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Bishop David Emrys Richards is the oldest living bishop in The Episcopal Church. He and his wife, Helen, live in Coral Gables, Florida. Bishop Richards was consecrated Bishop Suffragan of the Diocese of Albany (New York) in 1951 — the youngest priest ever to be elected and consecrated bishop at that time — and served as Missionary Bishop in Central America from 1957 to 1969. In 1969, he established the House of Bishops' Office of Pastoral Development. Bishop Richards shared his thoughts for this article with the Rev. Robert M. Libby, a retired priest and longtime friend who lives in Key Biscayne, Florida, and Father Libby assisted Bishop Richards in preparing the article for *Vintage Voice*.

About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Three Keys to Creative Aging

By the Rt. Rev. David Emrys Richards

Spirituality, friendship, and service. These, I believe, are three keys to creative aging. At age 95 and after 65 years as a bishop, people keep asking me for guidance in the process of making a difference in their senior years, which I like to refer to as our “ascending years.”

While a little more than a century ago 50 was considered the average life expectancy, the psychologist Eric Erickson discerned that there are now eight stages of human development, the last two being “later adulthood” and “old age.” It is to these two stages of human development that I direct my thoughts.

I begin with *spirituality*, as most of the people who seek my counsel have had or would like to have experience in a faith community. I pray prayers that our spiritual journey will take us through the disciplines of piety, i.e. scripture, sacraments, prayer, fasting etc., on to the development of a genuine intimacy with God through the careful, thoughtful study of the scriptures, through the practice of meditation, through contemplative prayer, through disciplined intercessory prayer in which we willingly take on the burden and pain of other persons' lives and the pain of the world as a way of uniting oneself and the whole of creation to God, the creator and Father of us all.

I do believe that one of the gifts of our later years is time, which provides us with the space to exercise the disciplines which will lead us to ascend to see more of the mystery of God.

Friendships are an essential part of creative aging, and the gift of time also makes this possible. It is not only important to nurture lifetime friendships, but to cross generational lines, as well. A phenomenon of our times is that generational roles are often reversed and — as in the case of the digital revolution — the juniors are so often coaching the elders. I call this “generativity.”

What I am suggesting is that while we find pleasure and stimulation in association with our chronological peers, we should never give up the pleasure and stimulation of seeking out multi-generational opportunities and experiences in our families, churches, and communities.

I am always struck by the account of the miracle of the loaves and fishes that is recorded for us in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John (6:1-13). Other accounts of this miracle are recorded in Matthew (14:13-21), Mark (6:32-44), and Luke (9:10-17), but the one in John has something that none of the others have. In the first three gospels we get the impression that the crowd that followed Jesus is a group of adults, who are eager to hear and take in his teaching. Toward the end of the day the problem of hunger and food arise, and in several versions the disciples look around and discover that they have only five loaves and two fish, which become the basis for what must have truly been a great miraculous feast.

In John's version, however, the disciples don't seem to be able to come up with anything, and we hear Philip saying to our Lord that they just don't have enough money to buy everyone in this crowd even a little piece of bread. Then Andrew suggests a solution and says, "Here is a small boy with five loaves and two small fish." Then we hear him add rather pensively, "But what is that among so many?" Then the miracle proceeds. The point I want to make is that this was a multi-generational event and that a small boy played a very important part in the life of the community.

Friendships are important and in our senior years multi-generational relationships are especially important. Life is not getting easier for the younger generation. We need them and they need us. So reach out in friendship with care and compassion.

Service naturally flows from friendships and in the senior/ascending years there can be a shift in motivation from "getting" to "what can I contribute?" We need to ask, "How can my life, in some sense, be a gift to the lives of others?" The counterbalance to this is stagnation and inactivity, just quietly getting ready to die. We bemoan the elders who are concerned only about themselves. We need to move from this pattern of self-centeredness and thus set the model of generativity for future generations. The heroic model of later adulthood and old age is giving something back — being a giver rather than a taker.

And so as ascending seniors we have the opportunity to take our spirituality more seriously as we seek to deepen our relationship with God, to experience the mystery and wonder of the divine nature. We do this in a communal way and seek to deepen the bond of friendship among one another, and as we learn more about friendship and fellowship our lives are enriched by making an effort to interact with all of the rest of the people in our congregations and communities. At the same time we have the opportunity to be of service. Serving others is the best way to stay alive with hope for ourselves and for the world. The opportunities for meaningful service are abundant.

Spirituality, friendship, and service are keys to a creative, abundant senior chapter in our ascending life and I pray for a happy aging to one and all.



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