

Screening in Faith

MINISTRY GUIDELINES – MINISTERING TO THE ELDERLY

Most of us are familiar with the physiological changes that accompany aging. Pain and stiffness in joints can result in loss of manual dexterity and decreased mobility. Hearing often deteriorates, making communication more difficult. In later stages of life, cognitive ability may decrease, resulting in difficulties with memory or periods of confusion and disorientation. In addition, significant emotional changes are likely to occur as people begin to face end of life issues including: the inability to perform tasks that they once did, loss of significant life-long friends or companions, possible regrets over mistakes made or opportunities missed, and the inevitable facing of one's own mortality.

All this being said, we need to remember that many people remain active and contributing members of their community well into their eighties and nineties. Often, these people possess life experiences, gifts, and wisdom that make them a joy to minister to, as well as significant resources for ministering to others. The following should be kept in mind while working with the elderly:

1. Approach each person as an individual with dignity and respect. Do not prejudge an elderly person's interests or abilities. Physical difficulties may not be indicative of interest or mental acuteness.
2. Elderly people often hold clergy and other church personnel in extremely high regard, particularly if they were taught at an early age not to question The Church. Extra caution must be used not to exert undue influence in these situations, particularly in the area of financial giving. Elderly people should be encouraged to speak with their family before making significant contributions in order to avoid allegations of undue influence or abuse of trust.
3. Be aware of signs that an elderly person may not be caring for him or herself as he or she should, and may require additional community resources or assistance. Signs of personal neglect include, but are not limited to: a decrease in personal hygiene, wearing the same clothes all the time, particularly if they are stained or soiled, and periods of confusion, disorientation, or loss of memory.
4. If you become concerned about the wellbeing of an elderly person, speak to your supervisor about trying to initiate contact with a family member in order to discuss the situation and recommend possible courses of action.
5. When meeting elderly people in their homes, be sure to arrange the visit in advance and do not overstay your welcome.
6. People visiting elderly people should be aware of their own level of competence and avoid working in areas for which they are unqualified.