

# **Ministry with Seniors**

**Ministry Conference 2012  
Jill McGilvray**

*“There is still no cure for the common birthday”* John Glenn

*“John Quincy Adams is well. But the house in which he lives at present is becoming dilapidated. It is tottering upon its foundation. Time and the seasons have nearly destroyed it; its roof is pretty well worn out. Its walls are much shattered and it trembles with every wind. I think John Quincy Adams will have to move out of it soon. But he himself is quite well, quite well.”*

*“I inhabit a week, frail, decayed tenement; battered by the winds and broken in on by the storms, and, from all I can learn, the landlord does not intend to repair.”*

John Quincy Adams

*“It seems important, however, to say that caring for the ageing is not a special type of care. “As soon as we start thinking about care for the ageing as a subject of specialization, we are falling into the trap of societal segregation, which care is precisely trying to overcome...the care of the old for the young is no different from the care of the young for the old. Real care takes place when we are no longer separated by the walls of fear, but have found each other on the common ground of the human condition which is mortal but therefore very very precious.”*

Henri Nouwen - Ageing the Fulfillment of Life

*“I have already had my 76<sup>th</sup> birthday...humanly speaking I don't have that much (time) left...on the other hand, if there is life after death, if eternity is really eternity and I have the greater bulk of my life to look forward to, then that makes all the difference.”*

John Chapman –Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life

*“We wonder how much older we have to become, and what degree of decay we may have to endure. We keep whispering to ourselves, “Is this age yet? How far must I go? For age can be dreaded more than death...it is waiting for death that wears us down, and the distaste for what we may become.”*

Florida Scott-Maxwell - The Measure of My Days.

*“I have learned that a culture which equates material possessions with success, and views the frantic, compulsive consumer as the perfect citizen, can afford little space for the aged human being. They are past competing, they are out of the game. We live in a culture which endorses what has been called “human obsolescence”. To the junk heap, the nursing home, the retirement village, the “Last Resort”.*  
Sharon Curtin quoted in Nouwen.

### **The truth:**

Seniors ministry is not the coolest ministry. (When is a congregation plant not a congregation plant?)

“You wouldn’t love our oldies” – You’re right, I wouldn’t. WHAT?

It can be challenging and confronting – find your prejudices and insecurities and press your buttons. Fear of ageing, fear of death ... do you know what yours are?

“This church is too full of gray hair.”

### **Seniors ministry matters:**

#### **Practically**

- Because most church congregations are full of older people – an ageing demographic.
- Because some of them are going to be your disgruntled ones who especially need loving out of their grumpiness
- Because they are going to be your main source of revenue for the church
- Because they might be suspicious of you just as you are suspicious of them
- Because when it’s good, it’s wonderful ministry, and your church almost certainly contains some great treasures among its oldies

## **Theologically**

### **What does the Bible say about old age?**

- Ecclesiastes 12
- Psalm 39:4-7
  - Psalm 71 (possibly connected to Psalm 70 and therefore by David.)
  - Psalm 90 – A prayer of Moses the Man of God
- Psalm 92:12-15

### **HOW TO TREAT THOSE WHO ARE OLDER**

- Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly, and revere your God: I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:32 (NIV)
- Do not despise your mother when she is old Proverbs 23:22
- Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you. Exodus 20:12 (also see Ephesians 6:2-3)

**When that didn't happen** – Deceiving Isaac. Genesis 27: 1-33  
What was the outcome of this? For Jacob? For Rebekah? For Isaac?

### **GREAT BIBLICAL PICTURES OF OLD AGE**

- **CALEB** – Joshua 14:6ff  
“...So here I am today, eighty five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out.”
- **BARZILLAI THE GILEADITE** 2 Samuel 19:31-37  
Not wanting to be a burden – a Biblical example
- **JETHRO** – A wise father-in-law - Exodus 18:1-24

- **SIMEON AND ANNA** - Luke 2: 22-40  
Here is wisdom and insight in old age – after a lifetime of faithful waiting - the pinnacle of godly wisdom and maturity. Finishing a good life well. How did they recognize the Christ in the baby before them? After a lifetime of faithful service and study of God’s word.
- **PAUL in old age:** 2 Timothy 4:6-7  
“As for me, my life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight, I have run the race to the finish, I have kept the faith.”
- The mentoring of the young by the elders - **LOIS and EUNICE**, mother and grandmother of Timothy whose lives and teaching shaped him. 2 Timothy 1
- **2 CORINTHIANS 4: 7ff** – treasures in jars of clay.  
“We are afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed...so we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight and momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal...we walk by faith not by sight.”

## **Pastorally**

- The **losses** of old age – Material, Relationship, Systemic, Functional, Intrapsychic, Role
- The **fears** of the old – why grace is a hard concept for our oldies
- End of life issues and ministry to the dying – people need compassionate companions on the journey

- The importance of culture and ritual - Meeting the practical needs and preferences of older people is just as important as those of the young.
- Seniors don't want to only be the recipients of care, they want ways to continue to minister.
- Seniors are sinful too – sometimes obstructionist, sometimes judgmental, often jaded, resistant to change.

### **Going to church**

Hebrews 10:25 “Do not neglect meeting together...and all the more as you see the day approaching”.

- We need to make this continue to be possible for as long as possible.
- Physical needs of those who are old
- Valid preferences
- What works?

### **But it's not all hard work, seniors' ministry can be wonderful**

- Because when you love them they love you back
- Because they have lots to teach as well as to learn
- The value of good inter-generational ministry – they have had time to learn a lot about God as well as about life.

### **What are the particular issues for *this generation* of older people?**

- A stoic generation, works theology suits their life experiences. “Filthy rags” language will be very offensive to them. There are ways to express this truth in ways that are more likely to encourage them to hear.

- **Grace and assurance** are hard to grasp when all your life you've believed that you only get what you work hard for, and there's no such thing as a free lunch
- They started out with very little, built what they have, so they hold it in high regard and when they feel it is disrespected they will be very angry.

### **Messages they need to hear over and over**

- The gospel, obviously – by faith in Jesus you have been saved
- If you fear your faith isn't strong enough, God's love is strong enough
- It's not too late for a new beginning
- Forgiveness is possible
- This is not all there is –look forward to Revelation

### **A particular pastoral challenge – don't underestimate the pain in this**

“What about my spouse?”

See Chapman p 54

“Often when I have spoken about people's need to turn to Christ, someone has said to me, “My spouse has died and I don't think he or she will be in the new creation. So I'm not sure I want to be where they will not be.”

This is not a good reason to delay. We are not in a position to know what God's judgement has been on anyone. We may think we know, but in the end only God knows. If your spouse could speak to you, would he or she urge you to be part of the new creation, or to reject Jesus and be excluded?

### **Essentials for Seniors Ministry**

- Imagination - empathy
- Listening skills
- Kindness
- Patience
- A sense of humour

**Books**

- Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life – John Chapman
- Nearing Home – Billy Graham
- Who Stole My Church? – Gordon MacDonald
- Missy Buchanan books

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# *Your Thoughts*

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