



# EncourAGING and Equipping Congregations for Older Adult Ministry

*An inter-Lutheran ministry by, with, and for adults age 65 and up*

August 2020

## Sturdy Faith in Terribly Troubled Times

*By Roland Martinson, ALOA Board*

**2020! Not since the Great Depression and World War II has our nation, has our world, faced challenges like this year.** Authorities tell us we are pummeled by a “triple tsunami,” a pandemic of gigantic proportions, global economic recession and racial unrest internationally. People, some whom we know and love, are dying by the tens of thousands. Experts describe 2020 as an “Unprecedented Crisis.”



With huge national and global forces like this come disruption and tragedy. Isolation. Job

loss. Family separation. Bankruptcy. Racial injustice. Riots. Students struggling. Homelessness. Lack of sufficient community, state and national resources. Over-run hospitals. Political stalemates. All of this and more, with no end in sight.

With the disruption and tragedy swirl destructive feelings and mental duress. Frustration. Fear. Anger.

Isolation. Loneliness. Sadness. Anxiety. Depression. Hopelessness. All of this surrounded by uncertainty, scarce resources and no apparent solution.

Coronavirus. COVID-19. The frail among us and those who have debilitating diseases are the most likely to die from the infection. Nationally 8 of 10 of persons who have died are over the age of 65.

Many of us live in older adult residential communities. When quarantined or sheltering at home alone, it is often difficult to carry on life day to day without others. Elders living alone become isolated and lonely. Many live on limited incomes and are among those susceptible to economic down-turns.

**2020 has been a difficult year... many would even say a dangerous year for older adults.**

**But there is more than difficulty and danger to the older adult pandemic story, especially for elders of sturdy faith and life.** Research has discovered a number of specific

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**ALOA's purpose:**  
*Equipping persons in the second half of life as disciples of Jesus Christ for their service to family, church, community and world.*

Greetings! I hope this letter finds each of you safe and well. During this time of great change, many of us have settled into a routine quite different from what we were used to. We find ourselves prevented from



Carolyn Ross  
ALOA President

engaging in many of our usual activities, and our days are much different. At ALOA, we recognize that this time of forced rest can be one of great opportunity for growth and revitalization. In that spirit, the board met virtually in August to begin work on the ALOA Congregational Centers for Vital and Resilient Aging program. The goal of this program is to provide congregations with re-

sources to encourage, develop and strengthen intentional older adult ministry. Our first step is the development of an ALOA Older Adult Ministry Toolkit to guide to congregations in this work. The toolkit will address four main components: spiritual, educational, community building, and intergenerational programming. I look forward to working on the project with our Board members as they share their wisdom and knowledge. Funding for this work is being provided by the ELCA Lutheran Services for the Elderly Endowment, and we are excited about this opportunity to develop new programming to strengthen and grow ALOA's ministry.

Please know how much your continued partnership and support of ALOA is appreciated. Blessings to all!

*From the Desk of* **Hans Springer, Executive Director**

**BEING APART. . . BEING TOGETHER**

In these days of the great pandemic I am sure you feel as frustrated as I do...even isolated. My wife and I finally took a ride for a couple of hours recently, just to avoid "cabin fever." And yet as we stay apart from friends and family, we now relish being able to get to church once again, even though we can't hug friends or shake hands, and we sit in every other pew. It is harder to sing through the necessary masks.

I have been reading a small book written by N.T. Wright, my favorite modern-day theological writer. Its title is *God and the Pandemic*. It only runs about 75 pages. It has given me an opportunity to consider the biblical implications of the coronavirus on my life. There is an easy tendency to blame COVID-19 as God's judgement on

mankind. That, of course, is totally wrong. I commend this book for your edification and enlightenment. Wright gives a truly Christian perspective that I found immensely helpful.

In one section of the book, he takes you to the famous quote from St. Paul's letter to the Romans at the end of the chapter 8. It is these words I want to leave with you, as a word of encouragement: ***"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, not powers, not height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."***



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factors that are most conducive to resiliency and thriving among elders. They include:

- **Physical durability** nurtured by good nutrition and exercise
- **Mental acuity** tended by diet and challenging cognitive activity
- **Emotional depth** developed through reality-orientation, honesty and courage
- **Relational connectedness** with family, friends, colleagues and congregants
- **Positive ethical commitments** shaping decisions, attitudes and actions
- **Spiritual vitality** born of reflected beliefs and lively practice of faith

That final factor, ***Spiritual vitality born of reflected beliefs, lively practice of one's faith***, along with

participation in one's religious community serves to ground and integrate all the other strengths.

Studies over the last decade regarding the contribution of religion and spirituality to older adult resilience and thriving give evidence as to why faith and participation in a faith community strengthens older adults especially during times of crisis.

**When facing difficulty, danger and death, God's people over the centuries have relied on God's promises.** Isaiah's words express it well:

*But you, Israel, my servant Jacob, whom I have chosen, The offspring of Abraham; my friend; You whom I took from the ends of the earth; And called from its farthest corners, I am saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off; Do not fear, for I am with you, Do not be*

*afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my Victorious right hand. Isaiah 41:8-10*

Hank, my Christian neighbor, who is 86 years old, knows Isaiah's strengthening, comforting message in his "bones," he says. "Even though I am limited physically and I forget a lot, during COVID I've been more careful and I know in my bones God loves me and is with me. So I've prayed a lot and e-mailed and been on the phone with my Bible study friends."



**Hank's faith not only strengthens, comforts and gives him hope, it also provides a community within which he is embedded and with whom he communicates daily, even though he is sheltered at home.** Hank's participation in

his congregation's ongoing virtual presence in his Bible study group and online worship strengthen him socially, emotionally and mentally.

So as Christian older adults we honestly recognize the dangers and huge challenges of these unprecedented times. But, we do so aware that God loves us, accompanies us and leads us into a new time of promise. So we go forward praying this prayer....

"God you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

*A continuing series of interviews with leaders in senior adult ministry.*

By Mary Manz Simon, ALOA Board

Pastor Dick Hafer has extensive experience working with older adults, including the development of two retirement centers and as Executive Director for ALOA's Florida Region. He has served in eight congregations, resettled hundreds of refugee families, developed affordable housing projects and schools in Haiti and Sierra Leone (Africa).

Our interview with Pastor Hafer focused on Ageism.



*Dick Hafer*

**Years after seminary graduation, you returned to school for a master's degree in gerontology. Why?**

**Hafer:** I grew up around older adults, so being with

them was always very comfortable for me. I spent a seminary practicum at the Lutheran Home at Topton, PA at a time when the orphanage transitioned into a home for older adults. Years later, I pastored a small Lutheran parish, five miles from the University of South Florida in Tampa, which opened a Masters program for Aging Studies. I quickly registered as a full-time student. I firmly believed that I could make a huge difference in developing creative new ministry among seniors.

**A variety of "senior living" facilities are being built to deal with the "age wave" as Boomers get older. Is age-segregated living healthy for older adults?**

**Hafer:** Absolutely not! And I say this having been the developer and executive director of two large retirement centers and fostering affordable housing projects for seniors. These facilities are one very effective way to solve age-related illnesses and handicaps, but more creative ways to provide intergenerational experience must also happen. What about placing a child day care center in the middle of a retirement center? It would solve child day care for some of

staff and afford residents the opportunity to volunteer to work with the children.

**Inclusion and equality are major themes in the US today, so why isn't age discrimination (i.e. ageism) getting the same attention as other forms of bias?**

**Hafer:** In Florida, there are many seniors. I've seen many pastors who are convinced that only with youth will the church survive (as it was in 1950). Each one therefore was resigned to the eventual death of their parish and too often ignored a ministry to the 200 seniors that were in those pews. Creative senior ministry did not occur.

Pastors would respond, "I have many seniors in the parish already, but they don't want to do anything I ask them to do. My response to those pastors, "Ask them what they would like to do to help." Too many churches make decisions about what older people can do instead of listening to what they want to do (learning about their skills and passions). Older adults bring a wealth of gifts and experiences to that parish that is too often untapped.

**What are 3 positive steps congregations can take to defeat ageism locally?**

**Hafer: 1)** If a church is already sponsoring a day school or a day care center, there are hundreds of ways seniors can interact with those children – the pastor, school administrator and some creative leaders need

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to gather to begin thinking of ways this can happen. Far too often the church day care program was begun only to solve some of the church's budget problems.

**2)** Have church leadership develop regular pastoral and organized lay visits to congregants who are isolated (due to crippling diseases or loss of significant others in their lives). These lay visits provide a double gift – one to the isolated person, the other to the lay visitors who play new and significant roles in the parish.

**3)** After retirement at 65, my creative and fun-loving father was offered a job as a van driver for a small retirement center. He loved taking the ladies any place they wanted to go. They also loved him. At age 70 he was abruptly let go because of his age. He loved the work; he was still very capable and the people he served loved him. For the last 22 years of his life he sat watching TV, bored with life. His congregation (in which he was very active) could have created many ways to use his gifts in the parish or the community (maybe transportation for non-drivers). Churches might begin new community projects using seniors. I believe ALOA can model projects like this for congregations.

### What actions can judiciaries take to defeat ageism on a broader scale?

**Hafer:** Too often judicatory leaders, baraged by existing parish problems and shrinking budgets, find little time or money to create new ministry. Capable seniors, problem solvers their entire lives and with no need for financial reimbursement, could be asked to create exciting new ministry with minimal guidance from leadership. Ageism is reduced, new ministry established.

### How can individuals fight ageism?

**Hafer:** It's unfortunate that too many of our retired folks have bought into the idea that retirement means playing away the rest of their lives with golf or cruises. God expects us to serve Him in whatever way we're able until God calls us to our eternal home.

I'm afraid that too often seniors themselves have propagated the myth that they no longer have serious responsibilities in their communities. "They've been there and done that." No wonder the youth of our society do not look to seniors as problem solvers! A long life of many human experiences can be invaluable to our world today.

Then again, with the Tech revolution, there are those who believe seniors' skills are useless unless that person has the most up-to-date technology. Rubbish!!

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Ironwood Springs Christian Ranch near Stewartville, Minnesota has developed appropriate protocols to safely host this week of learning, worship, outdoor activities and fellowship. We'll enjoy presentations on topics of local interest and optional outdoor



activities that include a zip line, cornhole tournament and hiking. Lodging is in comfortable hotel-style rooms in the camp's Miracle Lodge.

**Cost:** \$575 per person/dbl occupancy includes program, lodging and meals. Camper sites: \$525 per person. Commuters: \$350 per person (no lodging or breakfast). For more information or to register, go to [aloaserves.org/events/ironwood-springs-lutherhostel/](https://aloaserves.org/events/ironwood-springs-lutherhostel/)



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**Questions?** Call us or email George Algozzina at [georgea@aloaserves.org](mailto:georgea@aloaserves.org)

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**Questions?** Call us or email George Algozzina at [georgea@aloaserves.org](mailto:georgea@aloaserves.org)

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