

FAITH AT FIFTY – OLDER PEOPLE, GOSPEL AND CHURCH

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A look at the challenges and opportunities of the best years of your life. What can the church do to help? How can the church benefit from the gifts and talents of the over 50s. What are the needs of the community for the over 50s and how can the church respond to them

Old age, for a variety of reasons, has become a source of humour in our culture

1. He's definitely getting more cautious in his old age. Nowadays he slows down when the traffic lights are red
2. He's so old he can remember when Heinz had only one variety
3. I'll say he's old! At his last birthday the candles cost more than the cake.
4. She's 85 years old and she still doesn't need glasses. She drinks it straight from the bottle
5. You know when you're getting old when you bend down to tie your shoelaces and you try to think of other things you ought to do while you're down there
6. 'How does an 80 year old man like you persuade a 22 year old to be your bride?' 'Easy. I lied about my age. I told her I was 90!'
7. The pastor came the other day. He said at my age I should be thinking about the hereafter. I told him 'Oh, I do, all the time. No matter where I am; if I'm in the lounge, upstairs, in the kitchen or down in the basement, I ask myself, What am I here after?'

Former President Jimmy Carter takes a more positive and constructive view:

1. When *are* we old? When we *think* we are!
2. We worry too much about something to live on – and too little about something to live for
3. Too many folks spend their lives ageing rather than maturing
4. It is a sign of maturity when we can accept honestly and courageously that frustrated dreams, illness, disability, and eventual death are all normal facets of a person's existence – and that despite these, we can still continue to learn, grow and adopt challenging goals.
5. The simple things that comprise success include our own happiness, satisfaction, peace, joy, and sense of being worthy.
6. You are old when regrets take the place of dreams

1. THE BEST YEARS OF YOUR LIFE?

The world has adopted the youth culture – and the church is little different from the world. Older people tend not to be valued in the world – and for the most part they are not valued in the church. When a church looks for a minister, they don't want the experience of years – they want the energy of youth. Most churches' picture of an ideal pastor is a man (sorry, but it is true), married, with children, under the age of

35. By the time pastors get to 50, they begin to be regarded as past it – indeed, few churches want to call a minister who is beyond the age of 52.

Yet the descriptive blurb of our seminar equates the years 50+ as the best years of our life. I am reminded of those lines from Robert Browning's *Ben Ezra*:

“Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made!
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, ‘A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God, see all,
Nor be afraid’”.

Is it true that the second half of life is better than the first half? Physically, it is not true. By the time we get to 50 flab begins to set in – we may have been able to sport our bodies with confidence on the beach in our earlier years, but no longer. However, its not only the 50+ who are running downhill – the same is true of anybody over the age of 21. Anybody over the age of 21 is beginning to experience physical decay.

But physical fitness is not the be all and end all. There is something to be said for maturity. The best of wines are not the youngest of wines. In our church we once ran a group called Zenith, whose target age group were the 45s-55s – the implication was that we the 45s-55s were at the peak of our powers!

The joy of being 50+ is that the hassle of child-rearing is over (although some of us are finding that our children are returning home again!) – so too the long hours spent climbing the greasy pole at work – and most of us have entered calmer waters. And, what's more, hopefully by the time we have reached 50 we have gained wisdom, we have gained maturity, we have gained a right perspective on life. And although that is not true of everybody, I believe that there is sufficient truth to make a case for the 50+ to be 'the best years of your life'.

2. HOW OLD IS OLD?

When I was a young pastor I regarded *anybody over 40* as old. From the perspective of ancient classical society, I was no doubt right. The Romans called a man under 40 a *iuvenis* - i.e.. a young man; whilst a man over 40 was a *senex* - an old man. In ancient societies there was no such thing as middle age.

Today people often link their definition of old age with *the statutory retirement age*: so in this country if you are a woman over 60 or a man over 65, you have entered old age. But, if that is so, then we have to recognise that there are stages within old age - there are 'old people' and 'old people'.

The World Health Organization, recognising that the term 'old' is insufficient, has suggested that *'the elderly'* are 60-74 years of age, whilst *'the aged'* are 75 years and

above. And yet it is not as simple as that. Age has very little relation to the actual physical, mental or social health of people.

One way of looking at the ageing process is to divide life into four ages:

1. **First Age:** Childhood
2. **Second Age:** Paid work and Family Raising
3. **Third Age** (sometimes called the 'Golden Age'): The age of active independent life beyond child-rearing and work. This can be as long as 30 years. For some the Third age can start as early as 50. This can be a very active period of life. Many are active in pursuing all kinds of further education - there is the University of the Third Age. Many churches are dependent upon on people of the third age to staff many of their activities. Certainly I am grateful to God for all the many volunteers who fall into this age category - we just couldn't do without them.
4. **Fourth Age:** The age of eventual dependence, often very short.

Notice the positive way of viewing the Third Age. Unfortunately, far too many models of development have a negative approach toward the ageing process. For example, a manual for Southern Baptist pastors divided the adult period of an individual's development process into the following four stages:

1. Start-Up Stage (from about 15-25)
2. Stabilization Stage (from about 25-40)
3. Summit Stage (from about 40-55)
4. Sunset Stage (from about 55+)

I would be interested to know the age of the person who authored that particular manual!

By contrast Andrew Blackwood, an American pastor of a former generation, divided the period of active ministry into three stages:

1. Years full of promise (25-40)
2. A period of transition (40-55)
3. A time of fruition (55-70)

An imaginative approach to the life-cycle of older people was developed by Tim Stafford, who broke the years beyond 65 into seven stages - or, as he expressed it - into seven 'days of the week of old age'

The First Day - Freedom Day - begins with retirement which introduces the life of leisure

The Second Day - the Day of Reflection - leads an elderly person to begin meditating on their life.

The Third Day - Widow's Day - comes with the loss of a spouse

The Fourth Day - the Role-Reversal Day - begins when an older person needs frequent help to manage

The Fifth Day - the Dependence Day - comes when a person must lean on others for basic needs.

The Sixth Day - the Farewell Day - is the period of preparing for Death

The Seventh Day - the Sabbath Day - is the day of worship, the day of rest.

3. FAITH AT FIFTY

The title of our seminar suggests that fifty is the crucial stage of transition. This certainly ties in with Andrew Blackwood, who sees 55 as the turning-point. It also accords with some words of Victor Hugo, "*Forty is the old age of youth; fifty the youth of old age*".

In preparing for this seminar I discovered that, in the OT, 50 was the retirement age for priests. So we read in Num 8.25f:

“At the age of 50, they must retire from their regular serve & work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work”.

Richard Morgan, a retired American Presbyterian minister, commented:

“When they reached the age of 50, the Levites were released from routine work, no longer taking their place in the regular work of the community, free from the more exacting duties that would tax their physical strength. They could pursue a second career, which for them was voluntary ministry in the holy place....”

An increasing number of people in Britain today are able to take early retirement at 50 – but certainly not all. Currently in this country there is a good deal of discussion about when people should retire. Partly because people are living longer, and particularly because of the recent poor returns on the stock market, and the ending of most final salary deals, the pension world is in a turmoil. The government is talking about the possibility of allowing people to remain in work until they are 70. Indeed, although almost everybody has to retire by the age of 65, many 65+ find themselves having to stack supermarket shelves or do other forms of menial work in order to make up the losses incurred by Equitable Life or whoever.

In preparing for this seminar I read a book by Jimmy Carter entitled *The Virtues of Aging*, in which Jimmy Carter tells of a poll in which Americans were asked ‘What do you consider an optimum retirement age?’ The average answer was 54. Another question was, ‘At what age do you consider a person to be old?’ The average answer was 73. So what happens during the 20 years or so between retirement and old age? (11). Before we consider that question, lets look at some facts and statistics.

4. A GROWING SECTOR

As a nation we are ageing as never before. Already half of the population is over 50. There are more retired people than people in full-time education.

A baby boy born in 1901 could look forward to 48 years of life, and a baby girl to 52 years. In 1981 their life expectancy would have been 70 & 72 years respectively. In 1997 a man of 60 could expect to live for another 18.8 years, and a woman of the same age for 22.6 years..

Thanks to improved public health measures & to a better diet, a greater proportion of the population of GB is made up of the so-called "elderly".

- In 1999 there were almost 11 million pensioners (i.e. 18% of the UK population).
- By 2031 the numbers are expected to increase to over 15 million.

In 1999 the figures broke down as follows:

- 6,908,000 were women aged 60+ (of whom 5,448,000 were 65+)
- 3,845,000 were men 65+
- 4,364,000 were 75+
- 1,142,000 were 85+

Furthermore, most of these older people are active healthy people.

In this respect the pessimism of Ecclesiastes 12 is somewhat misplaced.

“Remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, "I don't enjoy life." That is when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away. Then your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly. Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will be gone. We are going to our final resting place, and then there will be mourning in the streets. The silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered. Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth, and the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us. “

The advances in medicine have taken some of the negative assumptions out of growing old. It need no longer be synonymous with a time of ill-health. Medical statistics for Scottish general practice show that patients between the ages of 65 and 74 are likely to see their doctor about 4 times a year. Over 75 this rises to [only] around five times...(Michael Hare Duke)

5. THE CHURCH AND OLDER PEOPLE

Church statistics:

- In 1998 out of almost 8 million people in England aged 65 and over, less than 1 million attended a church.

- In 1994 Christian Research carried out a survey on church attendance which showed that only 1% of church goers start attending church when they are 60+, and of those whose church attendance started before they were 60, 42% stopped going between the ages of 60 & 64, and 38% stopped aged 65-74.... Why? I seem to have met many older people recently who have dropped out because 'I somehow don't feel at home there any more (Rhena Taylor)

Rhena Taylor (51): A fact to remember. As young people are not the church of tomorrow, neither are older people the church of yesterday.

My own observation of church work with older people is that we entertain them, rather than challenge them. We tend to feed them with the dull pap of afternoon fellowships, rather than stretch them. NB Arthur Creber: "It really cannot be satisfactory for us to present a gospel which encourages older people to withdraw from life and to prepare for death (although this may be wholly appropriate for a person suffering from a terminal illness). Neither is it satisfactory to reduce our ministry to the patronizing provision of free handouts or cheap trips to the pantomime at Christmas. If the gospel has to do with New Life we should be encouraging older people to explore their potential for creative activity, for maintaining and improving their health, and for establishing or re-establishing loving relationships with other people and with God. We should be providing opportunities for the development of understanding, growth and experimentation. A positive approach to the potentialities of old age will motivate us as ministers and will ensure that the necessary resources are made available for the provision of creative opportunities" [I find it interesting that a significant number of our older people will not touch the Thursday fellowship with a barge-pole – for them it appears to be a waiting room for eternity]

We have confused old age with the 'fourth age' and have failed to take much notice of the 'third age'. We have meetings for the aged, but not for the ageing. Furthermore, matters are not helped by many churches concentrating most of their resources on the young rather than the old. An increasing number of churches, for instance, have youth ministers – but far fewer have pastors for seniors. I dare to believe that at Chelmsford we have a good eye for priorities: Matt, my assistant minister, is responsible for the under-35s, and David, my associate minister, is responsible for the 55+s

6. DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR THE FIFTY-PLUS

i) Encourage people to socialise

Oscar Wilde believed that "other people are quite dreadful; the only possible society is oneself". Wrong, Oscar, and sad! "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2.18). We need others – not least when we are growing old. Older people have social needs – just as young people have social needs. These social needs become all the more important as friends and loved ones die. Older people can feel very lonely.

It is good, therefore, when churches provide opportunities for older people to socialise. Furthermore, we need to recognise that there is nothing ‘un-spiritual’ about social activities. True, if all a church offers is social activities, then something is wrong – but something is equally wrong if all that is on offer is a diet of devotional activities.

Some Christians need to develop a more positive approach to enjoyment. In this respect some words of Bishop Michael Hare Duke are pertinent: “One of the good things when we retire is that we have ‘permission to play... Adult life, as most people experience it, is largely concerned with tasks to be done. We are defined by our job or our career... In retirement work has been put behind”

ii) Encourage people to continue to grow as persons.

Some years ago I was a guest lecturer at a large Baptist theological seminary in Dallas, Texas. There I met a distinguished emeritus professor in church history. He must have been in his late 70s. I forget the content of our discussion apart from one thing he said: “Yep, in that particular area I’ve still got a lot of growing to do”. That remark challenged me. I asked myself: ‘When I am in my late 70s, will I still be in the business of growing?’

If the truth be told, some people have a good deal of emotional growing to do. The sad fact is that many older people are stunted people as a result of experiences which have embittered them. Although the event may have happened years ago, they still not have been able to forgive and draw a line under whatever the perceived injustice may have been. Here is a massive pastoral challenge – not least to ensure that the words of the Psalmist express reality, when he says: “Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be green and succulent” (Psalm 92.12,13)

iii) Encourage people to continue to use their minds

When people in my church retire from work, I try to visit them. Inevitably in the course of our conversation we talk about how they will use the years that now stretch ahead. Obviously we talk about the opportunities for service in the church – but I always encourage the person concerned to explore opportunities to continue to expand their minds. My stock challenge is: ‘Why not learn Japanese?’ So far, none of my members have taken up that challenge. But a number have joined WEA classes and the like. And I am delighted. We need to encourage ‘life-long learning’.

Church leaders need to be concerned for the good of people – rather than fodder for the church machine.

iii) Encourage people to continue to grow spiritually

Rhena Taylor, the founder of ‘Outlook’, a Christian organisation for older people, commented: “The one course that is missing in most churches today is the one that

might affect a good part of their congregation: how to keep spiritually healthy and spiritually active during the 30-40 years that may follow retirement” (16).

If we are honest, during the years of working-life the challenge is often simply the maintaining of a spiritual discipline, rather than a developing of it. With hectic schedules, time is of the essence – Quiet Times are necessarily limited. But with the beginning of the retirement years, there is now an opportunity to develop one’s prayer life, to explore new and unfamiliar paths of spirituality, to go on retreat, to attend regular quiet days etc.

Now too is a time when Christian books can be read and the mind can be developed. Yes, spiritual growth involves the mind as well as the heart – indeed, the Bible calls us to love the Lord our God with all our mind as well as with all our heart. Disciplined study is as much a way to God as discipline prayer. Indeed, it was the Cambridge scholar, Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, he spoke of how he began with his head in a lexicon and ended up before the throne of God. NB such disciplined study does not need to be frightfully academic: I can think of two widows in their early 80s, who haven’t got an ‘A’ level between them, yet are devouring new series of popular commentaries on the NT .

Ageing can and should be viewed as a period for growth. “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4.6).

iv) Encourage people to face their mortality

Sometimes it is not just non-Christians, but also Christians too who need to be encouraged to face their mortality. As friends and loved ones begin to die – and this experience begins in the fifties – inevitably the question arises: ‘And what will happen to me’? Among many there is a good deal of vagueness and uncertainty about death – indeed, a good deal of fear too. Just as sex should regularly feature on any programme for young people, so too death and the world to come should feature regularly on any programme for older people.

On reflection, it is not simply death and the world to come which need to be on the agenda, but also what Tim Stafford calls the ‘Fourth’ and ‘Fifth’ Days, the days of Role-Reversal and of Dependence – or what others call the ‘Fourth Age’, those closing months and perhaps years of life when we can no longer be the active kind of people we used to be. ‘Where is God in the closing stages of life?’ We need to remind our older friends of the promises of God: “I have cared for you from the time you were born. I am your God and will take care of you until you are old and your hair is grey; I made you and will care for you; I will give you help and rescue you” (Isaiah 46.3,4).

As we grow older we need to encourage one another to adopt a positive view of old age. In the words of REO White: “Old age is part of the Christian plan of life. With Christ, youth is an adventure, middle life a task, old age a harvesting, an opportunity to see more clearly what are the really important things, for deliberately recalling all that was good and gracious in a long career, for walking daily a little closer with the

God who has been loved and trusted through the years, until the day comes when like Enoch we walk on and on and fail to come back” (*A Guide To Pastoral Care* 176).

v) *Encourage people to continue to serve the Lord*

If your church is like mine, then there are always plenty of opportunities to serve God through his church. Indeed, because of the way in which most women are now out at work, increasingly churches are largely dependent upon the young retired to run many of their activities.

In our church we have literally scores and scores of older volunteers who are involved in helping:

1. Oasis, our four-day-a-week café
2. Child Contact Centre
3. Mental Health Clubs
4. Church cleaning and portering

Furthermore, volunteering for Christian duty doesn't do just the church good. It can do us too. Indeed, the Swiss doctor, Paul Tournier, believed that retired persons need a second career that must be distinguished from leisure activity. He insisted that second careers have goals and a mission, with precedence over more selfish pleasures. He wrote: such careers “will have no age-limit, no routine, no fixed wage tied to an obligation to work. It can be voluntary, it can be paid, but without any compulsory relationship between earnings and output. It has nothing to do, therefore, with the idea of a second *job*”

vi) *Encourage people to exploit opportunities for evangelism*

Donald McGavran, the founder of the modern church growth movement, observed that there were groups of people who were, at certain times, more receptive to the gospel than others. He argued that older people form such a receptive mission field.

- In the first place, post-retirement years are in many ways turbulent years. That may sound a strange thing to say, but compared to previous 30 or 40 years they are in some ways more eventful. It has been said that the years between 65 and 90 are probably the most dynamic period of life, excepting childhood. In middle-age it is all too easy to get comfortable and to get stuck in a rut. But the advent of old-age marks the onset of a series of life-changing events. These events provide 'windows of opportunity' in which people seem to move from resistance or indifference to the Gospel, on the one hand, to receptivity and openness on the other hand. Here is an opportunity for sensitive evangelism.
- Secondly, post-retirement years are often increasingly lonely years. Our parents are normally dead. Our children are often living far away and are any-rate pursuing their own careers and are wrapped up in their own families. We long for meaningful relationships, but do not always find them. A medical researcher at John Hopkins University in the States has called loneliness the number one

killer - "some other illness goes on the death certificate, but the prime cause was loneliness" Here is another 'window of opportunity' for churches which are genuinely prepared to welcome others into their midst.

- Thirdly post-retirement years inevitably cause people to reflect on their mortality. Death is no longer a remote possibility. It becomes an increasing reality. Those of us who are younger can as it were hide death under the carpet. But the older we become the less we can do so. Here too is another window of opportunity.

However, we also need to recognize, that there is one particular obstacle in winning older people for Christ: viz. past bad experiences of church. Time and again, it is not the Cross of Christ which is the obstacle to faith, but rather the people of Christ.

7. CALEB – GOD’S MODEL SENIOR CITIZEN

We first meet Caleb in Numbers 13 & 14 – he was one of the men sent to spy out the promised land. But 45 years later, we meet him again in Joshua 14. Caleb was now 85 - and by any definition he was therefore an old man. But to be old is not to be decrepit. Caleb was as full of energy and vitality as he was 45 years ago. Listen to him: "Here I am today, 85 years old. I am still as strong today as I was on the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then" (v11).

Goodness, he must have visited the gym twice a day to be that fit. Caleb clearly an exceptional man. To be honest, I find it difficult to believe that he was that fit. But what can't be disputed was that he felt himself to be still in pretty good shape.

But Caleb wasn't just physically fit - more importantly, he was *spiritually fit*. The faith that he had exercised 45 years ago was still his. Listen to him: "Give me this hill country - AV Mountain - of which the Lord spoke on that day; for you heard on that day how the Anakim - the giants - were there, with great fortified cities; it may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out as the Lord said" (v12).

With the passing of the years Caleb was still ready for a challenge. Caleb may have been 85, but he was not yet ready to settle down. In the words of one American commentator "Even at his ripe old age, Caleb was not ready for a rocking chair or a tent in some retirement village in the Jordan Valley. Some may have thought that it was the time for his disengagement from life, but he claimed a mountain. He asked for a challenge, not a cushion. He wanted more adventures in his 'retirement' years" (Richard Morgan, *I Never Found that Rocking Chair*]

Caleb was an adventurous soul - he was still ready for a challenge. Why? Because he had kept himself fit spiritually. He was still in great spiritual shape, because, as he stated in v8 he had "**wholeheartedly followed the Lord my God**".

We see his spiritual fitness in his ability to exercise faith. Do note that Caleb didn't simply believe that God was all-powerful. Rather Caleb

was prepared to put that faith to the test.

He was prepared to go and claim the hill country/the mountain because he believed that God would be with him.

Caleb was a man of action because he was a man of faith. "It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out as the Lord said". NB the words "It may be" don't indicate doubt, but rather a sense of modesty. Caleb had no doubt that God would indeed be with him.

Sadly far too many of us Xians with the passing of the years become timid followers of the Lord JXt. We allow not only our physical muscles to waste away, but also our spiritual muscles. We want to settle down. We want a life of peace and quiet.

But not Caleb. At the age of 85 Caleb was asking for a mountain - not any old mountain - but a mountain controlled by a tough tribe of great and mighty warriors.

Caleb never found his rocking chair.

He was a man always ready to for a fresh challenge - always ready to move on with God - always ready to put faith into action. Caleb was God's model senior citizen.

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