

Religious communities urged to do more for older women

NEW YORK – Older women living in poverty are an often invisible and overlooked population that could be better served by religious communities, said participants of an interreligious dialogue at Jesuit-run Fordham University Nov. 15.

According to U.S. government statistics cited at the presentation, women who reach age 65 now have an average life expectancy of an additional 20 years. More than 12 percent of older women live below the poverty level. Older women living alone are more likely to be poor than those living with families – and half of women over 75 live alone.

Each dialogue participant outlined how her religious tradition encouraged respect for the elderly and how her personal experience brought her to a deeper understanding of the growing needs of older women in poverty.

The speakers were a Presbyterian minister, a rabbi, a Dominican sister, a Methodist deaconess and a Muslim chaplain.

“Faith traditions offer something that social service organizations cannot,” said the Rev. Lisa Hill, a Presbyterian minister who is the director of quality care at the West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing in New York. “Faith communities are safe places to say ‘I hurt, I need, I’m scared,’ and they are an entry to connect the person to a series of concrete services.

“We help do social work, but our call is to connect people with spiritual resources of prayer and ritual that can be found nowhere but in the faith community,” she said.

The faith tradition is “at its best,” she said, when it “offers help to people who are

discerning their call in their discretionary years. The faith community is also an opportunity for justice. It can advocate for systemic changes to fight racism, poverty, violence and the myriad ills that older women in poverty face.”

Rabbi Judith Edelstein, director of the religious life department for the Jewish Home and Hospital Lifecare System, said clergy and others have a responsibility “to change the paradigm to uncover the hiddenness of this population.”

She encouraged compassionate action and enlightened self-interest. “We too will struggle as we lean on our shopping carts to get across the street,” she said.

“As the gap widens between our youthful, hopeful self and our older diminished body, God invites us to fill the chasm with divine presence,” she said. “Perhaps God’s design enables us to make room to get closer to the holy one, to ease the passage from doing and accomplishing to concentrate instead on being.”

Sister Ursula Joyce, executive director of the Dominican Sisters of Sparkhill senior housing ministry, said she had witnessed the power of religious communities to address social justice issues, especially “when they moved beyond their walls and united with other people of faith to use their collective clout to get government to do what it is supposed to do.”

Sister Joyce said, “Faith communities have to have a passion for the needs of older women and be specific about what we want done, so we can go to the legislators with it.”

Rev. Hill suggested that some potential activists feared grappling with the issues of aging. “As a single woman working in a do-good job with not much pay, I should be a crusader, but it’s way too scary to look at because it’s too personal,” she said.

Betty Letzig, a deaconess of the United Methodist Church and a member of the

United Nations nongovernmental organizations committee on aging, recalled a U.N. forum in which an African delegate referred to older citizens as his community's "library."

"That reflected an appreciation for the aged that is not generally reflected here," she said.

Sanaa Nadim, Muslim chaplain at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, said women who are informal caregivers to elderly family and friends are not working at jobs where they are building large pensions and earning Social Security credits. Legislation needs to reflect that reality, she said.

"Faith-based institutions should be able to connect with one another on a community-by-community level to tell people what the community can offer them" and how they can access government benefits, she said.

Rabbi Edelstein said, "Older women with deep faith are much better able to cope with circumstances than women without it. Faith sustains them and allows them to give to others."

A church connection is vital to keep people from "falling through the cracks," Sister Joyce said. "We're really good at listing the names of (hospitalized) people who need prayers, but we really need to be there when they are discharged to make sure that they are getting the services they need."

"We can't be too satisfied with lining up a lot of services with initials. We have to have someone sit down with them and have a meal and monitor them," she said.