

The Fair Havens

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The Role of Adult Child Caregivers

If elderly parents come to you for help, does *'Honour your father and mother'* mean that you should be able to solve all their problems? Should you always be able to make your parents happy and contented? No one can 'fix' old age. What's required is learning new ways of showing honour that are appropriate to this last stage of life. Aging is a new experience for both you and your parents.

It is important to try to *understand* what our elderly parents are going through. This involves learning to *accept* them as they are now and not as they were in the past. In the process, we need to learn to *surrender our need to be in control* of their aging. Aging is not something that we can do for our parents as much as we might like to spare them the struggle. We can, however, stand beside them as they go through it. Simply being there for them speaks to our love, care and validation of their lives.

Gerontologists tell us that the elderly experience more stresses than any other age group. Physical changes such as failing eyesight may make reading, television and hobbies either difficult or impossible. Deafness can lead to social withdrawal. Failing physical strength may isolate the older person at home. The loss of a spouse is perhaps the most devastating stress of all.

But there is more to old age than adjusting to losses. It can also be a time of parental growth and change. The Psalmist wrote,

*The righteous will flourish like palm trees,
They will grow like the cedars of Lebanon.
They are like trees planted in the house of the LORD,
That still bear fruit in old age
And are always green and strong. Psalm 92: 12-14*

Old age is not a disease. It is not a problem to be solved. Aging is a stage of life that must be lived. Other cultures understand this better than we do. Many of the problems that we see in seniors—anger, contempt, denial and stubbornness—are caused not by the aging process, but arise because of society's disdain for the elderly.

As long as the elderly are shunned and looked down upon by society, we'll have elders who are depressed about

being old. If caregivers share society's skewed perception, they too will look at their parents' old age as a problem rather than an opportunity.

As you strive to fulfill your role as caregiver, it is necessary to learn to strike a balance between independence and dependency. Some aged parents won't accept help. There are elders who would rather die—and do—before they'd accept help from their children. Or if they do accept help they feel shamed by it as if they were failures. At the opposite

extreme are parents who want their adult children to take control of their lives becoming dependant upon them for everything. Rather, we ought to seek to develop what is termed 'intergenerational interdependence' where each generation has something to contribute to the other, each taking and receiving in turn. This provides opportunities for children, parents and grandparents to all grow and mature as members of God's family.

Assessing Your Parent's Capabilities

Ideally when a parent's failing health or frailty makes some changes necessary, all the family should be involved in the decision making process. Unless the parent is mentally impaired, he should also participate in the discussion and the final choice should be his.

Practically speaking, it is sometimes difficult to know if a higher level of care is needed. Is the parent exaggerating his symptoms to garner sympathy or attention? Could medical treatment or a piece of equipment turn the situation around so that he could continue to live independently? Is a poor diet, medication or depression contributing to mental confusion or forgetfulness?

No matter how much support you give, your parent will still suffer in ways that you can't do anything about. These emotions include:

Fear and anxiety—When your strength is failing, it's hard not to be anxious about what tomorrow will bring. A widow may be afraid to live alone. Living on a small income may make an elderly parent anxious about finances.

Anger—If your parent's independence is taken away it's natural for him to be angry. Unfortunately, you may be the only target available. Sometimes the elderly can become paranoid. Their fear, anger and hostility are projected onto others—perhaps accusing others of being out to get them, or stealing their things.

Jealousy—It is not unexpected that the elderly may express jealousy at the younger generations who are able to do so much while they may be confined to a nursing home.

Guilt—Some elderly feel that their illnesses and frailties are punishments from God. Others may feel guilty because they believe they've become a burden.

Sadness and depression—These are normal reactions to loss. A grieving period must be experienced, but if depression lasts for a year or more after the death of a spouse, the grief may have triggered a deeper depression that may need to be treated medically.

Loneliness—Like other emotions, it may present in the form of physical symptoms. Many of your parent's negative emotions will not be communicated openly. One of the skills as a caregiver is to learn how to decode these hidden messages.

By learning to accept our elderly parents as they are now—and not wishing that they were different—can have a tremendous healing effect on our relationship with them. The natural reaction of caregivers is to try to talk their parents out of their feelings. But arguing with feelings never works. Your parents' feelings are seldom under rational control. However, they may dissipate if you support them while they struggle through.

Recall when Naomi had lost her husband and her two sons. She was angry and bitter. "Don't call me Naomi [pleasant]," she said. "Call me Marah [bitter], because Almighty God has made my life bitter. When I left here, I had plenty, but the LORD has brought me back without a thing. Why call me Naomi when the LORD Almighty has condemned me and sent me trouble?" (Ruth 1:20-21)

Although Naomi was certainly troubled and distraught at her immediate circumstances, she came to realize that God had not abandoned her, but rather blessed her with a compassionate caregiver in Ruth her daughter-in-law and with a hope beyond the frailties of this mortal life.

The Challenge of Caregiving

One of the principal problems that caregivers face is wanting to provide all that is needed for their elderly parents but realizing that they have only limited resources. Every caregiver at some time faces limits on their time, finances, patience, acceptance, knowledge, and support from others in their caregiving role.

In a US study, the researcher reported that over a quarter of the adult child caregivers in the sample were emotionally exhausted as a direct consequence of their caregiving activities. In addition 30% reported being physically worn-out by caregiving. And 75% claimed to suffer from significant negative feelings toward their aging parent. The evidence would suggest that caregiving to the elderly can certainly be stressful.

To successfully deal with these challenges, the adult child caregiver needs to be knowledgeable about her role and receive the support of others to fulfill it.

Caregivers need guidance to give the best care possible to their aging parents. Learning how to enhance this relationship with elderly parents in turn enables the caregiver to retain her own integrity and her own sense of self, while not becoming engulfed by the very care she's attempting to provide. An appreciation of the five key factors below will equip you to build upon and strengthen the relationship with your aging parents.

1. Caregivers need to develop an understanding of the needs of their aging parents as well as their own needs.

This encompasses an appreciation of both emotional and physical needs. It is particularly important to recognize the role of loss in the lives of the elderly as well as their common emotional reactions to loss. Furthermore, caregivers must realize that seniors need to make adjustments to deal with these losses, and they should be encouraged to do so.

2. Caregivers must learn to develop and nurture healthy relationships with their aging parents.

Such a relationship is essential for effective caregiving. It encompasses genuineness, love and a positive regard for the elderly. This mirrors the love and care God has for us through the redeeming work of His Son.

3. Caregivers need to learn how to break down barriers that may exist between the aging parent and the adult child.

Examining our attitudes about aging can be a useful exercise because our own preconceived ideas about aging may not be accurate. Perpetuating negative stereotypes about aging is called ageism. When the caregiver is able to dispense

with these 'hang ups', barriers in the relationship with the aging parent are often removed.

4. Caregivers must encourage positive communication between themselves and their aging parents.

By practicing active listening skills—listening to the meaning behind their parents' words and offering empathetic feedback, true communication is enhanced. Communicating empathy however requires skill to reflect both content and feelings.

5. Sharing the love and the redeeming message of Christ's sacrifice helps aging parents and caregivers maintain a positive and meaningful attitude about themselves.

As brethren in Christ we can take solace in the one who is the Resurrection and the Life. Knowing the five stages associated with death—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—helps both caregivers and parents deal with death and grief. A hospice can provide support if the need arises.

Support

In addition to the factors above, caregivers need to realize that they are not alone and that others care about them in their caregiving role. A support group can be vitally important in sustaining the caregiver. Such a group provides a forum for sharing experiences with others. Because of similar circumstances, participants seem to implicitly understand the struggles and challenges of compassionate caregiving. A support group can offer mutual support in distinct ways.

1. The support group provides empathetic identification.

There is real value in participants recognizing themselves in the accounts of other caregivers. There can be immediate bonding amongst those in similar circumstances. Participants not only share themselves, but the problems they've encountered and how they tackled them with God's help. Support groups can also assist in times of crisis. Some may enter a support group and not really know why they are there. What they do feel is a disturbing inner turmoil and they may not realize that they still have options.

2. Support groups provide practical education.

Information that is timely and practical can be readily shared amongst the participants. Who got help at what place? What home health agency provides the best service? What hospital or doctor specializes in geriatric care?

3. Support groups increase the caregivers' confidence

in their own God-given abilities.

Participants help each other guard against overwork. They assist one another in developing coping skills. They also encourage each other to draw boundaries between their own lives and that of their parents. Caregivers must realistically identify what they can and cannot do.

4. Support groups help caregivers grow in self-affirmation.

It is easy to become embroiled in the demands of caregiving. Sometimes it is hard for caregivers to know what is a normal and acceptable response and what is 'out of line'. Support group members can help one another by affirming caregiving activities and behaviours that are healthy and gently dissuading members from actions that will eventually become destructive or incapacitating.

Together, both guidance in strengthening relationships and peer support provide caregivers a safety net of protection

against harming themselves or their aging parents. Both elements provide the tools needed to meet the rigors of caregiving and safeguard against the stresses that can lead to physical or emotional overload. They are the prerequisites for caregivers who want to prevent themselves from slipping into a state of uncertainty that could eventually make them incapable of competent caregiving.

Even more than depending on one another, we can depend on the loving care of the Father and Son. They are aware of the struggles that face adult child caregivers. Like our Lord we too can aspire to his high standard. As we recall Jesus' words on the cross to Mary regarding John, "*Woman, behold thy son*" we are reminded that in his own dying agony he made sure his mother was cared for. Similarly, like the Apostle Paul, we too can affirm, *'I can do everything through Him who gives me strength'* (Phil. 4:13).

Making Wise Caregiving Decisions

When making caregiving decisions it is essential to face the reality of the current situation, rather than basing decisions on illusion or an idealized wish of what should be. When the truth is recognized, decisions can be appropriate and this in turn brings peace of mind.

Failure to objectively evaluate the situation can result in caregivers saying 'yes' when they'd rather say 'no'. But saying 'no' serves to demarcate boundaries. It sets the limits of behaviour in different situations. By failing to set limits, adult children may be subject to the whims of their aging parents. The one clear message that this leaves with the aging parent is that their own children aren't supposed to be rational in their dealings with them. This leaves both the adult child and the parent floundering and the relationship out of control.

Adult children can also over commit. They may place the needs and wants of their aging parents above their own. If there is a failure to evaluate the parental request objectively—whether it is necessary or beneficial for their parent—the adult child caregiver may seek to fulfill the parent's wishes irrespective of how illogical or unnecessary the wish may be. Not only may this be detrimental to the health and welfare of the parent, but seeking to fulfill every wish can lead adult children to neglect responsibilities to themselves and their families.

Because there may be so little analysis and organization to their decision-making, adult children may seek to impose control over situations where control may not be necessary or even possible. In an effort to 'take charge' they try to assume control over all of their parent's life—up to the point of employing 'heroics' to attempt to control the aging process. By compulsively doing more and more, making promises of care and personal presence, adult children can begin to feel used, overwhelmed and confused. However, when it becomes apparent that all their efforts are not making things better, they try to do even more, not less. It is not possible, though, to alter the course of human aging and sooner or later when reality sets in the caregiver becomes disillusioned.

Whether in trying to impose their own wills on aging parents, or suspending their own decision-making powers in deference to the wants and needs of the parent, adult child caregivers can become confused and frustrated when the desired result is not achieved. Some adult children will completely pull away and 'throw in the towel' thinking that their attempts to help make no difference. Consequently, they may simply ignore their aging parents. Others may succumb to feelings of hopelessness. Neither of these approaches is healthy or beneficial for either party.

If adult children make poor choices they can be saddled



with feelings of hopelessness—believing that they’ve forfeited everything to their aging parents and now have no options. Caregivers can become depressed or angry even to the point of lashing out in elder abuse. Once adult children feel they have no options, a sense of resignation can set in causing their caregiving to become emotionally detached. Though they go through the motions, they have really given up.

Giving up is not to be confused with abandonment. Giving up can be much more subtle. Giving up is when caregivers cease to call their aging parents, when they don’t seek care for their parent’s depression as quickly as they might, when conversations with parents become recitations of what they need to do, rather than exchanging ideas and feelings. Many adult children focus on the physical needs—food, clothing and shelter. But they quit trying when they realize that although all the physical needs have been met, things don’t improve. It may not occur to them that the real test of a caregiver is the quality and depth of the relationship between child and parent.

If the caregiving relationship is in a downward spiral, adult child caregivers can judge themselves as failures. They perceive themselves as ‘bad people’ because of their sense of guilt and turmoil. Caregivers can come to undervalue themselves, their worthiness and their ability to be loved. This insecurity can follow them around as they see themselves as ineffective, uncaring or inadequate. Furthermore, adult child

caregivers’ faith and hope in God can be shaken as a consequence of their caregiving role. It is not that they abandon the ecclesia but rather their relationship with God becomes clouded and they lose their way. Drifting, they become more vulnerable to the emotional storms of life.

Acceptance

In a study of adult child caregivers, acceptance was identified as their number one need. There needs to be an acceptance of an elderly parent—his decisions, his feelings, his history and his deficits. The caregiving adult child must come to accept the reality of aging, its consequences on both the caregiver and elder, and the caregiver’s powerlessness to alter the aging process. By acknowledging your inherent powerlessness to change your aging parent—to stop trying to control the situation—you will find a sense of peace that will displace the negative emotions that previously held sway.

Forgiveness is the path to peace. Past grudges, feuds and interpersonal tension all need to be forgiven if relationships are to be transformed. Oft times we can be more unforgiving of our selves even after God has forgiven us.

Actively seek ways to make your caregiving relationship better. Be open to exploring different options and viewing your caregiving role through ‘new eyes’. Rather

than continuing to repeat the same mistakes and hoping for a different outcome, try to perceive the reality of the situation more clearly and accurately. Be flexible and willing to yield. Be willing to embrace creative acceptance.

Creative acceptance involves living in the present, seeking what is inherently positive. Such an attitude of mind frees you from the fear that you are somehow losing something because of your caregiving role. When you perceive caregiving as a loss, it brings with it resistance and turmoil. But if this role is seen as a learning process, it provides a path that will lead to growth and maturity, and a Christ like mind.

Establishing a quality caring relationship with your aging parent is one of the most important tasks you will undertake. It is characterized by 'being with' rather than physically 'doing for'. It involves a willingness to support your parent rather than constantly attempting to find 'solutions'. There are no solutions to aging. Focus on what you're doing right rather than what may have gone wrong.

Paradoxically, the best way to gain control is to give up the notion that control is possible and simply 'let go'. We must be conscious that what is happening is governed by God and this is all ultimately for our good. Blaming your parent, or by extension, blaming God ultimately results in fear, but implicit trust in Him yields peace and confidence. This becomes an act of faith. And as an adult caregiver's role becomes one of acceptance and disengagement, emphasis can be placed on developing a loving and close relationship.

Let go...and let God

You may have heard the counsel to 'let it go'. And it is easy to confuse 'letting go' with not caring but the two are quite distinct. Below is a list of 'letting go' ideas gleaned from the World Federation on Alcohol Abuse. These same principles are applicable to adult child caregivers in need of guidance in decision-making.

- To let go does not mean to stop caring. It means I can't do it for someone else.
- To let go is not to cut myself off. It's the realization that I can't control another.
- To let go is not to try to change or blame another. It's to make the most of myself.

- To let go is not to fix. It's to be supportive.
- To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes. It is to allow others to affect their destinies.
- To let go is not to be protective. It's to permit another to face reality.
- To let go is not to criticize and regulate anyone. It is to become what one aspires to.
- To let go is to fear less and love more.

Adult caregivers do not control their parents' destiny. God is in control. He and His Son care for both you and your aging parents. Many adult children find it hard to let go, not because they seek power over their parents, but because they truly believe that theirs is the best way. Because they believe their own solution is preferable, they try to impose it upon their aging parents—usually with disappointing results. Our parents will age according to God's plan and we need to be receptive to His will.

Caregivers' Top Ten List of Essential Virtues

1. Acceptance—a nonjudgmental attitude of mind
2. Strength—the capacity for exertion and endurance
3. Peace—a state of tranquility and quiet
4. Patience—bearing pains or trials calmly without complaint
5. Hope—an expectation of fulfillment or success
6. Self-control—restraint exercised over one's own impulses or desires
7. Joy—a state of happiness
8. Harmony—internal calm
9. Gentleness—mildness of disposition
10. Love—unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another

Looking Ahead

When it comes to aging, the ‘sandwich generation’ is usually in a much different position than their parents. The older generation didn’t know that they’d live so long; ours does. They could be excused for not planning for old age. We have no excuse. Should our Lord soon return, such plans would be unnecessary, but that does not mean we should not be prepared.

Upon retirement, our life’s journey enters its final phase—a period that could last twenty or thirty years, or up to one third of your life. What will you do with this gift of time?



Solomon wrote, “*The road the righteous travel is like the sunrise, getting brighter and brighter until the daylight has come*”. (Prov. 4:18) It may have been that we began caregiving as a duty simply because of our circumstances. But such an opportunity can change our perspectives. We are no longer the same person. Following are candid responses to the question, ‘How has caregiving changed your perspective?’

**I want to be the very best old person I can be so I can be a role model for my children and the younger people around me.* Prior to caregiving, many people hadn’t given a thought as to what sort of an older person they would become.

**I’ve learned to be a more compassionate person.* Caregiving has imparted to many a deeper compassion for those who suffer, particularly the elderly. As they support suffering parents and are willing to suffer with them, adult believers can be transformed by the experience. The Apostle Paul wrote, ‘*Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us*’ (Rom. 5:3-5).

**I’ve lost some of my smug self-righteousness. I used to think that anyone who put a parent in a nursing home was awful! When I had to do it myself, I stopped being so judgmental.*

**I’ve learned to take one day at a time. You simply can’t prepare for every eventuality, and you can’t predict what is going to happen.* Caregiving serves to strip away our pride and dependence on self. Acceptance and confidence only come with reliance on God.

**I’ve learned acceptance and to let go of the little things that aren’t really that important. I’ve learned that in spite of everything, life is good!*

**I’ve learned that I’d better become a more loving person so that others will want to be around me when I’m old.* Seniors don’t become models of love as a natural part of the aging process. Experts say that as you age, you become whatever you were before, only more so. All of your life you build the self that will become old. If we allow God to be the Builder, His work will continue to make us more loving like His Son.

**I’ve learned that I must take responsibility for my own health and well being, that it’s not selfish to take care of myself.* When caregivers see what taking care of a sick, elderly person can do to the family dynamic, they begin to realize that taking care of themselves is the kindest thing they can do for others. If we can avoid becoming a physical burden, then we should do so.

Foundation's Terms of Reference

How can the Fairhaven Christadelphian Charitable Foundation be of assistance to your ecclesia? Are there health and welfare needs in your meeting that require attention, but ecclesial resources are strained or insufficient? The Foundation, operating under the applicable government regulations, may provide grants only to registered charities in Canada. We must disperse a percentage of our investment income each year, based upon a government regulatory formula.

Ecclesias in Canada may request assistance from the Foundation by following these guidelines:

Only requests from Arranging Boards will be considered. Requests from an individual member of an ecclesia will not be considered by the Foundation. Priority is to be given to the welfare needs of Christadelphian elderly, since this reflects the original purpose of Fairhaven House. If additional funds are available after meeting these needs, then more general health and welfare needs of the Christadelphian community will be considered, followed by health and welfare needs of the community at large. Requests must be in writing and should document, in confidence, the need, the background, the amount of help required and the amount of help being provided by the ecclesia. It is expected that the ecclesia requesting support will also provide funds to assist from its own resources. It is preferable, if possible, that ecclesias address emergency situations, and subsequently follow up with a request to the Foundation. The board of the Foundation considers requests at its semi-annual meetings in March and August each year. Emergency requests will also be addressed as quickly as possible.

Requests may be sent to:

The Fairhaven Christadelphian Foundation
c/o Sister Penny Keeting, Secretary
728 Church Street Toronto, ON
M4W 2M6

It is important to appreciate that the primary responsibility to meet the welfare needs of our brothers, sisters and young people lies at the ecclesial level, and consequently the Foundation's role is to supplement, rather than supplant this ecclesial responsibility. We encourage ecclesias to be actively aware of situations where there is a need, extend help, and then approach the Foundation as a funding partner.

Year End Financial Report

Statement of Revenue, Expenses and Fund Balance for the Year Ending March 31, 2010

Revenue

Investment income	11,822
Donations	555
Grants returned	0
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	12,377

Expenses

Grants	27,430
Professional fees	2,059
Administrative	1,692
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	31,181

Net Income (Loss) (18,804)

Opening fund balance 398,990

Closing fund balance 380,186

An Appeal

In this low interest rate environment, income generated from investments has been inadequate to address the needs of recipient ecclesias and consequently, the Foundation's capital has continued to diminish.

The Foundation would welcome ecclesial and individual gifts to support this work of the Lord. Donations may be sent to the treasurer, Bro. Clive Daniel, 8583 Sansum Pk. Dr., N. Saanich, BC. V8L 4V7

The Fairhaven Christadelphian Charitable Foundation
c/o 728 Church Street
Toronto, ON, M4W 2M6

Directors

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Bro. Clive Daniel, Treasurer
Bro. Alan Ghent, Chair

Sis. Penny Keeting, Secretary
Sis. Marie Klien
Bro. Ian McPhee
Bro. Tom Thorp

Sources

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