1985

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Older Sisters Know What They Need
To Keep Up Their Morale

JAMES J. MAGEE, D.S.W.

During the summer of 1983, I contacted 150 sisters, 75 each from two congregations with headquarters in the Northeastern United States. The sisters were all between the ages of 71 and 85, retired from their primary ministry, and randomly selected for inclusion in this sample. Every sister returned a questionnaire which revealed her level of life satisfaction, the factors which contributed most significantly to that satisfaction, and which allowed for her own recommendations about the kinds of lifestyle that seemed to enhance her morale in her later years. The findings showed that the sisters tended to have moderate to high levels of life satisfaction and a wealth of recommendations. Only 16 respondents offered no recommendations.

Their recommendations fell into three categories. First, the sisters discussed lifestyles. They urged sisters who are approaching retirement to anticipate how they might prefer to remain occupied, what hobbies they may be able to pursue, and whether they had begun to consider the diverse opportunities for engaging in ongoing service either to those in need within the congregation or to those in the environs where they will be living. They suggested preparing a self-designed activity schedule for each day of the week to assist sisters planning for their future. The following are two representative excerpts from the questionnaires. “Retire while you still have life and ambition. Decide how you can be fulfilled. Turn outward to others and give whatever you have in talents and gifts.” Another wrote, “Be alert; read; continue to learn; share your sense of humor; look for the good; exercise; pray; and keep busy.”

The second category of recommendations addressed kinds of institutional prerequisites which would be necessary for a meaningful routine. They regarded it as essential that a program of ongoing planning for career and personal development needed to be in place for all sisters. The investment each sister makes in reflecting with a counselor about the challenges confronting her during each decade of her life will enrich her decision-making concerning

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years after retirement from her full-time ministry. So too, there should be frequent events accessible which will assist retired sisters to remain informed about apostolates in which younger sisters are engaged. Not only are older sisters eager to share their own perspectives about these ministries, but they can also glean from these exchanges a variety of ideas for smaller scale projects in which they themselves might be interested in participating.

Finally, there ought to be no exclusion on the basis of age alone from an administrative or governance position within the community. Such exclusion by age alone has been an impediment to older sisters positioning themselves within their congregation so that they might readily participate in varied or innovative ministries.

The final category of recommendations concerned the kinds of interaction older sisters prefer to have with their superior. The principal sentiment they expressed was a need to “feel appreciated,” “to still be valued.” They thought that they were more likely to receive this recognition when their superior lived at the retirement residence where most of them also lived. They expected that the superior should have a recommendation for each of them concerning some way in which the sisters could continue to contribute to the commonweal of the community. This is, indeed, a delicate matter. On the one hand, these sisters look to the superior for her recommendation—with the expectation that it will be tailored to their interests and physical capabilities. They want the superior to be able to individualize a proposed assignment for each sister. On the other hand, they want the superior to present her proposal in a manner that emphasizes that the final decision remains with the older sister herself, without any pressure being brought upon her to acquiesce.

These requests and recommendations that the retired sisters shared in their questionnaires deserve serious attention. They reveal that the sisters are eager to continue, in a modified and abbreviated manner, their life-long style of service and activity. They are looking to their congregations for institutional resources, such as ongoing programs for career changes and preretirement planning and opportunity for governance and administrative positions, and to their superiors for that humane recognition that they continue to be valued and unique members in their congregations.