



INVISIBLE WOMEN

Congregational Care with Older Women

In a study of church women over sixty-five, to my question of “How do you feel older women are perceived?” one participant responded: “We are invisible. Didn’t you know that? Old women are invisible.” It was a typical response.

This invisibility felt by older women is in sharp contrast to the demographic realities. Older women currently outnumber older men in the United States and the proportion increases with age. In 2001, the U.S Administration on Aging reported that women make up 58% of the population over the age of sixty and 70% of the population over age eighty-five. Demographic trends indicate that this older population will double between 1999 and 2030. By 2030 older adults will constitute about 20% of the population, the majority of which will be women.

How do older women become an invisible majority? Clearly it is not because they are few in number. Instead I have come to believe that invisibility is a result of the social construction of age and that this is particularly magnified in women. Saying that assumptions about age are largely socially constructed means that concepts like “old woman” are not actually universal or fixed, but reflect social and

cultural beliefs that can change over time.¹ We may not be conscious of these beliefs and attitudes, but they become visible in our social institutions and practices. Since our current cultural beliefs about “old women” are generally negative, older women have little status in the culture, are often no longer seen as attractive, and perceived as unable to make significant contributions to society. Such attitudes do not reflect a natural outcome of the aging process, but are the result of culturally created attitudes and practices.

The church is not immune to holding negative images of older women. While in some congregations the contributions of older women are recognized and honored, in many others older women are pushed to the sidelines and become an invisible majority in the church.² The sad fact is that this happens so much in the church, the very institution that claims that human beings—of all ages—reflect the image of God and hence deserve attention.

But how do we enable such theological claims about being made in God’s image to actively challenge older women’s invisibility and reshape our ministry with them? Holding together our theological beliefs

Karen Scheib

with the awareness of how perceptions of age are socially constructed allows us to critique our own beliefs and practices toward older women in our congregations. We can then examine whether our beliefs and practices are consistent with our Christian theological claims about human beings and the life of the church.

The church is more than a voluntary association or a social service agency. It is called to be a community in which God's love for all humankind is both proclaimed and lived. As the Body of Christ, the church is brought into being through God's gracious activity and is a sign of God's continuing presence in the world. Such a community should be constituted by love, acceptance, forgiveness, commitment, and intimacy.³

When the church takes seriously its theological claims about Divine love, it is often called to counter-cultural witness. But it seems to me the impetus for such witness comes not simply from a theological understanding, but from being convicted and transformed by hearing older women themselves tell their stories, explain their perceptions, and share their feelings.

One such story is Sarah's. It shows how one church's unexamined assumptions about aging affected the life of one of its older women members as she navigates the transition to retirement.

Sarah: Edged Out

Sarah is a 73-year-old white woman with just a touch of gray in her brunette hair. She and her husband of 53 years have a large family of five children and thirteen grandchildren. Sarah was a stay-at-home mom for a number of years, "which was the thing to do after WWII," but she also wanted to teach. After relocating to the city where they now live, with all her children in school, Sarah completed a Masters degree in education and began working

with behavior-disordered children in middle school. Sarah retired at the age of 62, at the same time as her husband "because it seemed like a good idea for both of us to retire at the same time."

Sarah finds that she does not feel much different at his stage of her life than twenty years ago. She holds similar political views and still has a liberal take on religion. As she and her husband have faced health restrictions in the last three years, she has become more aware of her age.

Sarah had not expected retirement to be a difficult transition and had looked forward to increased involvement in her local church. She had enjoyed being in church leadership positions in the past and was eager to become involved in church in something other than education, one of the few careers that had been open to her earlier in life. Sarah was both surprised and angered at how she experienced her church's response to her following retirement. She states that she felt she "aged ten years in six months" in terms of others' perceptions about her. She remarks further:

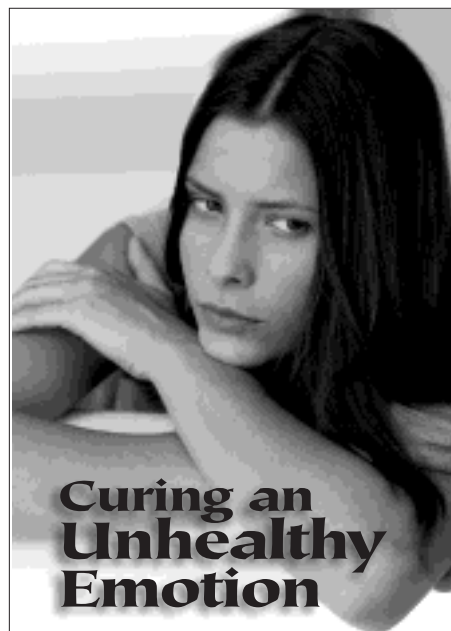
**They might have
sat about ten of us
down at that time
and said: "How do you
see your role?
You contributed a lot.
Do you want to
continue?
Do you want to do
something different?"**

—Sarah

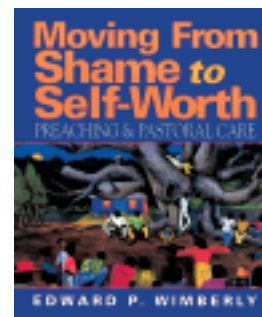
And that's when we get into the church thing—how other people perceive you. This might sound strange, but I saw within a six-month period that I'd aged at least ten years from sixty-two to sixty-two and a half, because when I retired I was seen as a whole new person—they just programmed me and put me over here.

Before her retirement Sarah had often been asked to fill leadership positions at church. These offers dwindled following her retirement.

I was on call to do this, this, this, this, but also, a leadership role. Leadership roles I had when I was fifty, I was still quite capable of handling. And I was seldom asked in comparison to those times. I'm not a great big deal different, but I know that at times



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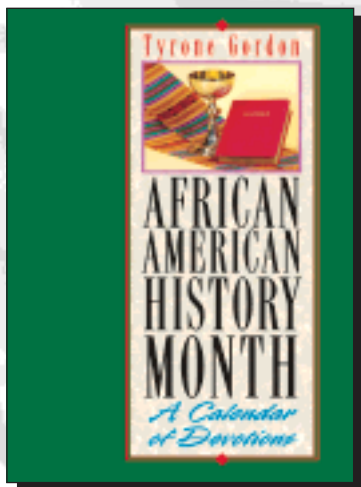


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I would be the first or second person called upon to do something that I could do and had done. It was as though we were stereotyped right up that stair step.

While she herself felt no less competent, she experienced being judged by others as less competent following retirement. It seemed to her that she had once again to prove her competency:

I think they just hear the word retirement and they guess your age because they know the age of your children and so forth. They just categorize you. And you have to re-prove yourself, as if you were a student in class, that I am capable of doing so and so.

Somehow, now that you are retired (it is assumed) it's because you are not as sharp or capable as you once were. You are not working and there are certain assumptions (made).

Sarah also felt that the church could have been more helpful to her in vocational discernment in retirement. Those few times after retirement that she was asked to volunteer, it was typically in the area of education, whereas she was interested in using her retirement to discover new gifts and abilities. She suggests:

They might have sat about ten of us down at that time and said: how do you see your role? You contributed a lot. Do you want to continue? Do you want to do something different? I think they make a mistake. ... And the churches, it seems to me, still pigeonhole you. If you have been a teacher you might have to be on the education committee. I might like something else, you know? I don't think they (the church) do enough in that respect. And I think someone needs to sit down and help you.

Pastoral Analysis

Unfortunately Sarah did not experience the church's attitudes about retirement as either positive or reflective of her own experience of this new period in life. These attitudes were primarily communicated through how the church selected leaders. That Sarah is now less active in her congregation is a direct consequence of these attitudes. Finding herself edged out of leadership positions in the church, Sarah has gone back to work as a substitute teacher, a role in which she is seen as competent and her contributions are appreciated.

Perhaps unwittingly, Sarah's church acted out stereotypical cultural assumptions about retirement as a sign of lessening competence and a time of disengagement from leadership. Unless these assumptions are challenged, it is likely that the members of the congregation will continue to interpret her reduced church activity, and that of other retirees, as a consequence of retirement rather than a result of the congregation's practices toward retired members.

How might we in the church improve this situation for Sarah and other older women in our midst? Most fundamentally by examining attitudes toward aging and retirement reflected in our congregational practices. And we should invite and attend to the suggestions of retirees themselves, such as Sarah's proposal that rather than viewing retirement as a time of disengagement, lay and clergy church leaders might engage retirees in vocational discernment. Approached this way, retirement can become an opportunity to discover new avenues of service to the church as a continuing expression of one's lifelong commitment to discipleship—a profound and welcome gift to both the older person and the larger church community. □

¹ See David Fischer *Growing Older in America* (New York: Oxford Press, 1977) for a history of American attitudes toward aging. See Carroll Estes *Social Policy and Aging* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications 2001) for a further discussion of a social constructivist perspective on aging.

² See the *1994 Survey of United Methodist Opinion* for more detailed church demographics.

³ This portrait of the church reflects the perspective of communion ecclesiology. See Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Press, 2000), for further description and discussion.

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