

Christians on Ageing - Church of Scotland Guild - Faith in Older People
Harvest field – A celebration of the contribution of older people to our faith
communities
Wednesday 17th November 2021

CHANGING SPIRITUAL NEEDS AS WE AGE

This expresses an important but insufficiently understood experience and truth about older people and their faith. Regular church attendance can so easily lead to them being taken for granted. Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady's 17th century hymn:

“Through all the changing scenes of life
In trouble and in joy
The praises of my God shall still
My heart and tongue employ”.

can reveal a misleading sense of contentment with faith and life for older people. Some do find, through prayer, fellowship with others, regular reflection on the Bible, a real degree of contentment. But, like all generations, older people are not an homogenous generation, there are a variety of attitudes, which I believe underlines the fact of change in the spiritual needs of older people. My experience of listening to Third Agers (70 to 80+ year olds) has led me to appreciate that they have more questions and doubts concerning matters of faith now than previously in life. Sixteen years of leading a workshop on faith and life issues for Third Agers made me well aware of the importance of their continuing questions and concerns in this area. The first issue concerning changing spiritual needs as we age, I believe, is:

1. **Acceptance** that there will be change as we age is a given for physical, emotional, mental suffer from limitations in some way. Spiritual needs are affected by this since human life is a psycho-somatic interrelated matter. Older people may discard previously held beliefs eg, The Virgin Birth. This is not surprising, for as I was told, when doing research with Third Agers, how:

“Honesty, openness and questioning” and how they were disappointed not to find more in the life of the church. important is:” (1)

2. **Acknowledgement** that older people are still “pilgrims on a journey”, as it was put to me. Therefore, there needs to be a readiness to understand and respond to the changing needs of older people and their faith. Here the churches have not been helpful in having meaningful policies regarding ministry to and with older people. They do not identify the changes in practice and belief brought about by the ageing process. It is too easy to approach this ministry as “business as usual” and not reflect changing needs.

3. **Awareness** that there will be a cost involved in the journey of faith as we age. Saussy claims:

“Inevitably old age will hold an assortment of loss and suffering along with joy and fulfilment.” (2)

Christians on Ageing - Church of Scotland Guild - Faith in Older People
Harvest field – A celebration of the contribution of older people to our faith
communities
Wednesday 17th November 2021

Research for my PhD, with Third Agers (3), revealed that they experience faith as involving “cost and struggle” This is hardly surprising since, as the sociologists, Barger & Luckmann maintain:

“From birth to death human beings are work in progress”. (4)

Older people, therefore, suffer the upheaval of change as much, if not more, than other generations.

4. **Assurance**, for older people, in my experience, can mean the need for an open and honest conversation about the last stage of life. My research with Third Agers has led me to hear from them such things as;

“When are we going to have a grown up debate about death and dying? Why is the church so coy about this/ Are we not a community of hope?” (5)

Assisted dying is something that has challenged me across 60 years as a Methodist Minister. How often have I heard that folk are not afraid to die, but it is the prospect of dying and prolonged suffering that highly disturbs them. It is my contention that a particular assurance and spiritual need that older people face is an honest and open discussion about this very issue. The renowned Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, engaged in a public debate on the issue in Germany and stated:

“Who has the responsibility for dying? As a believer I know that the life of God is a gift, but I also know that at the same time it is a human responsibility (first of my parents and then my own). One cannot simply ‘leave everything to God.’” (6)

With longevity the need to face this challenge, I believe, becomes more pressing.

5. **Achievement** in meeting these spiritual needs as one ages does require some recognition of them and the part that older people can play with others in meeting them. The life narratives of older people are indeed a creative resource in this as Saussy maintains:

“The wisdom of age is to be lifted up, embraced, and plumbed for the wealth of knowledge and insight acquired over many years of day-to-day existence in an ambiguous, unjust world.” (7)

This can best be achieved, I believe, in a multi-generate context. Moberg, I consider, wisely states that

“Spiritual maturity cannot be attained in isolation, but in an ongoing process of relational interdependence between God, self and others.” (8)

Christians on Ageing - Church of Scotland Guild - Faith in Older People
Harvest field – A celebration of the contribution of older people to our faith
communities
Wednesday 17th November 2021

So where does this leave us in appreciating the changes in spiritual need as we age?

6. **Assessment** of the situation means that we can expect change in spiritual needs as a 'given'. Bengtson & Johnson express this clearly when they observe:

"To assume that uncertainty and new understanding are signs of faltering or of being overwhelmed by doubt is to fail to comprehend the essence of ageing." (9)

The Bible offers reassurance of God's continuing gracious love midst the changes of life, as Isaiah claims:

"... even to your old age I am he; even when you turn grey I will carry you: I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46 v 4)

Psalms 71 and 90 similarly make the same point. Methodist Homes for the Aged in their 50th year celebrated by publishing "God, Me and Being Very Old" (10), a collection of life narratives told to chaplains by residents at the homes. The stories convey vividly the variety of experiences of challenge and change that the older people faced across the years and especially in their later years, emphasising the nature of changing spiritual needs as we age. As Moberg has indicated a

"relational-interdependence between God, self and others" is required in order to nurture and celebrate wholeness" as we age". (11)

Rev Dr Graham Hawley
Christians on Ageing
November 2021

- (1) K. G. Hawley unpublished MA University of Manchester 2004
- (2) C. Saussy, "The Art of Growing Old" 1998 Augsburg Fortress, Minn. NY USA
- (3) K.G. Hawley. unpublished PhD, University of Manchester, 2017657656565
- (4) P. Berger & T. Luckmann "The Social Construction of Reality" Penguin, London, 1991
- (5) K.G. Hawley, unpublished MA, University of Manchester 2004
- (6) H. Kung & W. Jens, "A Dignified Dying" SCM Press London, 1995
- (7) C. Saussy ibid
- (8) D. Moberg, "Ageing & Spirituality" in "Spiritual Maturity in the later years" edit. J.J. Seeber, Haworth Press, N.Y. USA.1990
- (9) V. Bengtson & M. Johnson "Religion, Belief and Spirituality in Old Age: How they Change" in "Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing" edit. M. Johnson & J. Walker, (Cambridge University Press) 2013
- (10) K. Albans & M. Johnson edit "God, Me and being very Old" SCM Press, London, 2013
- (11) D. Moberg, "Ageing and Spirituality" Haworth Press, NY USA 2001