

Ageism and the Church

Ageism is discrimination against people, especially older ones, because of their age. It produces a mindset that despises old age in others and in ourselves. It has spilled over into the church, often in ways we are unaware of.

History and Background

In Proverbs we are told to “Listen to your father, without him you would not exist. When your mother is old, show her your appreciation” (Proverbs 23:32, TEV). In Job, it is noted that wisdom belongs to the old: “There is wisdom, remember, in age, and long life brings understanding” (Job 12:12, NEB). While The New Testament doesn't say much about older people, it does assure us that life is constantly renewed in Jesus Christ.

There are negative aspects of growing older. Some of our negative images of the aging process arise out of fear of our own aging, of our finitude and inevitable death. Negative images also arise out of “facts” about older people, many of which are not facts at all. These need to be dispelled before ageism is conquered. For example:

- “All old people resist new ideas.” In fact, an individual's personality traits become more marked the older she or he becomes. So, people who are creative and imaginative remain creative and imaginative. Cranky people become crankier. Independent people tend to be fiercely independent.

- “Most old people are senile. They don't know what they are doing and can't reason or learn.” In the past even physicians seemed to believe senility was part of life. They failed to diagnose dietary deficiencies. They overlooked the possibility of effects of several drugs or prescribed tranquilizers. More people were disoriented than necessary. Now physicians are aware of this and are treating root causes rather than accepting symptoms of senility as inevitable.

- “Most old people end up in a nursing home, assisted living or retirement center.” Actually, about 20% percent of the population is in such places.

- “Old people are unattractive, unsociable and do not get along with younger people.” Anyone who has had a cherished grandparent knows how untrue this image is.

It is becoming more imperative that the church come to terms with its ageism, because in the United States:

- There are more than 35 million people 65 and older.
- By the year 2050, 35% of the population will be at least 65.
- The percentage of mainline church members over 60 is now estimated to be 25% and is expected to be 40% by the year 2020.

Common Practices

Some churches practice ageism. “Will the new pastor appeal to the young people?” “I surely wish we could get

some young blood in our congregation. We are going to die out if some people with children don't come soon.” “How old is that candidate? We don't want a pastor who's coasting to retirement.” “Well, Mrs. Smith has been on the board for years. She must be ready to rest on her laurels. Besides, it's time to give the younger people a chance.”

All these statements indicate that the church isn't taking seriously the idea that life is constantly renewed in Jesus Christ. Nor do they show that God values all people, not because of who or what they are but because they are God's children. These statements are based on stereotypes; commonly held beliefs that aren't true and don't deal with the individual but with an idea of what it's like to be old. Pastors who coast come in all ages-and so do active pastors. Pastors need to appeal to older people as well as youth. Most churches have more old people than youth, but you don't very often hear, “Do you think she'll get along with the old people.”

Some churches have programs for older people. They have set up a telephone check-in service for calling people every morning. They have begun drop-in centers or adult day-care centers to provide enough services so people don't have to go to full-care facilities. Members participate in delivery of meals, shop for people who can't get out or bring them to church on Sunday.

All those programs are needed. Every person, regardless of age, should be able to determine for her or himself how to participate in the church's

program. Many who no longer have full-time jobs have plenty of vigor. They are a potential source of volunteers for your church's ministry. While making substantial financial contributions to the church, older people should not have to put up with hearing that the church is dying because it is filled with old people. For those members who are on a limited fixed income, ways need to be developed so that they can contribute to the ongoing life of the church in ways other than increasing monetary contributions. Can they set up coffee after church? Can they teach church school or make decisions about the budget? Can they fix the thermostat or supervise the youth who are tending the shrubs? Can they edit the church newsletter? Can they teach cooking to new immigrants or be foster grandparents?

While it's true that not every person who is older is also incapacitated, physical changes affect some church members. Churches almost always have a nursery for children who need care. Churches expect to provide this service. Those churches usually do not have hearing aids built into the pews or doors that are easily opened or aisles wide enough for wheelchairs. People who do all right elsewhere seem to be on display if they sit while others stand through a call to worship, opening hymn and invocation.

People who are isolated during the week because many of their friends have died, they don't drive, or their kids live out of town often continue to be isolated on Sunday mornings. They

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are in “the old ladies’ class” rather than an intergenerational class where they can tell their stories and share their joys and sorrows. They are given a bulletin with fine print and ushered into an uncomfortable pew.

Issues Facing the Church

- Programs with and for older people are needed. Yet, they will not get at the root causes of ageism. Education and advocacy are needed to get at the root causes of alienation, loneliness and poverty. The church can help eliminate the crippling images of old people as senile, reclusive, uninterested and uninteresting. What is the role for the church in effecting social change related to ageism beyond its own doors?
- Obviously, churches that have no young people will someday no longer be viable. But a church that ministers to and through its people will have appeal to people of all ages. How can a church minister to and through its people no matter what their age?
- There is some disagreement about whether ageism will worsen or improve as the number of older people increases. What can the church do to make certain there is less rather than more discrimination as the age of the population increases?
- Although the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ speaks

of the church as encompassing “faithful people of all ages, tongues and races,” the intention was to refer to epochs of history. Would “all ages” be as meaningful if it meant people from infancy to old age?

- People face losses as they grow older: friends and family die, occupation and its prestige are left behind, agility and mobility may be lost. How can the church help people deal with the depression, despair and anger that naturally accompany loss and change?
- Although the focus here is on older people, there is discrimination against young people as well. Can you think of ways your church participates in this kind of ageism? What could you do about it?
- One of the results of the aging of the population is an increase in the study of ageism. How can you remain informed and help your church hold correct assumptions about aging?

Resources

There are an increasing number of good materials on aging. Ask at your public library about them. Here is a sampling:

- **Aging as a Spiritual Journey** by Eugene C. Bianchi (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984) explores the spiritual journey for aging persons.
- **Aging Comes of Age: Older People Finding Themselves** by Frank Hutchison (Louisville, KY:

Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) helps people explore ways to expand their lives as they age.

- **Why Survive: Being Old in America** by Robert N. Butler (New York: Harper Collins, 1985) is a well-documented study relating the history of discrimination against the elderly and identifying necessary legislative action to cause changes.
- **Longevity and Quality of Life: Opportunities and Challenges** edited by Robert N. Butler and Claude Jasmin (Plenum Publishers 1999).
- **Take Care: Help and Advice for Caregivers** by Anne Rhodes (Harper- Collins Publishers, 1998).
- **Promoting Healthy Aging: A Community Perspective**, by Anne C. Breckenridge (Mosby Inc. 1993).
- **Aging: Culture, Health and Social Change** by David N. Weisstab (Springer-Verlang, 2001).
- **Learn to Grow Old** by Paul Tournier (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) relates this theologian's experience in growing old to his Christian witness.
- **Aging: The Fulfillment of Life** by Henri J. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) combines photography with an understanding of the causes and problems of aging.

Questions

- What does your church do that contributes to ageism?
- Is the percentage of people over 55 who serve on committees in your church about the same as the percentage of people over 55 in the congregation?
- What is one way your church could educate people about ageism?
- What is one program your church might consider participating in for older people?
- What is one new way your church could work with older people?
- What is one way your church could be an advocate for social change that would benefit older people?