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Spirituality: Integral to the Assessment of the Life-Satisfaction of Retired Sisters

James J. Magee

The issue of November/December, 1984 carried Dr. Magee's "A Model for the Congregational Assessment of the Life-Satisfaction of Retired Sisters." As he explains, many readers commented on what they felt to be an omission from the perspectives offered in this earlier article. This prompted Dr. Magee to design an instrument and develop this second article which explores the topic further. Dr. Magee may be addressed at his office in the College of New Rochelle; New Rochelle, NY 10801.

This article is a sequel to "A Model for the Congregational Assessment of the Life-Satisfaction of Retired Sisters" which appeared in the November/December, 1984, issue of this journal. In that article I presented a three level model that communities could follow in evaluating how effectively they have incorporated five variables into their planning for the quality of life of their retired members. These variables included the opportunity for older sisters to participate in cultural events, participation in the decision making process about one's own retirement, a satisfactory relationship with an age-peer confidant, satisfactory relationships with family members, and the quality of one's health.

Many sisters have contacted me since to indicate that attention to one's spiritual life is a factor that impacts so significantly upon a sister's life-satisfaction that it should be included as an additional variable in my model. Accordingly, I researched this topic through questionnaires sent to a purposive sample of twenty-one superiors or administrators responsible for programs for their retired members. They were unanimous in affirming that attentiveness to one's spiritual life is a decided asset to the life-satisfac-
ation of retired sisters. Their recommendations for the manner in which communities can support this attentiveness have been categorized below according to the congregational assessment model.

The first level of the model focuses upon the structure of a congregation’s communal lifestyle as a resource for institutionalizing support of the sister’s spiritual life. The second level addresses the manner in which each sister internalizes and expresses her own spirituality. The third level concerns opportunities for sisters to mutually support one another’s spiritual development through their interpersonal relationships.

Level I

There are three ways in which communities usually enhance the spirituality of their retired members. First, congregations can implement those changes which will facilitate the continued participation of older sisters in the liturgies and devotions intended for the congregation in general. This will entail a review of the scheduling of liturgies and devotions, the physical proximity of these events to the older sisters’ rooms, and the removal of architectural barriers. The participation of the retired members in the congregation’s retreats and days of recollection, for example, emphasizes that the retired sisters, indeed, share in the common spirituality and way of life of the congregation.

Second, communities can provide opportunities for the retired sisters to plan for their own days of renewal, favorite feast days, and particular devotions which may no longer be emphasized by the entire community but have been a valued part of the older sisters’ spirituality for many decades. These opportunities will not develop serendipitously. They occur because the administrator who works with the retired sisters encourages this planning, initiates the group process involved, but allows the dynamic itself to evolve among the older sisters themselves. This sensitivity to the preferences of the retired members is seen, too, in the availability of books, tapes, and magazines in which the older sisters express an interest and in implementing programs which their group requests, such as in interpretation of Scripture, or in discussions of death and dying.

Third, communities can exercise care in their selection of retreat masters, confessors, and chaplains for retirement facilities. They should seek those who are attentive to the life cycle challenges that confront the older sisters and who are responsive to their interest in continuing religious study and formation.

Level 2

There are also three factors that enhance the attentiveness which retired
sisters themselves bring to their spiritual life. First, this is the *raison d'être* for their lifelong commitment to the community’s way of life. They have chosen their lifestyle in response to a personal call from God and express this choice through their daily routine of reflection and prayerfulness. Moreover, their life in community, their shared experiences of liturgy and service provide continuous orientation to the primacy of their spiritual life.

Second, their spirituality offers meaning to the cardinal task of their stage of the life cycle-letting go. Their spirituality helps to sustain them through the decrements accompanying aging and to recognize the redemptive value of unmerited suffering.

Third, their spirituality remains a basis for continuing their contribution to the ministry of their community. The retired sisters can daily offer their prayer, their infirmities and losses for the success of the works carried on by their younger colleagues.

**Level 3**

Finally, there are three areas of interaction among community members that are supportive of the retired sisters’ spiritual life. First, there is the interaction between those not yet retired from their primary ministry and those who have retired. Presentations by the younger sisters about issues that confront them in their ministries are opportunities for involving older sisters in the work of the community, for drawing upon their wisdom in problem solving, and for seeking the sisters’ ongoing prayers for the success of the several ministries of which they are kept informed.

Second, many older sisters have developed beneficial relationships among colleagues working together. In these cases the sisters approaching retirement age should discuss with their superior whether they may continue their ministry in a less rigorous capacity rather than have to interfere with these relationships.

Third, retirement from one’s principal ministry is often an opportunity for older sisters who have supported each other’s spiritual growth over the years to collaborate in some shared volunteer service. When retired sisters can share in both the devotional life and service outreach of their community with a valued colleague, their relationship can truly enhance their older years.

Congregations, then, are well advised to incorporate attention to the older sisters’ spirituality into their evaluation of the sisters’ life-satisfaction. As this model for assessment indicates, there are multiple opportunities for achieving this.