earlier stages of life, our congregations and societies are becoming much more aware of both the opportunities and challenges of life in what we often refer to as the retirement years. In many congregations, the over-sixty population



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is larger than the under-sixty population, making challenges and opportunities even more acute.

This issue of *Vision* focuses on the opportunities and challenges associated with three aspects of spirituality and aging in particular: changes, questions, and resources. Through these themes we honor the experience of aging, with all its emotions, ponderings, and questions. We hear about ways to challenge ageism and engage life more fully with and as older adults. We open ourselves to the voices of older adults and those who know them well and love them deeply to better appreciate the marvelous interrelationship of spirituality and aging.

One way to think of aging is in terms of *change*. With the passage of time comes change—in our bodies, minds, roles and relationships, vocation, circumstances, home, society, and church. Sometimes change is experienced as loss or decline. Often change is experienced as a maturing, a becoming, that takes time. Life ages us. How do we navigate the changes that come with time? And what does our spirituality have to do with it?

Spirituality is the awareness of God's presence—the life-affirming sense that we are not alone, that our Creator who loves and cares is present with us. Spirituality is intimately connected with physical, emotional, relational, and financial health. While the focus of this issue is on the challenges and opportunities of spiritual health, we acknowledge and embrace the interconnection of multiple dimensions of health.

Spirituality can be an anchor in the midst of change. It can also lead us on a search for meaning in change. Our personal and communal spir-



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ituality may offer tools and resources for engagement with both stability and change. In this issue we consider spirituality to be about both rootedness and aspirations or longings. Spirituality is about connection, identity, and belonging. We also consider spirituality to embrace meaning and mystery, convictions and commitments, while recognizing our Christian faith from a Mennonite—

or more broadly Anabaptist—perspective. This recognition leads us to ask questions like these: How do we follow Jesus as we age together with persons at various stages of life? How might the church both listen to and speak into the experience of aging and its implications for all of us?

The themes of changes, questions, and resources help structure and animate this issue of *Vision*, though most of the essays include elements of more than one theme. We hope these themes provide helpful entry points into the world of spirituality and aging.

The first three essays address changes in bodies, activities, and relationships. Ardith Frey considers changes in later life and spiritual practices that help seniors transition with faithfulness and grace. Ingrid Loepp Thiessen explores changes brought on by dementia and provides practical suggestions for how to be a pastoral presence to those with declining cognitive abilities. Velma Swartz invites readers to embrace the emotions that accompany life changes with honesty and integrity.

The next five essays highlight questions older persons may be asking. Cynthia Brubacher Noel considers questions older persons might ask toward the end of a long life and the role of service, ritual, and spiritual autobiography in addressing these questions. Barbara Bowman ponders what is gained by viewing death as a natural part of life and what a “good death” might entail. Marian Wiens asks about the role of spirituality in

the experience of grief. Lisa Heinrichs helps us to think through questions pertaining to medical assistance in dying—questions prompted by relatively recent legal changes in Canada and some states in the United States. Kathryn Cressman prompts us to be curious about the meaning of home and decisions about where to live in later life.

The final essays suggest resources for embracing aging in communities of faith. The piece by Jane Kuepfer highlights considerations for families and congregations as they accompany seniors who continue to explore and grow spiritually. Wes Goertzen reminds us that no one “ages out” of discipleship and offers reflective resources for renewing a sense of vocation. Bev Suderman-Gladwell advocates for the power of music and provides practical suggestions for ministry in long-term care living. Moses Falco models how to lead intergenerational conversations that foster self-discovery for both older and younger participants. Elsie Epp finds herself in the biblical story, in Philippians, as she discerns what it means practically to transition from the pulpit to a pew. This issue of *Vision* ends with an annotated bibliography of resources curated by the editors, which we hope you find helpful for personal reflection, group discussion, and church leadership.

About the authors

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Andy Brubacher Kaethler is associate professor of Christian formation and culture at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Previously he was a pastor in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. As he progresses through mid-life himself, he is becoming increasingly attentive to spirituality as a key ingredient for healthy aging.