

## **How can elderly help the young**

*By Sister Constance Veit, lsp*

I attended SEEK23, the annual conference of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), At the beginning of January.

Our Sisters have attended this event for many years and we have seen it evolve from a modest gathering of several hundred college students in a hotel to a huge, intergenerational event with 17,000 participants.

One of the first people I encountered was a young priest who had volunteered with our Sisters as a seminarian and who currently serves in a university parish in the Rocky Mountain region. I asked him about his ministry, thinking that a university parish must be a perfect combination of generations and backgrounds. I was surprised by his reply!

He told me that it is actually quite challenging for him and his collaborators because various age groups have different needs and aspirations and they live more or less separate lives. Whenever the parish invests time or funds in one age cohort, he said, the others seem to resent it. How sad! I am passionate about bringing young people and seniors together and assumed this type of parish would be the ideal place for intergenerational relationships.

The young priest told me that he has succeeded in bringing teens to visit seniors in a local assisted living facility but it is more difficult to interest active seniors – those still living on their own – to get more involved in the parish where they could engage with families and young people.

We brainstormed about how he might motivate young people to perform acts of service for seniors living in the community – from shoveling snow and helping with home improvements, to helping seniors get up to speed with the internet and social media.

We also talked about how he might draw young and old together for social events in the parish as well as how the generations might join forces to serve the community.

Pro-life work, outreach to individuals dealing with poverty and groups living on the peripheries, ecological initiatives and fund-raising efforts to support refugees are just a few examples of charitable efforts that could be undertaken by intergenerational parish teams.

Finally, I shared my conviction that older people have a special calling – an authentic mission – to mentor the young and inspire hope in them by sharing their own life experiences, dreams and wisdom.

Even when they seem accomplished and self-sufficient, young people need guidance and affirmation. They want role models and wisdom figures who look on them with fresh eyes, discern their potential and accompany them on their journey.

In *Christus Vivit* Pope Francis wrote, “The community has an important role in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging and challenging them. All should regard young people with understanding, appreciation and affection, and avoid constantly judging them or demanding of them a perfection beyond their years.”

Pope Francis’ words to older people shows his concern for them, but also shows his conviction that they have a serious responsibility to younger generations. As I feel myself aging, I sense this responsibility very personally.

In the book *Sharing the Wisdom of Age* he wrote, “What do I ask of the elders among whom I count myself? I call us to be memory keepers ... where prayers of supplication and songs of praise support the larger community that works and struggles in the field of life.”

He continued, “I also urge that we take action! ... As elders, we can thank the Lord for the many benefits we have received. ... We can remind today’s young people, who have their own blend of heroic ambitions and insecurities, that a life without love is an arid life. We can tell fearful young people that anxiety about the future can be overcome.”

Clearly, the church as a whole, and each local faith community, needs seniors who take their unique mission seriously.

If you have witnessed initiatives fostering the role of seniors as mentors or the effective partnering of young people and elders in your parish, I would love to hear from you! Please email me at [serenity@LittleSistersofthePoor.org](mailto:serenity@LittleSistersofthePoor.org).

*Sister Constance Veit is the communications director for the Little Sisters of the Poor in the United States and an occupational therapist.*