

## EXECUTIVE SUITE



Emerson Lesher, PhD, president of Messiah Village

By Barbara Trainin Blank

**I**n one way, Emerson Lesher's career path was unexpected.

While working for Philhaven, a nonprofit behavioral health care organization, as director of adult services and senior psychologist, he was invited to join the board of Messiah Village. He spent several years, four of them as chair, on the board of the Mechanicsburg-headquartered network of senior services that include nursing care, personal care, residential living, and community services.

When George Kibler, who had held the top executive post at Messiah for more than 20 years, announced he would step down, Emerson decided to apply. Somewhat to his surprise and very much to his delight, he was chosen as president/CEO.

"It's unusual for a chairman of the board to become president," says the 58-year-old. "But I knew the board and they knew me. There was a sense of trust."

In a more general sense, though, his path might have been predictable. With a

# Senior Moments

## Emerson Lesher at Messiah Village

pastor-social worker father and a mother who became a nursing assistant after years as a homemaker, Emerson was always drawn to the helping professions.

But for a long time, that interest was only broadly defined. "I was also interested in farming and didn't think about [gerontology] until

later in college. I never thought about working with older people per se."

What changed that was a sort of chance event. While an undergraduate at Messiah College, he was required to do an internship for his behavioral sciences major. He applied to and was accepted to what was

then called Messiah Home, a facility in Harrisburg.

Immediately Emerson noticed that he enjoyed listening to the stories residents told about their lives, how they had taken twists and turns. He also realized this was an underserved population, particularly individuals in their mid-70s and up. "Gerontology was a new thought for me. I realized these people needed support, and maybe I could be of help."

Another aspect of the profession that appealed to him was that working with older people means bringing together all the aspects of life—social, physical, spiritual, and emotional. "These are more interrelated with older people (and children) than with other people. It's more holistic."

Another influence on Emerson's career choice was a close relationship with his grandparents. "One was very high functioning and engaged, while my other grandparents suffered from depression for the first time late in life. So I

had two models. It was an interesting disparity. I saw the possibilities and also the problems" of being older.

His decision was further clinched by a later internship in what was then the Philadelphia Geriatric Center.

After completing his college education, the Fairfield County native went to Pasadena, California, for 5 years to get his PhD in psychology. He was accompanied by his wife, the former Ruth Detweiler, whom he had met while working at Philhaven Hospital in Mt. Gretna, who was also pursuing her doctorate. One of his mentors is Roland Shank Sr., who was Philhaven CEO and also a psychologist.

Ruth is also a psychologist, with an active private practice in Lemoyne and Lancaster. She is one of seven partners in Behavioral Health Care Consultants.

The two have been married 35 years and have two children. Ben, 24, a research analyst for satisfaction and health surveys, lives in Lancaster County and is married. Katherine is a junior in college, not surprisingly a psychology and sociology major.

While happily taking on the presidency of Messiah Village, he did have some doubts about the administrative end of things. But he thought a strong interest would serve him well, as would his Philhaven work experience. "I was getting more into management at Philhaven and wanted to grow in that area."

Another asset as Emerson saw it was his background in the behavioral sciences. "Psychologists study about change and the group

process. I knew how to work with people and bring them to a new point."

The leadership style he has developed over his 16 years at Messiah Village is participatory, incorporating the belief that a CEO is only as good as the people who "decide to follow me. Leadership is a choice; I need to invite people to choose to follow, and I need to provide support to others and have others participate and be engaged."

Another way of looking at leadership stems from the dialogue psychologists have with patients. "Leadership is about having a conversation we've never had before. I see my role as a leader to help talk about other things we don't usually talk about."

Among these topics of conversation are the challenges Messiah Village and other facilities serving older populations are facing. At least one of them, according to Emerson, is actually good for the clients. There are more options for older people—more services, more programs—which make the field more competitive. "So we have to become more sophisticated in our marketing. Clearly one size doesn't fit all."

As opposed to years ago, as well, a senior facility may well be serving two or three different generations with different needs. "Obviously an 85-year-old may be very different from a 65-year-old and want different things. We can't lump everyone together in a segmented market. We have to get better at that."

Another challenge is for campuses such as Messiah Village to reach out to those who may never move there. "One big initiative is to offer services to areas. Not

everyone wants to or can afford to live here. We have to go to the people" through lifelong learning and wellness programs, for example.

Even for those who do eventually move on campus, the average age of people applying for a cottage or apartment is higher than it used to be. People are waiting longer.

When Emerson isn't working, he likes to read history books and books concerning leadership, such as the best-selling *Open Leadership* by Charlene Li. John Grisham is a favorite fiction writer. He and Ruth belong to a book-discussion club that meets a few times a year. His listening tastes run to Garrison Keillor and to Bob Dylan and other "folk music."

He and his wife also enjoy eating out, and recently they've stepped up their travel—with favorite destinations being almost anywhere. "We went to England and Scotland to celebrate our 35th anniversary, and we go to Seattle to visit our daughter."

The couple lives on the family farm his wife grew up on. "We don't actually farm, but we do landscaping and work outside. There's a walking trail, which is good for exercise."

His indoor working space, Emerson says laughingly, is a hangover from his days as a scholar and psychologist—dimly lit and book-lined. "People often ask me to turn up the lights," he laughs. Technically, it's not entirely a hangover, since he still has academic credentials: Emerson is adjunct professor of human development and family studies at Penn State University and contributes

to publications such as the *Journal of Gerontology*.

The office is also full of objects that residents made, such as a cross with the Messiah Village logo, a stained glass piece, a wooden bowl. There are historic-related items, such as a milk can from the original Messiah Home when it was located in Harrisburg, a globe, and two photos of his mother's family, probably dating back to the '30s or '40s. "It helps me stay in touch with who I am."

Also meaningful to him are the awards the senior community received based on what staff members—there are some 600 of them—said. Messiah Village was designated one of the "Best Places to Work," and in 2010 was also voted a Democratic Workplace. Not a political designation, this is an honor based on the fact that at least 80 percent of employees have to fill out a survey indicating their employer is a participatory workplace. "This is an international award—only 30 places around the world made the list. What employees say is very significant."

Another source of pride for him professionally is the opening of a second campus in Mt. Joy and the completion of a capital campaign that brought in \$3.5 million.

On a personal level, Emerson is very proud of his children, pleased with how they're doing and what they're doing. "Even with the pressures of leadership, we have remained close. We spend time as a family."

That's only to be expected in a man who drew so much inspiration from his own family of origin.