

# Biblical and Spiritual Perspectives on Aging

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**Your age is  
measured by  
your dreams  
not by the years.  
— Amit Ray,**

## Introduction

The aging process is talked about a lot. Yet it seems that little is said about the biblical and spiritual aspects of aging. By examining and exploring Bible passages that have something to say about aging and older adults, we will discover a deeper knowledge and understanding of the process of growing old.

**Growing old touches every aspect of life.**

This study series will guide you in exploring some general topics of aging and some specific issues relating to older adults. Together we will struggle with what our personal attitudes toward aging are and what our society holds as the advantages and disadvantages of growing old. The series is written for groups AND for individual study.

The series is divided into four sections, each with three lessons. The first section concentrates on the continuum of life, seen as God's gracious gift. The second section explores finding wholeness in life, oneness of body, mind and spirit. The third section looks at human relationships and older adults in community. The final section poses some challenges in ministry with and by older adults. The lessons move from general to specific, then to goals and plans for ministry in church and community.

By the end of the series you may expect to have more resources for dealing with your own aging and some new ideas for advocating for societal changes in your community. This study debunks

many stereotypes and myths, and invites you to enter new territory with greater awareness about life and living.

The information supplied here should be supplemented with commentaries, maps, books, poetry and plays, films and photos. Be sure to have writing materials available for taking notes or journaling. Many questions to ponder and discuss will be raised in the lesson text. Some questions can be quickly answered while others will require some delving into hidden feelings. Plan to actively participate. The journey will enrich and offer you nourishment.

The section at the end of each lesson called *“Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper”* contains actions for enhancing the lesson. There are many ideas to choose from. Allow the impulses of one or two of the suggestions to speak to you and to augment your own learning.

Plan early in the series to arrange for related special programs at your church with guest speakers, a film, panel or intergenerational activities several times during the coming weeks. Not only will these activities involve others more fully, they will nurture greater growth in the process. By all means, include older adults in your study and growing - their experiences, wisdom, and firsthand knowledge will enhance your travel with this series.

Look ahead to the next lesson so that suggested reading and preparation can be planned. Collect and share articles, photos, books, essays or experiences of your own related to the aging process. Through our Bible study we will learn of the rich heritage and tradition older adults can share, and of Jesus’ absolute love for all life.

**Our goal is to sort out how  
we relate to older adults and to our own aging.**

### **Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper**

Each session ends with a section that supports the lesson material and takes exploration to a deeper level.

A good practice for each session is to ask, “What are the learnings or surprises from this lesson? Plan to share your realizations.

Questions are open-ended and do not always have easy right or wrong answers, they encourage deeper thought and conversation.

Be sure to adapt this material to your needs.

Some lessons call for advance preparation. You will want to allow time for it in your study.

## SECTION 1

### LIFE: GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT

#### 1. THE FULLNESS OF LIFE

*Ps 92, 1 Peter 1:22-25*

**The longer I live, the more beautiful life becomes.  
—Frank Lloyd Wright**

#### Psalm 92

Imagine the setting for Psalm 92. *It is autumn and the time for the celebration of Rosh Hashanah – the festival of the New Year. It is the most important festival of the year for the Israelites, and there is an air of joyful excitement in the Temple. The stage is set for drama and spectacle on the evening of the Sabbath.*

*Walking among the clusters of chattering people, bits of conversation can be overheard. A young girl tugs at her father's sleeve and asks why so many people have come. Her father patiently explains this is a celebration of Yahweh's agreement with the chosen people of Israel. Yahweh commanded that the people remember the covenant in worship. The father reminds his daughter that very soon she will hear and see the story of Yahweh's mighty acts. She must learn the story by heart so that someday she can tell it to her children.*

*Three people standing near the front of the Temple are huddled deep in conversation. They are dressed in unusual, old-style robes. They will tell of Yahweh's will and the commandments given to Moses, and how these have been passed on in today's law. Their authoritative demeanor inspires confidence that Yahweh will speak through them to renew the relationship with these chosen people – linking the past and present as one.*

*The air becomes vibrant as the ceremony begins. Musical instruments come alive, and strong voices are raised in singing a joyful psalm.*

After reading this description of the setting for the festival, read the psalm aloud as a poem used in the Temple service of worship. Consider how the text conveys Israel's view of life. Israel's most important tradition was worship, especially joyful praise for Yahweh's power and might.

The psalm opens with an animated description of worship in **vs.1-4**. Look again at the number of references to the aesthetic and experiential aspects of worship in these verses. **What do these references imply about the role worship played in Israel's outlook on everyday living?**

Through the celebrative reenactment of their history, the Israelites learned to view the past as a product of Yahweh's steadfastness and judgment. The drama was also a clear reminder of Yahweh's power over every being. **How do you suppose these vivid reenactments might have offered the participants new outlooks on their faith journey? Has there been a specific**

**experience in worship that has offered you a different view of your life in faith?** Recall and share some of your memorable worship experiences.

A historical understanding of Yahweh's will led to a reminder of Yahweh's judgment of good and evil, which could be invoked at any time. The people knew life was a gift of God. In order to find good in life one had to obey the commandments and do God's will. The reward for righteousness was long life. The curse of sin brought pain and burdens to life, but with God, goodness in life could be found. Read **verses 7-11**. **What role do you think the affirmation of Yahweh's judgment played in the Israelite's view of a long life?**

There are many symbols of life presented in the psalm. Look again, especially at **vs. 6-15**. Make a list of symbols that refer to an aspect of living found in these verses. Attach possible meanings to each symbol as a component of life. **Do you feel these symbols convey a positive or negative view of life? How do you feel the symbols of life portrayed in the psalm are similar or dissimilar to the way we think of life today?**

### **I Peter 1:22-25**

Picture the scene for Peter's letter. *He is troubled and has felt compelled to compose a letter to the new Christians in some of the provinces of Asia Minor. Times are wicked in Rome. Christians are being persecuted. Nero has had Christians brutally tortured and killed, and the people are terrified.*

*The Christians are now exiled in scattered communities. Before, Christians were allowed to worship freely, but now it is prohibited. Luckily, the Christians can encourage one another in their small close-knit groups. But they are very proud and opinionated; they are young, and many are poor and uneducated. There has been word of bickering.*

*In this time of persecution these newly baptized Christians need to be reminded that they have experienced a spiritual transformation. They have entered a community of love, where hardships can be endured. Suffering must be expected, but Christ is coming again very soon. Hope is found in the future.*

Peter's letter was meant to be read aloud in the new Christian communities. Read **ch. 1:2-25** aloud. Peter draws a vivid picture of the Christ-filled life in contrast to the Christ-less life. You may find it helpful to read all of **ch. 1**. Peter fervently reminds the Christians to always be aware of their birth, through baptism, into the Christ-filled life. A Christian's life is transformed into a life that does not dwell on Jesus' agony on the cross, but on the hope of resurrection.

**One is ever hopeful in living toward eternal life.**

**Verses 22-23** identify the requirements for fulfilling baptism into eternal life. **What are some of the everyday features of a Christ-filled life implied in these requirements?**

There is need for loving unity in the face of danger among the young Christians. Certainly, times will worsen. Through God's love the Christians are a strong community bound by their unique love for one another. Their adversaries are baffled by this loving care. **How could this kind of love advance the cause of the Christian community while it was being persecuted?**

The early Christians were ever hopeful despite their suffering. Today Christians suffer pressures that tempt away from Christianity. It may be very hard to choose to live differently and with Christ today. Peter speaks of a life of many new dimensions (v. 23). Take a moment to explore the meaning of the phrases, "imperishable seed" and "perishable seed." **What do these seeds represent? What meaning do they have?** By choosing a life in Christ, we receive new responsibilities. Yet Jesus' redemption offers each individual the possibility of being freed into a new life. As a result of Jesus' death, every life has infinite worth.

Recall the symbols listed in the Old Testament study of **Ps. 92**. Now make a list of symbols that are representative of the New Testament view of life. (Additional symbols can be found in the rest of **1 Peter, ch 1.**) Some examples might be the lamb, blood, seeds, grass. **How are these symbols similar or dissimilar to those in the Old Testament?**

**Change is constant.**

### **Our Fast-Moving Culture**

In our previously agrarian society, the family was the center of productivity. As our society "modernized" change seemed to come faster and faster. Industrialization, urbanization, technology and increased productivity sped up society's pursuit of happiness and that of individuals too. People were all busy struggling, hoping to gain control over the forces of modernization. This caused divisions between people and groups and narrowed their focus. Society's goal, it still seems, is to be ever-moving, bigger and better. We think filling all the spaces and time in our lives, will bring happiness. There is so little time. How quickly time seems to be running out!

The early Christians felt that life was God's gift. Life was sharing in caring community which led to goodness and happiness. Through the centuries, the center of life has moved out of the family. **How does technology, productivity and industry affect attitudes toward life today? How is our culture ever-moving? What are some of the points of fragmentation in our society? How can they be re-connected?** The generations of our society seem to be moving in different directions. **Where do you find individuals of different ages moving together (the young, the middle-aged, the old)?**

Having completely programmed lives can limit personal growth and often serves only the group. The programmed individual may experience less satisfaction and feel a decreasing sense that he or she is making any significant contribution to any human cause. Society seems to focus more on *doing* than on *being*. Those who are busy doing, bring power to society and to themselves. The production of more is so important that people also become things to a society, which easily discards the non-productive.



How can changes in interaction among people re-emphasize the value of individuals?

How can the enveloping darkness of “powers and principalities” be countered by the experience of the Light?

How can the Christian community offer a different outlook from today’s society?



### Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To open the series with a positive overview of life in the Bible; to see the differences and similarities between the Old and New Testament outlooks on life; to consider our society’s attitude about what is important in life.

1. Knowing something about cultural attitudes during biblical times can be a great help in understanding certain scripture passages. Review the Bible lessons again to get an idea about how time was viewed in Israel in Old Testament days and during the New Testament period. **How did people view the past, present, and future? What was the time orientation in Israel? In the time of Peter?**

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

2. **How has the threat of poverty, illness, racism, war, climate change, etc. affected your view of the life? To what extent do you honor the past, live in the present, fear the future?** Draw some conclusions for yourself about our society’s view of life. Try to distinguish between the general societal view of life and the views you and your friends hold.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

3. **If you could live one day of your life over, which day would it be? What did you learn about life from this day? Was the day you chose a happy day? If so, have you tried to have similar days since? Or Was it a sad day? Did you want to undo a mistake?** Share your learnings and surprises.

*Suggested time: 10 minutes.*

## SECTION 1

### LIFE: GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT

## 2. GROWING INTO THE FULLNESS OF AGE

*Psalm 90*

**There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents,  
the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love.  
When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age.**

**—Sophia Loren**

**How old are you? Can you comfortably tell others what your age is? Do you tend to give a coy or humorous response?** One man responded by saying, “I just had my forty-third anniversary of my thirty-ninth birthday.”

**Why do we freely ask this question of a child, yet once we've passed the thirty-year mark the topic is often avoided in adult conversation? Is avoidance a symptom of fear – fear of growing old? How old is old anyway?** Take a moment to decide on an age that you feel is generally accepted as the entry into old age. Jot this number down on a piece of paper.

Another response to a question about one's age is, “I feel much younger than my years.” **If we sidestep our chronological age by quickly confirming how young we feel, at what chronological age will we be old to ourselves?** Take a moment to think about the age at which you will consider yourself old. Jot this number down on the same piece of paper, below the first number. **What do these differences say about how we perceive other people's ages and how we think of our own?**

Now that you have considered a number at which a person is considered old and the age at which you will accept your own old age, **how shall we characterize these ages?** List words and stereotypes associated with old age e.g. rocking chair, wisdom, loneliness. Note the positive and negative words and images. **Are there more positive or negative words, images on your list? What does this suggest about our own and our society's attitude?**

The Old Testament Hebrew word meaning “old” has a variety of associations. Different forms of the word evoke slightly different meanings. *Zaqan* means “beard on the chin” (*Lev. 19:27*); *zoqen* means “old age” (*Gen. 48:10*); *zaqen* is “the one who wears a beard” and occurs most often. *Zaqen* is also used for “an old man” (*1 Sam. 28:14*), “man full of days” (*Gen. 25:8*), and “the old father” (*Gen. 44:22*). *Zoqen* also means “elder,” one of a special group of men appointed to offer counsel and judgment. The elder was an adult who might or might not be old. There are additional descriptive phrases in the Bible referring to characteristics of age that will be discussed in a later session.

## Longevity

**Does your perspective on being old have anything to do with our society's stereotypes about what old means?** Life expectancy in America in 1900 was 47.3 years, so age 37 was thought to be old. Life expectancy in 1970 was 70.8. As of 2020 it was 80, and there were 90,000 people over the age of 100 living in the U.S.!

When we think of biblical life expectancy our minds may turn to Methuselah who it is said lived to be 969 years old. Other Old Testament figures lived extraordinarily long lives. Abraham lived 175 years (*Gen. 25:7*); Isaac, 180 (*Gen. 35:28*); Jacob, 147 (*Gen. 47:28*); Joseph, 110 (*Gen. 50:22*); Moses, 120 years (*Deut. 34:7*). **What do you think of such ages? Were these average life spans or were these historical persons especially blessed? Was there a different way of counting age then? How do you explain these long lives?**

Biblical scholars have proposed three theories about biblical longevity. The first theory is that people actually lived nine hundred years or more because conditions in the world were different before the Flood, making such longevity possible. After the Flood life expectancy decreased.

The second theory states that time must have been telescoped. Some Babylonian records show people living thirty thousand years! This theory is generally rejected, because if ages are divided by ten, Methuselah was almost one hundred, but Enoch would have been only six and a half (*Gen. 5:21*) when Methuselah was born.

The third theory surmises that biblical records list the families of the people mentioned, not necessarily the chronological age of an individual. Therefore, the family of Methuselah existed for 969 years. This theory is complicated by the fact that *Heb. 11:5* tells of Enoch as an individual and records his personal life, not that of his family.

Take a moment now to read **Ps. 90**. The psalmist states that one can expect to live for seventy or eighty years. There is, we quickly realize, a fifty-year discrepancy between this reported life expectancy and the life span of Moses and the other well-known persons listed above. Some scholars believe the psalmist presents a more realistic life span for that time. The kings of the Davidic dynasty were recorded to have lived an average of only forty-four years. The person who lived a long life had received divine affirmation of righteousness and had been rewarded with many years and a full life.

**The biblical recording of the total years of a person's life  
is a symbol of the gift and blessing of God.**

## A Life of Purpose

The Bible recognizes aging as a phase of living that rounds out the circle of life. Even though life can be burdensome for the old, it can also be burdensome for the young. Still today, having survived to old age is truly a gift from God.



Most people want to live a long life and yet hate to think of getting old. **Is old age merely a burden to be survived? What is it you hope to avoid in growing old? Are you afraid of nearing the end of life? Will you “give up the gift” of life upon facing mortality? How do you think of your own mortality?**

Moses’ prayer (**Ps. 90**) offers some insight. Moses approaches mortality from the viewpoint of God’s eternity. The focal point of the psalm, particularly in **vs. 2-6** is God’s eternity set against the transience of human life. People return to dust; a person’s life is but a small span of time known in those days as a watch in the night (**vs. 4**). A person’s life is like grass, which fades and withers at the end of the day. How insignificant the reader of these verses is made to feel! **What understanding did the poet wish to instill by repeatedly stating such a pessimistic view of the fragility of life?**

Growing old is tangible evidence of the finitude of life and its limitations. In the very facing of our mortality, our will to control our own lives may be weakened. The writer of **Psalms 90** saw this phenomenon as a great moral issue. Look again at **vs. 7-12**. If people wish to live forever, to reject their finitude, then it appears that God will consume them in anger. In these verses God seems to be an infinite enemy. God’s judgment seems harsh and unfair. Isn’t it by their very nature that people strive to live forever? But when faced with death, the hope of immortality dims and for some, causes life to seem profoundly disappointing. This profound disappointment may be one image you have of older adults. Exerting one’s will to control longevity is futile.

**God’s ultimate power and the limits upon our own power are clear.**

The poet does not end with the pessimistic commentary on life found in **vs. 7-10**. The utter despair of not being able to control one’s life then enables a person to surrender to the possibility of God’s offer of everlasting purpose in life. Once hope in our own strength is dismissed, we can find faith in God. Positive life in God uncovers the knowledge of the true gift. (**v. 12**).

Paul Tournier’s classic book, *Learn to Grow Old*, describes this surrender as an experience that leads believers to an encounter with God that is felt in an intensely personal way. He asserts that only through this experience can the anxiety felt at the approach of death be accepted peacefully. There are “intellectual believers” who may accept creed and gospel with their minds but have not experienced this surrender. Without surrender faith may only build walls around the anxiety. Tournier’s explanation raises a question. **Do believers accept old age more readily than nonbelievers. Reflect on this and explore your thoughts with others.**

**Transformation means to move from a life filled with fear and waiting to a life filled with present meaning, active purpose, and daily striving for deep joy.**

Read aloud **vs. 13-17**. This section is a powerful affirmation of God’s grace in forgiveness. God does not promise to “settle accounts,” to balance gladness with pain. God does promise the grace to heal wounds and transcend guilt.

## Attitudes About Growing Old

**How does the possibility of God's transformation of our lives offer a new outlook toward growing old? Can you look forward to being old?**

In order to closely examine your feelings about old age, take a sheet of paper and a pen and write a letter to yourself at the age of eighty (or ninety). In this letter tell yourself about the attributes you believe you will have at that age, how you will feel and function, and what you will do on an average day. Tell about your health at age eighty (ninety), your level of mobility, and the presence or absence of family and friends. After you have written the letter, sign your name and put it in an envelope. Plan to keep the letter in a safe place to reread on your eightieth (or ninetieth) birthday. **What feelings or thoughts did you have while writing the letter? Which parts were easy, which were hard to write? Did you find yourself forming new images or roles for growing old? Do you feel your letter reflects a true eighty (ninety) year old?**

When we consider aspects of life at any chronological age, many factors are involved. We can speak of our physical, intellectual and emotional age, in addition to our chronological age. We each are many different ages and the older we are the wider the spread between our various ages can become.

It would be difficult to determine how old we are in all these ways, but we should keep in mind five basic types of age: chronological age (number of years); biological age (degree of growth or decline of the body); social age (responsibility assumed, e.g. marriage, parenting, working, caregiving, friendships, etc.); psychological age (mental, emotional, interpersonal abilities); self-age (how old the individual feels). Your chronological age is defined by the calendar but the age you *feel* cannot be challenged or debated by others.

**Do you look forward to old age as a continuation and integration of all that has been and is now in your life?**

**Can you look at old age as an affirmation of God's infinite, joyous gift for you to receive?**



## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To explore our personal feelings about growing old; to identify our attitude toward old age; to consider the biblical attitude of facing mortality rooted in God.

1. Look again at the ages chosen and at the list of images you thought relate to old age. Be open to the fact that many of these images are stereotypical categories of older adults in general. Identify the positive and negative images. Formulate a list of images and phrases that fit the middle-aged person. Identify your positive and negative statements. **Are these stereotypical as well? Is the number of positive and negative images equal? What tasks does this set for the church? Why is the church particularly suited to and responsible for image making?**

*Suggested time: 15 minutes*

2. Sociologists have divided old age into three phases called young old age, middle old age, and old, old age. Consider these phases and define each. **What age span might be included in each phase? How might these phases be used to increase acceptance of the older adult in our society? Do these phases reorder your concept of what being old means? How do these phases affect your attitude toward growing old?** Share your learnings and surprises.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

3. Think of a person who was significant to your life's path. **What did that person have to offer you as his/her greatest gift? What age was this person? How did that person influence your life? How is this person still affecting your life?** Share some of your "heroes" with your family and friends, then celebrate the life of that person in prayer. Give thanks for the gift of life and for each other.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

## SECTION 1

### LIFE: GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT

#### 3. GROWING INTO THE FULLNESS OF GOD

*Eph.4:4-7, 11-16*

**Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm,  
but to add color to my sunset sky.**

**— Rabindranath Tagore**

An apple growing on a tree came from a blossom which transformed into an orb that grew larger with time. First green, it reddened with the sun (if that is its type), and finally it was ripe – or was it? Some say an apple is ripe while it is still slightly green. Others say it is best when it has lost its tartness and become sweet, or when it has fallen from the tree. In any case, once the apple has reached its peak of flavor and color, it begins to diminish.

Human maturity is often defined as ripeness or the reaching of a pinnacle. Maturity is not guaranteed with age, but maturity by its definition assumes that some aging, some life journeying, some interacting with others has taken place. It may come early or late, smoothly or traumatically. Or it may not come at all.

**Maturity is the badge of the struggle with one's own inner self,  
with the world of others, with history, and with God.**

For Christians, growing into maturity means, in part, growing into the beauty and energy of our inner selves. We must find our own unique spirit and then grow in the Spirit of God. Finding our personal beauty and spiritual energy may take a lifetime of questioning and exploring our inner self in an effort to place our faith and hope in God. It seems that as we age the various stages of our lives can be seen as journeys into our inner selves. Along the way we discover what gifts and abilities we have to offer to others. Each stage of our life is a part of our whole self, while at the same time our whole self is involved in each stage. Examination of life's stages leads us to the center of our being, the core of true purpose and meaning in our life.

#### Stages of Life

Birth is the start of the journey of aging, of course. After that we pass through several "rites of passage." Each stage is assigned a specific role and is given respect because of that role. The titles of these stages indicate their expected roles. There are many views about the number of stages into which life may be divided. Let us become familiar with a few of these views, keeping in mind the roles of the older adult.

*Psalm 148* tells of three phases in life – childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood. In this model, old age is considered a part of adulthood. In *Jer. 51:22* there are four phases: childhood, youth, young married, and elderly. This division was probably made on the basis of degrees of

activity and vitality. In **Jer. 6:11** three groups of adults are mentioned that indicate the different roles and changes that occur in aging.

Erik Erikson identified eight stages of life, the last three devoted to adulthood. Carl Jung identifies four stages: childhood, youth, middle age, and old age.

Think of some adjectives that describe the phase of old age. Then think of some of the roles expected in this phase. **What is the role of the older adult in the last stage? Do they seem specific to old age, or do they restate roles from previous stages? Is the final stage of life expected to be a conglomeration of the previous stages, a time when one finally emerges as truly authentic?**

Those who have to accepted themselves in each successive stage of life seem to age well. They may be able to see all of the stages contributing to the full circle of life. This process of acceptance is not an easy one. Not only must each stage be accepted, but it also must be embraced as a positive part of life's journey. Acceptance of each stage should not be confused with the resignation of having to endure. Old age will come, as does each stage, but we can choose to accept and affirm life's stages rather than resent them.

We must not overlook the fact that an impairment of our physical capacities in later life may tempt us to offer great resistance to accepting old age. It may often seem that life is seeking only to diminish us and not enhance life. Old age can be received as a potential for growth, not an exercise in futility.

**What happens to our physical bodies may not be within our power to control, but what we do with our years is our responsibility.**

Think about how growth can come out of significant changes in later life. Discuss this with others. Impaired mobility, curtailed activity, the loss of friends – are significant matters. But there is hardly any fullness to be found in life without the final acceptance of old age. Old age can be beautiful if one has developed a positive attitude throughout all the stages of life. Wrapped in the diminishing returns is God's life-giving power for good. Paul speaks of the power of God made available through weakness. (**II Cor. 12:9**).

### **Growing Toward Maturity**

It is easy for older adults to fall into bitterness and despair over their losses. The diminishments of life can become a dominant focus. But in God, acceptance of life's losses can lead to an augmentation of one's gifts and abilities. **What are some ways in which older adulthood can be a time for distinctive personal growth and contribution?** Consider some specific areas of growth open to older adults, i.e. mentoring, advocacy, awareness of social issues, education. It is through the very acceptance of diminishment that a deeper personal transformation can take place, where greater value is found in one's own gifts. When self-centeredness and self-interest have in effect been set aside, a step can be taken toward maturity. Think of individuals who have faced physical limitation in a positive way. Share some of these stories with others.

Some can step past their physical limitations and keep growing toward maturity. Others may be so caught up in the struggle that they may never be able to reach for the potential that lies waiting. Diminishments can be serious and painful and have a profound effect on us. But psychological healing can take place when the wound is recognized and accepted. In addition, a recognition of God's continual presence through the pain of life can inspire a creative approach to the possibilities of life.

Read **Eph. 4:4-7** aloud. Paul wrote these words during his own suffering in prison. His strong, comforting words tell of Christ's all-sufficient power to get us through any suffering. Just as there are stages in our human lives, there are aspects and stages of faith. By this we affirm the wholeness of the body of Christ of which we are all members. Reflect on these verses and list similarities in parallel columns. **How do these scripture verses parallel the experiences of old age and its limitations and potentials? What does Christian faith have to offer to us as older adults?**

It is only through a willingness to battle our inner demons at any stage that there will be growth. The inner struggle leads to deeper self-awareness and perhaps the discovery of a new image of self where new fulfillment can be found.

Older adults are deeply affected by the prospect of facing the end of life. On one hand, there may seem to be no future. Yet, there is a future if there is faith and hope in God. We can have hope by emphasizing the fact that the present affects the future.

**Older adults have a special mission in shaping the future to contribute to humanity as a part of the body of Christ.**

Consider **Eph. 4:11-16**. **What are some specific roles older adults can contribute to the unity of the body of Christ?** We may think of older adults being adept at sorting out what is valuable from what is merely popular. **Verses 14-15** refer to a lack of maturity in faith. **What is a mature Christian?** Read **vs. 16**. Spend some time thinking about how older adults are active contributors in your church and how they can be encouraged to offer their strengths as opposed to needing to be protected.

### **The Link of the Spirit**

The Spirit cannot be touched or controlled; it is always mysterious. Death in its mystery is believed to hold the key to spiritual power. Sociologists say that in many societies older adults provide the link between life and death, between humans and the Divine. In these societies older adults are given the vital role of mediators between society and the Spirit. Their advice is believed to be already tinged with the Spirit, and their every word is respected. Even though these older adults may resent being pushed into old age, there is the satisfaction of growing in power, because of their closeness to the Spirit. **Does this theory describe a common link between the young and the old? What are the similarities between the experience of the young and the old**



### in relation to the Spirit? How do these experiences enable a person to be closer to the Divine Spirit?

For many, old age means being on the edge of eternity; for others it means only a wish that time would end. Knowledge of nearing the end of life can be a powerful motivating factor leading to creativity or ultimate despair. Psychologists point out two general attitudes of the older person facing death. Some old are acutely conscious of the reality of death and its relationship to sorting out the meaning of life. Others seem to repress the fact of death in order to achieve comfort or security. Most people constantly mix and alternate between these attitudes.

### How does facing the end of life turn you to finding life's true meaning? What are some of your personal experiences of this?



Older adults who tend to be optimistic seem better able to balance the joys and tragedies of their lives. They continue to learn, change, be productive, creative, and resourceful. Many want to leave their legacy to the young. Optimists have found that a positive mind and heart enables them to show empathy and understanding, and thus they feel they are making a satisfying contribution to the life and work of the world.

**None of us knows whether  
we have already lived  
the best years of our lives,  
or whether they are yet to come.**

The greatest adventure in life is to grow toward fulfilling the potentials of love, beauty, and authenticity to the very end of life.

## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To explore personal attitudes that lead to a positive view of aging; to come to view life as a unit consisting of various stages; to make use of the fact of mortality as a catalyst for the search for meaning and authenticity in life.

1. Draw a lifeline marking your various life stages. Then think of one or two significant events in your life for each of the stages of development. Note these on your lifeline. **How have these events affected your life journey? Your faith journey? For stages not yet entered, what are some hoped-for or anticipated events?** Write these down as well. Share learnings and surprises with others.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

2. The lesson material focuses on the diminishment of life functions and the potential for growth. Write on the left side of a piece of paper the attributes of old age that you hope to possess. List on the right side the liability of diminishments you expect might occur in aging. Check over the list, then turn the paper over. **What are the attributes you will begin to enhance right now? Write these on the left side of the page. What approach will you take now to minimize or overcome possible diminishments?** Write these on the right.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

3. Hold a shiny red apple in your hand. This apple has reached its peak of growth, was picked at just the right moment of ripeness. It is a delight to see. The apple has benefited from sun, rain, and nourishment from its parent tree. Now consider an old apple. This apple looks like it was left on the tree unpicked. It ripened and matured, then it began to wrinkle and turn brown. One day the apple fell to the ground. It no longer received nourishment from the tree and lay among the dry leaves on the earth. Over winter its flesh split. In the spring sun, its core dried and opened, yielding its seeds – the seeds of new life. **What can we learn from each of these apples? What does maturity mean? How does our society define human beauty? Is a beautiful form more desirable than an inner metamorphosis? How can we shift our view of beauty to also accept those who look wrinkled and worn?**

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

## SECTION 2

### FINDING WHOLENESS

#### 4. DISCERNING WHAT IS PLEASANT

*II Samuel 19:31-40*

Aging is not lost youth  
but a new stage of opportunity and strength.  
—Betty Friedan

We have come to a point in this series where we must face some hard facts about aging. We will look at some statistics and a list of certain physical losses experienced in old age. The purpose of this listing is not to overwhelm but to supply some data that must be dealt with. The ultimate question we must ask ourselves is: **What am I going to do about my own aging?**

##### Barzillai and David

We read in **II Sam. 19:31-40** that Barzillai generously provided supplies and food for King David and his troops while they occupied the land east of the Jordan river. David was traveling to the tribes of Israel who were feuding and fighting. David wanted to give Barzillai royal repayment for his generosity. But Barzillai, being chivalrous and generous, minimized his services and refused the invitation to go to live in the court at Jerusalem. However, he did offer to send his son, Chimham. David accepts Chimham and promises to treat him as Barzillai himself would.

**What was Barzillai's purpose in listing his physical ailments as a reason for refusing David's repayment?** Thereafter, Barzillai's family was cared for generously and fairly even by the kings who followed David.

##### Symptoms of Old Age

The Bible mentions various aspects of old age. Barzillai's speech is perhaps the most artistic and sensitive description of an older adult. Barzillai seems to accept his situation matter-of-factly. Other scripture passages are not as positive. Many speak of these aspects as distressing and bringing great unhappiness to life, despite the claim that old age is a gift. Perhaps the reality of growing old is too painful for some to allow them to be thankful for the gift.

The writer of Ecclesiastes applies his/her wry humor to a metaphorical description of the painful reality of old age. Through humor, he/she manages to accept the losses as unavoidable. Read **Eccl. 12:1-8**. **What physical attributes is the writer referring to in these verses?** There is a message in these metaphors. List the metaphors, then refer to the list and consider what the basic message is in this passage. **What role do personal choices play in how we age?**

## Physical Changes in Old Age

Between the ages of twenty-five and seventy, physical strength declines by 30 percent. At age sixty-five, one has about 10% of the immune capacity of a twenty-five-year-old. The major organs decrease in their output by an average of 30-40%. There is declining hormonal activity.

Older adults have accumulated injuries, diseases and environmental insults to their bodies, and this increases the probability of physical breakdown. Older adults are more vulnerable to stress which can also lead to physical changes.

Older adults in the U.S. have been asked to assess their own health. The results found in the *2017 study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, showed that 82% of adults ages 65 to 74 described their health as excellent. By contrast, 18% of this age group had a negative perspective, describing their health as fair (14%) or poor (4%). Among adults age 75 and older: 73% of this group said their health was excellent (12%), very good (28%) or good (33%), while only 27% gave a fair (20%) or poor (7%) evaluation. This perception may be surprising to us.

**What we assume about older adults  
and what is experienced by older adults  
may be two different things.**

*Approximately 85% of older adults have at least one chronic health condition, and 60% have at least two chronic conditions, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.* A chronic disease is a long-drawn-out illness that usually cannot be cured but can be controlled. For many older people, coping with multiple chronic conditions is a real challenge.

The National Institute of Health (NIH) affirm, forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging. As people get older, changes occur in all parts of the body, including the brain. As a result, some people may notice that it takes longer to learn new things, they don't remember information as well as they did, or they lose things like their glasses. These usually are signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems, like Alzheimer's disease.

Older adults have been found to be more productive in the work force, not because they work faster, but because they have learned to pace themselves. Older adults have a realistic conception of their own capacity. The reaction time of older adults slows, but this can be overcome with practice. Many symptoms of old age have a treatable cause, and most often improved nutrition and exercise can ameliorate them.

## Physical Abilities in Old Age

Studies show that older adults who are able to walk at a fairly brisk pace (about 3 miles per hour) *increase their longevity by as much as ten years*. The Non-Profit Urban Institute published a study in 2019 *finding that 80% of older adults ages 65 to 74 own their home. For those ages 75 and older, 75% own their home. More than 80% of seniors live independently. After age 75, close to 40% of seniors live alone. The length of stay in the same house increases with age. Thirty-nine percent of people 75 and older have lived in their current house for more than 30 years.*

*Even after age 75, 81% of seniors live alone or as married couples. Some seniors are more likely to live with their children as they become older. For those ages 55 to 64, only 3% live with their children. The percentage increases to 10% for seniors ages 75 and older. The number of older adults living in nursing homes also increases with age. In 2017, about 1.7 million seniors lived in nursing homes: just 1% of 55-to-74-year-olds and only 4% of seniors 75 and older.*

After noting these positive realities of older adults, we still may not feel convinced that some of the possible physical losses will not affect us. Our society assumes that a body with any disability or physical sign of age seems to confirm that old age means brokenness -- bringing on pity or even revilement. Our media remind us over and over that youth is beautiful and is supposed to last a lifetime. According to society, our lives are measured by our efficient functioning and productivity.

### Is it any wonder that physical aging is so hard to accept?

Acceptance, is the key to health and hope. Recall Barzillai's words in **II Sam. 19:37**. **How does Barzillai's response indicate his acceptance of his age? How do you suppose he arrived at this acceptance?**

The Bible often speaks of the brokenness of people; people are incomplete in comparison to God's eternal power and love. Discuss what symbolic meaning you have internalized about old age.

As Christians we have learned to keep up the struggle to improve. To fight against losses of aging is a constant battle, one that can be painful and difficult. In fact, one of the largest by-products of old age is depression. Incompleteness of body can present many uncertainties. New roles and models for living must be created in order to thrive.

Through the study of the passages in II Samuel and Ecclesiastes we have begun to formulate a list in our minds of the physical losses associated with old age. Scientific research has revealed more physical changes that occur as one grows older. Throughout our lives our bodies are continually changing, but perhaps the most significant change occurs in middle age with the "loss of youth". At middle-age we begin to count the years to the end of life instead of the number of years from birth. Around the time of this mental shift, along come the physical signs of aging, such as diminishing energy and stamina, the need for longer recovery periods, poorer muscle tone, increased probability of chronic illness, thinning hair, lines on the face, thickening waistline,

weakening eyesight and hearing, digestive impairment, less acute taste and smell, shrinking stature. All of these physical changes test our faith in ourselves and in God's goodness to humanity. But only in faith can we find hope.

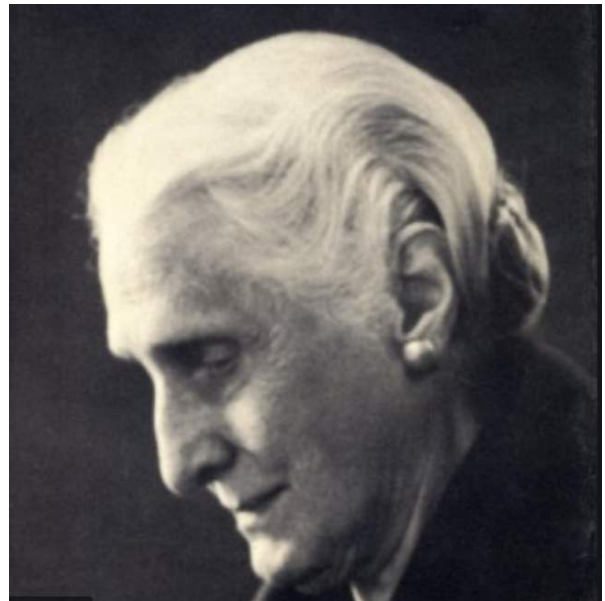
**For many, physical limitations  
enhance one's ability  
to discern beauty and value.**

We can resolve to make a contribution in spite of limitations, as Barzillai did. Losses can bring us to a place we've never been before, a place where new and lovely flowers may thrive.

Florida Scott-Maxwell writes in her still-popular classic, *The Measure of My Days*, of her experiences as a person in her eighties. She had been an actress, writer of short stories and plays a mother, worker in the women's suffrage movement, and at fifty years of age, an analytical psychologist. She tells of her attitude toward declining ability:

*"Realizing now that we have reached the place beyond resignation, a place I had no idea existed until I had arrived here..."*

*It is a place of fierce energy. Perhaps passion would be a better word than energy, for the sad fact is this vivid life cannot be used. If I try to transpose it into action I am soon spent. It has to be accepted as passionate life, perhaps the life I never lived, never guessed I had it in me to live."*



Think again of Barzillai who, despite his physical liabilities, offered David his energy and generosity. He gathered the energy and vitality of the action around him. Barzillai chose to leave a lasting mark in Israel by offering his son the opportunity to experience life at court, thus ensuring a generous pension to all of his descendants. Barzillai means "man of iron" and denotes the physical or mental character of the person. The name may also mean status as head of a metalworking caste. Reflect on the words of Barzillai and Scott-Maxwell, and determine what choices they made about their later years that gave them passion and meaning despite their limitations.

**How will you take up the challenge that physical changes present?** Share and discuss.



## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** to learn about the physical changes that usually occur in old age; to become familiar with the possible physical losses; to turn the focus from physical changes to a meaningful life of contribution; to hear the perspectives of older adults about their own physical capabilities and grapple with compensating for limitations.

1. After reading Ecclesiastes and making a list of limitations, seek out other passages in the Bible that refer to old age. You might read aloud from the following passages and others you have found. Make a list of descriptive phrases from each. *Gen. 18:13; 48:10; I Sam. 12:2; Ps. 71:9*, and more.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

2. A tenet of nearly every society is that when a person reaches a particular age he or she is expected to behave in a certain way. It is assumed that the 65-year-old will slow down and retire by the age of 70. An 80-year-old may be thought to be forgetful. Make a list of some of the expected behaviors for a 70-year-old today. Then create an opposite statement for each item on the list (i.e. retirement's opposing statement could be "second career.") Now compare what society expects with what the individual may actually perceive or experience.

*Suggested time: 10 minutes.*

3. Complete the True or False Quiz. Its purpose is to raise awareness about the actual experiences of older adults. After the quiz is completed, check the answers and consider your thoughts and insights. Research actual statistics for the facts.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

### True or False Quiz

(The questions relate to Americans aged 65 and older.)

1. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Aging is a slow process with parts of the body aging at different rates.
2. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ The majority of older adults retain basic health at least through their 70's.
3. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Ninety-nine percent of older adults have reduced eyesight.
4. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ One third of older adults experience dementia.

5. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Ten percent of the older population live in nursing homes.
6. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Older adults do just as well as the young when there is adequate time to complete a task.
7. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Older adults tend to become more faultfinding, demanding, irritable and suspicious.
8. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
9. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Artistic, creative, and scientific achievement reaches its height early in adulthood and declines with age.
10. T\_\_\_\_ F\_\_\_\_ Eighty percent of older adults are not able to live and function independently.

***Answers: 1.T; 2.T; 3.T; 4.F; 5.F; 6.T; 7.F; 8.F; 9.F; 10.F***

## SECTION 2

### FINDING WHOLENESS

#### 5. DISCOVERING LAUGHTER IN OLD AGE

*Gen. 18:1-15; 21:1-7*

I have reached an age when if someone tells me to wear socks,  
I don't have to.  
—Albert Einstein

The Old Testament storyteller related the story of Abraham and Sarah in great detail, artfully combining many ancient traditions, weaving them together into a tapestry. The story is on the surface, a test of Abraham's love and piety reflected in his treatment of strangers. The story is a metaphor of Yahweh's love for others that is particularly meaningful in nomadic life.

#### Abraham and Sarah

Abraham had chosen the barren land as his own when his nephew Lot took the lush green countryside. Abraham moved to the land hoping to find success and fulfillment in his life. God had promised him many descendants, and that one day Lot's land would belong to Abraham's descendants. Instead, there was a great famine in the land.

**Sarah was as barren as the fields around the tent.**

Surely Abraham recalls his dream of Yahweh's promise to make of him a great nation (*Gen. 12:2*), to give him descendants numbering as many as the dust of the earth (*ch. 13:16*), and to give the land to his descendants (*ch. 15:18*).

At one hundred years of age, Abraham may have thought, what possibility is there for any success in this life? As we read in *ch 18:1-15*, Abraham is resting at the door of his tent, which sits high on a hill in a place called Mamre, just north of Hebron. Abraham does not see the three strangers approaching. In his surprise at their sudden appearance, he jumps up and sets all of his family to preparing a generous meal for the three strangers. Abraham is very respectful and urgent about serving these people. **Does Abraham know who these strangers might be? Who do you think they are?**

The narrator has taken great care to depict Abraham's exemplary hospitality to his guests. Oddly, the strangers know not only Abraham's name, but the name of his wife. Sarah, who cannot be seen or heard is eavesdropping from the tent. The three strangers tell Abraham that Sarah will have a son within the year -- a seemingly impossible promise to be fulfilled!

How unbelievable this all must have seemed to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah dismisses the possibility of having a child as absurd. The strangers seem to have heard Sarah's reaction and

reproach her for having laughed. They accuse her of renouncing Yahweh with her unbelief. **Does she know these strangers? Was their reprimand justified?**

Sarah's laugh is understandable as a natural expression of surprise and puzzlement. Yet the narrator makes it very clear that the word of Yahweh was laughed at. The guests are indignant at her limited thinking and at how quickly she dismissed the prediction.

When Sarah is reproached, she becomes terribly embarrassed and tries to lie her way out of her predicament. Abraham must have listened to the promise of the strangers in silence. His silence gives us time for many thoughts. **Wouldn't we dismiss what our mind cannot comprehend as possible?**

The narrator carefully expresses the human frame of mind when confronted with Yahweh's promises. **What did the reaction of Sarah and Abraham reveal about their ability to receive Yahweh's promise? In what ways is this a story of Yahweh's testing Abraham and Sarah? What key phrase in the passage relates to the human understanding of God's power? How is human nature contrasted with God's all-knowing nature?**

### The Birth of Isaac

**Genesis 21:1-7** is actually three documents woven into one story of Isaac's birth. The name Isaac means "may the divinity smile" (on the child). The root of the name is "laugh" and this becomes the secondary theme of the story. The name itself was told to Abraham by God (**ch.17:19**).

"And Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me,'" (**ch. 21:6**) is an expression of Sarah's joyful affirmation of a new life given to a barren woman. **What part does laughter play in Sarah and Abraham's inability to believe the impossible?** "Every one who hears will laugh over me" (**v.6**) is a contrasting type of laughter. **What do you think Sarah meant by her statement? What feelings are behind these two types of laughter?** Recall her reaction in **ch. 18:12**. Think of yourself in your late nineties becoming a parent for the first time. This was a new and, no doubt, difficult experience for Sarah and for Abraham.

The old would do well to take up living as Abraham and Sarah did – living on the edge of life each day. It is then that the depth of God's love reveals many surprises. **Do you believe that for most, God is met most directly in old age?** The ability to meet life's surprises with humor, as Sarah must have done, can serve to enhance our life and our ability to cope. **Why do you suppose we must confront an impossibility in order to accept the incomprehensible acts of God?**

### Mental Well-being

We are different from one another in many ways, and yet we are all alike in other ways. If we have the ambition to make the most out of life and to see our lives as worthwhile, we will want to take our life's journey with hope. This is one definition of mental well-being. Older adults may arrive at a positive attitude toward life in many ways, but some may not arrive there at all. We can probably name acquaintances who have grown more cynical with age. We probably also know many who have found renewed faith in old age. Most older adults have ways of reacting

consistent with their younger selves. Life has not changed the person, so much as that person has changed in the eyes of others. The older adult is still the same person s/he has always been.

It seems older adults who have aged well have come to terms with themselves. They have become more authentic in old age. Some of their former roles have become less confining, many artificial expectations have fallen away, and they have relied on their own inner resources and other people to adjust and adapt.

### **Most older adults express satisfaction with their life.**

List those attributes of older adults you have known which directly contributed to their aging well, e.g. a sense of humor. **How have these attitudes proved vital to their successful old age?** Studies have shown that the majority of older adults do maintain a healthy attitude about their lives and continue to learn and grow. The needs of older adults are the same as those of people at other ages but may simply have become more acute.

### **Satisfaction in Old Age**

Older adults lose many roles as they age, and roles define the feeling of worth and importance we hold in our society. Older adults often lose their roles as worker, spouse, parent or friend. Many of us rely on others to affirm the meaning of our lives. **If these people are taken away and the roles we fulfilled for them are gone, can we affirm ourselves as we are? What strengths should we build in ourselves in anticipation of growing old?** Write down some goals for yourself. Keep these to use as reminders for planning in the days ahead.

In order to adapt and maintain mental well-being older adults must find satisfaction in some aspects of their lives. Inner strength and resiliency can be a resource in the struggle to adapt. A close relationship with at least one other person is very important for all of us. People of every age need to have at least one confidant – someone who will listen to their joys and troubles, someone who can justify their life. People who are all alone have been found to suffer greater physical and mental illnesses.

### **Socialization is of utmost importance for the health of any person.**

Most older adults prefer independent living, and they want to be able to control their own lives. Perhaps the most stressful experience in our life is to gradually lose control of making our own choices and decisions. Some older adults are no longer allowed to drive a car and then must rely on a relative or public transportation to determine their activities. Those in skilled care facilities are often completely directed by others. Both men and women feel these losses acutely.

Older adults should always be treated respectfully. Older adults have so much that they can share with others. They are not always sick, and the many illnesses they do have can often be managed.

Intimacy in old age is just as vital as at any other age. Think of how many older adults are not touched by another person all day, for many days. Think of those who have not received a hug,

or had their hand held in months. Touching is a key element of mental health. The more older adults are pushed, directed, or abused by others, the more quickly they can lose the will to live. Older adults need to be able to take pleasure in tasks well done, to find personal companionship, to be reassured that their life is worthwhile and significant.

**Older adults experience a great deal of stress in their lives,  
but they are resilient and capable of bouncing back, if given time.**

Stressful changes should be spaced apart, if at all possible, to allow the individual time to recover from one change before facing another. The recently widowed, for instance, should postpone major changes such as a move, for several months to a year.

**How do you think of yourself growing old?**

**When life deals many blows that seem to overwhelm, how will you reach for inner strength?**

**How will you reach out for support from others?**

**What part will acceptance  
of God's power in your life  
play in your mental attitude  
toward growing older?**

Consider the part faith and hope in God's power play in mental well-being. In all, remember that our goal is to do the will of God.





## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** to discover our personal attitude toward the importance of mental well-being in old age; to evaluate our own tendency to deny that God can accomplish what seems impossible; to begin to accept God's will and receive the gifts of the Spirit.

1. Spend time going over the lesson's text. Create some descriptive summaries of people in the Bible. The following passages tell of some older adults and the ways they handled their own old age. Read each passage, then explore what the mental attitude of that character implies, and how that attitude affected his/her life. **How does the outcome of the action influence others?** *Gen. 18:11-14; Josh. 23:2; I Sam. 2:22-25; 8:5; I Kings 11:4-13; 12:6-11; Job 21:7; Ps. 92:14-15; Joel 2:28.* Check for learnings and surprises.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

2. Psychologists have found a therapeutic technique for older adults to develop a more positive mental attitude called *life review*. The exercise in the third lesson that uses a life line can be a vehicle for a life review. As the phrase describes, older adults, or a person of any age for that matter, is to look back on his/her life reviewing the key aspects of it. Ultimately, the goal is to find the good in it. The process of life review is therapeutic, in that the teller is enabled to resolve unfinished experiences, come to see that a disagreement may no longer be relevant, see that failure is less important than what was learned, and perhaps "put one's house in order." Tell another person about the key aspects in your life to this day, or significant experiences that changed your life.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

3. Engage in a conversation with an older adult during this coming week and specifically encourage that person to tell stories about his or her life. Listen closely, and patiently allow the stories to be told, even if they are romanticized or exaggerated. The stories chosen have importance in the teller's life and should be affirmed. You may want to pick up on a theme and ask pertinent questions to discern the story's importance. Let the storyteller know of the worth of his/her story and the value of each experience. **What results have you seen from this listening?**

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

## SECTION 2

### FINDING WHOLENESS

#### 6. WAITING FOR WISHES

*Luke 2:21-40*

**As soon as you feel too old to do a thing, do it.  
—Margaret Deland**

In the year of the birth of Jesus, the spiritual commitment of the Jewish people was low. But there were still some pious people. Some believed the Jews were the chosen people and one day they would become masters of the world. Some believed that a heavenly being would come to earth or that another king of the Davidic line would rule. Some said God would come by supernatural means. There were also people known as the “Quiet in the Land.” These people had no thoughts of violence, power or armies, but held hope through a life of prayer and quiet watchfulness for God’s coming. Simeon and Anna were both people of the “Quiet in the Land.”

#### A Dream Realized

Read *Luke 2:21-35*. Simeon felt called by the Holy Spirit to be watchful for God’s coming, and he spent much of his day in the temple worshipping and praying. He hoped God would soon come to comfort the people, and he believed his life would not end before he had seen the Messiah. Apparently one day, Simeon felt compelled to go to the Temple. He arrived just before Mary and Joseph entered with the baby Jesus. Try to imagine how he must have felt on seeing this tiny, newborn infant, and suddenly realizing that this was God’s Messiah! **What can we discern about Simeon in light of the fact that he was called to not only see the Messiah of God in the flesh, but to bless the child?** Refer to *vs. 27-28*. **How did Simeon feel fulfilled and rewarded for his life?**

Consider now *vs. 36-40*. Anna was a prophetess to whom God gave revelations. She lived in the Temple most of her life and served the God in worship and prayer. Anna faced tragedy in her life. Yet after enduring these events she emerged with a sense of direction from God.

**Anna reached beyond her hurts  
to find the courage and patience  
to face a life spent waiting on God.**

After seeing Simeon bless the infant, Anna talked about the child named Jesus to a group in the Temple who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. She spoke only to those who were earnestly waiting and hoping for the coming. Through Anna the coming of Jesus the Messiah, became widely known.

## Spiritual Well-Being

Simeon and Anna have so much to teach us about the dimensions of spiritual life as older adults. One might say that since Simeon and Anna both maintained a religious lifestyle as a vocation, of course their faith was strong! What about those of us who live and work in the everyday world? We do know that Simeon and Anna centered their lives on God, but we do not know if they performed other jobs or services for their daily bread. We cannot assume that their lives were without trial and trouble, sadness or difficulty. It is clear, especially in Anna's story, that misfortune led to a greater consciousness of God's presence.

Simeon and Anna might have dealt with the meaning of their experiences at each step along the way without running away from God. They must have experienced hardships and poor health at times. Perhaps there was frustration, even anger, but there would also be a willingness to grow from this suffering.

**Reflect on how hardships can be confronted and turned  
into opportunities for growth rather than into material for despair.**

During our life we sometimes avoid thinking about things that are hard or painful. Older adults often have memories of these experiences come flooding back. Memories can be overwhelming because older adults may not have enough emotional reserve needed to cope with the painful feelings. **The problem is how can one deal with difficult life experiences so that resolution of the difficulty will contribute to growth?** Learning from life offers the key to expanding the horizons of spiritual life. List the key elements of the faith, lifestyle and character of Simeon and Anna. Compare your list to the following factors that contribute to spiritual well-being.

**Faith** In order to be spiritually healthy at any age, one must make a commitment to living with hope amid the sorrows and joys of life. Life must be rooted in God.

**Reflection** Experience is a great teacher, but only if time is taken for reflection. Periodic life review can be very valuable. If every experience is seen as an opportunity to grow, acceptance of life's ups and downs becomes an expression of faith.

**Tolerance** The capacity to enjoy life despite its variations prepares us for learning resiliency. Some older adults cannot tolerate change in their lives. When it does inevitably come, they experience painful anger or despair, and as a result their lives are spiritually limited.

**Loss** Previous sessions have noted the numerous losses experienced by older adults. Clinging to loss too long leads to isolation or hopelessness. Practice and discipline can help us learn to accept the losses that are irreversible. Through pain and loss, a new sense of richness is possible.

**Being** We want to control our own destinies. It is hard for us to let go of pursuits and allow ourselves to be in a relationship with God. It is difficult to let go of ourselves in order to be transformed into Christ-like beings. We may blame God for our personal tragedies and feel sorry

for ourselves. Some learn to eventually take time to look for the message hidden in such a tragedy and allow themselves to come to new understandings.

**Dialogue** We need to carry on both inner and outer dialogues. Inner dialogue can help us resolve the tensions we experience between fantasy and reality, between what we are and what we wish we were. We need to struggle with ourselves to find what is important. Inner dialogue nurtures outer dialogue with others. Outer dialogue nurtures strength and the ability to accept the challenge of life with the support of others. A lack of inner dialogue can lead to a loss of spiritual direction. If we have not confronted ourselves, we cannot develop a life in the Spirit. We must not underestimate that intergenerational dialogue can facilitate growth for everyone involved.

Elder Care Alliance reported in 2017 “spirituality is a significant part of many people’s lives, and it can become even more important as we grow older. A study by the University of Chicago found belief in God tends to increase with age, especially for those older than 68. Luckily for these spiritual seniors, faith practices come with a host of health benefits.”

<https://eldercarealliance.org/blog/seniors-and-spirituality-health-benefits-of-faith/>

We all know of individuals who seem to have an aura of peacefulness about them. This may be related to their coming to terms with the existential questions we all face in life. Spirituality and religion, whatever one’s age, is a very important factor in maintaining a healthy perspective on life.



**Our outlook and lifestyle have been found to be far more crucial to good health than genetic or environmental factors.**

Attitude and lifestyle are even more important than the highly sophisticated medical care of today. **What is the relationship between your lifestyle and your religious and spiritual beliefs? Why is spiritual well-being so closely connected to physical well-being?**

Spiritual well-being relates to the way we look at life and is an important factor affecting our longevity. In life-threatening illnesses, the mortality rate is higher for those who give up on themselves and who have little spiritual strength. On the other hand, those whose beliefs and faith sustain them in times of loneliness or restricted physical activity can remain strong and vital. Physical well-being and mental well-being are both enhanced by a sense of spiritual well-being.

Anna and Simeon practiced their faith daily. Their lifestyle and outlook were deeply rooted in God, and their spiritual life affected their whole being. **What does this suggest to you about the importance of a holistic approach to well-being? How holistic is the approach to lifestyle in your congregation?**

### **An Attitude of Hope**

The practice of collective religion may not be all that is needed for spiritual growth. Anna and Simeon worshipped with a community of believers and obviously found support and love there. A large part of their lives was also spent in private prayer and meditation. In such activity they could examine their own inner makeup and discover new spiritual heights. Spiritual growth can follow as a result of our acceptance of the hardship and goodness of our life in God's care.

The spiritual well-being of older adults has its foundation in earlier life and is built over a lifetime. When we were young, the rush of time may have led us to avoid looking inward. A lack of perspective in any period of life can lead to mistrust of God. Spirituality implies trust in something beyond the material world, trust in the future. Learning from experience and living reflectively in earlier life can lead to wisdom and a perspective on life that can contribute to spiritual growth. Our challenge is having the insight to do so when we are young and the courage to continue growing when we are old.

### **Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper**

**Objectives:** to evaluate our own personal spiritual health, to review the value of private prayer and corporate worship in increasing hope and trust; to consider what types of responses to life's experiences enhance the spiritual dimensions of aging.

1. **What contribution to the religious community did Anna and Simeon make by being the first to recognize the infant as the Messiah? Did the ages of Simeon and Anna play a part in their announcement of the Messiah? If so, what part?**

*Suggested time: 10 minutes.*

2. Religion played a key role in the lives of Simeon and Anna. Reflect on the section of the lesson about the characters of Anna and Simeon. Consider and discuss these questions: **What is the importance of your church in affecting your outlook on life? How can a congregation become more influential in the lives of older adults in the community?**

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

3. In light of the statistical facts on health and spiritual well-being presented in the lesson, **how does your congregation act as a mediating influence in our society's care of older adults' mental and physical health? What spiritual role do older adults play in your family and in your church? What sort of spiritual wisdom can they provide? What are the ways your church can utilize the contributions of older adults to enrich your congregation?** Share your ideas with others. Sum up possible program ideas.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

## SECTION 3

### LIFE IN COMMUNITY

#### 7.THE WORKING SOCIETY

*Deut. 31:1-8, ch.34*

Half our life is spent trying to find something to do  
with the time we have rushed through life trying to save.  
—Will Rogers

#### The Luxury of Retirement

As Americans we have learned that if we are ever to amount to anything, we must work hard to achieve success. To be idle is sinful. Society insists that a job and dollars are vital to dignity and survival. To be retired is to be old, society says, and the old need to make room for the young in the job market.

Retirement is generally welcomed. Retirement frees us from the necessity, if not the compulsion to work. Retirement is an opportunity for leisure and new interests with, it is hoped, income provided.

**Retirement is a luxury many cannot afford.**

There is no data to support an arbitrary age for retirement. In 1883 the German chancellor Bismarck chose the age of sixty-five as the retirement age for his country. The U.S. Congress thought sixty-five sounded reasonable when the Social Security system was set up in 1935. Unions and industry encouraged the movement to early retirement in the 1950's. The number of mandatory corporate retirement plans greatly increased, but many plans did not include any cost-of-living provisions.

Given the U.S.'s extended average life span, retirement has become another stage of life, one that may span thirty years! Retirement means a transition from one adult lifestyle to another, and a retiree's personal identity will probably be redefined accordingly.

What if Moses had retired at sixty-five or seventy years of age? A most significant time of his life service came after he was *eighty*. Read **Deut. 31:1-8** and consider the three major events in these verses.

Moses speaks to the people shortly before his death. He speaks as their leader and reminds Israel of God's refusal to allow him (Moses) to enter the Promised Land (**Deut. 3:23-28**). In his old age Moses steps down to allow Joshua to take over as leader. He continues, however, to act as mediator for the people with Yahweh. He works with Joshua to prepare the people for entering the Promised Land.



In **ch. 34**, Moses is depicted as a great and lonely figure. His death is recounted with little emotion but there is tremendous poignancy in the story. Moses climbs Mount Pisgah to survey the Promised Land. His act of scanning the land is considered a legal act of taking possession of that land. Moses remained an active contributor to the nation of Israel until his death. Moses' story is not the only Biblical account of retirement of great leaders. Joshua and Samuel also retired in old age and remained active and respected public officials.

**As a prophet without equal, Moses completes his life  
with a view of the land that his descendants will inhabit.**

An account of retirement benefits is found in *Leviticus 27:1-7*. These verses lay out a plan of financial worth according to the ability to do physical work. Those over sixty who are incapable of physical work receive a tax break. Older adults can still hold the highest offices and offer advice. They still command and enjoy respect. Consider the similarities and differences between our retirement system today and the one in this passage.

The Old Testament elderly reach the point of retirement as parents when family possessions are transferred to the sons, especially the eldest son. This rite often took place during the parents' illness, when death was near. The son is then responsible for the care of his parents.

### **The Happiness Factor**

When a person ceases to be productive and has time on one's hands, our society undervalues the worth of that person. Even though many retired older adults report that their lives are happily satisfying, they perceive their older adult peers as being unhappy. **Are the negative perceptions older adults have of their peers merely a reflection of our society's attitude? Do today's older adults receive the respect that those in Biblical times did?**

Many retired older adults develop a new way of life that is satisfying. Satisfaction in retirement is affected by many factors. Try to think of some of these factors. Some retire against their true wishes, in order to meet the expectations of others. **How satisfying can retirement be when a person has been denied the privilege of doing the work they still feel able to do?**

**There is a great deal of pressure exerted by society for workers to retire.**

A search for new horizons begins with retirement, better yet, pre-retirement. If one's identity has been thoroughly tied up in his or her former work, retirement can be a totally unnerving experience. The sense of loss of personal value can be overwhelming. New roles, even another career, may be called for.

Being forced or encouraged to retire can leave a person feeling a loss of control over life and income. Many retired people experience a feeling of economic captivity, having to face the high cost of living and inflation when their plans and savings for retirement may be nonexistent or inadequate. **Is the right to work past 65 a basic right? Is work necessary for survival?**

The experience, skills, and knowledge needed for certain job-related tasks are often put aside in retirement. Personal qualities and character traits developed in the competitive years of working may seem to be discarded in retirement. **What are some of these qualities? What qualities or traits are associated with or called for in later life? Is there a difference between the traits developed during the working years and those needed in later life?**

The majority of people over 65 want to keep working. AARP reported on a study by United Income which found that more than 20 percent of adults over age 65 are either working or looking for work, (as of February 2019) compared with 10 percent in 1985. It is expected the trend of older people working will continue. Blue collar workers are less likely to continue working and it is those in white collar jobs who are able to continue to work. There is a disconnect between those who continue to work and need the money less than those who cannot keep working. Older adults generally have better work records, less absenteeism, more stability, a steadier rate of productivity, and do higher quality work. The U.S. needs to create a culture that honors experience and accepts modified ways for older adult to keep working.

Retirement support organizations are overwhelmed with applications for jobs. Working provides structure and a place to go each day, which most of us need. Of course, many older adults who work are underpaid and are often limited to part-time positions or certain types of work.

### **Choosing Retirement**

For many, retirement is not a choice but a fact. Many older adults begin to “practice” for retirement in their middle years. Travel, recreation, and alternative second careers are considered. Many invest in property or plan where they would like to live in retirement. Pre-retirement planning should include assessing one’s capacity to adjust, to renegotiate priorities, and to look for new ways of contributing to the world. **What new capacities does retirement call for? What retirement pitfalls must older adults be alerted to?**

### **As we age we evolve.**

We may be quite a different person at sixty than we saw ourselves to be at twenty. Change is unavoidable, and remaining fixed on one age can be boring. The contributions of youth are different from those of older adults. Think of older adults you know who have maintained a lively and resourceful life well into their eighth or ninth decade. A new kind of creativity can grow out of aging.

Many notable figures grew in creativity in their later years: Michelangelo, Voltaire, Tennyson, Verdi, Tolstoy, not to mention biblical figures like Sarah and Abraham, Moses and more. Moses must have felt bitterly disappointed at being kept out of the Promised Land. Yet he recognized the importance of his work in mentoring Joshua. **What role does mentoring others play in old age? Who were some of the mentors in your life?**

As birth rates decline the older worker is becoming more welcome in the workplace. As countries near zero population growth, older adults are becoming valuable resources once again. We tend

to think of retirement as something that occurs in all other advanced countries. This is not necessarily so.

**How might we reconsider the way we think of retirement? What societal shifts are already occurring? What are your feelings about retirement? Do you think retirement is a time to disengage from responsibility? How much rest are you entitled to, or would you want, after having worked for so many years?**



There are rites of passage for every stage of life. These rites serve the purpose of preparing the individual and predicting an outcome for the new phase. Every new phase may have joys and dangers, and there are role models and traditions affirming the successful passage to a positive outcome. A happy transition into retirement is very possible, and many achieve it. But proper preparation and realistic expectations are vital to retirement success. It is hoped that the acceptance of personal worth and the continuing contributions of older adults will lead to recognition as a valuable resource in our country and in our world. **What rites of passage are there for retirement?**

## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To discover various attitudes toward retirement that have positive or negative influences on people; to explore an historical overview of the institution of retirement; to consider the relationship between productivity and personal worth in our society.

1. Read the scripture passages cited in the lesson, then consider the Old Testament portion on retirement. **What special provisions were made for retirees? How did the issues of choice and maintenance of dignity come into play? What factors were present to encourage continuing vitality and involvement in society? How is our society today different, and what are the factors that make it different from Old Testament society?**

*Suggested time: 10 minutes.*

2. Brainstorm ways to develop an alternative to our country's retirement practices - something more equitable and serviceable for each age group. **How could education, work, and leisure time be distributed throughout the life cycle instead of concentrating these activities in three separate periods of life?** Take three 3" by 5" cards, or a piece of paper. **What three ideas for change can be realistically implemented?** Write one idea on each of the three cards. Share your ideas with others.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

3. We must never retire from Christian involvement. **What is your understanding of an involved Christian? What are the important components of a Christian life? What key roles does the Christian older adult play in the church and in the community? What is the role of the church in retirement as a passage?**

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

**NOTE:** Read "The Cherry Orchard" by Anton Chekhov in the coming week. A pdf version can be found here:

<http://shsdavisapes.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/76523765/The%20Cherry%20Orchard.pdf>

## SECTION 3

### LIFE IN COMMUNITY

#### 8.THE VITAL LINK

*Gen. 47:1-12; Prov. 23:15-25*

**If you feel like there's something out there  
that you're supposed to be doing,  
if you have a passion for it,  
then stop wishing and just do it.  
—Wanda Sykes**

#### The Extended Family

When a society is in flux, as is ours, even traditional institutions like the family are not immune to redefinition. We can look to the biblical concept of the family for some assistance in forming our current concept of family. Society at large, especially in nomadic groups, was considered an extended family. The nation or clan was made up of smaller extended families. The family was a hallowed unit of society and was given the utmost protection.

**In biblical times older adults remained an integral part of the family.**

The Fifth Commandment was the basis for many passages throughout the Bible. *Honor* in ancient times implied a place of preference in society. Honor was considered a gift from God that humans should acknowledge and seek to enhance. It was in the sharing of honor that the community was given a sense of wholeness. **What place does the sharing of honor have today?**

Older adults of the Bible represented the link between the past and the future; the link between humanity and God; between tradition and present policy. They enjoyed considerable respect and power. The major role of older adults in the extended family was to pass along family traditions to the young, to tell of their history, and to teach about their heritage.

**Given this key role in biblical society,  
older adults remained vitally involved.**

The old were not forgotten or ignored. Their advice was considered not only relevant but necessary. Even today the wisdom of the biblical elderly touches our lives. To be touched by the Bible at all is to learn the traditions of the old. **How do contemporary family patterns contrast with the biblical attitudes toward older adults?**

The reuniting of Joseph with his family adds insight into family patterns. Though this narrative is straightforward, many questions are raised regarding family responsibility. As you read *Gen. 47:1-12*, jot down your questions or thoughts.

Joseph requested and was granted an official audience with Pharaoh. **What was Joseph quick to establish in v.1? Why is this information significant to Pharaoh? Look at a map to locate the route Joseph's family took from Canaan to Egypt. Why did Joseph tell his brothers what to say to Pharaoh? Why did they ask to live in Goshen?** Pharaoh made a most generous agreement with Joseph, as recorded in **v.6. What political factors made this so significant? Why did Pharaoh ask Jacob's age? Why did Jacob answer as he did (v.9), and what did he mean?**

Obviously, Joseph felt responsible for his family not just in offering forgiveness and welcoming them into his life once again. **What duty did he feel obliged to perform? What part did God play in the life of this family? What plan was completed by God?**

### **Family Fragmentation**

Just as Joseph's society expected him to perform certain duties for his family, society at any given time in a nation's history supports certain views of family life. Family ties today, seem to have been cut into ever smaller pieces. This is not a recent phenomenon. The extended family began to come apart in the developing world long before the New World was settled.

The *Pre-Colonial Period* (1492-1607) when the lure of gold and the urgency to spread God's name caused numbers of individuals to uproot themselves, to live without family ties, even without significant relationships, because of their wish or call to adventure.

*Seventeenth-Century New England* communities were settled and networking and cooperation existed among villages. It was believed that the old resembled God and had cooperated with God in shaping history. There was a deep sense of intergenerational sharing. Retirement was not assumed but remained an individual choice.

From *1800 to the Civil War*, the church became aggressively evangelistic. Revivals occurred in nearly every community. Collective needs were addressed in these revivals, but the emphasis was on individual decisions for the conduct of one's own life. Volunteers established agencies to deal with specific needs, especially poverty. Although many of the old were poor, the subject of older adults was not taken up for special attention.

Until the late 1800s and early 1900s family had been predominant in American society. But with urbanization, secularization and modernization, older adults became an issue. Unfortunately, they were kept out of sight as if by doing so, society could maintain the appearance of order with high standards of living for all. Special homes for the elderly were built and the "warehousing" of the old began.

The church began to concentrate on strengthening the family unit, but the old were ignored. (Divorce was viewed as a greater threat.) Specialists in human service professions who formerly worked primarily in or through the church, moved into academia. The profession of social work became specialized, and one area of focus was the care and challenges of the old.

*The New Deal* (1933 – 1939). Older adults became more educated and vocal. The Social Security law was passed in 1935. The retirement process became more formal and older adults became an institution. The care of the old shifted from the church to secular agencies subsidized by public funds.

For many decades now, older adults have been a force to be reckoned with. **What historical events have played the greatest roles in changing or putting pressure on the extended family? What shifts in our understanding of the family have occurred recently? How did the shift from an agrarian society to industrial, then service economy to technology effect older adults and their families? Does the information age enhance or diminish the place we give older adults in our society?**

### **The Generation Gap**

The rate of social change has been rapidly accelerating in this century. One of the major tasks of the church is to help people deal with such pervasive change. Older adults are especially vulnerable to escalating change.

Anton Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*, is a classic drama dealing with the suffering that can attend change. The various characters in the play are young, middle-aged, and old. With the imminent bankruptcy of the family, the characters have been reunited to share in deciding about the cherry orchard. Each one has found a deep sense of value in the cherry orchard, a value not easily given up. The orchard symbolizes key aspects of the characters' existence, and their whole lives are tied up in the sale of the orchard. The substance of the play is the different attitudes of each generation, the passing of time, and loss. Each character wants the cherry orchard to remain forever as s/he has known it.

The young, especially Trofimov and Anya, are strong and hopeful. To them the orchard can be left behind as a childhood memory as the whole world can be their home. The future and unknown are an adventure. The old, Gayev and Firs, are considered to be no longer important in the family. Their tributes and memories of life with the orchard are intolerable to the young. The future for the older characters, offers only despair and loneliness. All the characters are confronted by the paradoxes of life: old age and youth, death and life, past and future, loneliness and hope.

Chekhov's play is rich in symbolism and metaphors. **How is this part of the family's life a commentary on societal attitudes toward the whole of life? If you could choose, would you invest more in the extended family or move toward a more separate, private lifestyle?**

Whether they live in extended, nuclear, blended or fragmented families, parents feel impelled to teach many things to the young. Each generation is eager to perpetuate itself, to be assured that its values will not be lost. One generation passes on to the next its legacy of truth and guidance, hoping to instill in the young the means to a fruitful and useful life.



An example of such guidance is found in *Proverbs 23: 15-25*. Read this passage and try to discern the intention of each instruction. Write five proverbs you feel are important instruction for the young. Let these express what you feel is most important to pass along.



Just as older adults in biblical times fulfilled their roles as sages by oral teaching, we too can play an important role in our society's future by sharing what we know. The issue remains, will society permit its older adults to instruct?

**Today, older adults are not so much dishonored as disregarded.**

To change this will require a major shift in the way we all think about older adults. It will take time to change, but it would be well worth it.

## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To explore the shift in society from the extended family to other lifestyles; to consider the biblical meaning of extended family living; to explore symbolic ways of expressing views about living.

1. The lesson text describes the importance of taking responsibility for one another as described in Old Testament extended families. Care for the old meant not only physical and financial care but care for maintaining dignity and value within the family. Today care for older adults seems to have a very different meaning, that of a custodial, and even “warehousing” mode. **What responsibility for caring for older adults should the family take? How does this care complement the care given by public and private service agencies?** Discuss this issue with others in light of the story of Joseph, and your own wishes.  
*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

2. Discuss with others *The Cherry Orchard* by exploring the relationship between Anya and Trofimov, and Firs and Gayev. Ask those who have seen or read the play to share their views about the symbolism used. **Is this drama a tragic commentary or a depiction of modern reality? What is the symbolic meaning of the heron and the owl? What is the purpose and meaning of the snapping of the string? What emphasis on color is made and for what reason? How do these symbols create a complete picture of family relationships in modern society among the young, middle-aged and old? What do the young and the old have to offer each other in the play?**  
*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

3. Nationwide statistics about show that many older adults live near at least one of their children with whom they visit weekly. A majority of older adults with siblings have seen their sibling in the last month. **To what extent does this information describe your experience and community?** Share with others your own personal experiences if you have had your parent/s live with you. **How did this affect the relationships among the generations in your family?** Take a poll of the church to determine how many would choose to have a parent live with them, and how many would choose to live with one of their children. For what reasons and under what circumstances?

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

## SECTION 3

### LIFE IN COMMUNITY

#### 9. SHARING WISDOM AND EXUBERANCE

*Job chapter 32*

**Knowledge is learning something every day.  
Wisdom is letting go of something every day.  
—Zen Proverb**

In Chinese the word for wisdom is *zhi*: the ability to use your knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgments. In Japanese it is *chie*, meaning intelligence, sense and sagacity. But *knowledge* in Japanese is a different word having many variations.

Neel Burton, M.D. psychiatrist in Oxford U.K. argues in his article "What is Wisdom?" that "Wisdom is not so much a kind of knowledge as a way of seeing, or ways of seeing. When we take a few steps back, like when we stand under the shower or go on holiday, we begin to see the bigger picture. In everyday language use, "wisdom" has two opposites: "foolishness" and "folly," which involve, respectively, lack and loss of perspective.

But things were not always thus. The word "wisdom" features 222 times in the Old Testament, which includes all of seven so-called "wisdom books": Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the Book of Wisdom, and Sirach. "For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it" (Ecclesiastes 7:12). Many things can lengthen your life, but only wisdom can save it.

But above all it helps to be courageous, because the view from up there, though it can be exhilarating, and ultimately liberating, is at first terrifying—not least because it conflicts with so much of what we have been taught or programmed to think. If you have proper perspective, you cannot fail to understand the goals and values of life or indeed fail to act on that understanding. This chimes with Socrates' claim that nobody does wrong knowingly: People only do wrong because, from their limited perspective, it seems like the right or best thing for them to do. In the words of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201811/what-is-wisdom>

Courage, said Aristotle, is the first of the human qualities because it is the one which guarantees all the others.

**Do you agree with these definitions? What other values might you include as fundamental for gaining wisdom?**

**An openness to life's encounters  
can bring contentment rather than anxiety.**

This view suggests that we can overcome physical limitations by developing our mind. Through gaining knowledge, we can enlarge or enhance our capacity to learn. As a person develops these four virtues s/he will be fulfilled and the self will be nurtured. The four virtues form a continuum in a person's life: the past and future, ability and knowledge, cannot really be separated. The promise of wisdom provides a certain stability and unity. **How does this theory relate to Christian faith? How are these virtues learned? Do we expect older adults to prove that they deserve respect by exhibiting their wisdom before we will honor them? How do we honor wisdom? How can we “know” that older adults should be treated with respect and not carry out that respect in action? How can knowledge and action be related?**

### Age Before Beauty

**The Bible tells us wisdom is rooted in reverence for God.**

The teachers of wisdom sought to pass on the oral tradition of their nation and ancestors. The message to the younger generation was that God is the motivating power in history. Therefore, God must be revered and feared.

Much of the Bible assumes that the old have gained wisdom. **Does wisdom come only with a long life?** For some, wisdom does not come at all. **What was the basis of the biblical assumption that only the old were wise?**

Read **Job, ch. 3**. Elihu has listened as Job's elder counselors have offered advice and attempted to answer Job's searching questions about faith. Elihu has waited for his chance to speak. He has heard the fumbling words of his elders and has become impatient. Elihu is disgusted with how the elder counselors cannot seem to understand the world anymore. **What motivated Elihu to state this? Is he speaking with the voice of an inexperienced youth?**

The elders have expressed what they see as the advantage of long years in attaining knowledge and wisdom. They have expressed their opinions in hard and fast terms. **Are they speaking in narrow-minded ways?** Eliphaz reminded Job of a need to be open to God in the events of his life (**ch. 15**). **On what basis do you think these advisors claimed their right to share their knowledge and wisdom in old age? Would you say they were self-righteous? Do you think Elihu understood their claim that knowledge and wisdom come with a long life long? On what basis do older adults today make their claim to wisdom? How does the biblical idea of wisdom expressed in this passage compare with the concept of wisdom in Neo-Confucian thought?**

### Validity and Antiquity

Elihu was the youngest of Job's counselors. He let the elders speak first to share their wisdom. Then it was his turn. Reread **ch. 32:6-9**. **What does Elihu believe is the root of wisdom? How would you characterize the personality of Elihu? What is your image of Elihu as a young man?**

What important truths has Elihu found (vs. 10-22)? Review Elihu's reaction to his elders. By asserting his right to speak, what claim did Elihu make regarding wisdom? How is Elihu successful or unsuccessful in defining and embodying wisdom? Does one forfeit the respect of others when exhibiting age without wisdom? How did Elihu earn the right to speak? He felt his words could overcome his lack of years. He points out that youth should first listen to elders, but elders should also listen to youth. What does our society think about such a belief? Is it validity and not just antiquity that counts?

## Wisdom

How do you define wisdom? How is wisdom defined by our society? A modern thinker has defined wisdom as the ability to share, tolerate, and affirm oneself and others – to be free of the need to prove oneself. How is this definition similar to or different from the examples given above? How does it compare to the biblical view? What do modern definitions of wisdom have to say about the accumulation of experience? Teachings on wisdom state that the wisdom of old age is rooted in the quality of options chosen in youth. Some describe wisdom as a willingness to acknowledge the past and be open to the future. Others say one who has grown old may become wise due to the acquisition of three virtues: hope, humor, and vision. How do these virtues interconnect for you? What virtues of wisdom can be gleaned from the words of Elihu?

Some older adults recover a childlike capacity for wonder and surprise. Their thinking can become freer and more uninhibited. Youth and middle-aged people often tend to think in terms of time, money and pleasure. How do you think these different attitudes are integrated in our society?

Individual choice may shape one's life, lifestyle and decision-making. The wise are able to accept a mixture of good and bad, and believe that goodness will prevail. What are the differences in the way we think and the way biblical writers thought?

Society's reliance on data and information is reflected in the way people are treated. Our culture values facts, data, comparisons and predictions. We rely on fast, accurate data so that we can make certain decisions and even predictions. In gathering data and applying it, people seek to manage information. What does this say about the quality of life we expect for older adults? What is the relationship between individual values and social values? How can we begin to change the way our society values older adults?

In what behaviors is one considered less effective as the years go by? In what activities does one become better with age? Do perspective and intuitive judgment get better with age? The struggle to obtain wisdom is linked to the ability to recognize wisdom when we see it. What is wise in the sight of one generation may seem foolish to the next. Old age does not guarantee wisdom, but it also does not mean mental decline or irrelevancy.



## Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To identify some definitions of wisdom; to explore whether wisdom and age go hand in hand; to compare biblical and modern concepts of wisdom.

1. Imagine a modern-day drama of the biblical story. The characters are Job, Elihu, Bildad, Eliphaz and Zophar. Job is an older adult in a hospital who has had a long series of very stressful experiences. He is asking many questions about faith. Some of the elected elders who are also his friends in his church pay him a visit in the hospital. Elihu is the newest elder. Eliphaz speaks curtly of his irrefutable logic. He is certain that his theories are absolute. He has a shallow theology of God and sinful people. Bildad is a teasing, sarcastic and chastening figure. He uses simple, dogmatic language that matches his simple theology. He allows for no gray areas; all is black or white. Zophar is a frustrated and nervous person. He is impatient with Job. He continually tells Job that if he is good, some good will come to him in the future. Zophar is more concerned with changing society's crimes than listening to the confessions of one man. Observe points at which Job receives true wisdom and compassion from his friends. **How can this imaginative drama be expressed and applied to sharing the wisdom of older adults in your church?**

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

2. Draw a graph dividing the horizontal line of the graph into decades of life, 0 - 100. Number the vertical line called wisdom into segments numbered 1 - 9. Place an "X" at the point of your present age. Using the criterion of wisdom below, rate yourself for each decade of your life so far. Give yourself one point for each criterion of wisdom you feel you achieved in that decade. After totaling the criteria for each decade, draw vertical lines on the graph for each decade to the height of your "score" on the vertical scale. Once completed, find the decade of greatest change, greatest growth, greatest wisdom. **What are the implications? Is there a criterion or two that you would add to the list?**

### **Criteria of wisdom** (one point for each)

Knowledge  
Balance of body and spirit  
Reverence for others  
Spirituality  
Ideals  
Discovery of the Spirit in oneself  
Receiving respect from others  
Affirmation of oneself  
Tolerance of change

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*



## SECTION 4

### MINISTRIES WITH OLDER ADULTS

#### 10. AN INDIVIDUAL'S MINISTRY

*John 4:1-30*

**Beauty is not who you are on the outside,  
it is the wisdom and time you gave away  
to save another struggling soul like you.  
—Shannon L. Alder**

#### Stereotyping

You are either already an older adult, or one day you will be an older adult. You may enter older adulthood thinking that age is a problem, a time of loss, a time to quit. No prescription or advanced medical technique can improve life in the later years as much as a change in our attitude, and ultimately, society's image of old age. A change in our own attitude toward growing old is necessary if any societal change is to be expected.

**We can begin resisting stereotypes now.**

Oswald, the reeve in the *Canterbury Tales*, describes himself as the stereotypical old person. He is sad and cranky, and says old age prevents him from having any fun. He explains that his will is strong but he has lost the ability to be actively involved. His life is almost spent, and all that remains is time to dote on having lived so long.

#### What stereotypes of aging have you taken into your psyche?

Consider these questions:

1. Which of these terms seems derogatory toward older adults?

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> little old lady | <input type="checkbox"/> over the hill  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> golden ager     | <input type="checkbox"/> old maid       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> widower         | <input type="checkbox"/> old codger     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> retired         | <input type="checkbox"/> senior citizen |
2. When I think of getting older I

|   |
|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> look forward to new challenges.            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> worry about being sick a lot.              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fear being alone.                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dislike the idea of how I will be treated. |
3. When I am with someone much older than me I

|  |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> want to get better acquainted but don't know how. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> don't know what to talk about.                    |



\_\_\_\_\_ enjoy listening to his/her life experiences.  
\_\_\_\_\_ would rather be with someone else.

**What does this questionnaire say about your own attitudes? Which of these answers are examples of stereotyping? Which do you feel are harmful and untrue for most older people? How can these stereotypical attitudes be countered? How can we develop positive and healthy relationships with and as older adults?**

### Sharing Discovery

A Bible map of Galilee, Judea, and Samaria will be helpful when reading **John 4:1-30**. Trace the route Jesus must have taken from Judea to Galilee. **What alternate routes are there?** The trip from Judea to Galilee took three days if walking through Samaria. Alternate routes could take up to three times longer. But there had been a quarrel among the Jews four hundred years before Jesus' time. Since that ancient disagreement, Samaritans were rejected by other Jews, and in turn, Samaritans made traveling through Samaria difficult for other Jews. **What characteristics of Jesus can we determine from these verses? What do we learn about the Samaritan woman? What barriers do you see Jesus breaking in vs.10-21? What is Jesus saying to the woman in vs.22-30?**

The Samaritans worshiped God as well as other gods. They studied only the first five books of the Old Testament in worship, rejecting the rest. Fear of punishment for sins seems to have played a strong part in Samaritan worship. **How do you suppose Jesus' comments about faith affected this woman in light of her perception of worshipping God?** Most rabbis in the society had a low opinion of women and even believed them incapable of learning. Jesus' first words to this woman made her look at herself. He showed her the good and the bad in herself. Evidently, she had spent her life feeling shameful and refused to look at her inner self. She experienced overwhelming guilt and had been shunned by her neighbors. Her shame had engulfed her life. Now Jesus led her to a new discovery. Suddenly it seems, she was rid of her shame, and she wanted to tell everyone.

**Discovery becomes complete when it is shared.**

Jesus broke many traditions in speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. Most importantly, he emphasized the love and respect that is due *each person*. **How can we apply the lesson of this story to older adults in our society? Is this a discovery we want to share? Can we stand with Jesus in elevating people above stereotypical categories so they may be accepted on their own terms?**

**Sharing Jesus' respect for all people  
and believing in the absolute worth of every individual  
is our Christian duty.**

**How can we exemplify this belief in our daily lives?** if we are to accept our own discovery of the need to rid our lives of stereotypes, we must also accept the challenge of ridding our lives of

ageism, which is prejudice toward the aged. **How can this truth be embodied in our collective and personal mission?**

As Christians, we each carry the burden and promise of ministry. We must understand Jesus' basic requirement of us to further the Message by ministry. In order to meet this challenge, perhaps we ought to begin with a commitment to self-enrichment. Increasing our knowledge in about aging can be our first goal. Then we can become effective spokespeople for God in upholding the rights of older adults. Uneasiness about the aging process is nearly universal. We have shared a wealth of information about the aging process.

**But information requires involvement to be useful.**

**Has there been an area of aging that particularly interests you and on which you might like to concentrate your learning efforts?** The reading list in the Appendix challenges you to become involved in gathering useful material – and taking the first step on your journey as a spokesperson for the rights of all people.

### **Exemplary Ministry**

**Where does personal ministry begin?** It begins with an understanding that our life is an example of our ministry through our daily actions, conversations and learning. Ministry begins with where we are.

Ask yourself, "Do I...

*See* older adults as if I were seeing them for the first time?

*Share* with older adults a common concern or need?

*Give attention* to older adults where they are – in libraries, centers, parks, at work?

*Try* to see life as they see it?

*Include* older people in my life?

*Believe* older people have wisdom?

*Respect* older adults?

*Spend* time with older adults?

As the Samaritan woman left Jesus determined to tell her story, she must have felt a strong sense of direction and focus for her future life. It was through the story she told that opinions and outlooks in her village must have begun to change. She contributed to the development of a new value system. Jesus had given her permission, through her experience and knowledge, to share by example the message of Jesus. It is through our own understanding of a personal message given us by God that we can carry out our ministry in our community.

We have absorbed societal stereotypes about older adults and have been slow to respond to the myths society reinforces about aging. Our challenge and influence can be as significant as that of the Samaritan woman. We can meet the demand of developing an effective ministry by and with older adults, which provides nurturing role models, a sense of value, and an important purpose in life. Ministry, no matter how singular or simple, regenerates life just as it did for the woman at

the well. Begin by acknowledging the unique contribution you can personally make with older adults to provide leadership and advocacy.

Older adults ask two basic questions of themselves and of us: “How can I maintain my best life?” and, “What gives life meaning and purpose?” **How do you respond to these questions?** The struggle in old age can be between authenticity and despair. Knowing this can help us be more supportive and helpful to older adults who are depressed and fearful. It is our faith that in Christ there is healing power. It is our task as disciples to let that healing power into our own lives and the lives of others.

### Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper

**Objectives:** To consider our own personal ministry with older adults; to heighten our awareness of our personal ageism; to practice Jesus’ example of total acceptance of all people.

1. Invite three or four older adults from your community to form a panel. You might choose a person from each decade of life, the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties. Inform the panel what is expected of them. Have each one tell about the aspects of their life relevant to aging. Then pose questions such as: **What is one positive aspect of aging in your life? What is a negative aspect? What stereotypes of old age have you encountered and how have these made you feel?**  
*Suggested time: 30 minutes.*
2. Alternatively, ask three or four church members to share something about their life experiences, relating these to their attitudes toward aging. Ask them to speak about a book, article or special person in their lives who influenced their thinking about being old. Allow time for questions and discussion.  
*Suggested time: 30 minutes.*
3. Create a collage depicting images of aging from the media. Use magazines and other printed materials you have on hand. Tear out photos, headlines, phrases and ads to create your montage about aging. Share with others and explain some of the examples you found and what they mean to you.  
*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*

Read about [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild\\_Strawberries\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_Strawberries_(film)) or watch the movie, on HBO or [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050986/Wild\\_Strawberries](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050986/Wild_Strawberries) during the coming week.

## SECTION 4

### MINISTRIES WITH OLDER ADULTS

#### 11. A CHURCH'S MINISTRY

*Luke 1:5-25; James 2:14-19*

**You're never too old to set another goal or dream a new dream.**  
—C.S. Lewis

*Luke 1:5-25* tells the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah became a priest as a descendant of Aaron, but since there were so many descendants each priest was assigned to serve just one week in the year, and for just his own district. There were numerous priests in Zechariah's district alone. Burning the sacrifice in the morning and evening was a special honor for those who were lucky enough to have their name drawn by lot. These sacrifices were for the whole nation. When Zechariah's name was chosen, it was the greatest day of his life. In the Temple that week, Zechariah spent much of his time thinking and praying about his own personal tragedy – he and his wife, Elizabeth, were childless.

Zechariah had been waiting and listening through his prayers, expecting to hear God's voice. God's message came first in the Temple to the one who was listening. Finally, Zechariah saw a vision and received a message at a time when he'd given up all hope for a child.

*Wild Strawberries*, is a film by the famous Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. The main character is an elderly man on his way to receive a Nobel Prize. He begins to wonder about his life and listens for some message. He visits his boyhood home and starts to recall forgotten memories. The film places great importance on this life review and on the hope of receiving visions and messages vital to the well-being of an - in this case – older adult. We are reminded of Zechariah and the value of taking time to listen and to be prayerful.

Religious organizations claim the largest number of older adult members -- more than all other voluntary associations combined. The church has contributed so much to the well-being of older adults. It has taught the value of love and compassion, and has sought to serve the needs of all ages. In so doing it has nurtured personal faith and offered older adults a more satisfying life.

Churches have also unknowingly contributed to the plight of older adults in our society. **What are some of the ways the church has unconsciously or sometimes consciously done this?** God's message of ministry comes first to those who are attentive. **What is the message you and your congregation are hearing about the role of older adults in your community?**

Many churches' normal activities are intended for members of all ages. The question is whether there are enough activities of the right kind for older adults.

**Older adults have unique needs,  
just as do the young, adolescents, young adults, and middle-aged.**

**A church must be attentive to those older adults who are visible  
and those who are not visible or present in the church's activities.**

### **Assessing Needs**

Ask the leadership of the church to work with you to complete the survey below. Access to the church records or rolls may be helpful.

1. The number in your congregation who are ages:  
\_\_\_\_\_ 1-19  
\_\_\_\_\_ 20-29  
\_\_\_\_\_ 30-45  
\_\_\_\_\_ 46-59  
\_\_\_\_\_ 60-75  
\_\_\_\_\_ 76-90  
\_\_\_\_\_ over 90
2. The number of older adults in your congregation:  
\_\_\_\_\_ living alone  
\_\_\_\_\_ living with a spouse  
\_\_\_\_\_ living with relatives  
\_\_\_\_\_ living with non-relatives
3. The number of older adults in your congregation who are:  
\_\_\_\_\_ employed  
\_\_\_\_\_ seeking employment  
\_\_\_\_\_ retired
4. The number of older adults in your congregation who are:  
\_\_\_\_\_ married  
\_\_\_\_\_ separated or divorced  
\_\_\_\_\_ widowed
5. The number of older adults in your congregation who are:  
\_\_\_\_\_ able to do what they choose in the community  
\_\_\_\_\_ do not have use of a car  
\_\_\_\_\_ do not have access to transportation
6. The number of older adults in your congregation who are:  
\_\_\_\_\_ able to go out only with help  
\_\_\_\_\_ housebound  
\_\_\_\_\_ bedfast

7. The number of older adults in your congregation who have:

\_\_\_\_\_ no relatives nearby

\_\_\_\_\_ no children

\_\_\_\_\_ no living relatives

8. List the organizations in your community to which older adults belong:

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9. What activities do older adults attend which are part of your church program?

---

10. What are the unmet needs of the older adults in your congregation?

---

11. Is there a committee of the church with responsibility for older adults? Which one(s)?

---

It is important to count carefully the number of people on the rolls of the church rather than estimating them. Accuracy is key to obtaining a true picture; guesswork in this case is often misleading. If part of the survey has not been completed, a church leader or member might help in completing the survey.

**What does the data reveal about the ability of older adults to meet their own needs? What concerns have been raised in which the church can become involved? How can older adults be involved in this work?** Once your church has become aware of the needs and interests of older adults in your own congregation and community, the task of offering options, then facilitating and enabling them to participate in activities becomes the goal.

### Emotion and Action

The author of *James* speaks in *ch.2:14-19* in opposition to the Greek religious teaching that the aim of life was to withhold emotions, and that serenity and detachment were the way of achieving happiness. James claims it is dangerous to experience an emotion and then not put that emotion into action. If feelings are put aside, action may never be taken. He said, it is only through work, discipline, and effort that emotions portray the “stuff of life.”

**Both belief and works are manifestations of faith.**

**How can Christians express both faith and works at the same time (*vs.18-19*)? Why must both be involved - why not concentrate exclusively on the power of prayer? How does this apply especially to older adults? Why is it our Christian responsibility to translate our concern for a ministry with older adults into programs and projects?**

Many agencies provide services to meet some of the needs of older adults, as does the church, but secular agencies cannot emphasize religious values. The most important job of the church is to attend to the spiritual needs of all age groups including older adults. Spiritual needs involve physical and emotional needs as well.

### The Church's Call

One mission of our churches should be to call older adults to continue to be productive members of their church, community and society. **How do you believe this can be accomplished?**

**Many older adults feel that they have done enough  
for the church and community in their younger days  
and now it is time to "retire."**

Some older adults use church "retirement" as an excuse to become detached or uninvolved. **How can older adults be convinced to take James's message with them into old age?** Giving can take many forms, and it can change with one's years and abilities. Think about some opportunities that the church can make available for older adults to be involved. Here are some general thoughts for encouraging an open attitude toward older adult involvement in the church.

- a. Uncover and encourage the use of *talents*. Talents will strengthen and revitalize the life of your church.
- b. Concentrate on *inclusion* of those older adults who are not directly involved.
- c. Enable older adults to become their own *advocates*.
- d. Include older adults in *leadership* roles.
- e. Establish opportunities for *intergenerational* activities.
- f. Consciously *cooperate* with community service groups and other churches and synagogues.
- g. Encourage a *holistic approach* to the needs of the homebound and bedridden.
- h. Encourage *development* of in-home services and housing alternatives.

Now add to this list some of your hopes and dreams for involvement. Even ideas that at first appear to be unrealistic should be included. All things are possible with a little enthusiasm and faith!

Most of us find it much easier to give than to receive. This is especially true when our perceived need of another allows us to "help". Older adults are no different and any implication that they need help may well be met with resistance. We all have lessons to learn before we offer a service. We are not to be the rescuers of older adults. They do not need to be rescued. We are not to be the great giving parents of older adults. They do not need to feel like children. All people are capable of giving something. Even the bedridden can give thankfulness, cheerfulness, prayer for others, a sharing of thoughts, talents and concerns.





**We must train ourselves to accept the idea that real help is given not in a one-way fashion, but in a true open exchange.**

We must become sensitive to the psychological implications and social interpretations of giving and receiving help. A congregation may see it as their mission with older adults to make their church buildings barrier-free. This is a reasonable first consideration. Take a look at your buildings and ask what your facility is saying to older adults (and others) – “Come in or stay away”? At the same time, we must be sensitive to people’s feelings. We might provide something those who were expected to benefit won’t use because of embarrassment or some implied stigma.

What is the best way to begin implementing a ministry for older adults? The key is to plan a ministry *with* older adults, not just for them.

We are all the body of Christ, and each has gifts. Our task is to learn what those gifts are and how they can best be used and expressed.

### **Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper**

**Objectives:** To put the messages we have heard about ministry with older adults into action; to determine what some of the needs of older adults in church and community are; to test our ability to listen for the Word of God.

1. Review the lesson text and scripture passages. Amend the needs assessment survey so that it is suitable for use as a survey of older adults in your church. Ask others to join you in spending the next few weeks conducting personal surveys with older adults in your church and community. Explain that your purpose is to gather helpful information for the congregation about their interests and concerns. Older adults should not be made to feel responsibility or commitment as a result of responding to the survey.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

2. Make a comprehensive list of the abilities and opportunities for service that you and others in your group possess. Relate them to older adults: i.e. home repair, visitation, letter writing, etc. After the survey of needs and interests of older adults has been completed, try to match the needs with the persons who can provide the service. A volunteer-sharing network can begin in this way.

*Suggested time: 20 minutes.*

3. Watch the movie, *Wild Strawberries* (found on HBO) with a group, then discuss the film. **What ways the film speak to the interests and needs of your church’s older adults?**

## SECTION 4

### MINISTRIES WITH OLDER ADULTS

#### 12. A COMMUNITY'S MINISTRY

*1 Tim. 5:1-22*

**Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been.  
—Mark Twain.**

As we reach the end of this series, our work does not end, but continues. Perhaps it is just beginning. It is time to look into your community with the determination to share compassion and preserve the dignity of older adults.

The first letter to Timothy speaks of the duties and responsibilities of Christians in the community. Paul was concerned with how easily the new Christians might slip back into un-Christian ways when they could be examples for the people of the community. Christians should not become ingrown, Paul said; with concern only for their own members, but must reach out into the world.

The nurturing of Christians is where faith is formed and where it grows, but faith can be expressed best in the life of the community. Sharing faith among the young and the old, and all ages in between, is essential for the growth of both young and old. We cannot restrict our relationships to our peers alone since true balance results from relating to people of all ages.

#### Promises to Keep

Let's look at what Paul wrote in *1 Tim. 5:1-22*.

**Verses 1-2** establish a spirit of overcoming generation gaps. It states that we should be careful not to hurt anyone with criticism. Peers of all ages should be tolerant and generous with one another. **What do these verses say about the mutual respect of various ages? How can each generation complement the others?**

**Verses 3-8** express one of the most basic Christian tenets, that of charity. Children were to repay a debt to their parents. (Wives of polygamous husbands were considered widowed when their husbands became Christians and had to send their wives away.) **What do these verses say about the responsibility of children to parents? How was this duty more than a verbal commitment? What duty did parents have?**

**Verses 9-10** name two types of widows – those who could take care of themselves and those who could not. All widows were expected to try to remain useful and responsible in the church community, and all widows needed to do everything they could to take care of themselves. **Why were women over sixty considered especially suited to specific duties? How can the description of the qualifications of widows' behavior be more broadly applied?**

**Verses 11-16** expresses how the church was continually concerned with the way Christians appeared to the outside world. Those widows who made a vow to the church and then changed their minds and remarried were not considered good examples. **Although these verses may seem to express an archaic expectation, how can the concept of inactivity in the Christian community be applied to older adults?**

**Verse 17-22.** The early church believed people were rewarded according to their work accomplishments. Those to be especially honored were teachers and preachers. **How can educating the young in the Christian faith contribute to meeting the needs of older adults? What responsibilities do older adults have as teachers and mentors?**

**This entire passage emphasizes action, involvement, training and responsibility.**

The passage's theme is mutual respect and motivation. **How can these verses be translated into planning for action in your community? How can you encourage older adults to maintain their own responsibility for the community, and dignity for themselves?**

### **Planning for Action**

Work with a group of clergy and laity in your church to discuss and respond to these questions:

1. What is our mission as a church?
2. What are the specific issues that we need to work on in preparing for a ministry with and for older adults?
3. What is our purpose in developing a ministry with and for older adults?
4. What resources are there in our church? Are there specialists in our congregation who could help?
5. What resources are available in the community?
6. What is one specific goal we want to reach to address an issue?
7. What needs to be done in order to reach this goal? What kind of help is needed?
8. These three specific tasks will get us to our goal:
9. When will each task be accomplished?
10. How will we evaluate the project? How will we know when we have finished? How do we define success?

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**Begin to practice what you believe about ministry with and for older adults.**

You have just created an action plan. Following your action plan, your church will implement a project. Just as Paul hoped that the early church would follow his reminders to be a caring and understanding community, we must seek to make an impact in our own corner of the world. No

grand and glorious schemes need be attempted. Rather, we can do small things and still make a difference. Each of us can live as an example of affirmation and acceptance.

Courage is required in starting a project with a small group of workers. Enthusiasm and motivation will be present, but a support system is also needed. **How can motivation be sustained? What are some ways to communicate and work with other churches and service agencies in your area? What services are being duplicated? Is the whole person being ministered to? How can the support and participation of the congregation be enlisted in such a project?** Throughout ministry we must continually ask ourselves how we can help older adults become advocates for themselves, resulting in greater participation in our church and community.

### Conclusion

**Has the process of studying aging affected your personal feelings and outlook about older adults? What ways have you discovered to reach out and care for others? What ministry options have you considered?**

Little by little, people are beginning to see that older adults are causing something significant to happen in their communities and beyond. Take note of the number of older adults in your community. If we are ready to listen and try to understand another person's life story, it is a great affirmation of life.

**How do you embrace your own aging? If you are not yet an older adult, how will you celebrate your new status when that time comes?** There are positive models to follow – older adults who have a great sense of possibility and promise. God calls you to move out of what you feel are your safe places to take some risks. You are sustained by your faith and will discover you are not alone on your journey. Others have gone before, others are going with you, others will come after you.

Faith without action is unfulfilled, and there is so much that we can share with others. Think about yourself and consider your own church. How can you and your congregation most effectively begin to express some of your new discoveries about aging? Name some of the possibilities you have thought of. Perhaps a service of worship and recognition could be an annual event. Maybe you could establish a task force on aging. **Might you**

**initiate a visitation project or an adopt-a-grandparent program in your community?** Perhaps programs could be planned to raise greater awareness of the unique needs and issues of older adults. Intergenerational experiences enrich all when people of all ages share and learn from one another through telling their own stories and experiences. Your church might establish an intergenerational group that sets goals and designs an event.



There is much that can be done and much that needs to be done. What we all have in common is that we are growing older every day.

**The task for us as Christians is to accept this incredible inevitability with grace and courage as another opportunity for the expression of our faithfulness.**

### **Ideas and Suggestions for Going Deeper**

**Objectives:** To discover some ways to develop community caring among all ages; to complete an action plan outlining goals and objectives; to examine Paul's exhortations to the Christian community and relate them to realistic service in our own community.

1. Invite a guest speaker to present to a group of your church. Perhaps there is a gerontologist, geriatrician, or social worker in your congregation or community who would share their views and perspectives on aging and older adults. Ask the guest to tell about his/her work, experiences and philosophy. Conclude by asking them to share dreams and suggestions about how your church might become more actively involved in the lives of older adults.

*Suggested time: 30 minutes.*

2. Join with others in your church to create an action plan for older adult ministries. Work with the group to compile a list of resources for older adults in your community. Be sure to consider area churches, service agencies, retirement centers, counseling centers, universities, etc. Don't forget personal acquaintances. Plan how these resources can help with the project your church has chosen as a focus.

*Suggested time: 30 minutes.*

3. Take some quiet moments to reflect on the gleanings of these twelve sessions and on your personal attitudes and feelings. Look inward to your own lifestyle, priorities and skills. **How do you create positive well-being? How have your feelings shifted or altered in the course of this series? What will happen in your future that you can look forward to in the present? How will you feel as an older adult? Will you celebrate life?** Share learnings and surprises.

*Suggested time: 15 minutes.*