

Witnessing to Hope when visiting and caring for Older Adults

I read somewhere that “years wrinkle the skin, but to give up hope wrinkles the soul.” As I shave each morning, it is quite evident that the first part of this statement is true. As I visit with the residents and patients at Wesley Village I have come to know the second half is also true. We cannot do much about the wrinkled skin (botox notwithstanding) but we can do something about wrinkled souls.

Tragically I too often visit those who have come to believe that aging is only about sickness and dying, whose family and friends and church have done little, if anything, to counter the claim. They are the folk who seem to sit and wait and who have come to see life as a burden to be laid down. As a result they are unhappy, dispirited wrinkled souls.

When visiting older adults in their own homes, in the hospital or in a nursing home, it is often difficult to know what to say that will not sound trite or condescending. It is difficult to “confront” the aging with another vision – the vision that life always has possibility and opportunity. It is not always what a “wrinkled soul” wants to hear. But it is an integral part of the Christian message. We are called to bear witness to this vision nonetheless. How then do we do so?

A few suggestions follow! There are do’s and don’ts! But the one visiting needs to use her/his own resources in deciding how to do so. These are ideas that work for me.

1. Affirm the person and the feelings! “I’ve never experienced that, do you care to tell me more about it?” NEVER say something like, “You are a Christian, you know better than that.”
2. Redirect the negatives! “Yet here you are. You must have amazing resources and internal strength to have gotten this far. How did you do it?” Get the person to willingly reflect on her/his ability, rather than inability.
3. Affirm the positives! “I’m not sure you agree with me, but it seems as if God has given you the strength you need to cope.”
4. Point toward the possibilities! “Does anyone get visitors every day? I wonder if they would like a short visit from you?” “I remember how much you like to read. Did you know there’s a weekly book club right in this building?” Simple observations on your part can raise the consciousness of new possibilities.
5. Be a witness to hope by demonstrating that you expect more from the one you are visiting, always bearing in mind real limitations, physically, mentally and spiritually.
6. Avoid offering false hope! “You’ll get better and be back to normal soon. Just hang in there.” The truth may be very different and you and the person you’re visiting likely already know it.
7. Visit ready to listen and learn. The older adult will sense that and be more willing to share with you.

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