



## WORDS OF WISDOM A Ministry for Older Adults In the KY Conference

### Reframing Aging in Churches

*“The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon...in old age they still produce fruit, they are always green and full of sap.”*

Psalm 92:12, 14

Some studies indicate that ageism is decreasing in our society and we are headed toward a more inclusive view of aging. They also indicate that age stigma is getting reduced, citing the recent presidential election as a good example. These past four years, while in office, President Trump was in his early 70s. President Joe Biden was 77 when elected. I wonder, though, if our society is really seeing the value of wisdom that can come with age – where experience matters and age is seen as an asset.

In many United Methodist congregations, older adults comprise a large proportion of the total church membership. Some of these older adults have been church members for many years, while others may be relatively new to either the congregation they attend or to the Christian faith. The presence of these “seasoned” adults can be a blessing to most churches. Unfortunately, in some congregations, older adults may be taken for granted or simply ignored.

The prevailing myth about aging – that it is nothing but slow and steady decline – is a byproduct of our culture that worships youth and abhors getting old. Aging in our cultural context is “bad” and old is “ugly.”

Some church leaders may believe a crisis exists within the church because there are too many older adults. In our society, the image of an aging congregation is often seen as outdated, close-minded, stuck in tradition, and a hindrance to church vitality and church growth.

Not having a growing membership of young people is viewed by many clergy and church members as a failure in mission and outreach. There are pastors who have retired with a sense of guilt because they failed to “grow” young churches – an attitude reflecting an assumption that church growth is only valid when there are increasing numbers of people under 35 years of age.

Granted, old age is often associated with negatives: growing frailty, declining independence, loss of loved ones, and the approach of our own death. However, research shows that older persons are better positioned than younger adults to cope with stresses (including the COVID-19 pandemic), depression, worry, and anger. Additionally, older adults experience more enjoyment, happiness, and life satisfaction.

The crisis which does exist is ageism. First coined by Dr. Robert Butler, ageism is defined as prejudice or discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes. Ageism is hard to overcome because it exists everywhere and is deeply rooted in our culture and society. It causes church leaders to believe that the church has too many older adults and causes churches to neglect the spiritual and emotional well-being of older adults.

Here are examples of ageism in churches:

- An older adult ministry is planned without the involvement of older adults.
- Church leaders believe that the only way the church can be innovative and growing, is to have seniors step aside and let younger people be fully in charge of decision-making.
- Facilities are not accessible to accommodate the needs of aging persons.
- Church leaders believe they know what's best for older adults without consulting them.
- Church leaders hire staff to develop ministries for various age groups but ignore ministry with older adults.
- Church leaders regularly ignore issues of aging and older adult concerns in sermons, prayers, and hymn selections.
- Church leaders focus solely on young families and ignore older members.

When we deny our own aging as an older adult, that's ageism!

Aging is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be embraced. It is a natural lifelong process that includes gains and losses. Every age and stage of life has its own unique challenges and assets.

Some church leaders view aging and older adulthood through the lens of old norms and stereotypes. They see older adults as having worked hard and then retiring, just relaxing,, lying on a beach somewhere, playing bridge or golf.

They want the financial gifts of older adults to help maintain the church building and supportive ministries but not necessarily their input and leadership involvement. Seniors should no longer be defined by the old expectations of what older adults should or should not do at a certain age. That means church leaders need to reimagine, revision, and reframe aging and older adult ministry.

Solving our churches' challenges regarding the aging of our congregations requires church leaders to think creatively, re-imagine congregational vitality, and to re-frame aging.

Parker Palmer, author of *On the Brink of Everything*, wrote, "we need to reframe aging as a passage of discovery and engagement, not decline and inaction." The church can be blessed indeed when older members have an opportunity to capture a new vision, new purpose, and meaning for living.

Leaders should avoid demeaning language concerning older adults. For example, recognize that older members are home-centered or homebound, not shut-ins.

Reframe program titles. For example, caregiving programs should not be titled, Parenting Your Parents but rather, Caring for Your Parents or Managing your Parents' Care.

As church leaders we are called to help change attitudes in our congregations about aging. We need to first recognize the negative attitudes we may have about our own aging and that of older adults in general. We can teach our congregation by example and serve as advocates on behalf of aging and older adults.

When we reframe aging – ours and others – we are challenging the cultural myths of growing older. By reframing aging, we see older adulthood not as an age of liability but as an age of opportunity (sounds like a good title for a book!).

The Older Adult Team of the KY Conference provides church leaders with the tools and resources so congregations will have a more fluid and inclusive view of aging. Don't let ageism keep your church from growing and becoming a vital, healthy congregation for people of all ages.

For more information read ***An Age of Opportunity*** by Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. (Discipleship Resources, 2018) and visit [www.kyumc.org](http://www.kyumc.org) and find the Older Adult Section where many resources can be found.

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