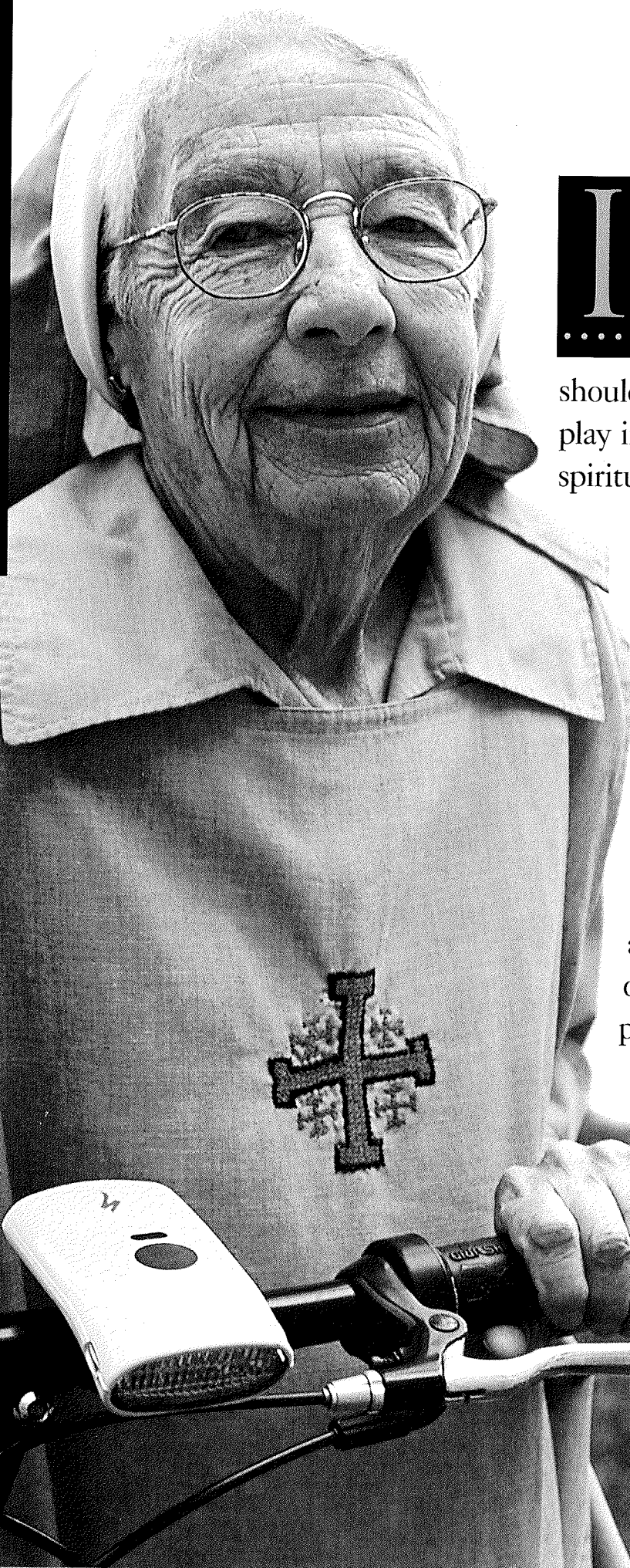




"MY CALL WAS  
TO BE A SERVANT  
TO THE SERVANTS,"  
SAYS 75-YEAR-OLD  
MARATHONER  
SISTER MARIA,  
A CATHEDRAL  
VOLUNTEER  
CHAPLAIN.



**I**n a culture that prizes youth, how are senior citizens to live meaningful lives? What role should organized religion play in helping seniors find spiritual fulfillment? While many members of the clergy and laity—some seniors themselves—are addressing these questions, no simple answers emerge. In the highly personal matter of spirituality, answers are always a matter of individual perspective.

PHOTO BY DONOVAN MARKS

In this age of medical miracles, America finds itself facing a new theological challenge: the aging of its population. The United States has proportionately more senior adults—traditionally defined as age 65 or older—than ever. The nation is discovering moreover that aging does not necessarily mean a loss of independence. Statistics indicate that Americans are living longer and healthier lives. The vast majority of Americans will not live out their lives in nursing homes. Rather, many are blessed with the opportunity to live actively.

For Jerry Coward, 72, a retired junior high school principal who is twice widowed, the Episcopal tradition has always played a prominent role. With two grandfathers who were ministers, Coward was raised in a deeply Christian home. His faith has sustained him through very difficult times, including the untimely deaths of two wives and the continuing challenge of handling the mental retardation of his only child, Gerald.

“When a crisis comes, I get closer to my upbringing, my religion,” says Coward. The time after his first wife died was particularly bleak, Coward recalls. “I was sitting on top of one of the toughest junior high schools in Washington, D.C., and I had to raise my son—alone. I took it one step at a time, but I had to take the right step. I couldn’t

afford the wrong one. So I took my son to church. I put my son to bed. I’d put records on the turntable, a glass of scotch in my hand. I don’t know what that means, but I did that a lot.”

In his mid-fifties, Coward lost the lower part of one leg to diabetes. But he soon learned to walk and drive again; his beloved second wife, who passed away eight years ago, told him at that time: “I’m glad I’m not married to a quitter.” Today, Coward leads a moderately active life, serving as secretary of the local Lion’s Club and doing a fair amount of travelling. But he no longer attends church as often as he used to.

“The church has changed,” Coward says. “They have gotten away from the structured service that I knew and got accustomed to. They seem to have relaxed to attract more people. I guess they’re looking for younger people. But I’m a traditionalist, you might say old-fashioned.” But Coward is quick to point out that attending church, by itself, is not a measure of piety. “You don’t need an edifice to have a church, to meet your spiritual needs. Christ and his followers practiced in the open. The Sermon on the Mount was in the open.”

“I try to practice my faith every day through deeds,” Coward says. “The same way you don’t need an edifice for religion, if you live a religious life, hold

religious thoughts, adhere to religious tenets, then you’re a religious person. And it doesn’t matter what religion you belong to.”

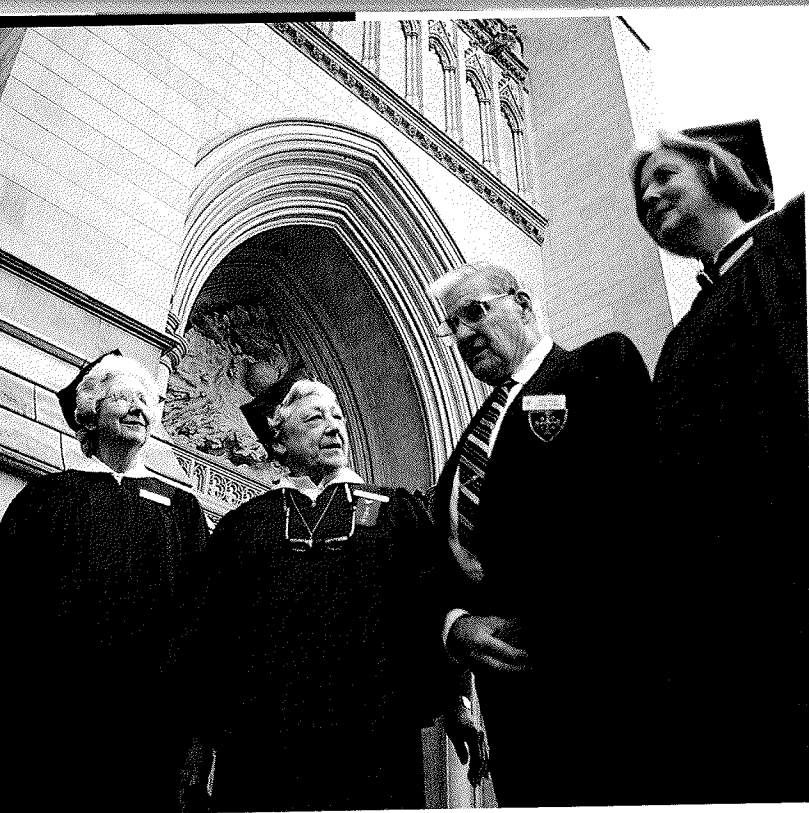
Other seniors are finding fulfillment by immersing themselves in the religious life. Sister Maria, 75, became an Episcopal nun at age 59, nearly twelve years after being widowed and after losing her son—one of her two children—in a drowning accident. Although she was in seminary, Sister Maria decided not to be ordained. “My call was to the religious life, but not as a minister. My call was to be a servant to the servants” of the church.

In her Easy Spirit athletic shoes, wimple and glittering greenshamrock-shaped earrings, Sister Maria shatters all stereotypes about nuns, women and growing older. Around the Cathedral, where she frequently volunteers as a chaplain, she is known affectionately as “the little smoker,” for indulging in cigarettes. She is also a breast-cancer survivor who, while struggling with a degenerative spinal cord disease, recently walked the 26.2-mile Marine Corps Marathon, her first marathon ever.

“I was in agony,” she recalls of the marathon, which she completed after a full seven hours and fifty-two minutes. “The last twenty miles, my back was in spasms. But I did it because I had to. It

*In the new millennium, mature spirituality touches heart and life*

# THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



Many of the Cathedral's 1,100 volunteers—especially docents such as these—have contributed for countless years to this organization they count dear to their lives.

sobering and often spiritually challenging problem. Wheelchair confinement has forced “Leah,” 79, to confront both severe physical limitations and personal memories of one of the most tragic events of the twentieth century: the Holocaust.

and adores” for his recent statements in support of the Jewish people.

Although raised in Orthodox Judaism, Leah never attends synagogue and does not seek spiritual or social support from a rabbi or Jewish congregation. Nor does she consider herself a devout Jew. “I’m a humanist,” she says. “I believe in loving your brother and your sister.”

She nevertheless faithfully follows at least one Jewish ritual—the Passover seder. Each year, despite her limited mobility, she cooks and freezes each traditional Passover dish in preparation for the family seder, which is conducted by her son. Leah plans to continue the tradition as long as she can. “The seder is my way of keeping the memory of my parents alive,” she says. “My parents died because they were Jewish. I have to keep the traditions alive, just to spite Hitler.”

Whether disabled or physically fit, living in their own homes, retirement communities or nursing homes, seniors are no different from other adults in needing spiritual support, agree clergy and lay experts.

At the recent annual conference of the National Council on the Aging, spirituality among the elderly was the focus of a forum entitled “Amazing Grace through the Years.” Monsignor Charles J. Fahey, a senior associate at the Third Age Center and a professor at New York’s Fordham University, told the forum that the church and society need to find ways “in which people can come together and grow” in the Third Age—the stage of life after childhood and young adulthood. For seniors, Fahey noted, relationships become more important precisely at the time when they are more difficult to develop and maintain because of limited mobility.

“There is a tendency in the church to say ‘the future is in the hands of the young,’” Fahey said, adding that he rarely hears a homily that applies to seniors. “We don’t have a role, a status for people in the Third Age.”

was the end of the millennium and I was seventy-five, and with two major medical problems I’m still alive and kicking. I was supposed to be in a wheelchair years ago. So I did it for the glory of God.”

Sister Maria knows that the sight of a tiny elderly nun participating in athletic events commands attention, and she uses that attention to support causes she believes in, like AIDS fundraising runs and Gay Pride Day. “I wear my veil to say ‘we love you and so does God.’”

She speaks proudly of the flexibility that the Episcopal Church has given her to support these causes and to tend to her favorite, if unorthodox, ministry—patrons of restaurants. Sister Maria routinely makes the rounds of several Washington restaurants, where she often meets businessmen who share their concerns about such matters as illness and marital problems. “We talk together and sometimes pray together,” Sister Maria says.

While ministering plays a crucial role in Sister Maria’s life, she also places a premium on remaining physically fit, noting that seniors benefit from activities besides work: “Those of us who stay the healthiest are those that find other outlets. It helps you stay mentally alert.”

For the wheelchair-bound and bedridden, staying active and alert poses a

A native of Poland, Leah—an Orthodox Jew—spent World War II fleeing the Nazis. Doctors later told her that her debilitating neurological disease is rooted in the severe hunger she experienced during the war. “For three months, I had only bits of bread and water. We called it tea and cake, but it was bread and water.” Still, she says softly, “it was great to have bread.”

Leah is haunted by the memory of one beautiful day during her flight from the Nazis, when she and her husband and a group of other Jews ran along a road toward another hideout. The road forked. She, her husband and another couple turned toward the right; the rest of the group moved left. “We said to that group, ‘Good luck. We will see you later.’ About half an hour later, we saw four or five German airplanes flying very low. Bombs fell. Nobody survived from the other group. The four of us did. I still have not found an explanation.” Nor has she found an explanation for why her parents and sister lost their lives in Nazi concentration camps.

Having come to believe despite such tragedy that “every one of us who survived the war was taken by the hand of God to a safe place,” Leah has found solace in prayer. Prayer, she says, “ennobles the human spirit.” She includes in her prayers the Pope, whom she “respects

Susan Blue would agree. As the rector of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in downtown Washington, D.C., Blue "tries hard" to find meaningful tasks for senior volunteers. "Older people carry a lot of wisdom that we need to tap," Blue says. "Other cultures, like the Native American culture, knew that. I think we need to feel useful and be useful all of our lives. We need to feel valued."

Blue believes that intergenerational programming—bringing seniors together with youngsters and young adults—is one arena in which churches can and should do more. She is currently developing a tutoring program that would bring senior parishioners together with youths from a nearby inner-city neighborhood. She hopes one day to start a surrogate grandparent program.

Innovative programming like Blue's is becoming more common around the country. In some instances, local government-sponsored social service agencies are partnering with local religious institutions to offer seniors an array of opportunities for learning, exercising and socializing—opportunities that can help create a sense of community and a climate that encourages spirituality.

One such program takes place every weekday at St. Alban's Episcopal Church, only steps away from Washington National Cathedral. A joint venture of St. Alban's and Iona Senior Services, a government-supported social service agency, the "Super Sixties" program offers seniors hot lunches, along with optional exercise and creative writing classes. Shuttle service sponsored by St. Alban's transports seniors living in nearby neighborhoods to and from the church.

The program attracts a cross-section of seniors living in Washington who are, in many ways, representative of seniors across the country. They range in age from sixties to nineties and are from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, religious persuasions and spiritual beliefs.

For Blanche Marion, the Super Sixties program affords a way to get out of the house and socialize. Small and frail at age ninety, Marion has been coming to the program for four years, since moving from her home in Connecticut to live with her daughter in Maryland. It was her daughter, an Episcopalian, who encouraged her to come to St. Alban's. She said, "Mom, you can't stay at home all the time. You're gonna get depressed. You've got to go out."

Clergy and other caregivers should seek out seniors who cannot go out, says Diane Mayer, executive director of Defiance County Senior Services in Defiance, Ohio. Mayer recounts the story of how, while visiting a retirement home, she met a wheelchair-bound 92-year-old Catholic woman who seemed "very mean and bitter." Mayer asked the woman to pray for a nearby family whose two daughters had been raped by a family member.

"I said, 'Do something with your life. Pray for them.'" Mayer recalls. She shakes her head in wonder at the result. "It was amazing. This woman has now totally changed. She's become this kind, loving woman who prays."

The power of prayer, the power of feeling valued: these are the gifts that clergy can bring to seniors—gifts that seniors, in return, can use to make their own lives more enriched and fulfilled. In the 1997 book *A Gospel for the Mature Years*, author and physician Harold G. Koenig notes that even Jane, a depressed, elderly stroke victim who could only blink her eyes, found new meaning in her life, thanks to an inspired idea by her pastor.



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"The pastor knew the woman had coordinated a prayer chain in the church prior to her stroke," Koenig writes, and so "he asked if she would be willing to pray on a regular basis for him as well as for the persons in the congregation who were having problems."

The woman blinked her eyes twice—her code for "yes." The

next day the pastor brought in a list of people and problems that needed praying for and suspended the list above the woman's bed where she could read it.

"Members of the congregation began to visit Jane to tell her about the amazing things that were happening in each of the situations that she had been assigned to pray for," Koenig notes. "Jane eventually caught pneumonia and died, but those around her reported that her spirits increased tremendously once she found that she could do something that might be useful to someone else."

Being useful to someone else: Isn't that the stuff of life itself, a crucial part of every human journey? Indeed, says Margaret Woodward, a vigorous 90-year-old Washingtonian who will soon leave her home of eighty-seven years to move into a nearby Presbyterian retirement center.

A retired State Department officer, Woodward says she plans to continue being active in the Unitarian Church to which she has belonged since 1947. "I like the good works we do," she says of her church. Then she pauses to look out the window of her home, at the daffodils bobbing in the late March sun, at the hyacinths she planted too long ago to remember. "I'm interested in being a part of things like helping neighborhoods," she says with a warm, wide smile, "not just saving my own soul." ✠