

"WHAT IF..."

WHAT IF YOU VISIT AN ELDERLY MEMBER AND SEE SIGNS OF ABUSE?

The indicators of elder abuse are similar to those for spousal/partner abuse and child abuse. In addition to physical, sexual, emotional or psychological and financial abuse, there is one other aspect of elder abuse. Elder abuse may also involve neglect – passive, active or self-neglect. Neglect accounts for the largest percentage of elder abuse, 48.6% according to the Administration on Aging (1998). Stress is often a catalyst for neglect of the elderly.

Passive neglect is a failure or the refusal to carry out care taking obligations. This may include forgetting to check on or take care of someone, not researching all the community resources available to the person (i.e. meals for the elderly, day care, homecare aides).

Active neglect is the intentional withholding of the person's daily needs, food, clothing, toileting needs or keeping a person in restraints.

Self-neglect occurs when the elderly person does not take care of himself or herself, either intentionally or because they are unable to financially, physically or mentally.

Theological/Scriptural Response

In the book of Sirah, located in the Deuterocanonical Apocryphal, we read in Chapter 3:12-17, "My child, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives, even if his mind fails, be patient with him, because you have all your faculties do not despise him. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against your sins; in the day of your distress, it will be remembered in your favor, like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away. Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord. My child, perform your tasks with humility; then you will be loved by those whom God accepts."

Community/Congregational Response

List the agencies in your community that work with the elderly and summarize what they do. Make this resource list available to the entire congregation.

Identify the elders in your congregation and develop a plan to have them visited often. When you visit, offer to be a friend, to listen without judging, and to be a contact person if they need you. If a personal visit is not possible, arrange for telephone contact weekly. A simple "Hello, how are you?" telephone call can make all the difference in the world to someone who is lonely.

Talk to your church session and consider forming a health ministry team to address the problem of persons who are alone, lonely or vulnerable.

Legal Response

Mandates for reporting elder abuse vary by state. Reporting elder abuse is the moral and ethical thing to do. The policy of the PC(USA) recommends that "...all clergy, elders, church members, other church staff, and volunteers to always report to the appropriate authority the abuse of children, the elderly, and those disabled in ways that prevent them from reporting the abuse themselves; and after appropriate training, discuss with all victims/survivors their risk and safety options, and refer the victims/survivors to appropriate resources." Many times the elderly are aware of the abuse and prefer to stay in the situation because the alternatives may seem less attractive to them. When a referral is made, Adult Protective Services will conduct an investigation.

Pastoral Response

Talk about the issue. Encourage your session to discuss and take on the issue in your congregation. Preach and pray about elder abuse. But be prepared! If you talk about it, they will come. Know what the church can do and when, where, and to whom to refer. Use the community resources; they are the experts. The church is the expert in being a witness to the continuing presence of the love and care of God in their lives.

Educational Response

Use *Anguished Hearts* (see resources) as a study in your church. *Anguished Hearts* covers all the different areas of domestic violence including elder abuse. Consider training the entire church, from children to adults.

Invite a speaker, who works with the elderly, to talk about elder abuse and neglect and about what the congregation/community might do to become involved.