

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

James M. Houston and Michael Parker. *A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 272 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0830839483.

James Houston, prolific author, founding principal of Regent College in Vancouver, and passionate spiritual theologian has teamed up with Michael Parker, a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the United States Army with degrees in social work and extensive research and teaching experience in the field of aging and geriatrics, to produce a timely and important book. The authors argue for and examine two main points: that the church needs to become more involved in the care and wellbeing of its senior citizens and their caregivers, and that the church needs to re-awaken to the rich resources seniors have to offer the ongoing ministry of the church. The result of this intergenerational and interdisciplinary collaboration is a theological, and research-based account of the needs and opportunities presented by America's and the church's aging population.

The aging demographic in America is about to explode as the Boomers begin to reach their senior years. This explosion in the number of seniors, combined with a decreasing birthrate, means that fewer young people will be available to provide support and care at a time when societal resources will be severely stretched. In the face of this rapidly growing need, the authors find the church startlingly ill prepared to help. They note that few seminaries in the United States offer even an elective course on aging and ministry. They have found few churches that offer support to caregivers, and those that do often feel under-prepared and overwhelmed by the task. The authors find evidence of ageism, not only in the wider society, but also in the church. While the need is glaring, Houston and Parker do not argue for greater ministry

to seniors on this basis alone, but also on the basis of biblical and theological understandings of what it is to be a human being. Our creation in the image of God holds true despite the debilitating effects of diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's. Our intrinsically relational—as opposed to functional—identity means that we cannot view another human being from a strictly utilitarian perspective. The church is called to love and ascribe value and worth to all people, even those seniors struggling with debilitating illness.

The authors devote a significant portion of the book to a discussion of issues and ideas that will aid the church in this important ministry. Myths about aging persons are identified and dispelled and the importance of developing parent-care plans is discussed. Churches are encouraged to develop intergenerational small groups, to become sources of information regarding community services, to offer seniors the opportunity to complete a life review, and, most importantly, to join with other churches and institutions for the purpose of creating community-wide support programs that complement those already provided within the community. Finally, key issues facing the elderly, such as depression and dementia, are discussed from theological, scientific, and cultural points of view. The need is great, but the authors believe that as churches work together with one another and with other institutions and community groups, they will be able to make a significant contribution to the betterment of, not only their own constituents, but to the wider community as well.

While acknowledging the need for greater ministry to seniors, the authors also argue for greater ministry *with* seniors. This vision is bold and in order to illustrate it, they draw upon the narrative of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem to re-build the walls of the city. The authors argue that spiritually mature seniors can contribute significantly to the metaphorical rebuilding of "the walls" of our churches, the wider community, and the world. The authors envision seniors making a more significant contribution to the spiritual formation and wellbeing of the church community. Drawing upon biblical references to elders, for example, they suggest that seniors have a significant role to play in maintaining and deepening the fellowship of church communities. Seniors'

long experience of living life in a relationship with God must certainly enrich the spiritual lives of those “younger” in the faith. Their redemptive experiences with loss and suffering can become a tremendous source of hope and help to the church. Even those seniors struggling with disability can become our teachers and mentors as we are given the opportunity to offer love in self-giving ways and to learn that our true identity is conveyed not by the phrase, “I think, therefore I am,” but by the phrase, “I am beloved, therefore I am” (p. 195).

The authors, however, also envision a prophetic role for seniors, both within the church community and beyond it. Concerned that church culture has, in many ways, become co-opted by the wider secular society, the authors believe that the depth and length of experience that comes with long life gives seniors a unique perspective from which to challenge the status quo in our churches. Beyond this, the authors see a larger divine purpose behind the aging of America. They argue:

When one thinks of elders one should not think of frail, dependent people. On the contrary, the hope of our nation and perhaps of the world rests on the shoulders of those who comprise the aging church. The most frail and physically dependent person may also be the most ardent prayer warrior or the most wise or courageous member of a congregation. Legions of seniors in churches nationwide can lead the way to a spiritual transformation of America and even the world (pp. 124–25).

This is an important book. The authors have identified what is, generally speaking, an area of lack in many churches, and have made some good suggestions as to how the church can move forward from here. Writing from a Canadian perspective, I affirm that though this book is written from and to an American context, its benefit extends to a Canadian context as well. While the nature of Canadian social and medical supports for seniors may differ from those in the United States, Houston and Parker’s call for greater ministry to and with seniors still applies.

Despite my affirmation of this book, I do have some concerns. The first is of a more technical nature. While the overall message of the book is a positive one, the strength of it is

diminished by the fact that the writing styles are sometimes repetitive and awkward. Second, while I affirm the message of this book in general, I found that the authors sometimes made sweeping statements, such as their comments regarding the co-opted culture of the church and the depersonalizing power of technology. While I am inclined to agree that there is some validity to these statements, the message of the book would be strengthened by a more nuanced account of these important issues.

I close with an observation that I suspect Houston and Parker might agree with. What these authors are calling for requires not just renewed attention to the needs and resources of seniors, but actually requires a reformation of our churches in a fundamental way. The authors have observed that our diminished ministry to and with seniors can be attributed, at least in part, to ageism, a culturally co-opted view of aging, and ill preparedness. But their observations also point to more fundamental issues such as an impoverished understanding of church and impoverished models of spiritual formation. All of this is to say that the situation we now find ourselves in with respect to seniors in the church is quite complex and deserves considerable attention. Recognizing this, Houston and Parker have already planned a subsequent volume. I encourage them in this, and encourage others of us to follow their lead in giving attention to this important subject.

Dorothy Hunse
McMaster Divinity College