

Keeping Faith Amid Much Change

By Jim Stinson, Consultant on Older Adult Ministry

Spring is here. The trees are popping; the flowers are blooming. Life is as it should be!

Spring is here. Tornadoes are rampant and random. Floods are threatening homes, crops, and wellbeing. Life is not as it should be!

Kate and William are finally married, giving millions of people a few hours of believing in fairy tales. Life does go on happily ever after!

Osama bin Laden is dead. The world's most notorious terrorist is no longer a threat. Yet the pundits are already warning that retaliation—or at least attempts at retaliation—is most likely in our future.

“How are you this morning?” “I couldn't be any better.” What a good thing to hear from someone for whom you care deeply. It's going to be a good day. “Jim, we just heard that she is terminally ill.” What happened to: “It's going to be a good day?”

Life is like that, isn't it? Nothing seems as certain as we would have hoped.

Nothing seems as secure as we would like to believe. Life truly changes on a dime. Is there nothing that is sure and unchangeable? Is there nothing in which we can believe?

People wrestle with these questions all the time! We wrestle with these questions all the time! I wrestle with these questions all the time. Can we even begin to imagine the wrestling an older adult has to do as she/he faces the inevitable changes of life? Spouses die. Lifelong friends move to be near family. Adult children leave the area. Health concerns mount in importance. Physical and mental ability often decrease. Moving from the home we love is often the only viable option. And the list goes on.

How to minister to folks wrestling with such serious changes is not always apparent. What is apparent is that this wrestling is deeply spiritual, involving questions of identity, faith in God, and the reason and the purpose of growing older. The church, including all those seeking to minister to older adults, needs to be clear that the changes in life bring pain and grief to many older adults. That clarity helps frame the way we do ministry.

Older adults are not necessarily intransigent when they balk at doing “what's best for them.” They quite often are dealing with pain and grief. All ministry—including to and with older adults—begins with empathy about their situation. It begins by being open to talking and listening to the pain. It is hard work, but it pays big dividends for the older adult who often feels misunderstood and unappreciated.