

## **Listening, Respect Integral In Ministry to Older Adults**

BY REV. JIM STINSON, Consultant on Older Adult Ministry

More than eight years ago, Ann Pearson (director of Connectional Ministries) asked me if I would write a regular column for The Vision dealing with issues in ministry to and with older adults. With reluctance, the answer was yes, but it came with a caveat. "The first time I can't think of something to write, I'm done!"

It came time for submitting an article this month and, horror of horrors, the pastor in me ran out of words, or so I thought. Ann was going to get a phone call telling her to find someone else. As I was mulling over the planned conversation, a resident of Wesley Heights came by and sat down in my office. No explanation, no "are you busy," no "can we talk?" Just walked in and sat down!

"May I help you?"

A hesitant response: "I'm not sure."

"Well, why don't you simply tell me what made you stop by."

And then it happened!

"I feel like I don't matter anymore. No one listens to me. They hear my words, but they don't really listen. I guess because I'm 90 plus, they assume I don't know what I'm talking about, so they politely let me speak, but then move on to their own thoughts and plans."

I had something to say to her and to anyone who cares for or about an older adult. I had my article.

I told my friend I thought she had a lot to say and that I valued her opinions and that I suspected others did as well; or that they would come to appreciate those opinions if she shared her feelings with them.

"Too many well-meaning people," I told her, "assume because age often brings diminished bodies and diminished minds that it brings it to everyone, even if the truth is very different. Many people age with mind and body intact. Some lose some mental abilities and their bodies stay strong, and some of their bodies fail even as their minds stay strong. Some are blessed with good minds and strong bodies all of their life. Ask them not to make assumptions about you based simply on your age."

The message came loud and clear: I wasn't done writing articles just yet. There is still more to be said. Our culture is continuing to grow older and, as it does, variations of what it means to

age will continue to change. Assumptions of the past, which often guided our ministry to and with older adults, will prove to be less true than ever.

Stereotypes have always been a source of prejudice in regards to race and ethnicity. It has always been wrong in those areas and in any other area of judging others. It is equally wrong in the area of aging! In our ministries of caring for and about older adults, we owe them the same respect we ask for ourselves and for others. Not to respect them is to shortchange them, and to risk forgoing important life-giving relationships.