

There are also too many older adults who have adopted prevailing stereotypes of retirement as a time of sitting in a rocking chair, or endless recreation in fishing and playing golf, or simply being taken care of. They may have accepted the notion that they are no longer able to learn anything or do anything simply because they are old. They and society in general need to develop a new and more accurate image of the possibilities in the later years.

UNEARTHING THE TALENTS

How can older people be encouraged and enabled to share the gifts they have with their congregations? How can they be helped to discover the joy that can come through participation in the life of the people of God, bringing the good news of God's plan of salvation for the world?

• **Communicate that persons in the later years are valued, wanted, and needed.** Let them know people believe they can make a valued contribution to the church. It helps to highlight the life and work of older people who have been and now are constructively involved in ministry. A new consciousness and a new image of the significant place of older people

DISCIPLESHIP JOURNAL 29

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ALEXANDRA BUXBAUM

in the community needs to be created.

• **Reach out to older adults in the congregation.** Seek them out in church, visit them at home, call them on the telephone. Listen to their stories. Telling their story is one way they can find out who they are now and put their lives together at this stage. Turn to them for information, counsel, and advice.

Make sure older people receive information about what is going on in the church and opportunities for their involvement. Consult them about what they want and need. Programs involving older adults in the congregation need to be designed by older adults themselves! This will all help develop a new image of older adults as people with possibilities, rather than burdens.

• **Assist older people to recognize and claim their talents.** Help them recall what they have done and like to do or have always wanted to do and were not able to do. Sometimes older people can be encouraged to reactivate long unused skills and interests.

Otterbein Home in Lebanon, Ohio, organized an orchestra with a few who were interested. Before long a number of people who had once played instruments but had laid them aside began to recover old skills. One woman reclaimed her violin from her granddaughter. A man who had played a French horn in college went out and bought one. Most people can be interested afresh in doing things that were a satisfying part of their past.

• **Offer significant opportunities for ministry.** Show older adults how the things they are invited to do will make a difference in the lives of others. Assure them that they will receive support from and find fellowship with fellow workers—they may prefer to work as part of a team rather than on their own. Encourage them with the concept that they are not only doing something for others, but also opening up an opportunity for them to grow in grace as persons and to find fulfillment as those who are called by God to ministry.

Provide workers with the tools they need to do their best work. Teachers, for example, need adequate space, curriculum materials, teaching aids, and storage facilities. Orientation and training are important in nurturing volunteers, older as well as younger, and in enabling them to perform effectively.

Also, let volunteers know that their contributions are seen and appreciated. A pat on the back, a note of appreciation, a service of commissioning or recognition, or a notice in the parish newsletter strengthens resolve and encourages volunteers to keep on. Have volunteers testify about the satisfaction they re-

ceive from their involvement. A corp of successful, happy older workers attracts others to become involved.

• **Remove as many of the obstacles to involvement as possible.** Create a context that enables people to give of themselves. Tailor the tasks to their circumstances, taking into account their schedules, time, and energy. Provide transportation if necessary. If fear of failure holds them back, start them out on small jobs at which they can succeed. If lack of skill is a factor, promise training and support. Perhaps they can observe for a while to see what a program involves, or serve as an assistant until they feel comfortable in taking on more responsibility.

Supervision gives people the sense that they are not working alone but have continuing assistance in doing their best. It does not mean "spying" on individuals, but rather helping them achieve their objectives.

• **Establish clear expectations and responsibilities.** Job descriptions are helpful in communicating what is expected, how long the agreement is to last, and to whom the volunteer is accountable. Older people may be more comfortable with a limited-term commitment that does not commit them too far into the future. They may want an arrangement that includes substitutes or replacements at times, giving them freedom to travel or visit relatives.

A PROCESS OF LIVING

When older people are enabled to meet their basic needs and supported during times of strain, they are more likely to want to invest themselves in service to others. Ministry is a process of loving. John tells us that we love because we have first been loved (1 Jn. 4:19). When we express love for the older generation by treasuring them and their gifts, we enable them to respond in love with the unique contributions God has prepared them to make. And in the giving as well as the receiving, the whole body is enriched.

Note

1. Names have been fictionalized.

PAUL B. MAVES, a retired minister in the United Methodist Church, is currently adjunct professor of gerontology at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and a senior consultant to Shepherd's Centers of America, among other organizations. He is the author of Faith for the Older Years (Augsburg, 1986).