

Churches Respond to Problems of Seniors

By Religious News Service

President Nixon, in proclaiming May as "Senior Citizen Month," called on Americans of all ages to renew "the recognition, the respect, and the active concern which properly belongs to older Americans."

Churches in the U.S. — Protestant, Anglican, and Roman Catholic — as well as national Jewish agencies, have long shown an active concern for the aged in the provision of nursing and retirement homes, in the sponsorship of low-moderate housing for the elderly, and in visitation programs to the elderly shut-ins.

Of late, however, churches and synagogues have come under fire for relating to the aging through programs which, it is alleged, "smack of patronizing do-goodism."

Mrs. Margaret Kuhn, 68, one of the founders of the Gray Panther movement — a coalition of militant older people and their young supporters — has charged that many of the "Golden Age Clubs" and "Senior Citizens Groups," sponsored by churches and social agencies, though "nobly inspired," are often nothing but "glorified playpens" for the elderly "who are looked upon as children by their younger guardians."

"More creative approaches to old age" must be discovered, says the Joint Strategy and Action Committee (JSAC) — a coalition of the "national mission" agencies of major U.S. Protestant denominations.

In a recent issue of its bulletin, Grapevine, the JSAC said that the church, "as an institution in the total society and infused with many of its values," has "too often failed to provide a theological and environmental framework for viewing old age as a creative, on-going cycle of life."

"As more and more people in our society face early retirement and prolonged old age, it is clear that both church and society will have to find more creative approaches to old age — for the elderly, we are learning, are us!"

And according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau figures, the "us," i.e. persons over 60, constitute 25 per cent of the current population of 210 million and by the year 2000, will represent 33 per cent of the population.

Further, with the present trend toward earlier retirements, it has been estimated that between 40 and 50 million Americans will be on the "inactive list" by the year 2000.

These figures indicate that America's "aging minority" is the fastest growing minority in the country, and in the opinion of Bishop Joseph L. Hogan of Rochester, it is the nation's "most neglected minority."

The bishop decries modern American society for what he calls its tendency "to equate the values of human life with vitality, youthfulness, and productivity," and its failure to recognize the worth of life "when it lacks these qualities."

This tendency, according to a statement of the American Baptist Churches, is conditioned "by the pioneer-frontier ethic and the Protestant work ethic."

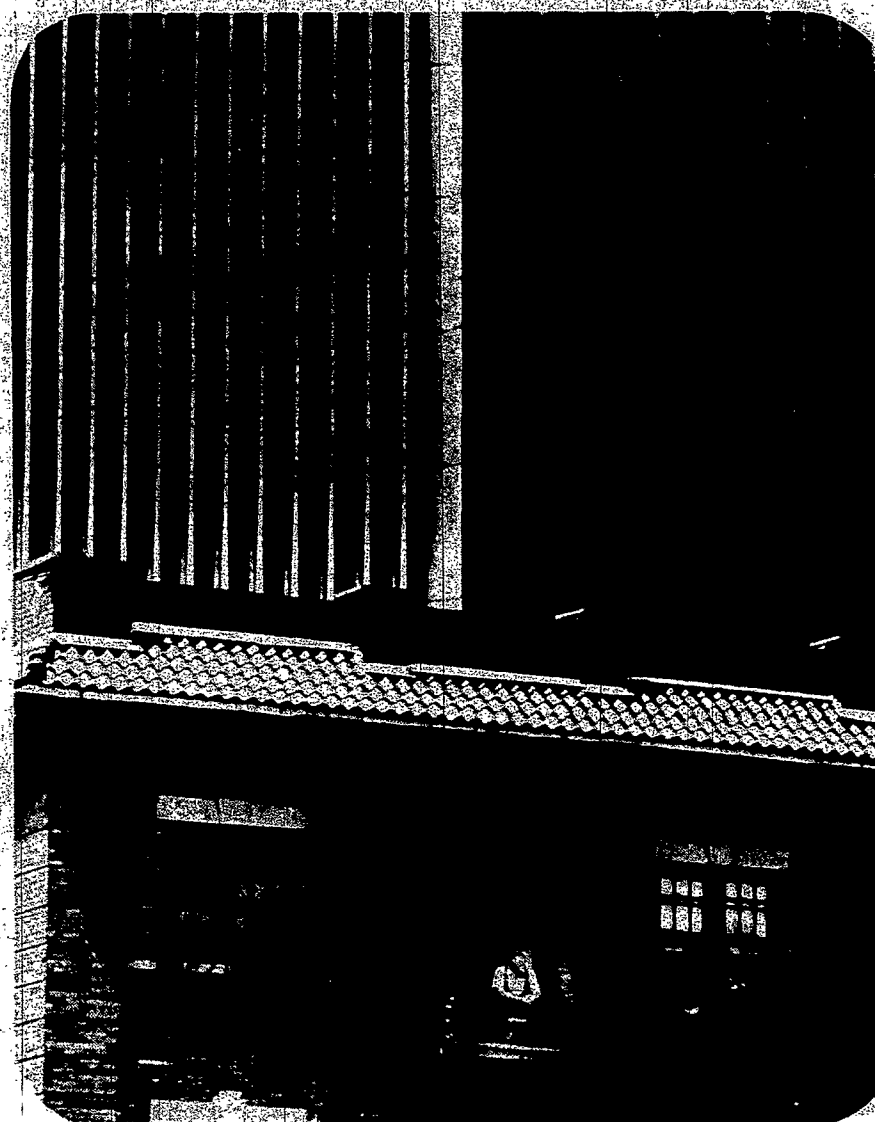


Photo by Dave Witbeck

"Value," it said, "is placed upon those who are productive contributors. The aged and infirm who are mentally impaired are seen as having little or no value in our society. Agism (discrimination because of chronological age) is an all pervasive negative societal attitude."

Spin-offs from this attitude are what Dr. James A. Peterson, director of liaison services at the Andrus Gerontological Center of the University of Southern California, calls "myths of aging."

Among these myths, he told a session of the Associated Church Press at its annual meeting in Denver, Colo. in April, are the "rockingchair myth," the "myth of senility," and the "myth of depression, unhappiness."

As for the "rockingchair myth" said Dr. Peterson, "research has found that most older people are in relatively good health" and are not suffering from debilitating ailments.

Scouting the "myth of senility," he said, again, that research had shown that 95 per cent of all older people are "alert."

"While there are some cerebral accidents," he added, "it has been proved that their ability to think is as good as it was in their thirties, but with wisdom added through the years."

Other studies have demonstrated that the capacity of older persons "to learn" is not diminished in aging, and that though learning patterns change, "the ability to learn continues to be vital."

On the "myth of depression," Dr. Peterson asserted that "most older persons are active, involved, alert, love life, and don't hobble."

The gerontology expert also criticized American society's attitude toward the sexuality of older people as "unrealistic," and urged the church to face up

to the reality of the on-going sexual needs of the elderly.

Major medical studies conducted during recent years indicate that there is no physiological reason why older men and women in reasonably good health should not have an active and satisfying sex life.

Despite this scientific evidence, however, says a summary report on the findings in Reader's Digest (May, 1974), "our youth-fixated culture continues to foster the belief that by the time one is in his (or her 60s, sex is neither necessary nor possible. Or if it does occur, it is somehow not quite normal. Or that it certainly isn't nice for the old folks to be indulging in it."

Conditioned by community attitudes to believe "erroneously" that sexual performance declines to the vanishing point with age, or that sexual expression is dangerous to their health, says the report, "many older persons tend to give up sex."

In numerous other instances, physicians and counselors attest, when older persons do admit to having sexual desires, they often apologize for having such "undignified" or even "depraved" sensations.

Martin Berezin, past president of the Boston Society for Geriatric Psychiatry, has pointed out that when "old people were young, they regarded an old man who was interested in sex as a lecher."

"So, when they're old, they're embarrassed by their own continuing needs," Dr. Berezin remarked. "What was considered virility at 25 becomes lechery at 65."

Gray Panther Mrs. Kuhn has scored this attitude, and has called on the church to "raise the consciousness" of its adherents on the entire matter of human sexuality.

Says Mrs. Kuhn, a former associate secretary in the United Presbyterian Office of Church and Society of the Board of Christian Education:

"The fact that we are sexual beings until the very end of life is seldom appreciated by the church."

"Indeed a kind of monastic, medieval mortification of the flesh still prevails."

"Many older persons have been so conditioned by this evasion of sex in the churches that we have strange and distorted views of the relationship that ought to obtain between men and women."

"The fact that we are male and female is so influential in determining who we are and how we perform and how we relate to others."

"Indeed it is the material of life itself and to deny it in old age is to deny life itself."

Young people prefer to think of their parents and grandparents as "old moralists," observes Unitarian Minister Richard Boeke of St. Petersburg, Florida. But the fact of the matter, he says, is that many of the aged "are still looking for sex and romance."

Rather than marry, however, many elderly men and women pair-off in what has been termed, "unmarriages of convenience." Dr. Paul Glick, senior demographer with the population division of the U.S. Census Bureau has reported that more than 26,000 couples over 65 listed themselves in the last census as legally unmarried and living together.

Counselors, retirement-community administrators, and gerontologists say that such long-term relationships are steadily increasing.

For some couples, they say, it is a purely practical matter, a way to preserve maximum Social Security and other retirement benefits.

For others, it may be a way of sharing chores, assuaging loneliness. But for a growing number of older couples, living together is seen as a logical answer to their desire — and need — for loving intimacy.

In many instances, however, gerontologist Peterson points out, the couple feel they are "living in sin," and this is "difficult for them to accept. And so, reluctant to give up Social Security benefits, they seek out clergymen to marry them without a state license."

The situation presents a mounting challenge to the church, says Dr. Peterson, who has called for a new "theology of aging."

It has been suggested that such a "theology" might well, among its many facets, echo the touching plea of British poet Robert Browning:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.
Our times are in His Hands
Who saith: 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half;
Trust God: see all nor be afraid.'"