

**Isaiah 46:3-4 New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>3</sup>“Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the people of Israel,  
you whom I have upheld since your birth,  
and have carried since you were born.

<sup>4</sup>Even to your old age and gray hairs  
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.  
I have made you and I will carry you;  
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

So, what will I do with a sermon **on Older Adult Ministry** I could take the easy way out and do as a young man who had come to a monastery and asked for admission to the order.

"He told the abbot that he would accept any task, no matter how menial, if only he could be part of the religious life. He set only one condition, that he not be required to preach. The abbot replied, "Obviously this is the one area of your spiritual development that needs attention, so tomorrow morning you will be our preacher!"

The young monk-trainee was gripped by fear when he approached the time to preach, but was seized by inspiration and said to the gathered brethren, "Do you know what I'm going to preach about this morning?" "No," murmured the other monks. "Well, neither do I, receive the benediction!"

The abbot was upset and determined that the young novitiate

preach, so he assigned him a second time. At the time of preaching, the man again said, "Do you know today what I'm going to preach about?" Wishing to help him along, the monks all nodded "yes." He said, "Then if you know what I'm going to preach about, there's no need to hear it again. Receive the benediction!"

Now the abbot was furious, and he instructed the novitiate to preach again the third time. At the third encounter the young monk said again, "Today do you know what I'm going to preach about?" The other monks were confused. Some said "yes," and some said "no;" at which point the novitiate declared "Well, then those of you who know tell the ones who don't. Receive the benediction!"

(Reverend William G. Stell, "Perfect Love" Preached at St. Luke's U.M.C. in Houston, Texas.)

Well I am sure that many of you know more about Older Adult Ministry than I do. And it is my hope that those of you who know tell those of you who don't.

In the words of the psalmist, "I have been young and now I am old, and in all my years I have never seen the Lord forsake a person who loves him." (Ps. 37:25) In that confidence let me suggest some biblical guidelines for utilizing our older adults within the Church.

One of the best ways to keep growing is to render a service to others. Retired persons represent the best volunteer pool in America. I am convinced that one of the keys to the church's

renewal is the creative use of retired persons in key volunteer positions.

I know of a church which has a group of retired men called Christ's Carpenters. They meet for breakfast and prayer two mornings per week. Then they go out and do carpenter work on houses of disadvantaged or elderly persons.

If we could get every healthy retired person into a significant ministry for about five hours per week, we could double the outreach of Christ Church.

A seven-year-old girl was sitting on her grandmother's lap. As the little girl moved her hand across the older woman's face, Grandma said, "Those are my wrinkles. They mean that I'm getting older." The little girl asked, "Do wrinkles hurt?"

What a loaded question! It involves more than just wrinkles. It deals with the whole business of getting older. Everybody has to address that question if one lives long enough. Is it fun to get old? Is it humiliating? Should we look forward to it or dread it? Should we apologize for it or brag about it? Do wrinkles hurt?

America needs to hear the truth about ageing and older people. The fact is that senior citizens are the wave of the future. Currently people over 65 constitute 13 percent of our population. Within twenty years they will comprise 20 percent. You've heard about the baby boom; what we have is a "geezer boom" on our hands.

Older adults are present in ever-growing numbers in nearly every congregation, and in greater proportions than in the total population. One-sixth of the Presbyterian Church's members are over age 65. Nearly another fourth are between ages 55 and 64. Between 5,000 and 6,000 congregations are made up mostly of older adults. They are located, for the most part, in rural communities in our suburbs and older urban neighborhoods. Most are small and are served by one pastor.

We who are under 65 must help our culture learn the biblical view of ageing. According to the Bible, "gray hair is a crown of splendor." The Bible decrees that older people should receive special honor and courtesy because of their wisdom, experience, and godliness. In biblical times the elders sat at the gates of the various towns in positions of honor; they adjudicated disputes and dispensed advice. They were honored for their wisdom. Many of the biblical heroes were up in age before they did great things.

**HONORING OUR ELDERS**  
**(A dialogue written by Alice Ann and**  
**Richard Morgan for the United Nations'**  
**International Year of Older Persons**  
**Celebration in 1999.)**

**FIRST READER:** We remember the faith of Abraham and Sarah, who left their homeland in search of a better country, and with great laughter produced a child in their later years. Through Abraham and Sarah came a new nation.

**FIRST READER:** We remember the faith of Anna and Simeon, two older saints of God, who watched and waited for the

Messiah. Their fading eyes recognized the Promised One in the face of the infant, Jesus.

**FIRST READER:** We remember the faith of Moses, who was called by God late in life. At age 80, he led the children of Israel out of bondage into freedom.

**SECOND READER:** Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, was forced to retire from her position with the United Presbyterian Church at age 65. She then became a tireless drum major of social justice for all ages. She called on us "to do something outrageous every day," even in later years.

**SECOND READER:** Rachel Henderlite, Christian educator, who at 60 became the first woman to be ordained to the ministry in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. At the age of 71, she became the first president of the Consultation on Church Union.

**SECOND READER:** Pope John XXIII. Angelo Roncalli, who at age 81 led the Second Vatican Council, which modernized Roman Catholic liturgy, fostered a spirit of ecumenism with all religious faiths, and created a new spirit of unity among Christendom.

**THIRD READER:** Grandma Moses, Anna Mary Robertson, who turned to painting at the age of 76 because, she said, "I am too young to sit on the porch and too old to work on the farm." She painted over 600 famous canvases and worked until she was over 100 years old. Her philosophy was "Life is what we make it, always has been, always will be."

**THIRD READER:** Golda Meir, who became the fourth premier of Israel at the age of 72. She exemplified her own words, "Old age is not a sin; it is a call to service."

**THIRD READER:** Benjamin Franklin, American patriot,

statesman, inventor and author who at the age of 81 effected the compromise that led to the adoption of the Constitution of the United States.

**THIRD READER:** John Glenn, Senator, astronaut, and Presbyterian elder. This old space warrior, who roared into space at the age of 77 and made us realize that age is not a barrier to achievement, did as much to combat ageism on the ground as registering new triumphs in space.

**FIRST READER:** "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

Do wrinkles hurt? No! They are badges of honor. Wear them proudly!

The truth is that the fastest growing segment of our population is those over 65. People are living longer and healthier lives. In less than one century, there has been an astonishing 50 percent plus increase in longevity (from 49 in 1900 to almost 80 in 2000). By some accounts, the life expectancy of a child born today is expected to be well over 90.

If any place in our culture should be excited about these numbers and what they mean, it should be the church. For too long, all the church has been moaning about the "graying of the church" and the shrinking numbers in church schools and youth groups as if Christians were all stamped with some kind of expiration date, like milk or meat, and should be discarded after a certain age.

Most people retire while they are active and healthy. They spend an average of more than 15 years, about a fifth of their life spans, in retirement. Yet in many congregations there is no ministry geared to their needs and interests, no challenge to leadership and mission that makes use of their skills and knowledge.

One-sixth of the church's members receive from their own congregations little significant response to their life experiences and spiritual needs, and little challenge to continue to grow spiritually or to seek new ways to serve others in Christ's name.

Ministry with older adults is not yet seen as a normal part of the congregation's program, and most congregations have yet to develop such a ministry. It is assumed that Sunday worship, adult church school classes and prayer groups, together with the community senior center and nutrition program, meet most other needs. There is often little awareness of needs and concerns that are particular to this period in life. Spiritual growth and development in later life are seldom addressed, either by congregations or by the presbytery's programs.

It is time to celebrate the positive dimensions of growing old "grace-fully." What gifts and graces do today's and tomorrow's "third-agers" have to offer our churches? All of us must follow Moses; lead and learn to grow old "grace-fully."

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean winding down. Instead, it means learning to shift gears, sometimes into overdrive, sometimes into four-wheel drive.

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean letting others take over the reins and settling back. Instead, it means letting God direct your course.

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean disengaging from the community. Instead, it means being prepared to take on new positions of leadership.

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean vision is dimmed. Instead, it means being a visionary for the future of your church, your community, your world.

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean losing touch with the sensual world. Instead, it means taking the time to celebrate all the physical and spiritual gifts God provides, and relishing them.

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean caving in to limitations. Instead, it means giving God the opportunity to strengthen your weaknesses no matter how long-lived they may be.

Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean rattling around in an "empty nest." Instead, it means opening the doors of your mind, heart and home to new ideas, new feelings and new people God sends your way.

Regardless of age, each individual is precious in the sight of God and entitled to the caring ministry of the church.

Regardless of age, each of Christ's disciples is called to minister to others through the church and in the community. Interpreted by

clear theological principles, the practical realities of population growth constitute a clear call to develop older adult ministry in every congregation where older people are to be found.

During his youth, Moses lived as an Egyptian, pampered and privileged in Pharaoh's house. In midlife, Moses worked hard tending sheep, raising a family, being a member of a busy community.

Not until he had appropriately aged did the Lord call Moses into his most active service. In his "third age," Moses did not "retire" into (cushy retirement) sedentary oblivion. He became the servant of the Lord unlike any ever known, Israel's greatest leader.

At midlife, Moses was a stumble-tongued shepherd, eking out a living on his father-in-law's land, consumed by the demands of a family. Having left behind the glamorous life he had led as a youth, Moses certainly was not looking for any more radical changes in his life. But then, God had other plans. With an open spirit of a fairly incredulous mind Moses obediently followed the dramatic "retirement plan" God had in store for him.

Are we open to doing the same? Are you looking forward to "retirement" as a time with a slowed pace, a quiet house and a lot of golf? Not if you're to grow old "grace-fully." The Spirit of Christ in you does not molder with age it remains as fresh and sweet and surprising as on the first day we received it into our hearts.

Do wrinkles hurt? No! They are badges of honor. Wear them proudly!