

## Learning How to Grow Old with Grace

By Jim Stinson, Consultant on Older Adult Ministry

I was having difficulty living alone, but did not want to live with my children. My wife had died, the house had become too big for me, and my kids live out of state. So I made the decision to come to United Methodist Homes, not saying, “Gee how glad I am to leave my life behind, but saying what choice do I have?”

These words speak to the observation in a quote attributed to Billy Graham, who, at age 87, said: “All my life I’ve been taught how to die, but no one ever taught me how to grow old.”

Phillip was struggling with the question implied by Billy Graham. How do I grow old? Where can I go for help? Is there someone who can teach me how to deal with this phase of my life? Philip reminded me yet again that no matter how much we might want to deny it, the time of aging often brings unwanted changes; diminishing abilities, change in mental status, and a variety of ailments.

In a culture that urges financial preparation for the retirement years, pushes age-denying panaceas, and all kinds of treatments and gimmicks to keep us feeling and looking younger than we are, there often is not adequate preparation for the reality of growing old.

How many times I’ve heard adult children say: “If only mother had exercised more, if only Dad had eaten better and other such wishful thinking, he/she might not be needing to make these changes.”

Our culture has suggested in various ways that we do not have to grow old. If we would just do the right things, aging would be a thing of the past. While practicing healthy living is a desirable thing for people of any age, there is only one way to avoid growing old, exercise and other good habits notwithstanding. It is called death. Short of that as a goal, there is a need to help people grow old.

Our churches are in a strong position to do just that. It involves preaching and teaching the value of every living being. It involves telling the truth as made known by our Creator God. In doing so it means seeing all of life, in all its phases as part of the creative plan. The Church sees life on earth as linear, rather than circular. Aging is one of the phases along this line. It is no less a phase than toddler or adolescence. It is not something to be ignored by wishing it will not happen to me or to the ones I love. It begs for understanding and acceptance. Just as a wise parent learns to cope with these other phases, allowing for the reality of the “terrible twos,” or teen behaviors, adjusting to their limitations and needs, we need to help prepare the old among us, adjusting to and accepting their needs and limitations.

We need to help our older adults and all members of our congregations to grow old with grace. But, the problem seems to be there are no rulebooks. But there are generalities that can be adapted for each individual situation and purpose.

- Dignity: Older adults want to be treated with dignity. They do not want to be treated like infants.
- Independence: Despite limitations, older adults want to maintain as much independence as possible.
- Choice: Older adults, if cognitively able, need to make their own choices, even if adult children or caregivers disagree.

The Church has a role to play in teaching people how to grow old. Our basic Christian values can guide us in finding that role as individual congregations.