

She's "Lucky" to Start Over at Age 99

By JIM STINSON, Consultant for Older Adult Ministries

She will be 99 in July. If she told you she was 75, you would have no reason to doubt her word. She is impeccably dressed at all times; her hair is perfectly coiffed and her nails are manicured and polished. She is striking in her appearance. What is most striking, however, is what accounts for her appearance. In one word, it is attitude.

She has many of the frailties of a person her age. Dependent on a walker and occasionally forgetful and confused, she is, nonetheless, positively inquisitive, still questioning, still willing to try new things, reveling in her painting classes and engaging with everyone she meets. I look forward to visits with her because she exudes a zest for living.

In the past few years she has given up her condo, moved to assisted living and very recently been hospitalized and subsequently spent a couple of months at the Bishop Wicke Health Center in Shelton, Conn. While she was there, her family—with her knowledge and permission—moved her to Wesley Heights. Even though these moves were all on the same campus of the United Methodist Homes, they required upset and change to her routine.

Today, just before sitting down to write this article, her family brought her to see the new apartment for the first time. She'll be leaving the health center in a few days. True to the attitude we've come to expect from her, she said: "I can't wait to see my new apartment. I'm so lucky! Who else, at my age, has the chance to start over?"

The attitude is one of optimism, of hopefulness, of anticipation. Sound familiar? Aren't these at the very core of Christian faith? Aren't these a large part of what Jesus taught would be prevalent in the Kingdom of God? Should these not be part and parcel of our ministry to/with older adults? Should we not be challenging them and inviting them to engage their lives armed with these faithful traits? What better way to face the uncertainties, the upheavals and the frailties that often accompany us on our journey into aging?

Jesus does not promise the kingdom of God, and the peace that passes all understanding, only to those below a certain age. He offers it to all who will accept its possibility and live accordingly—that is optimistically, hopefully and filled with anticipation of God's continuing presence in the twists and turns of our lives even to our dying moments. Our ministry to/with older adults—to be authentic—must be one of challenging them to faithfully live each day believing God still has something for them to do and to become. Anything less is not the Gospel! Anything less easily lapses into a ministry of pity and low expectations. Anything less dismisses the possibility of new life, of the chance to start over.