

# CREATING A NEW PARADIGM FOR AGING

**E**arly last year, the Pontifical Academy for Life released an 11-page “note” titled, “Old Age: Our Future — The Elderly After the Pandemic.”<sup>1</sup> To emphasize the document’s messages and create opportunities for sharing between ministries, CHA, the Community of Sant’Egidio and Catholic Charities USA offered a related four-part webinar series.<sup>2</sup>

A highlight was the final webinar that featured the wisdom of Sr. Doris Gottemoeller, RSM, chair of Bon Secours Mercy Ministries and one of our ministry’s best thinkers and writers about Catholic health care today and in the future. During her presenta-

tion, “The Elderly — Our Future: Connecting for Greater Understanding and Action for Elders,” Sr. Gottemoeller explored how families, parishes and other ministries can support older persons through 10 proposed actions.<sup>3</sup>

— JULIE TROCCHIO, BSN, MS

## 10 PROPOSALS AND A STORY: AMERICA’S AGING FUTURE

SR. DORIS GOTTEMOELLER, RSM

**H**ow do we improve the ways we incorporate older adults into American culture with dignity, appreciation and appropriate services? The “Old Age: Our Future — The Elderly After the Pandemic” statement from the Vatican reminds us that old age is our future. In other presentations in CHA’s “Old Age: Our Future — Continuing the Conversation” co-sponsored webinar series, participants heard statistics and studied trends, learned of creative efforts and were inspired by passionate speakers. With this knowledge in hand, what should we do if we want to affect the big picture nationwide, and what should we strive toward?

To address this, I offer 10 interrelated proposals for individual and collective action, what I refer to as “Ten Commandments,” in addition to a concluding short story to provide perspective on the strengths that older persons can pro-

vide to our communities.

### **1. Acknowledge the reality and scope of the issue.**

Here’s where the data and trend analyses are important. The percentage of older adults compared to the rest of the population has increased and continues to rise, both globally and in the U.S. The smallest age cohort will be caring for the largest segment of the population. While it’s important to have an idea of this reality, it’s equally important to look around locally within our cities, neighborhoods and even within our own families, because this is the core of our personal efforts, at least initially. When doing so, it’s also essential to examine the following questions: What kind of environment is desired by older adults? What services are needed to maintain that environment? What is currently available, and at what cost? You get the idea.

**2. Regard the issue — the dignified integration of older adults into society — as an opportunity, not a problem.**

Since this is in some ways an unprecedented situation, it calls for new initiatives, both personal and communal. This is an opportunity to demonstrate our love for our neighbor in new ways. To regard the growing proportion of older adults in our society as a problem to be solved or a burden to be carried is a bad way to begin. In contrast, viewing it as an opportunity challenges our creativity, our generosity and our commitment to the Gospel.

**3. Consult the elderly and feature their stories.**

We are working in partnership with older adults, not doing something for them. If we are fortunate, we will join their ranks one day. We can begin to prepare for that right now by developing relationships and friendships with older persons, listening to their stories, seeking their wisdom and by reflecting on the following: What are their life lessons? What is important to them now? What do they enjoy that's different from what they might have enjoyed when they were younger and more independent? What's still on their bucket lists?

**4. Cultivate partnerships and alliances.**

Numerous national and local organizations and faith-based communities are striving to be of service to the elderly. In addition to the sponsors of CHA's webinar — Community of Sant'Egidio and Catholic Charities USA — we might name the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, parish outreach groups, United Way, home health agencies and food banks, to name a few, as other organizations working toward these efforts. We are not in competition with one another. The better we understand the resources each brings, the better friend and neighbor we can be to the elderly.

**5. Create multiple models to accommodate different needs and desires.**

In another presentation held as part of CHA's webinar series on supportive efforts for older adults, participants heard of a number of creative models that enable people to stay in their own

homes or, if that's not feasible, to live in a congregate setting with appropriate services. A fact of life today is that the children of many older people live at a distance. Their education and their employment opportunities have caused them to settle in cities far from where they grew up and where their parents reside. This is fine as long as

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their parents can travel and enjoy occasional visits with their adult children and grandchildren. As they age, however, this becomes less feasible, and they will need supportive services in their homes or, in some cases, congregate living. A prerequisite of any institutional model should be that it facilitates community.

**6. Foster intergenerational relations.**

As previously mentioned, many elderly people live at a distance from any family member. Video calls, whether through computers or smartphones, can provide regular opportunities to connect grandchildren and great-grandchildren with their loved ones. Another initiative I have seen is inviting students in some of our high schools to visit elderly neighbors or residents of nearby nursing homes. Even just a half-hour conversation between the two generations can be mutually beneficial and enjoyable.

**7. Advocate for funding and public support.**

This is where assistance from national organizations like CHA and Catholic Charities USA becomes important. Their professional staff alerts us to pending legislation at the local, state and federal levels that can potentially impact the welfare of older adults, such as housing options, welfare benefits or pharmacy prices. A secret of successful advocacy is knowing the decision makers and stating a clear case for what is being sought, based on credible personal experience.

**8. Prepare RNs, social workers and volunteers appropriately for service to the elderly (especially in home health settings).**

Ministering in someone's home is far different than in a licensed facility. The visitor has no onsite supervision, so preparation — including background checks and an appropriate orientation — is crucial. Issues that should be addressed for proper training include: What boundaries should a service worker follow when visiting someone's home? What are the signs he or she should look for in order to recommend additional professional help?

### **9. Incorporate art and beauty into the environment and services.**

Wherever older adults are living or whatever their degree of frailty, they are persons who have enjoyed art, music and the beauty of nature. Regardless of their taste, they instinctively seek aesthetic delights, therefore any living setting should incorporate these as much as possible. It can be something as simple as a flowering plant on a windowsill, a new book or magazine, an attractive table setting or a visit by a local choral group, but this stimulus acknowledges the deeper humanity of the persons. Congregate living facilities that resemble hospital corridors risk diminishing the humanity of the residents and promoting isolation and loneliness.

### **10. Seek and support the spiritual wisdom of the elderly.**

Wherever older adults are living or whatever their degree of frailty, they are above all spiritual persons. Whatever their faith tradition, they are bound to have deeper questions of meaning and purpose and reflections born of a lifetime of experience. Access to spiritual services is critical. As fewer clergy are available, family and parishioners can step forward to bring the Eucharist, share a prayer and seek the spiritual wisdom of the aged.

### **WISDOM AND RESILIENCY**

When reflecting on ways to help older adults, a story from Genesis offers some perspective. One day God was talking to Abraham and mentioned that, in order to found a chosen people, he was going to see that he and Sarah would have a son. So improbable was this that Abraham fell on the ground laughing as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Or can Sarah give birth at 90?" Sarah was even more amused.

According to the storyteller, she was eavesdropping from the safety of her tent as her husband conversed with the Lord's three messengers. When she overheard the ridiculous prophecy, she laughed out loud at the incongruity of it.

Sarah and Abraham give us a wonderful example of older adults coping with unanticipated change to their lives. It takes some resiliency to nurse and diaper a baby at age 90 and a wholesome perspective to see the humor in all of it. Admittedly, these are semiapocryphal stories, but if all Scripture is written for our instruction, there may be some lessons for us. For instance, the metaphor of laughter suggests that older adults can choose a stance toward their circumstances. Also, it indicates that God sees their lifelong potential.

In fact, old age is frequently attributed to special friends of the Lord. Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated. The pious widow Judith, savior of her people, reached the advanced age of 105, renowned throughout the land. The wise and patient Job lived to be 140, and so forth. In the Bible, old age is associated with wisdom and honor and continuing accomplishment. As we move forward, let us seek to follow that example.

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### **NOTES**

1. Vincenzo Paglia and Msgr. Renzo Pegoraro, "Old Age: Our Future - The Elderly After the Pandemic," The Pontifical Academy for Life, February 2, 2021, [https://www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2021/Documento%20Anziani/Testi%20documento/02\\_OLD%20AGE\\_DEF\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2021/Documento%20Anziani/Testi%20documento/02_OLD%20AGE_DEF_ENG.pdf).
2. "Old Age - Our Future," Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/eldercare/old-age---our-future>.
3. "The Elderly - Our Future," Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/events/calendar-of-events/elderly-webinar-series/overview>.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Fall 2022, Vol. 103, No. 4  
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