

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

Hello and welcome, it is lovely to be with you today.

This talk is about pioneering and how it relates to older people. First off, I want to dispel some myths. Being a pioneer is not dependent on age.

William Shatner first went to space as a 32 year old, captaining the star ship enterprise. He truly went to space when he was 90 years old. This lady Gladys Burrell from Honolulu ran her last marathon at 92. She did it in 9 hours and 53 minutes and 16 seconds, amazing.

Teiichi Igarashi from Japan, climbed Mount Fuji when he was 100. A retired lumberjack, he started when he was 89 and has been doing it every year, in honour of his wife who passed. Mount Fuji is 12,385 feet high. Amazingly he did it in thick socks and no shoes, taking 3 days. He stopped every 3 minutes for a rest. He took no water but ate raw eggs during his breaks. He also appears to be quite shy because I couldn't find a picture of him anywhere.

Out of interest. Has anyone ever eaten at Kentucky Fried Chicken? KFC famously was started by Colonel Sanders, the quintessentially southern gentleman from America. Also, interestingly he didn't start KFC until he was 65.

If we get biblical Abraham became a dad when he was 100. Enough said on that I think.

Being a pioneer does not depend on age.

The 4 people you can see on the screen are quite interesting.

Jan Koum started WhatsApp, the messaging service used by Billions of people every day. Koum was born in a small village on the outskirts of Kiev, Ukraine where his father worked as a labourer and his mother was a housewife. Struggling to make ends meet, their home was apparently often without hot water. Aged 16, Koum and his mother emigrated to California, where he would support them by sweeping the floors of a grocery store and collect food stamps.

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In his spare time, Koum was researching computers, and by the age of 18 he had become a highly skilled computer hacker.

In 1997, he got a job as an infrastructure engineer at Yahoo. In January 2009, he is said to have purchased an iPhone and quickly realised the potentially lucrative app industry which it could spawn. On his birthday, February 24, 2009, he incorporated WhatsApp Inc. in California. Starting from nothing his company was sold to Facebook for \$19 Billion.

Oprah spent much of her childhood living with her grandmother who was so poor she could only afford to clothe her with dresses made from potato sacks. She then fled an abusive home aged 13, and aged just 14 her new-born child died shortly after birth. She then returned to live with her mother for a short while before being sent to live with her father.

It was here that Oprah turned her life around.

First by sealing a full college scholarship and then winning a beauty pageant (where she was discovered by a radio station). From there, the Oprah name became an empire. She is now worth \$3 billion. Starting from nothing.

While growing up on a farm in rural Sweden, IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad displayed a knack for business with a wide range of short-lived ventures in his early years. He was well known locally for selling his neighbours just about anything he could get his hands on, from matches and pens to Christmas decorations and fish.

Before long he decided to start a mail-order business (using money his father rewarded him with for good grades) which would eventually become IKEA.

Early on, furniture emerged as one of Kamprad's best-selling products as a result of him using local manufacturers to keep production costs and customer prices low.

Once one of the world's richest men, his value has fallen slightly recently but still stands at an amazing \$3.8 billion. Started from almost nothing.

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Being a pioneer does not depend on having everything you need to start with or even knowing where you are ultimately going to end up.

So, if you think you are too old you are wrong and if you think you don't have what it takes, you are also wrong.

One of my favourite Disney films is Ratatouille, you remember the story of the Rat who became a chef. He finds himself at Gusteau's restaurant where that chef was famous for saying, 'Anyone can cook'. I put it to you that anyone can pioneer. Irrespective of age, irrespective of how gifted you think you are or are not, anyone can pioneer.

Let me explain.

Fresh Expressions UK have for many years been fostering pioneers across the country. If you look at this graphic you can see what is called the Fresh Expressions Journey. Though there is a natural progression from one stage to the next this doesn't mean it just goes one way. Pioneering is a creative process so you can often find yourself going backwards before you move forwards which is why the whole journey is underpinned by prayer, ongoing listening and a grace-filled relationship with the wider Church.

The start point is listening. It is not saying I am going to plant a church.

When we were in lockdown what was that like? Did you enjoy not seeing anyone? The idea of some peace and quiet sounds fantastic but the reality is something different. There is not a single study that shows people felt better in lockdown, everyone felt worse.

The whole not being able to hug children or grandchildren was terrible. Even now wondering whether to give an elbow or a handshake or a hug is really strange.

When people are lonely what they crave is not merely company. You can be in a person's company and you can long to get out of it. What people long for is someone to talk to, someone to hear their story, to listen to them. That is actually true in lockdown or not.

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I want you to do something at this point. Go and get your mobile phone. Everyone has a phone. We will wait for 20 seconds whilst people get their phone. [20 Secs] Ok, now open the contacts list on your phone. When you scroll down this list ask yourself is this person a good listener or not? What do you feel when you come across a really good listener? You like being in that person's company.

A good listener you see not only pays attention they actually hear.

Having been married since 2006 I am fully aware that listening does not always equal hearing. Ask my wife and she'll tell you we've repeated many conversations because I wasn't really hearing what she said.

If you google Fresh Expressions Examples you will see a huge range of examples. Why? Because the starting point is listening. Did people start with I am going to pioneer a church and its going to look like this? No they didn't, they started by listening to people and out of that came a church.

Anyone can pioneer because anyone can listen, if they want to. I kid you not, this is the starting point. No fancy strategy, no need for ordination or anything like that, just a listening ear.

For my day job I am minister of Granton Parish Church in Edinburgh. When someone joins our fellowship I try to meet with them over a coffee.

We chat, we share our stories, they ask me lots of things about church and I ask them about their passions, about the difference they want to make in the world.

A young couple joined who were very environmentally conscious. They spoke passionately about how they saw the world. Only one of them is a Christian and they talked of faith as stewardship of creation. From that conversation, Granton Goes Greener came into being. Over the past 3 to 4 years its saved almost 7 tonnes of clothes from landfill, helped hundreds of people in need to be clothed and fed and given about 20 to 30 people a chance to volunteer and make a difference. Why? Because of a conversation where someone spoke of their passions and someone else really listened.

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If you are prepared to listen to someone then you can pioneer. Go back to that list of contacts in your phone and you know whose name is missing yours.

But your name appears in other people's phone, do you think they would have categorised you as a good listener?

There is an additional bit to this.

Pioneers are the people who go. Jesus commanded us to go, he didn't say wait, he said go. It is the pioneer who is the listener, the pioneer who takes initiative and says let's meet for a cup of tea, let's go for a walk, let's talk.

You can't effectively pioneer on your own, you need a minimum of two people. The way this was put to me was you need to be in the same space at the same time as other people. That means pioneering like listening is an intensely relational activity.

Again, go back to that list of contacts, who can you invite for a cup of tea that you would not normally do? Who can you offer that listening ear to?

You will notice that when I talk about pioneering I am not talking about a super spiritual exercise only for those who are close to God. Nor am I talking about shoving Jesus down someone's throat. Nor am I talking about something we think of as a young person's game.

If you are prepared to spend time with people, listening and sharing, then you ready to pioneer.

But what does it mean to actually pioneer?

A pioneer is someone who goes somewhere or does something for the first time. At that point you are pioneering.

If in retirement you take up a new hobby, that is you pioneering a new hobby. If you are into wine drinking and you say lets try a new brand, that's actually you pioneering. Essentially it is doing something you have not done before. That's it.

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In the context of Christian faith. Pioneering is taking faith to a place or a person you have not taken it before.

Go back to your phone and open the contact list again. Research by the church of England, you can look it up, Google Talking Jesus, shows that 1 in 5 people are open to a conversation about Jesus. 1 in 5 of the people in your contacts list are open to a conversation about Jesus. Are you willing to be the person that has that conversation with them?

If you are then you are pioneering. If you aren't then what does that say about Jesus command to Go? I've yet to come across a Bible translation that makes that opt in, the expectation is that everyone goes.

We started this talk with the idea that anyone can pioneer. Let me end it by saying everyone should pioneer.

We face many challenges today in our churches. Primarily amongst them is the idea that pioneering is someone else's job or that its for younger folk or that you need to be specifically called to it. We've professionalised sharing faith when sharing faith should part of everyone's faith.

So.... Start with the question. Who can I invite for coffee? Remember your contacts list. Really listen to the person when you talk. Maybe offer to pray with them. Then see where things go from there.

That's pioneering. Anyone can do it, everyone should do it.

Thank you.

Rev Norman Smith
Granton Parish Church
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