

# **The Role of Elders: Are We Realizing Their Potential?**

by Terry Anderson

In a December 2022 Zoom meeting of the 5th Principle Project over 70 participants listened to Rev. Todd Eklof explain the rationale and goals of a new liberal Unitarian organization, North American Unitarian Association (NAUA). During the discussion after the presentation, one middle aged participant commented on the large number of senior “grey hairs” amongst the audience. Indeed, in other related online fora, and in most Unitarian congregations, the majority of people are well past their 50’s.

Are these grey heads assets or liabilities to the future of liberal religious organizations?

It is no surprise to church goers in almost all denominations that their congregations are growing older. For many, with age comes increasing health concerns and limitations on mobility. However, the lifestyles and interests of Elders also provide opportunities for knowledge gain and transmission, and for community service. In this article, I examine the potential role for elders in UU communities.

I am not going to apologize for my age (72 years young), much as I don’t expect anyone to apologize for their gender, race, sexual orientation, height or weight – we all are beneficiaries of “inherent worth and dignity” – the 1st Principle of UUism. It follows that ill treatment of older people should be a concern. Both younger and older Unitarians can suffer from ageist reactions.

At the beginning of Canadian UU services, most public meetings and even hockey games, a statement is read that acknowledges the contributions of the first residents of the land upon which the meeting is held. In addition, it is unheard of to open a meeting of First Nations peoples without a prayer from an elder. The First Nations Pedagogy site describes Elders as “the Gatekeepers of First Nations wisdom, knowledge, and history. Elders traditionally hold crucial roles in supporting both formal and informal education in First Nations communities. They impart tradition, knowledge, culture, values, and lessons using orality and role modeling traditional practices.”

Elders have a defined role in Christian churches (see Acts 14:23, 1 Peter 2:25, Philippians 1:1) which has been described by Anthony Hilder (2019) as those “responsible for the spiritual government, direction and overall leadership of a congregation – they were not subject to any kind of council, board or another body within the church”.

The role and importance of elders is also visible in North American postsecondary institutions. Anonson et al (2014) note that elders primarily benefit younger students through counsel and through role modelling and that the positive effects of their actions permeate the institution and the wider community.

Elders also play significant roles in many other cultures. Aarushi Jain describes elders in East Indian culture as the “the roots of the tree. They hold the family firmly at all times and make them strong.” Jain also notes that their role is to preserve traditional and cultural values.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, ancestor worship plays a significant social and political role (Kopytoff, 2012.). In these societies “the elders are the representatives of the ancestors and mediators between them and the kin-

group” (p.129). The role of elders has played an evolutionary role throughout our history. From earliest times, knowledge of which foods to eat and how to harvest and prepare these foods is critical knowledge that supports the well-being of the community. Traditionally, this knowledge has been passed down through elders.

When applied in a Unitarian Universalist context, we are obviously not predominantly First Nations, Christian, South East Asian or African, yet even in modern North American society, elders can and do play important roles.

We learn a second lesson regarding elders from the role of hereditary kings and chiefs. Hereditary chiefs, kings and sheiks are often older than the population they come from – largely because their term of office only ends with their death. I write this from Canada where we are immersed in the monarchical soap opera known as the royal House of Windsor. Despite this example, we also follow the ongoing debate on fossil fuel use and the example of methane (so called natural gas) pipelines, illustrates the role of elder wisdom.

In Northern British Columbia an international company, Coastal Gaslink is building a gas pipeline that crosses traditional lands of Wet'suwet'en First Nations. The bands living in the area each have an elected Chief and Council, as defined by the Canadian Indian Act. The elected chief and councils from these bands have negotiated with Coastal Gaslink and struck a deal that they believe is both wanted and necessary for development in their communities. The hereditary chiefs take a longer view, arguing that the best way to meet climate goals is to leave fossil fuels in the ground and most certainly not allow pipelines through traditional territories. This different world view has captured global press attention and manifested in protests and police arrests.

Regardless of your opinion on this issue, it is obvious that the hereditary chiefs, backed by culture and indigenous law, have an important voice and capacity to alter social behaviour. Their age, in addition to their hereditary titles, gives them an authority that serves their communities – especially in times of crisis.

At a practical level, elders often have free time to pursue social action issues. The work of rearing children often has been eliminated or transformed to the fun of enjoying grandkids. Most elders in North America also have at their disposal very sophisticated digital and nondigital access to information, government, law, scientific research, social media and much more. They have time to read the minutes, watch the videos and listen to podcasts of groups, councils and “influencers”. Thus, they are valuable information and wisdom resources for their communities – at local, national and international levels. Melchor Lim argued that “elders deserve to be listened to – not because they are always right – but because they have more experiences of being wrong.”

Elders are also able to ‘speak truth to power’. This phrase is often used to describe protestors standing up to oppressive governments. However, it can also be applied to professions, cultural institutions or religions that fail to see or ignore uncomfortable truth. Elders are also gadflies and whistle blowers, they play the critically important roles of questioning, illuminating and championing valuable ideas or behaviours that are not always welcomed and sometimes seen as divisive and counterproductive.

Elders like other “intersectionalities” can be impoverished or living on very tight and fixed budgets. However, there are many elders who have more disposable income at this point in their lives than they had as youth or young parents. Both the resources of the fortunate and the challenges of poor elders can serve as catalysts for effective social justice programs.

Elders, like all humans, have different opinions, interests and commitments to social causes and issues. Opposition to illiberal activities, deep suspicion of ideologies and distrust of anti-democratic actions comes not only from old, privileged, mostly male activists. These injustices bother us all. There are many benefits of both giving and receiving guidance and support from older Unitarians. Besides this loss of opportunity, failure to recognize the value of our elders can result in their echoing Albert Einstein's feeling that "as an elderly man, I have remained estranged from the society here."

The challenges faced by Unitarian congregations in living our seven principles require the continuing efforts of all of us, including and perhaps especially our elders.

## **Bibliography**

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