A Model for the Congregational Assessment of the Life Satisfaction of Retired Sisters

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Doctor Magee is Associate Professor of Social Work at the College of New Rochelle (New Rochelle, NY 10801). His article is directed on an entirely natural plan for assessing the quality of life for retired sisters. As such, it invites our serious reflection on whether, to what extent, and in what manner these findings and recommendations might be modified by our spiritual/religious convictions.

The findings of my doctoral research with a random sample of one hundred fifty women religious who were retired from their full-time ministry revealed that the conditions that contribute to the life satisfaction of older adults in general contribute, as well, to the quality of life of older women religious. These conditions include the opportunity to participate in cultural and avocational events, a satisfactory relationship with an age-peer confidant, participation in the decision-making process about one's own retirement, satisfactory relationships with family members, and the quality of one's health. Because these conditions do have a significant impact upon the well-being of older members, a model is proposed here that a congregation can use to assess how effectively it has incorporated them into its institutional and personnel planning.

The model provides three levels of assessment. For each condition—and they need not be limited to those listed above—attention is given, on the first level, to the structure of a congregation's communal lifestyle as an ongoing resource which institutionalizes support for each of these conditions. At the second level, attention is given to the manner in which each member internalizes the condition in her own personal life. Finally, attention is given to the opportunities for incorporating the condition in each sister's interper-
sonal relationships.

This model for assessment is designed for implementation by an entire community. The first level, concerned with structures and policies, involves both current programs and institutional arrangements bearing upon the quality of life of members currently retired from their full-time ministry and also ongoing programs of religious formation and developmental psychology that all sisters can use to prepare for their years as older adults. All members, for example, can participate in a survey-research project that evaluates existing programs and services for older members in terms of supports for the conditions mentioned above and that also allows members to offer recommendations for modifying or developing new supports.

The second and third levels, concerned with interior and interpersonal experiences that enhance life satisfaction, can be profitably implemented through group discussions among the older sisters themselves. The discussions could focus upon the agenda items suggested in this paper and upon other themes that the participants regard as contributing to, or detracting from, their quality of life. (Their spirituality is such a theme and is not included in this paper only because it was not a variable in my own research.) Summaries of these discussions prepared by the participants, rather than by observers, will be valuable both to administrators for assessing the extent to which current arrangements facilitate those experiences the sisters find supportive, and to younger sisters as guidelines for their own development and in planning for their own later years.

The following sections contain a model for using this tri-level assessment with each of the key conditions.

Participation in Cultural and Avocational Events

Level 1. First of all, it is essential in the formation of its members that a congregation emphasize the legitimacy of ongoing interest and participation in activities that are not necessarily service oriented or devotional. Even given this endorsement, however, older members may not have access to these activities if the congregation does not compensate for impediments raised by the lack of information, transport, and by physical decrements.

A congregation can effectively address these obstacles in three ways.

The first is by actively soliciting from older members their preferences concerning events of interest e.g., ball games, art exhibits, shows.

The second is by publicizing the availability of transportation to these events. Simply posting on an activities board that someone with a car is attending an event and is ready to chauffeur others is not enough. That procedure often allows the same small network of friends who attentively read the notices to monopolize the one vehicle available. Many of the older sisters do not have a driver's license or have developed infirmities which militate against driving. “Access” requires not simply that a driver for a single vehicle may acquiesce to a request to chauffeur, but that a congregation
Life-Satisfaction Assessment for the Retired

regularly schedules vehicles that accommodate everyone interested.

Finally, the congregation can initiate at the retirement residence adult-education programs in areas corresponding to the interests most popularly expressed by the sisters. Often one of the community is an ideal leader for these sessions.

Level 2. For each sister there is the challenge of resolving the pseudo-dichotomy which would suggest that activities are either ascetical in nature or self-indulging. A stance supportive of mental health will assess all activities, in part, upon their ability to elicit energy and enthusiasm. This stance ratifies the personal significance of any number of activities which enhance the quality of life. Moreover, avocational interests may be increasingly supportive and even necessary when functional decrements impose an unprecedented amount of leisure time into one’s daily routine.

Level 3. Avocational interests are enhanced when they are shared. A sister may not have colleagues in the congregation, however, who are interested in joining her in some particular activity. In this case, she should feel comfortable in soliciting participation from among her lay associates.

Relationship With an Age Peer Confidant

Level 1. A congregation should consider the availability of opportunity for close friends to confer among themselves in weighing the decision about the location to which they will retire. Naturally, living in the same residence will facilitate their ability to engage in shared activities and to continue to be generally supportive to one another. Second, a congregation should incorporate a prominent social dimension into its regional, provincial, and chapter meetings, since many retired members look forward to using these meetings to socialize with age peers and confidants from different residences in addition to conducting the formal business of the meeting.

Level 2. A confidant may be especially helpful in facilitating an older sister’s “life review.” So many of the dysfunctional personality traits and tragic decisions that surface in a life review may have already been shared in discussions with a confidant. The acceptance, perspective and good humor that the confidant expressed can buoy an older sister in tolerating the anxiety that accompanies these memories and enhance her self-acceptance.

Level 3. Older sisters have new opportunities to develop additional friendships with colleagues they have not known so well. These opportunities are also an ongoing test of their capacity to reach out to others while still allowing others “their own space,” to appreciate culturally based differences and the value of personal idiosyncrasies, and to recognize those many occasions in which they should “mind their own business.”

Participation in Decision Making Concerning Retirement

Level 1. There are two keys in which a congregation can maximize the involvement of its members in the decision-making process concerning
retirement. The first is to include all members in a thorough discussion of existing and proposed policies of the congregation for retirement and, in implementing these policies, to provide for an ample period during which a sister can explore collaboratively with her superior the appropriateness and the ramifications of the decision to retire.

The second is the establishment of an ongoing program for all members that focuses upon personal development from the perspective of the entire life-cycle. Such a program will help prepare members to weigh mid-life career changes and to develop a repertoire of skills transferable to a number of careers. Then, when a member retired from a lifelong career wishes to continue in roles with which she is familiar, a variety of roles is more likely to be available to her.

**Level 2.** On a personal level each sister is confronted with the need to set priorities for her own needs and goals. She needs to assess the inner resources that she has developed, and the network of communal resources that is accessible to her. She needs to become increasingly aware of the kinds of experiences that she can anticipate encountering from one decade to the next, with a forethought given to the difficulties that ordinarily accompany the transactions involved.

**Level 3.** Sisters must reach out to ensure that they exercise their decision making in an informed manner. They can discuss important decisions beforehand with colleagues who are in similar situations. They can elicit the feedback of those whose opinions matter to them concerning the breadth of options available to them and the consequences, positive and negative, that can proceed from these options. Finally, they can approach superiors with a curiosity about the kinds of full and part-time activities for which the superiors may regard them as particularly gifted.

**Relationships with Family Members**

**Level 1.** There are four ways in which a congregation can provide opportunities for its retired members to maintain in-person contacts with family members. The first is to encourage visits to kin for whatever length of time the older sisters prefer. The second is to facilitate visits to the convent or retirement residence by offering overnight hospitality to family members who must travel from afar. The third way is to arrange for a retired member, who is so interested, to live as close as possible to kin who are in need of homemaker services. This arrangement will enable the sister to engage in service-related projects with valued family members, most often of the same generation. Finally, it may be possible for a congregation either to admit infirm relatives of the sisters to its own skilled-nursing facility or to convert underutilized buildings on the grounds near its retirement residence to accommodations for older adults, with preference given to relatives of members of the congregation.

**Level 2.** Family contacts can contribute significantly to the self-acceptance,
the Ericksonian “integrity,” that is essential to the well-being of older adults. Older sisters can draw upon family ties with age peers to note and reflect upon the intractability of dysfunctional family traits over the generations. They can observe the way in which family slogans, anecdotes, and mannerisms have succeeded in transmitting these traits among so many in their extended family. In brief, these contacts are occasions for recognizing the inevitability that, given their formative family experiences, sisters would “turn out” with the personal characteristics they have.

**Level 3.** Family contacts offer one opportunity to seek out the memories that other participants have about events of import to oneself and therein challenge or confirm the objectivity of one’s own perceptions. Similarly, retired sisters can use their new found unclaimed time to reconnect with cutoff family lines and in the process perhaps encounter some areas of their own personality with which they have remained ill-acquainted. Finally, their opportunities to meet or correspond with many branches of their families may enable them to develop and disseminate an extensive genealogy.

**Health**

**Level 1.** Since health correlates highly with life-satisfaction, a congregation should emphasize in its formation program the necessity of its members maintaining lifelong habits of good nutrition, exercise, and medical attention. A policy of annual medical checkups may be indicated.

**Level 2.** Sisters can profitably learn to listen attentively to their bodies for “messages” about the need to modify or end a given activity or career. The functional decrements that may accompany aging, on the other hand, can also be experienced as assets in one’s spiritual life.

**Level 3.** Hobbies and exercises that enhance nimbleness of limbs are often more faithfully continued when they are shared activities. This is true, too, for participation in events of aesthetic and intellectual interest and in many other energy producing and morale sustaining activities.

**Summary**

The life satisfaction of sisters who are retired from their primary ministry is affected by many conditions. Social science research indicates that the most significant of these are common to older adults in general. It cannot be taken for granted, however, that congregations have effectively incorporated these conditions into the lifestyle of their older members. Accordingly, congregations are encouraged to assess the extent to which these conditions appear at each of three levels: in their structures and policies, in the internal life of their members, and in the interpersonal activities and relationships in which their older members find themselves.