

Mary M. Cohen, *Reinventing Older Adulthood: A U.S. Perspective*

Thank you for the opportunity to share a summary of our findings about older adult ministry in the Archdiocese of Atlanta and the larger United States. I am here as a delegate of a growing field of people focused on the opportunities, challenges, and needs of a population increasing in both age and numbers in all segments of US society, but particularly in our Catholic parishes and domestic Churches.

I hope to offer some ideas that contribute to this emerging conversation on “reinventing” or “re-envisioning” aging in way that is attentive to the lived experience and realities of today’s older adults.

First, let’s get situated. As many of you know, the US varies widely in a number of respects, which all have an impact on the experiences of older people and how we align our ministry. Our country varies in geography, climate, population, industry, and in socio-economic measures like wealth, health, and education. We are a country of indigenous people, as well as long-assimilated and new immigrants.

We have areas such as the Northeastern State of Maine where the population is aging ahead of the rest of the country. The State of Florida in the lower Southeast attracts many retirees from other areas. Increasingly, people are moving multiple times after initially retiring. Then, when more assistance is required, they are moving closer to an adult child or other support.

My home of Atlanta, located in the Southeastern State of Georgia, is a large, metropolitan region and is fairly representative of the nation’s overall experience of aging.

Our Archdiocese covers miles of city, rural areas, suburbs, mountains, lakes, college areas, and farms. The Archdiocese is one of the largest in the nation, with over 100 parishes and missions over 300 priests and seminarians, more than 7 million people of which 1.2 million identify as Catholics; and a blend of many races and ethnicities.

There are three words that describe our area: diverse, growing, and aging. We’ll come back to all of these points.

Widening the lens again to the whole US, two infographics produced by the US Census Bureau paint a striking picture of how our nation's age demographics are shifting.

In 1960, the US population was shaped like a pyramid with a large base of dependents under the age of 18, supported by a solid number of working-aged people aged 19-64, and a dwindling number of people progressing up top beyond their seventies.

Fast forward to 2060, and demographers project a vastly different scenario. Immigration trends along with increased life spans due to improvements in nutrition, public health, education, and medical technologies swell the numbers we expect to see in the later years. Compared with today, by 2060, the population over age 65 is expected to grow to 95 million, a 90 percent increase. Also, the number of those age 85 and older is expected to grow to 19 million, nearly triple in size. Further, in the year 2035, for the first time in US history, the number of adults over age 65 will outnumber children under 18.

Put plainly, these emerging trends bring with them a broad array of challenges and opportunities that demand the attention of our government, businesses, and faith leaders.

As you know, the Church has always acknowledged the blessings of age. As just one example of several Scriptural passages that address aging, we read in Psalm 92:14: "They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap."

Sacred Tradition also offers insight into the experience of aging. I am always drawn, for example, to the witness of our holy saints like St. Teresa of Kolkata who carried out her great mission well into her ninth decade.

At the threshold of this century, the US Bishops issued two visionary documents calling attention to the aging population and providing additional guidance on growing older in a faith community. These documents are *Blessings of Age: A Pastoral Message on Growing Older within the Faith Community* and *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation*. They reflect insights found in the *General Catechetical Directory*, St. John Paul II's *Letter to the Elderly*, and the work of the former Pontifical Council for the Laity.

Our Archdiocese uses these and other inspirational sources, including Pope Francis's strong example and advocacy for the elderly, in developing our ministry.

We now know that, every day about 10,000 people in the US turn 65. This is a significant birthday because it is the typical age when people start collecting government-funded benefits, allowing a measure of financial freedom for many to retire from their jobs.

Retirement is a relatively new concept in American society. When the US Social Security Act was passed in 1935, the official retirement age was 65, four years beyond the average life expectancy of age 61 for men. Today, average life expectancy is around age 78, and how people spend the gift of those additional years continues to evolve.

Some Americans, like my father who worked decades for the same company, literally mark the days off on the calendar until they reach this eligibility day. They look forward to more leisure hours and relief from workplace stress. Some want to continue to earn more to pay debts or cover the living expenses associated with the additional years ahead.

An increasing number, however, see a longer span of years ahead and want to continue working or volunteering in some form to stay engaged. They seek to use their wisdom, experience, and vigor in a variety of exciting ways.

Basically, it's all being reevaluated, redefined, and as a creative friend of mine says, "re-inspired!"

We could therefore say that, while there are many challenges that come along with an aging society, the Church has a tremendous opportunity to engage the gifts of older people in new and vital ways. We also have an opportunity to accompany older people through life's transitions – which can come rapidly as we age – always seeking in the triumphs and trials to grow closer to Christ.

Allow me to pause here to underscore an important point. There can be a tendency to overly generalize older people – who span many generations from roughly age 55 to over 100. There is a big difference in the concerns of, say, a 57-year-old Hispanic-American woman welcoming her first grandchild while caring for aging parents, versus a healthy 68-year old newly retired man searching for purpose in his unstructured days, versus a lonely, frail 95-year-old woman wondering where God is in her suffering.

While some definition is helpful in promoting understanding and facilitating effective planning, there is greater awareness that the older we get, the more we vary in life experiences, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and hopes. In other words, the older we get, the more diverse we become individually and collectively.

I read a social media comment recently noting, “Age is a statistical category, not an identity.” That comment provokes the question of this forum: How do we reimagine older adulthood in the context of contemporary society?

In my work, I often hear, “I’m 87, but inside I’m not!” Some perceive the tension of their aging bodies with their youthful spirit and mind. Others perhaps perceive society has certain expectations of an 87 years old and they don’t feel they fit that description.

These ideas can lead to deeper questions about one’s sense of identity. Is my identity reduced to my age, health, job title, role in my family, or my mistakes, accomplishments, successes or failures? Or, do I truly recognize that I and others are beloved children of God?

Exploring these types of questions in the context of aging offers a whole new time to reflect upon our lives lived, to cultivate our relationship with the Lord and one another, to serve, and to seek His will for us. As a Church, how can we tap into these gifted years to accompany, evangelize, and engage?

In our diocesan work we are seeing a reluctance among older adults to identify with a statistical age group or with labels such as “senior” or “elder.” However, when we raise topics or hold events directly relevant to an older person’s pressing life concerns, we see far more eagerness to engage. As a result, in Atlanta we are focusing our efforts on developing and supporting initiatives related to life-course transitions typically experienced by older people.

Some examples include retirement, grandparenting, widowedhood, illness and disability, caregiving, moving, and preparing for end-of-life. In all of these lived experiences there are corporal and spiritual concerns that provide an opportunity for Christ-centered encounter.

One example in the Archdiocese of Atlanta is the development of parish-based widowed ministry. Mostly through the persistence of a few widows in our Archdiocese, the ongoing struggles of widowed persons came to our heightened attention. According to the US census, over 25% of people over the age of 65

experience widowedhood. Knowing the projected swells in population, we clearly saw how many more people will continue to experience what some experts consider life's number-one stressor.

We are, of course, familiar with the Church's teaching on care of widows, and we know there are excellent resources on bereavement in general, yet there is a striking void in awareness of and continued support of the widowed – both women and men – in the US.

One widow expressed her awakening after the first sorrows of grief passed over by declaring, "God still has a plan for me." She needed help, however, in taking the next steps forward.

One of our parishes has a thriving widowed ministry that we studied as a model. What we found was a forum for fellowship that compassionately draws people out of their loneliness and fears into a wider community of people who have "been there" and are eager to offer a safe, hospitable environment to accompany others on a similar journey. Those who have been widowed for some time find new meaning in their suffering and purpose in life by welcoming the newly widowed, offering a listening presence, practical advice, and ongoing invitations to participate.

Many members use their known or newly discovered gifts to organize meetings, plan the annual Masses of Remembrance, travel on pilgrimages, arrange transportation for those who cannot drive, volunteer at the food drive together, prepare birthday meals ... and the list goes on.

One widow told me that while she was serving as the primary caregiver of her husband who was experiencing a long, difficult illness, she knew there was a community of support awaiting her when her current vocation of wife and caregiver ended. It was a beacon of hope.

We see in this ministry many lasting spiritual fruits as people heal and grow. This model of widowed ministry can be a path of ongoing faith formation and intentional discipleship. All by meeting people in the midst of their life experience.

Our Archdiocese now offers resources, available on our website, to equip leaders to bring a widowed ministry to their parish.

Before ending, I'd like to address the importance of cultivating a spiritual life – always, but particularly as my octogenarian mentor, Bill Clarke, says, when “the days ahead are fewer than the days behind.”

In the US, much attention is given to the distractions that pull our young people away from the faith. My observation has been that similar temptations lure older people with increasing force. These include technology and other addictions, consumerism, obsession with youthful appearance, and self-absorption. A vibrant spiritual life is an antidote to these worldly temptations.

Further, as more people will live out their last years in frail health and dependency, a vibrant spiritual life is essential to combatting fear, loneliness, and despair. In her memoir of her later years, author Sarah-Patton Boyle, in part, said this: “Wiser now, I saw that if I had established spiritual routines, my present life would not be devoid of familiar grooves. I would have a comfortable, supporting structure from which to deal with the drastic changes and dislocations I had met.”

In my ministry with the homebound elderly, I have witnessed first-hand how those with active spiritual lives flourish even in the midst of chaos, loss, and diminished capacity. My own mother in the confusion of dementia was anchored by her Rosary and singing familiar hymns. Another woman I visit always asks how she can offer up her intercessory prayers for my family and our parish community. In the words of one writer, they “are luminous with age.”

There is emerging research supporting the benefits of connection to the parish community through pastoral visitors and reception of the Sacraments. The more we are able to accompany older people in cultivating a vibrant spiritual life, the more prepared we will all be to meet the serious challenges of advanced age with grace.

It is encouraging to see more attention paid to the range of issues facing older adults. Certainly, more research, scholarship, creative initiatives, and sharing of best practices are needed.

Thank you. I'm humbled by and grateful for your kind attention and I pray we have enriching discussions here and back in our communities.