

WHAT PARISHES CAN DO

Ministry with maturing adults

By Gisela Côté

“... in the North, the growth industry of the future is likely to be ministry to elders. What youth ministry was to the John Paul years, elder ministry will be to the twenty-first century.” John L. Allen Jr., *The Future Church*, Doubleday, 2009, p. 162.

ON MONDAY AFTERNOONS IN the spring and the fall, a group of maturing adults in the Life Story Writing program meet at St. Mary’s parish in Barrie, Ontario, share events that changed their lives and thereby see each other in a new light. They will return home to write, and one of their stories will make its way into an anthology to be launched in June, eagerly read by their children and grandchildren. Some of them will join the ongoing writing circle group.

“The Life Story Writing Program provides an opportunity to stop, take stock, look back over the process of life in order to gain deeper understanding, clearer perspective and a more integrated view,” writes Dr. Richard Johnson. “Undertaken from a faith perspective, it is a search for evidence in your life that God has been with you and is still with you. Such discovery nourishes one’s inner being, renews one’s spirit and energizes for the journey ahead.”

This is just one of the programs of Ministry with Maturing Adults, described as a ministry of holistic faith development for women and men in the second half of life. As people live longer, their need for a program that addresses their specific issues grows as well. Sister Mary Rose Marrin CSJ became the parish animator of this ministry in the fall of 2007.

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“The focus of this ministry is on-going growth and development,” explains Sister Mary Rose. “Our culture addresses questions of health, finances, housing and recreation for the retired population—but not issues of purpose and meaning which become more urgent as we grow older. These are the issues of the spirit and of faith.”

She goes on to explain how important relationships become in later years, especially when people begin to lose their support systems. “Churches need to recognize the necessity for this ministry,” she says. One of the ways that churches can communicate how their aging congregations matter to them is to offer programs that offer more than socialization, that

encourage the intentional forming of relationships.

When she first began, Sister Mary Rose developed the vision of the program with a group of St. Mary's maturing adults using the tools she had learned at the Johnson Institute for Spiritual Gerontology. The vision states that maturing adults (in the 60–100 age range) continue to grow into the fullness of Christian life. The group next formalized the mission: to support the lifelong faith development of women and men throughout all phases of the pre-retirement and retirement years. They defined support as: compassionate presence, respectful assistance and prayer for one another in relationships of mutual care and concern.

Each year, Sister Mary Rose reviews the past year with participants and so develops the programs for the coming year. This year's offerings, along with the previously mentioned Writing Circles and Life Writing group, include: Journeys Through the Maturing Years, in which six feature films are introduced, seen together and then discussed; a reading group, in which books of fiction, biography/memoir and spirituality are discussed; a Gospel of Matthew scripture study through CD presentations by Fr. Donald Senior; Positive Aging, an exploration of ways of journeying through this period in hope and celebration; and a programme of guided personal prayer. Each month there is a general gathering with an educational, social or spiritual theme.

Another important component of this program is the Ministry of Parish Prayer Companions. Parishioners who are unable to engage in active ministry but wishing to be of service to the parish contact visit with Sister Mary Rose, who explains the ministry. On the Feast of the Visitation, May 31st they are commissioned by the pastor to pray for a specific parish ministry on a daily basis. This commitment is renewed each year.

Not all maturing adults participate in programs but they are an important part of the ministry. One to one contacts are very important. This is definitely a ministry of presence.

Early on, Sister Mary Rose explained the ministry's goals in a newsletter to parishioners: "The first goal is supportive relationships which aims at connecting people and broadening circles of relationship. The second goal, participation in ministry, reminds us that retirement



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does not mean disengagement with life nor does it excuse us from our responsibility to actively contribute to life around us. We can never say, 'I've done my bit.' In Christian terms, we have a mission until the day we die.

Maturing adults need a new vision of aging that:

- 1) Lifts them up,
- 2) Accents the positive purpose of later life,
- and
- 3) Connects them with God's abundant grace.

"The third goal is programs: all of which serve to build relationship—with self, with others, with God and with God's beautiful creation; and to further our lifelong mission to contribute to the Reign of God."

Sister Mary Rose walks her talk. A Sister of St. Joseph of Toronto for 56 years, she has taught, engaged in parish work and also served on her congregational formation and leadership teams, so comes with many practical program

and people skills. Already holding a degree in theology, she went on to obtain a Certificate in Spiritual Gerontology from the Johnson Institute in St. Louis, Missouri.

"Dr. Richard Johnson is a pioneer in this field," she said. "He was among the first to offer people tools for this particular ministry." She especially recommended his book, *Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults, Principles, Practices, and Bold Proposals*.

The Institute describes its function as the following: "Johnson Institute programs in spiritual gerontology, senior adult ministry, and spiritual development view maturation/aging as a spiritual adventure rather than as a slip-page into a diminished status. Maturing adults need a new vision of aging that:

- 1) Lifts them up,
- 2) Accents the positive purpose of later life, and
- 3) Connects them with God's abundant grace. Without spiritual purpose maturing adults can slip into unhealthy behaviors and ageist attitudes that rob them of the joy, richness, and purpose of later life."

Sister Mary Rose adapts Johnson's tools to St. Mary's parish and its needs, always working closely with program participants and ensuring that the offerings have a 'local flavour.' She underlines the importance of having a facilitator who doesn't talk down to maturing adults and who has an appreciation of the challenges and blessings experienced in the second half of life. She is in the process of designing a basic course for any persons ministering to and with older adults.

The impact of the ministry is striking, as quotes from participants show. "My involvement in the ministry has been life changing," wrote Fred Campling in the ministry's newsletter. "As a widower of 2 1/2 years, my life seemed to be 'on hold.' Through the various ministry activities,

I have met new people and have become better acquainted with many people... My sense of belonging has never been greater."

"This ministry has brought parishioners closer together and I believe, closer to God," wrote Rita Cyr. "I have enjoyed all the sessions and I really think I have grown as a person. The ministry has helped me to see how the parish is a family and how much we need to help each other." †