

Introduction to Special Section: Congregational & Social Work Contributions to Human Thriving among Persons 55+

Dennis R. Myers & Terry A. Wolfer

I have come that you may life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

THIS SPECIAL SECTION OF *SOCIAL WORK AND CHRISTIANITY (SWC)* is devoted to congregational and social work contributions to human thriving among persons 55+. We believe that Jesus' intention to offer abundant living for humankind resonates with the positive psychological construct of human thriving. We think that a deep longing for abundant living and human thriving among marginalized persons 55+ in our communities explains why the contributing authors offer these contributions to social work-informed and congregationally-based responses to their challenges. Based on a definition authored by Benson and Scales (2009), human thriving represents a dynamic and reciprocal interplay of an older person intrinsically animated and energized by overcoming personal and environmental challenges to discover his/her specialness, and the developmental, relational, and institutional contexts (people, places, organizations) that know, affirm, celebrate, encourage, and guide its expression (p. 90). The articles in this special section highlight the responses of social work researchers and practitioners to the growing number of persons 55+ who daily encounter poverty; gender, racial and economic injustice; social isolation; invisibility; and life-threatening illness. Each article addresses one or both fundamental

questions: What are the personal and environmental assets and challenges that sustain and discourage human thriving? How can congregations and social work professionals contribute to this outcome among the 55+ population?

SWC has a long history of response to the implications of the longevity revolution for social work, particularly at the intersection of social work practice, congregations, and religiously-affiliated organizations. In 1983, SWC published the first special issue on aging, edited out of a conference at the University of Chicago. Since that time, the journal has consistently provided a forum for authors to deliver articles, practice notes, and book reviews informing colleagues committed to abundant living of the 55+ population. Thirty years later, in 2013, SWC published a second special issue on *Congregational & Social Work Responses to Older Adult Vulnerability*, featuring articles, practice notes, and a book review that offered guidance for social workers and religious leaders committed to collaborative approaches for enriching the lives of persons 55+. The special issue highlighted innovative responses of congregations and assets and vulnerabilities of the 55+ population and the role of social work in the design, delivery, and/or evaluation of these congregational programs. This special section is a five-year update on research and congregationally-based innovations since the 2013 issue. Congregationally-affiliated social workers have much to offer congregations in their mutual quest to nurture personal and spiritual thriving, the central theme across the thirty-five years of SWC commitment to informing social work practice with the 55+ population. The synergy at this intersect between the two is a potent place to disseminate research on human thriving in this population group and build congregationally-based innovations like the ones selected for this special section as well as the ones that will be needed in the future.

According to the Benson and Scales (2009) definition above, human thriving is an outcome of a reciprocal relationship between the internal needs and aspirations of the person and an external context that can activate and sustain the person's "specialness." Persons 55+ cannot thrive in isolation. The opportunity to realize their "specialness" is impossible without personal and contextual enablers. According to Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, and Standage (2017), personal enablers are "attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors that help him or her to thrive" (p. 171). Examples include religious beliefs and spirituality (Park, 1968), resilience, (Gan, Xie, Wang, Rodriguez, & Tang, 2013), and motivation (Benson & Scales, 2009). Contextual enablers, such as supportive family (Weine et al., 2013) and work environments (Paterson et al., 2014), are external facets of the person's relational and organizational environment that also foster human thriving (Carver, 1998). The articles in this special section demonstrate how congregations are also contextual enablers of thriving among persons 55+ who struggle with challenges to their sense of specialness.

In this special section, you will find five articles that offer guidance for social workers and congregations committed to collaborative approaches for activating and sustaining human thriving in lives of persons 55+. Three articles focus on the threats to thriving created by loneliness, dementia, and human and natural disasters. One article examines the extent to which hope is a personal enabler of thriving through its impact on resilience. The special section also offers an innovation in social work field education that prepares social workers for competency in strengthening congregations' contribution to thriving among the 55+ population marginalized by economic and health challenges. All the articles prescribe initiatives that congregations can activate, and interventions that social workers can implement to increase the efficacy of congregations as contextual enablers of human thriving.

In *Loneliness and Congregational Social Work*, Victoria A. Charles and Terry A. Wolfer address social isolation in later life, one of social work's Grand Challenges. In concert with local congregations, the authors demonstrate how congregationally-affiliated social workers can use community development, community organizing, and direct practice skills to foster human thriving by nurturing personal relationships and socially cohesive communities.

In *Remembering Faith: Rural Faith Communities' Outreach to Members with Dementia*, Kenneth Flanagan focuses on how congregations can become more dementia-friendly. Based on qualitative interviews with twelve pastoral staff in seventeen rural congregations in North Dakota, the researcher identified four characteristics of congregations that were welcoming to persons living with dementia. This article offers guidance to congregationally-affiliated social workers interested in addressing the challenges of promoting human thriving in this population group.

In *Congregational and Social Work Responses to Older Survivors of Natural/Human Disasters*, James W. Ellor and Margaret Mayo draw attention to the impact of natural or human disasters on older survivors and the responses of congregations and congregationally-affiliated social workers to these devastating and unanticipated events. This father-daughter author team offers a current perspective on how congregations can promote human survival and even thriving across each phase of the disaster cycle—pre-event preparation, post-event/acute phase, and post-event/long-term phase. Micro and macro prescriptions for congregational and social work engagement that support resilient outcomes for older survivors are included.

In *Hope and Resilience among Vulnerable, Community-Dwelling Older Persons*, Edward C. Polson, Rachel Gillespie, and Dennis R. Myers investigate how community-dwelling older adults experiencing poverty, social isolation, and deteriorating health and daily functioning remain resilient. Based on research with other population groups, the researchers tested the

proposition that hopefulness may help explain resilience in older, vulnerable persons. Based on survey data drawn from a sample of 64 persons 55+ experiencing devastating physical and psychosocial marginality, hope was a significant predictor of resilience among these older adults and mediated the effect of spiritual experience on resilience. Recommendations to social workers and congregational leaders for promoting hope in congregational and community contexts are provided.

Finally, in *The Congregational Social Work Education Initiative: A New Pathway in Field Education and Community Partnership*, Fran Pearson, Kelly J. Poole, Wayne R. Moore, Lelia Moore, John Rife, & Antonia Reaves Richburg follow an article in the 2013 special section with an update on a nationally-recognized field education model for equipping future social workers for competent practice with congregational and religiously-affiliated organizations aimed at vulnerable community members to include persons 55+. Based on sustained delivery of the model, the authors present the history, goals, programs, outcomes, strengths, and limitations of Congregational Social Work Education Initiative (CSWEI). This unique field education program, which partners with a local congregational nurse program, provides an array of services aimed at human thriving. The authors encourage replication of the CSWEI model and development of strategic interdisciplinary and religious organizational affiliations.

Our authors present evidence that congregations provide an enabling context for personal and spiritual thriving and abundant living among persons 55+ and that social workers committed to congregational affiliation have much to offer congregations in this mission. The longevity revolution will continue to offer new opportunities and challenges for persons 55+ facing marginalization. As never before, congregations and congregationally-attentive social work practitioners, educators, and researchers will have opportunities to build on the contributions of these authors and collaboratively create, promote, deliver, and evaluate innovative public policy and programmatic contexts for those facing seemingly insurmountable barriers to human thriving. ❖

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