Title: Pastoral ministry with the aging and aged in a local church: an attempt to discover a model for ministry

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Date completed: March 1988

Granting Institution: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS)

Description: Unpublished Dissertation (DPS): 309 pages

Abstract:

This thesis is a Malaysian pastor’s journey of discovery about aging. It is a study of the process of aging as experienced by the local clergy in his pastoral ministry. It is concerned with a growing population of elderly members within the local church. It seeks to discover what it means for one to grow old.

The case study method is undertaken to provide input and to help locate pastoral issues and, as a consequence, to discover a model of ministry with the aging in the local church.

The thesis begins with a description of the local situation involving three elderly members, Miss Kwong and the Lums. They represent life experience of individuals encountered by the pastor. The encountered situations are then analyzed and evaluated. In the light of the pastor’s relationship with the elderly member, conscious of his own inadequacy in his ministry with the older adults and his desire to learn about the aging and the aged, some pastoral issues and approach to the study are then considered.

The thesis then seeks to analyze and to understand in more depth and detail the nature of the situation as encountered by the pastor. It explores the images of aging in Malaysia as we see how the elderly persons experienced aging as both losses and gain. The consideration of some of the images of aging –as “good” or “bad,” as a phase of life to be welcomed or to be avoided –is
to see how often it is conditioned by the opinions, beliefs and images persons carry with them regarding the human experience of growing older and being old. While elderly persons experience some form of losses common among them, such losses are not the only unqualified experiences among them. Human life attests to other characteristics of aging, which could be considered as “gains”, viz. maturity of the personality, a broadening of sensibilities, and the testing of the spirit. The aging persons appear to be taking their successive losses rather well and do not succumb prematurely to the strains of aging, maturity and loss are related facets in adult experience. Furthermore, in analyzing the nature of the situation faced by the elderly persons the thesis looks into the influence Chinese religions have in shaping the attitude of the Chinese, particularly with reference to their attitude of the Chinese, particularly with reference to their attitude and care for the elders and their concept of filial piety. It suggests that any effective and meaningful pastoral care among Chinese Christians would need to take into account the rich traditional and cultural heritage of the Chinese with their centers around the family and its ethical network of relationships.

The thesis then seeks to interpret the findings in the context of the tradition and experience of the Christian faith. It seeks to discover, comprehend, and locate the reality of God’s presence as God is being experience, responded to, and hoped for by the believing Christian community. It will also consider the attempts by the Christian community, in the light of the Christian traditions from both East and West, to share the good news with the world. In addition, it will inquire into the functions and activities of the caring Christian community. It explores the theological discipline with which the local pastor brings into his reflection and the practical implications and applications in the ministry with the aging and the aged.
Out of the description, analysis and interpretation from the case writing, a pastoral plan is proposed. It looks at how the local church has demonstrated care and respect for the elderly members. It explores the pastoral models for ministry with the aging. It perceives the ministry to be intergenerational and congregation—centered. It aims to discover new models or new approaches to ministry affecting the relationship between the local congregation and the elderly. It also attempts to integrate the Christian and Chinese traditions with reference to respect for elders and life in the community of believers which is relational in essence.

The thesis demonstrates that the elderly persons are capable of growth and moving toward maturity but that their capabilities, wisdom and wealth of experiences are often not taken seriously. It hopes to propose steps to educate the local congregation on the aging process in which no one is left out. It shows that aging is a multidimensional reality that demands an interdisciplinary approach. Any examination of aging and the aged should reflect an understanding that it is the whole person who is aging and is aged.

The thesis makes a contribution to an awareness and concern of pastoral ministry (with the aging and aged) in the local church. It contributes an initial effort toward a study and understanding of pastoral ministry in the local church context. It helps to widen the theological base for a pastoral ministry which seeks to integrate the biblical and Chinese teachings/views on the community’s relationship with the elderly. It shows that the Chinese Christians with their rich heritage have a positive contribution to make to the ministry with the aging and aged. It shows that the ministry is located in the community of believers who seek to be faithful to the commandments to love, regardless of age, station or status. It contributes toward a Malaysian, and possibly an Asian, pastoral theology of ministry with the aging which involves the congregation in ministry. It seeks to interpret aging from the perspective of God’s gracious
purpose in creation and redemption. God’s love is not determined by a person’s age or productivity or efficiency, but is unconditional and external. The wholeness of existence is undergirded by an understanding of spiritual well-being that affirms that fullness of life is in relationship with God, self, community and environment wherever and whenever wholeness of life is nurtured and celebrated.