

Rights and Responsibilities of

SENIORS

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The Rights and Responsibilities of Older Persons

**Policy Statement and Recommendations
Adopted by the 185th General Assembly (1973) of
The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.**

Whereas one of the primary missions of the church is to be concerned with the quality of life throughout the lifespan of the individual; and

Whereas many older persons find themselves faced in the final years of life with serious economic needs, and recent actions of the Federal Government in terminating and limiting expenditures for programs of service to older persons have complicated this economic concern; and there is a need for the church at its various levels to respond to the economic needs of older adults by encouraging the reassessment of government policies and by developing programs to replace those which have been terminated; and

Whereas many older adults experience severe isolation and loneliness; and there is a need for the church to enable older persons to find answers to their loneliness, to minimize isolation, to overcome problems with transportation which further isolate the older person, to develop programs of cooperation between the local church and other organizations sharing similar concern, and within the local church itself, designed to respond to the needs of older persons; and

Whereas many persons are inadequately prepared to face the traumatic experiences of approaching retirement and death; and the church has a special responsibility to enable persons to respond adequately to these later stages in the life cycle, and to provide for the continuing education of all persons, including older persons, for full self-realization;

Therefore, the 185th General Assembly (1973) adopts the following Policy Statement and Recommendations on "The Rights and Responsibilities of Older Persons":

THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF OLDER PERSONS

Agism, characterized by discrimination and alienation and the profound changes that it has brought in the status and needs of persons sixty-five years and over in American society, demands our interest and concern. These changes, and today's prevailing attitudes toward the elderly, tend to move—almost push—them onto the edges of the mainstream of society's life. The dehumanizing and antisocial forces of discrimination and alienation are widespread among all people today, but as experienced by those of the later decades of life, these elements are escalated.

Aging is a cruel experience for many of the elderly. They suffer from a tyranny based solely upon the incidence of chronology. Many become victimized through the consequences of a widely held stereotype about them: because they have reached a certain point in time, arbitrarily set by a government body, a private organization, or a popular myth, their overall capabilities as individuals and even their essential worth as persons are assumed to have diminished. Solely because of the passage of time, esteem for their selfhood tends to be lowered and their status in society impaired. Doors which once opened to them and which many elderly are still capable of passing through are now closed; the earlier climate of acceptance in which age was, at most, a relatively minor factor has now changed—for the worse.

Penalizing Survival. An individual's success in surviving the upper decades should, it would rationally be assumed, assure an affirmative and respectful recognition by society as a whole. Millions of aged persons can testify that such is not their experience. Popular attitudes, subtly and without such an intent, lead to older persons being, in essence, penalized for living into the sixties and beyond. The elderly tend to acquire liabilities, not due to the arithmetic of their years in itself, but due rather to community attitudes toward the assumed effects of those years upon them. Some of the penalties for surviving as elderly are a kindly, but often demeaning, paternalism or a sort of tolerance at their misfortune for being elderly.

Cultural Factors and Community Attitudes. The attitudes which lead to a deterioration of the esteem and status of the aged in our society are nourished by important cultural factors. One of these is public and private policies which support enforced retirement. Enforced, rather than voluntary, retirement is an arbitrary expulsion

of an older adult from the work community which in our society provides the individual with a sense of membership in the community as a whole. Because we tend to overvalue a work ethic, we undervalue the worth of an individual adult who is without employment. The work community is an integral part of the larger community, and without employment older persons are cut off from "belonging."

Community attitudes toward the elderly are fed also by derogating implications uncritically associated with "dependence." But, dependence in some form is a constant of being alive regardless of age. In truth, may not the denigrating of the elderly for being "dependent" be an expression of the egotism of younger adults who wish to hide from their own measure of dependence?

Moreover, there is the widespread assumption that the moral qualities of being a human which are associated with body, mind, and spirit are found to a lessened degree in the elderly. But, in fact, they are present although perhaps in a different "mix" from that of other age brackets. Daily observation of people shows us that these qualities differ among individuals within the same age groups and are shared by individuals in different age brackets. Concretely, if not all old men dream dreams, neither do all young men see visions.

The Basis for Christian Concern and Action. The Christian faith affirms that the life of each individual is a gift of the life-giving God. Its birth is an act of God the Creator and its continuance is through God active as Provider. At every moment of each human life, each individual is precious in the sight of God. Moreover, in Christ, God seeks that all persons may have life more abundantly. No one is too young nor is anyone too old to be a recipient of this offer. Hence, within the context of the Christian faith the life of the aged is to be affirmed and accepted, their needs respected, and their contributions sought and used to the fullest.

The Christian faith also affirms that God seeks wholeness for each individual and for the community of which each is a part. Every person, however on in years, is responsible to seek his or her fullest fulfillment and the community should encourage the person in every helpful way. At the same time when it fails in justice toward any one of its members, the community itself becomes fragmented, rather than whole. "God is no respecter of persons" and in commitment to this inclusiveness rather than in discrimination and neglect of the aged, a community will gain a wholeness from which all of its members will benefit.

Furthermore, the Christian faith provides helpful perspective on

the significance of the time-measurement by which persons measure the length of their days on the earth. In the Christian view, the individual is not a disembodied spirit; earthly life is measured in terms of days and years and decades. How individuals and others view the onward movement of years is important to them as human beings.

Yet, the Christian view also sees each person in his or her essential nature transcending earthly time-bound existence even while living in it. Each person bears the stamp of eternal life. In this perspective, years—whether few or many—are not the full measure of who a person is. For we are made in the image of God to whom “a thousand years are but as yesterday that is gone.”

This twofold view of the individual needs to be kept in full balance in regard to older persons. The needs and promise of their earthly life belong to their worth and dignity, but their full worth lies both within and beyond any man-made measurements of how far an individual is into aging.

Lastly, the Christian affirms that there is no age limit for God’s use of an individual as an instrument for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. God looks to older people to continue to be carriers of the grace and mercy of God among all humankind. As God gives each individual strength and understanding, the aged are to live as examples and advocates of justice and reconciliation. As God’s faithfulness continues into their aging years, so the elderly are to respond to God’s love without weariness in well-doing.

The Elderly as a Source of Strength for Society as a Whole. We believe that a central truth about elderly people lies in their potential strength for society at a crucial point of helping society shape its future on behalf of such values as justice and compassion, integrity and peace. This truth about older people is overlooked by society, often by the elderly themselves.

The shape of the future lies largely in what the generations now living do in their present. In this vital service to their children and grandchildren, the aged can be a continuing source of strength through the exercise of elderly power. The elements of their potential strength are fourfold.

It lies, for one thing, in the recognition of their rights by society and in the assumption of their responsibilities by the elderly themselves.

It lies, in the second place, in the sheer numbers of older persons. There are so many of them in the population! There are now more

than twenty million persons sixty-five years and over.

The potential strength of "oldsters" in society is found, in the third place, in qualitative terms. It lies in their wealth of experience, in their inherent talents, and in their acquired skills of mind and hands. It lies as well in their new freedom in the use of time, which men and women possess who no longer are employed outside the home, and in their creative use of this freedom. Society is the poorer when this freedom is not fully utilized.

And lastly, the potential strength of the elderly in helping shape the future lies in their ongoing roles in the institutions of society. To be alive as an adult, young or old, is to possess the roles of consumer, citizen, neighbor.

For some of the time, some of the elderly will continue in the role of worker-employee. But their other roles are permanent elements of their adulthood. One may retire—voluntarily or otherwise—from being gainfully employed, but there is no release—no retirement—from being consumer, citizen, neighbor as long as life lasts. These roles can be channels through which society may be benefited in shaping its future by an informed and ethically concerned body of older persons.

Increasingly, aged persons will have to learn to participate in the political processes if they are to affect their own lives and indeed the future of all of us. Under the pressure of other national priorities, the needs of older persons will be met only if they are advocated by vigorous, well-organized, and aroused groups and coalitions involving older persons of all social and economic groups. Only by massive organization can public policy be influenced and redirected.

Major Areas of Needed Response by the Church. The church should be actively concerned to promote the growth, release, and use of the strength of older people throughout society as a whole. But it should be equally concerned that the strength of society itself is brought to bear upon the needs of elderly people, as individuals and as a group within the population. Stress should not be on the passivity of the aged as recipients of services issuing from decisions in which they have little or no part. Rather, the emphasis should be on the role of older persons in planning and controlling their own destiny. To be alive at any age is to have a moral claim upon the other members of the community who, the church affirms, are moral persons. No individual or group should be deemed outside the acceptance by society of its moral responsibility for their well-being. The church needs to help society to be aware of and responsive to

the weaknesses and needs of aging people. Among the major areas of such concern by the church we propose the following:

1. Needed changes of attitude toward the elderly in respect to their dignity and potential for living, particularly in view of the present youth-oriented "now" culture and the assumed "obsolescence" of past insights and skills.

2. Critical review of the policies and practices of public and private enterprises designed to serve older persons, including church-related retirement and nursing homes and similar agencies.

3. Deficiencies in the resources available to the elderly, particularly those who live outside a facility for the aging, including areas such as income, housing, medical services, transportation, education, and recreation.

4. Total employment, i.e., the opportunity for employment for all groups including those not now thought of—or who do not think of themselves—as members of the labor force, such as the elderly who are able and wanting to work. Total employment is a wider concept than the traditional one of "full employment," which embodies a more restricted view of who makes up the labor force.

5. Education and training to prepare persons, while still under sixty-five and those over sixty-five as well, to exercise their rights and responsibilities as consumers, citizens, and neighbors.

6. Values upon which our national priorities and economic policies are based, including particular reference to tax policies, so that there may be more justice in the way our nation's material resources are used to provide for its human resources among the aged.

The concerns can be undergirded and extended through the church's awareness and support of older persons in achieving their rights and affirming their responsibilities in society.

Older persons in our society live in diverse circumstances. There are the elderly poor in or close to deprivation, the isolated elderly living on the edge of loneliness, and the elderly in more privileged and affluent circumstances with satisfying relationships with families and friends. All groups of the elderly have basic human rights and responsibilities as well as particular resources to share in attacking agism and working for justice and human dignity for all persons.

Rights of Older Persons. Continuity and a sense of history are desperately needed in an age of unprecedented change, yet old people have few opportunities to contribute what they know. The accumulated experience and skills acquired by the elderly through years of living are largely unused and undervalued today.

The church, community, state, and nation must be sensitized to the unrecognized, undervalued, and unused resource of experience and skills of older persons. The elderly themselves must join with others in finding means to promote the free and viable involvement of older persons in the total affairs of contemporary society. To facilitate such involvement, the following rights of older persons are affirmed:

1. The right of older persons to live in community and with a life-style which affirms human dignity and self-worth regardless of racial or ethnic background.

Societal and cultural changes and the consequent development of new life-styles tend to exclude older persons from meaningful interaction with middle and younger generations. Against this background, the frustrations and insights of older persons tend to be unnoticed. The realization of a mode of living that promotes dignity and enhances self-worth is increasingly harder to achieve for the aging. Communities are also deprived when there are no opportunities to make use of the wisdom and experience of older persons.

2. The right of older persons to have financial and material resources to provide for their physical and social well-being, free from harassment, stigma, and enforced pauperization.

Inadequate income, insufficient medical care, and lack of safe and decent housing characterize the impoverished circumstances of many of today's elderly. In most cases, meager Social Security and private pension fund benefits do not allow for life's necessities. Lamentably, our nation lacks sufficient vision and will in the stewardship of its material resources to correct this injustice. As a consequence, the aged are unduly subject to indignities, hardships, and degradations.

3. The right of older persons to employment without discrimination on the basis of age.

Employment and retirement policies and practices need to be re-examined in the light of the diverse potential for continued employment among persons beyond sixty-five years of age. Specifically, corporations, labor unions, government, and the church need to develop more flexible policies related to employment and retirement based on chronological age.

4. The right of older persons to the benefits of an adequate health maintenance program, and comprehensive health care, which does not discriminate on the basis of income.

The 183d General Assembly (1971) called for effective action to support "the right of all persons to full access to comprehensive health care without regard to ability to pay." This general right is especially applicable to older persons because of their increasing

need for health services. Moreover, the vast increase in medical knowledge, skills, and facilities has far outstripped the social mechanisms by which these become available.

5. The right of older persons to expanded educational and recreational opportunities for self-development, social responsibility, and new knowledge.

Aging normally brings a gradual slowing down of motor responses, but the capacity for learning can continue throughout a lifetime. There is strong evidence that maturity and experience contribute to accomplishments in such fields as politics, administration, and the humanities. Today's adult education programs—public and private, formal and informal—should be expanded in order to provide more fully for the capabilities and needs of older adults.

6. The right of older persons to die with dignity and a sense of life fulfillment.

The great commitment of the medical profession to preserve life and enhance physical well-being should not be thwarted. But the aged should have the right to guard against medical technology being used in a brilliant, but costly and futile, effort to sustain the pulse instead of life. Individual persons are more than their physical nature; their rights rest upon the wholeness of their being.

Responsibilities of Older Persons. The social responsibilities of the elderly are manifold. Like other groups they have a continuing responsibility for the well-being of the nation. Particularly, they have a responsibility to share with other groups the special interests and concerns of older persons and to engage in resolving conflicts of interest between their own and other groups in society. The following responsibilities have been selected for emphasis and attention because of their importance to older persons themselves and because of their urgency for these times.

1. The responsibility of older persons to live as custodians of the future.

From their past, older people have experience and wisdom upon which to build for the future. These attributes should be joined to openness to change, creatively relating the values of our heritage and the lessons from the past to the need for giving direction to change on behalf of a more just and livable world.

2. The responsibility of older persons toward recognizing the importance of individual self-identity and of an individual's growth in social relationships.

Each individual is unique: this truth leads to a search for self-

identity. For many this search is thwarted and distorted by the circumstances of life. Older persons, especially those who are fortified by life-affirming experiences, must bring understanding and compassion to those of their own group and of other age brackets in a common search for such identity.

3. The responsibility of older persons to cultivate the creative use of leisure time.

Leisure time, a major element in the life-styles of most elderly persons, brings with it a special responsibility for its creative use. Imaginative ways of developing old and discovering new talents of hand, eye and ear, of mind and imagination and spirit; sharing one's time with those for whom life means boredom, loneliness, and suffering; growing in the effective exercise of one's power in the common life as consumer and investor, as citizen, and as neighbor—these are life-fulfilling uses of leisure time with benefit to oneself and to others.

4. The responsibility of older persons to participate at all levels of government.

Democracy is a fragile achievement of the human spirit. It is something that is not only to be inherited by older persons but to be preserved by them. The corruption of power through arrogance and greed can result in the use of the democratic process to undermine the process itself. "Vigilance is the price of liberty"—a price that older persons should be willing to pay through the maximum use, which their circumstances make possible, of ways to be heard and heeded throughout government.

5. The responsibility of older persons to work for a society with a more just access to its goods and services.

The very abundance of things in the United States of America hides from its racially dominant and economically privileged members the hardships and indignity of its poor and near poor members. Problems of decent housing, adequate income, and needed medical care are acute and urgent.

Social and economic deprivations require older persons to pursue intelligent, constructive action for the removal of all barriers to an equitable access to essential goods and services to match what people need for their survival and well-being.

6. The responsibility of older persons to work for peace and the use of technology for the advancement of human life.

In a setting in which we see the threatening consequences of technological warfare, the wisdom of the ages that "men shall learn war no more" has new relevancy. And the wisdom of the aged, born out of their own experience, affirms that nothing less than individual

and collective responsibility for the substance of peacemaking is required: to promote a minimum atmosphere of good will and a modicum of mutual trust; to strengthen international agencies designed to substitute cooperation for aggression, negotiation for force, internationalism for narrow nationalism; and to direct technology into life-enhancing instead of death-magnifying uses.

7. The responsibility of older persons to view their years as a time of life fulfillment.

This responsibility should have been started before, but it becomes a more immediate need, at sixty-five. Its exercise will draw upon and add to the inner resources of the older individual while at the same time undergirding the responsibilities toward others affirmed above. It is important for the aged to come to terms with the nature of advancing years, for these are part of the agenda of life itself. Older persons who withdraw from life before life withdraws from them are depriving themselves and, through them, others as well. With a commitment to life fulfillment, older persons become ready to move into that other world into which death ushers us all. Such readiness is the older persons' fulfillment of their responsibility for life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 185th General Assembly (1973):

1. Calls upon churches and judicatories to recognize and affirm the fundamental contribution of older persons to our society and to seek ways to draw upon their accumulated experience, skills, and wisdom to initiate change that will make our society more human and just.
2. Calls upon agencies, judicatories, congregations, and individuals to work for public policies implementing the rights defined in this statement.
3. Urges experimentation in new forms of ministry with and by older persons, so that the elderly may be properly involved in the church's mission.
4. Calls upon churches and judicatories to support the efforts of older persons to organize in groups and coalitions for their own welfare and the larger welfare of society, opposing the forces and institutions that oppress and isolate persons by age, sex, or race.
5. Supports efforts of persons and groups working to end all forms of age discrimination, including discrimination in employment.
6. Challenges and opposes as a massive social waste the policy of mandatory retirement based on chronological age as commonly prac-

ticed by corporations, unions, industries, institutions, and church-related agencies.

7. Urges churches and judicatories to support national pension reform and the necessary legislative and administrative action to establish and maintain portable and financially sound vested pension programs that are properly safeguarded against fraud, mergers, bankruptcy, and mismanagement.

8. Requests all church-related retirement homes to establish new democratic policy-making procedures whereby resident councils will be responsible for programming, and no less than 25 percent of the membership of governing boards will be residents.

9. Requests the Program and Vocation Agencies of the church to constitute consulting committees to advise and oversee the development of new and expanded ministries to utilize the competences of older persons, and provide the training and career counseling needed for such ministries.

10. Directs the Program Agency to assume the responsibility for assisting the church at its various levels in implementing its concern for the needs, rights, and responsibilities of older persons and the recommendations of the Policy Statement on the Rights and Responsibilities of Older Persons; and directs that a high priority be given this concern.

The Background Paper was received and commended to the church for study. It is available from the Advisory Council on Church and Society, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY, 10027. The following appendices are excerpted from the background paper.

Appendix A

AGE PROFILE—UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

According to the 1970 Census, there are well over twenty million people over the age of sixty-five. Percentage-wise, this represents about 10 percent of the population. Yet within The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), according to 1969 General Assembly reports, 16 percent of the constituent membership is over the age of sixty-four. A statistical breakdown of age groups within the church would be as follows:

Age	Percentage
0-14	4.8
15-24	17.3
25-44	30.2
45-64	31.8
65 and over	15.9

An informal study by a metropolitan judicatory in which there is significant population growth occurring revealed the fact that 60 percent of those on church rolls were over fifty-five years of age. Following the above indicators one could say that the majority of the church constituency would retire in ten years.

The year 1969 was the last year in which General Assembly Statistical Reports reflected age profiles. A 1967 study of "The Church and The Aged" concluded, that on the basis of returns from a sampler of congregations, that 13 percent of the United Presbyterian Church membership was over the age of sixty-five. The 1969 figure of 16 percent shows a three percent increase in two years. If one can presume a normal progression, one can project that as of 1973, 22 percent of the United Presbyterian Church membership would be over the age of sixty-five. Based on observations of church attendance, participation in church activities, and a cursory glance at Sunday morning attendance, the 22 percent figure is most conservative.

Another indicator of the increasingly older church population would be reflected in the persons presently being served in the UPCUSA-related retirement homes. Not too many years ago it was not uncommon for persons in their early seventies to enter one of our homes. Today average entrance age is close to eighty, with the average age of residents of eighty-four or eighty-five. Based on a 1971 study of residents of fifty-five UPCUSA-related homes, the average resident would be a woman over the age of eighty-one, having been in the home slightly over three years. Her monthly income would be in excess of \$400. Her professional background, or that of her husband, would have been within the professional or managerial field, having personally had at least two years of college. There would be a high probability that she would either be the widow of a clergyman or related to clergy within her immediate family. The income and educational level of residents within the UPCUSA homes far exceed the average of other persons over the age of sixty-five. According to 1970 Census figures, forty-seven percent of persons over the age of sixty-five live in poverty and the majority never finished elementary school. Nationally, a small percentage of benevolence giving goes into the support of UPCUSA-related homes. Rather, the majority of income is derived from fees, public reimbursement for services, and endowment income.

Some project that by the year 2000 close to fifty percent of the United States population will be over the age of fifty. By 1980 fifty percent of the UPCUSA constituency will be over fifty years of age. This has direct implications for United Presbyterian Church's program and mission.

Appendix B

Bill of Rights for Patients

Policy Statement
adopted by the
American Hospital Association

Issued: January 8, 1972

1. The patient has the right to considerate and respectful care.
2. The patient has the right to obtain from his physician complete current information concerning his diagnosis, treatment and prognosis in terms the patient can reasonably be expected to understand.
3. The patient has the right to receive from his physician information necessary to give informed consent prior to the start of any procedure and/or treatment.
4. The patient has the right to refuse treatment to the extent permitted by law, and to be informed of the medical consequences of his action.
5. The patient has the right to every consideration of his privacy concerning his own medical care program.
6. The patient has the right to expect that all communications and records pertaining to his care should be treated as confidential.
7. The patient has the right to expect that within its capacity a hospital must make reasonable response to the request of a patient for services.

8. The patient has the right to obtain information as to any relationship of his hospital to other health care and educational institutions insofar as his care is concerned.

9. The patient has the right to be advised if the hospital proposes to engage in or perform human experimentation affecting his care or treatment.

10. The patient has the right to expect reasonable continuity of care.

11. The patient has the right to examine and receive an explanation of his bill regardless of source of payment.

12. The patient has the right to know what hospital rules and regulations apply to his conduct as a patient.

Appendix C A Living Will

To My Family, My Physician, My Clergyman, My Lawyer—
If the time comes when I can no longer take part in decisions for my own future, let this statement stand as the testament of my wishes:

If there is no reasonable expectation of my recovery from physical or mental disability, I, _____

request that I be allowed to die and not be kept alive by artificial means or heroic measures. Death is as much a reality as birth, growth, maturity and old age—it is the one certainty. I do not fear death as much as I fear the indignity of deterioration, dependence and hopeless pain. I ask that drugs be mercifully administered to me for terminal suffering even if they hasten the moment of death.

This request is made after careful consideration. Although this document is not legally binding, you who care for me will, I hope, feel morally bound to follow its mandate. I recognize that it places a heavy burden of responsibility upon you, and it is with the intention of sharing that responsibility and of mitigating any feelings of guilt that this statement is made.

Signed _____

Date _____

Witnessed by:

To secure extra copies for your own use and to give to friends, write to:
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