



WORDS OF WISDOM

A Ministry for those in the Second Half of Life

In the KY Conference

Minister for Seniors at Famed Church Confronts

Ageism and the Shame it Brings

Later life is a time of reassessment and reflection. What sense do we make of the lives we have lived? How do we come to terms with illness and death? What do we want to give to others as we grow older?

Lynn Casteel Harper, 41, has thought deeply about these and other spiritual questions. She's the author of an acclaimed book on dementia: [Vanishing](#). She also serves as the minister of older adults at Riverside Church in New York City, an interdenominational faith community known for its commitment to social justice. Most of the church's 1,600 members are 65 and older.

Every Thursday from September to June, Harper runs programs for older adults that include Bible Study, lunch, concerts, lectures, educational sessions and workshops or other forms of community-building. She also works with organizations throughout New York committed to dismantling ageism.

I spoke with Harper recently about the spiritual dimension of aging. Our conversation, below, has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What does a minister of older adults do?

A large part of my job is presence and witness – being with people one-on-one in their homes, at the bedside in hospitals or nursing homes, or on the phone,, these days on ZOOM, and journeying with them through the critical junctures of their life.

Sometimes if people are going through really difficult experiences, especially medically, it's easy for the story of the illness and the suffering to take over. Part of my role is to affirm the other dimensions. To see you are valuable despite your sickness and through your sickness. And to affirm that the community, the church, is with you, and that doesn't depend on your capacity or your abilities.

Q: Can you give me an example of someone who reached out to you?

I can think of one today – a congregant in her 70s who's facing a surgery. She had a lot of fear leading up to the surgery and she felt there could be a possibility she wouldn't make it through.

So, she invited me to her home, and we were able to spend an afternoon talking about experiences in her life, about the things that were important to her and the ways she'd like the church to be there for her in this time. And then we were able to spend some time in prayer.

Q: What kind of spiritual concerns do you find older congregants bring to you?

One of the things, undeniably, is death and dying. I see a lot of older adults wanting to express their concerns and desires regarding that. I can think of one woman who wanted to plan out her memorial service. It was really important for her to think about what would be special for the congregation and her family – a gift she wanted to leave behind.

I rarely encounter a fearfulness about what will happen when someone dies. It is more about: What kind of care will I receive before I go? Who will care for me? I hear that especially from people who are aging solo. And I think the church has an opportunity to say we are a community that will continue to care for you.

Q: What other spiritual concerns regularly arise?

People are looking back on their lives and asking, "How do I make sense of the things that I regret or am proud or am ambivalent about? What do these experiences mean to me now and how do I want to live the rest of my life?"

We invite story sharing. For instance, we did a program where we asked people to share an important object from their home and talk about how you came to have it and why it is important to you.

For another program, we asked, "What is a place that's been special to you and why? That ended up being a discussion about "thin places" – a Celtic concept – where it feels like the veil between this world and the next is very thin and where you feel a connection with the divine.

Q: How did the pandemic and spiritual concerns change or influence the nature of spiritual discussions?

Every Sunday, our congregation offers a moment of silence for the victims of covid-19. And every Sunday we list the names of congregants who are sick and who died, not only of covid. It is built into our practice to acknowledge sickness and death. And that became something even more needed.

As much as there was a lot of worry about isolation and our older adults, in many ways our ties with one another became stronger. I saw a tremendous amount of compassion – people extending themselves in very gracious ways. People asking, “Can I deliver groceries? Does anyone need a daily phone call? What can I do?”

Q: What about pandemic-related loss?

The grief has been heavy and will live with us for a while. I think that the ongoing work of the church now is to understand what to do in the wake of this pandemic. Because there have been multiple layers of loss – the loss of loved ones, the loss of mobility, the loss of other abilities. There have been significant changes for people, emotionally, mentally, financially or physically. Much of our work will be acknowledging that.

Q: What have you learned about aging through this work?

I’ve learned how real and pervasive ageism is. And I’ve been brought into the world of what ageism does, which is to bring shame in its wake. So that people, instead of moving toward community, if they feel like they’re compromised physically or in some other way, the temptation is to withdraw. I’m pained by that.

Q: What else have you learned?

How wildly creative and liberating aging can be. I’m around people who have all kinds of experience: all these years, all these tragedies and triumphs and everything in between. And I see them every day showing up. There’s this freedom of being without apology.

I’m so appreciative of the creativity. The honesty. And the real radical attention they pay to each other and the world around them. I’m always remarking how many of our older adults pay attention to things that I hadn’t noticed.

Q: It sounds like a form of bravery.

Yes, that’s right. Courage. The courage to almost be countercultural. To say, even if the culture tells me I don’t have a place or I don’t really matter, I’m going to live in a way that pushes back against that. And I’m really going to see myself and others around me. So they’re not invisible, even if they’re invisible in a larger cultural sense.

Those of us who aren’t of advanced age yet, we often think we’re doing a favor by being around older people and listening to their stories. I don’t see it that way at all. It’s not charity to be around older adults. I am a better person, a better minister, our church is a better place because of our older members, not despite them.

It reflects poorly that our imagination is so stunted and limited when it comes to aging – that we can’t see all the gifts that are lost, all the creativity and the care and the relationships that are lost when we don’t interact with older adults. That’s a real spiritual deficit in our society.

This article was written by Judith Graham and was originally published by [KHN.org](https://khn.org) (<https://khn.org/news/article/minister-for-seniors-at-famed-church-confronts-ageism-and-the-shame-it-brings/view/republish/>). Used by permission.