Survival Needs of the Older Church Member: Implications for Educational Programming

Introduction

Pastors and/or church educators often are puzzled over what kinds of educational programs older church members need or want. Older church members typically are left on their own where their church educational needs are concerned. Many suburban and urban congregations have older adult clubs that meet monthly for dinner, informal socialization, and an educational program usually in the form of an entertaining speaker. Busy pastors generally let “well enough” alone, and do not intervene in these gatherings except to be an occasional guest for dinner. This “hands off” policy suggests that the clergyman, like his secular education counterpart, does not understand clearly the needs of older adults.

A perusal of secular educational programs for older adults suggests that program planners believe that what the elderly want most in their latest years are leisure or recreational activities. Structured church educational programs for older adults, where they exist, typically follow the same patterns of secular educational programs. Unfortunately, a misconception has been perpetuated in our society that older adulthood is an idyllic period because the older adult has been freed from the burdens of work and community activities. This misconception has had its effects upon the resultant kinds of programs offered to older adults in the community and in the churches. Typically, courses such as ceramics, arts and crafts, flower arranging, jewelry making, painting, literature, or Bible study are offered to occupy their leisure. These kinds of offerings suggest that pastors believe that older church members have vast amounts of leisure on their hands to devote to informal or cultural pursuits.

Many older adults are struggling to make adjustments in the life style that served them well in their earlier years. The evidence indicates that too few educators have understood that the older adult is also struggling with life and death challenges. There is a special need for programs which provide opportunities for helping older adults make life style adjustments necessary for survival. Throughout the adult portion of
the life span, one has had to develop a set of competencies in the various roles and tasks of his life. Typically, this competency is measured in terms of a person's effectiveness in his judgments and in the wise use of his skills as he meets the challenges of the various adult roles and tasks. The older adult, too, must continue to cultivate his competencies and effectiveness as he faces the challenges of old age. If he fails to develop new competencies in the face of new challenges he will lose the battle for survival.

An examination of some of the commonly held assumptions regarding older adulthood is in order in light of the empirical findings on the developmental changes that occur throughout the entire life span. Moreover, an analysis of the educational consumer will also prove useful in attempting to understand the older church member and provide programs to meet these needs. The following analyses will challenge rather critically the current program offerings for older church members. It is the thesis of this paper that an examination of the changing developmental processes that occur throughout the later period of the adult life span show clearly that instrumental forms of adult education, rather than expressive forms, provide the competencies essential for survival in the later years.

**The Classification of Educational Programs**

Some years ago, the sociologist, Talcott Parsons, demonstrated the usefulness of classifying the activities of persons according to the gratification they received when participating in the activities. Some activities yield immediate gratification, while others provide gratification only in the future after participation in the activity. He termed these instrumental and expressive orientations.

Educational programs and course offerings also can be expressed in terms of instrumental and expressive orientations. Havighurst suggests that instrumental education should be viewed as an activity that has a goal lying outside and beyond the educational program itself because it has the potential for changing the learner's situation. For example, one might enroll in a math course to learn how to exchange money and buy and sell things so that in time he might become a competent businessman. Or, a busy housewife might enroll in a sewing class to learn to make clothing for her growing family. Both examples illustrate that the gratification and value of the experience for the educational consumer lies beyond the immediate involvement in the activity.

Expressive education, on the other hand, is viewed as an activity that has its gratification within the learning situation itself. That is, the educational consumer participates in the activity solely for the gratification it provides him at the moment.

It is rather clear that the kinds of programs offered to older adults, whether in the community at large or in various congregations, fall into the expressive educational activities because the goal is immediate gratification received through participation in the ac-
