

# interact



christian growth ministries

## Retirement: Another Stage of Growth

by Kel Willis

Over the last few years I have found myself constantly answering the question of when I plan to give up work. I have developed a stock response: 'When I find something that I'll enjoy more than what I'm currently doing!' The expectation obviously is that, having reached the grand age (notice I did not say old age!) of seventy (plus!), retirement should be uppermost in my mind. Far from it! However, it has prompted me to think that retirement is a topic not well dealt with by the church, if it is dealt with at all. There has to be more to ministering to retirees than seniors' groups and morning teas.

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Medical experts tell us that our physical decline begins at about 28 years of age and from there it gathers momentum. This thought probably pulls most of us up with a bit of a start. Of course the rate of decline depends on our diet, exercise, stress levels, attitudes to life and genetic predispositions, however, it's commonly accepted in our culture that at somewhere around the age of 60 to 65 such decline brings us to the end of our useful working lives, and so we either choose, or are forced, to retire. It is said that German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck first introduced the idea of retirement at 70 in 1889 to make way for younger unemployed men. In the USA Roosevelt formalised the idea of retirement at 65 after World War 2, so the idea of retirement at 65 hasn't really had a very long history.

For some, approaching retirement conjures up visions of endless freedom, of days on the golf course, travelling around Australia in a caravan, or sipping cappuccinos while they read the newspaper from cover to cover each morning. Some perhaps feel that because they've worked hard all their lives and contributed their taxes to the system, they now have a right to take things easy and let the system take care of them. But others, especially those who have had very busy working lives, often suffer from a decline in status (often derived from one's vocation) and financial resources, especially if

they accept that their useful lives are now over. Some fear old age with its associated problems, particularly health ones, accompanied by feelings of rejection and loss of value because so much of our culture is geared to those who are young. This can be especially so in our churches, where an over-emphasis on ministering to the younger members of our congregations can have the effect of minimising the value of, or even displacing, retirees. They can be made to feel a mere addendum to their church's activities.

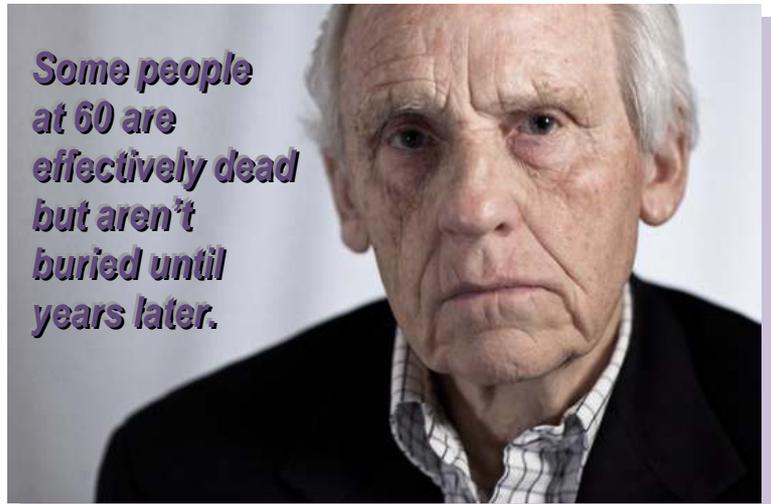


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Most people finish their formal careers more than 20 years before their physical and mental powers fail them. Imagine what it would mean to harness those years into productive ministry, rather than

allowing the retirement mindset to envelop us, robbing us of the richness of influencing others. What would it mean to the kingdom of God for us to be wholly committed to being a part of what he wants to do in our community during our retirement years?

Quality of life at any age is dependent on a number of factors, including a clear sense of meaning and purpose, a perception of personal worth and value (both from God's perspective and from others'), secure lasting relationships, the opportunity to contribute and be contributed to and, not least, being needed. If these things aren't found in the church, which talks so much about love, fellowship and acceptance, then where can they be found? Knowing that we are accepted and affirmed is important if we are to feel accepted and valued as part of the local church.



Ralph Winter is the founder of the US Centre for World Missions and, in his early eighties, is still travelling, speaking and writing. He wrote an article titled *The Retirement Booby Trap* almost twenty-five years ago when he was in his early sixties, in which he said, 'Where in the Bible do they see [retirement]? Did Moses retire? Did Paul retire? Peter? John? Do military officers retire in the middle of a war? Most men don't die of old age, they die of retirement. I read somewhere that half the men retiring in the state of New York die within two years. Save your life and you'll lose it.' <sup>(1)</sup>

Oswald Sanders, still doing an itinerant Bible teaching ministry in his eighties, wrote that 'age is about attitude and not about arteries'. Some people at 60 are effectively dead but aren't buried until years later! On the other hand there are just too many who are still active and wanting to contribute even into their eighties and nineties for this situation to be ignored by the church. Indeed many of history's greatest people produced their finest achievements after the age of 60. There is no limit to the potential accomplishments of older people:

***Our latter years have the potential to open up whole new opportunities and dimensions of living.***

'Michelangelo was still designing churches at age 88. Peter Roget was updating his famous thesaurus when he died at age 90... Albert Schweitzer was operating his hospital in Lambarene, French Equatorial Africa, at 89. Alexander Graham Bell was still inventing a year before his death at age 75. Thomas Edison produced the telephone at 84. Benjamin Franklin helped in the writing of the United States Constitution when he was 81. Claude Monet began painting his famous *Water Lily* series at age 76 and finished the work at age 85. Elizabeth Arden managed her cosmetics company through her 85th year... Pianist Arthur Rubinstein performed professionally until he was

90... George Bernard Shaw was writing plays at age 91. And at age 100 Grandma Moses was still painting pictures. Winston Churchill was called to head the British government in World War II at age 66.' <sup>(2)</sup>

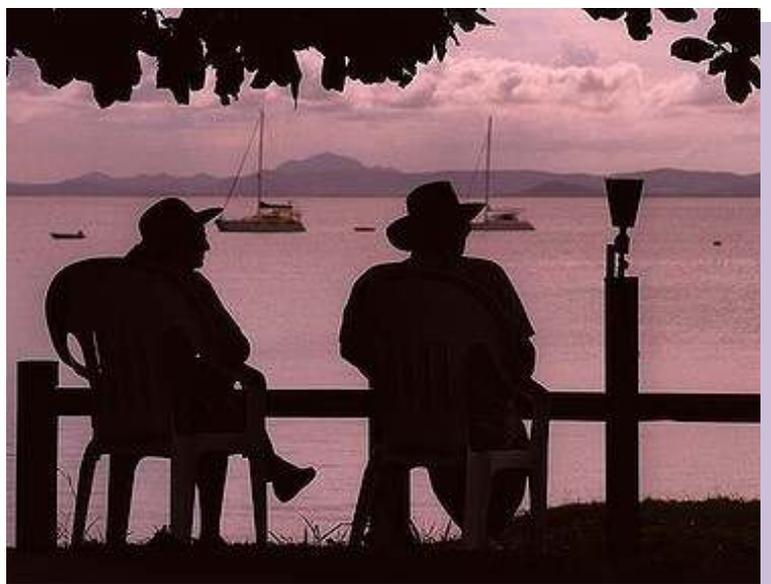
In addition, many great preachers have been actively expounding and proclaiming biblical truths far beyond the usual retirement age of today. John Wesley in his 86<sup>th</sup> year preached in every county in both England and Wales. He often rode his horse 30 to 50 miles a day and preached twice almost every day. Such examples certainly defy the common view that the most productive time of our lives is before 65!

So what is 'old'? It seems to me it is when:

- we have no personal vision for the future
- we feel the productive years of our lives are over
- we are no longer discovering, growing people
- we spend our time longing for a return to the past
- we constantly affirm our oldness.

In short, it is when we are thinking old! Take a little time to examine your beliefs about these statements and rate yourself on each of them on a scale of 1-5. If you score less than 20, you might be selling yourself short!

In fact our latter years have the potential to open up whole new opportunities and dimensions of living. The key will largely be in our perceptions of life and its purpose. I like this quote from Horace Kallen: 'There are persons who shape their lives by the fear of death, and persons who shape their lives by the joy and satisfaction of life. The former live dying; the latter die living.' Christians, above all people, ought to die living life to its fullest.



## *Is retirement a biblical concept?*

The Bible never speaks of retirement as we know and define it. Rather it speaks of 'pressing on' and finishing the race of life. It affirms the constant goal of the believer to be conformed to the image of Christ (Gal. 1:15, 16). The Apostle Paul was at what we could consider to be retirement age when he wrote, 'Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.' In our ministry to those facing retirement we need to foster this attitude.

## *Finishing well*

As we grow older we ought to be inspired by people like John Stott who recently passed into the presence of God at the age of 86. He was called by Billy Graham 'the most respected clergyman in our world today'. Stott was renowned for his energy and passion for the church and for evangelism. He was one of my favourite preachers and like thousands of others I was personally challenged by the vigour of his life, the clarity of his writing and the passion in his preaching. In many ways Stott became a benchmark, a model for others to follow.

I am encouraged by the biblical theme of finishing well and this to me means finishing life victoriously, productively, still with passion for God and for lost people. It means we don't take a break from embracing the privilege of being servants of the most high God, and we continue with all our hearts to 'occupy till He comes', so that like Paul we can cry, 'The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me on that day.' (2 Tim 4:6-8)

The question should not be about whether we should retire or continue in our working lives, but how we can reach a balance between enjoying the benefits that retirement brings and at the same time productively live for God and serve the church, for there is no retirement from being active members of the body of Christ. I believe we need greater intentionality in the way we approach ministry to and with retirees in our churches. There is wonderful liberty and fulfillment in knowing that we are contributors to what God is doing, rather than simply occupying a pew.

## *Preparing people for retirement*

Our goal in ministry to those near retirement should be to equip them for this next stage in their lives. I have been amazed that few of my friends on their retirement had given much thought to their next 20 years. Apart from going on a holiday and being able to spend more time in leisure, they had given little thought to their role in kingdom ministry. I believe that for those contemplating retirement, decisions about how they will spend the next decade or two should be made well before they begin retirement. Just as in marriage, where how we relate to each other becomes a pattern in the first year of marriage, so it is in retirement. We quickly settle into patterns that become the norm. Therefore, it is important that our decisions about retirement should be made before settling into a routine that becomes too set to change.

There are obviously a number of things that we as a church can encourage people to do to make this a growing time in their lives. The first is to accept what Oswald Sanders once said: 'Retirement should not be viewed as a terminus but as a junction leading to a new career or other opportunities... For the Christian, retirement is a divinely-given opportunity for new achievements.' It ought to be embraced as simply another stage in the process of growing up in Christ.'

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The second thing we should encourage them to do is to begin to intentionally take an active interest in other people (not just their friends) if this has not already been a focus in their lives. Without this habit being well established, it will be harder to shift their focus away from themselves in retirement.

Thirdly, every stage of life is to be enjoyed, the retirement years no less than any other. A vital step in any strategy to encourage retirees for their future is for leaders to ensure that there are structures in place to clearly teach them how to live and enjoy their Christian lives. Having said that, we must recognise that a life that is empty before 65 will not suddenly become full and significant at retirement.

Fourthly, retirees should be encouraged to look for new opportunities to develop their gifts and abilities to contribute to others. The people who keep discovering are the ones who keep growing. This became clear to me at a birthday celebration I recently attended. Most of the talk that night was about holidays and trips and I found myself feeling a little uncomfortable. Those at the party had at one time all been vitally involved in church ministry, but now seemed to feel that



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they had moved past that into retirement and relaxation mode. I found myself somewhat saddened and consciously thinking that I really have no ambition to retire and be part of that scene.

### *Tapping the potential of retirees*

What tremendous resource we have in the church in those who are retired: people who are better educated than ever before, with years of experience, freedom from time constraints and a potential for godly modeling before younger members of our churches. We are in the midst of a generation that is time poor, and many churches are crying out for people to be involved. So how do we tap into this resource in a better way than has often been the case in the past?



1. Promote a biblical view of retirees in our churches. This will mean giving them a greater level of recognition and respect. People usually respond out of their perception of how others view of them, and the last thing that retirees need is to feel patronised. 'Show respect for the elderly and revere your God,' says Leviticus 19:32. Many retirees have much to offer in terms of advice and counsel. Job 12:12 says, 'Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?'

Having said that, the attitude and mindset of those of us who are older also influences how we are viewed by younger generations. We are in the midst of what Mark McCrindle terms 'the terrain of intergenerational angst'. He makes a very challenging observation:

'Understanding is the prerequisite to engaging...candidly sharing the sources of frustrations in an open, intergenerational dialogue is useful, while writing off a whole generation with a slogan ('Generation Y have no work ethic' or 'Boomers need to get with the times' is unhelpful)... Indeed, the generation gaps need to be bridged from both sides of the divide. This is done through sharing experiences, articulating expectations and endeavouring to accommodate the other. Keep in mind that in no other area of diversity could people get away with such stereotyping, generalising and blunt criticism. Mainstream society is culturally tolerant and mature in dealing with any gender misunderstandings, but it seems that the generations are the final frontier where an old-school rant is socially acceptable.'<sup>(3)</sup>

It will continue to be a challenge for the church to develop strategies to help us move away from stereotypes that dismiss the value of age and experience, and towards a true community of believers where age at any level is respected so that the body of Christ is strengthened rather than fragmented.

2. Promote the concept that retirees are to be godly models for those who are younger (Tit. 2:13). If the reality of our walk with God is evident in our character and attitudes, if we model a passion for God, his church and a lost world, we will be both a challenge and encouragement to those who want to follow Jesus.

In my late teens one of those who made a life-changing impact on me was a godly man in his seventies. He prayed for and with a group of young men in our church and took a personal interest in us, encouraging us to grow and develop our gifts.

3. Encourage retirees to see the unique opportunities for evangelism amongst their peers. The Psalmist in 92:12-14 says, 'The righteous will bear fruit in old age.' Use training programs like Christianity Explained to equip them to share their faith. I know of one church which realised it had over 50 retirees and hundreds of lost people of the same age, so they organized training in evangelism and outreach to this group. Numbers have been converted and brought into the kingdom.



4. Encourage them to see their potential for pastoral care. This means that the congregation will need to be educated to see that pastoral care and visitation are not the exclusive responsibility of 'the minister'. Survey your community. How many people aged 50, 60, and 70 + live in your community? Are there social problems, shut-ins and lonely people whose needs aren't being met? What needs can you as a church meet using your retirees?

5. Encourage retirees to more fully use the gifts they already have. Some will already have volunteered their services in the church but others may need prodding! What are their specific gifts and abilities? I know a retired missionary who keeps the children (and adults) on the edge of their seats with a real life story from the mission field for a few minutes on Sunday mornings.

I know of a man heading for retirement who has offered to do the books for a local rehab centre. One organisation I know has provided wonderful ministry and very practical help in building and maintenance for Christian ministries: their work force is largely retirees. I am sure there are many business people who could be wonderfully used in the local church or other Christian organisations.

The truth that 'God has given each of us a special gift that we might employ it in serving one another' still applies and is probably more applicable than ever because of our spiritual maturity. The greatest resource needed in most of our churches is people. The harvest is ripe but the laborers are few. We can hardly afford to lose experienced workers, just when the harvest is getting ripe, because they turn 60!



6. Start a prayer team using retirees as key personnel. I have seen this work well in a number of churches. It consists of a group of no more than eight, with a coordinator to whom prayer needs are given at specific times (perhaps daily, 3 times/week, or as needed) by the pastor or those in need. The coordinator at a specified time (say 8am) phones two others, who in turn phone two others, and so on. The coordinator may be a retiree. In one church I know, all the prayer team members are retirees, and some churches have three or four prayer chains. The value of this arrangement is that those involved feel an integral part of the life of the church and the prayer team is of immense value as a support for the pastoral team. As with many other aspects of ministry, the key is in the initiative of the leader, who gleans prayer news and helpful information to disseminate to the group, keeping them informed and motivated. The leader also encourages the group by sharing with them when prayers are clearly answered. We had a dear friend in her nineties who for years prayed at 4:00am every day for Christian workers and felt very much part of their ministry. She was much missed when she went to heaven.

In conclusion, preparation for the effective involvement of retirees in ministry is something that should begin well before their retirement with input that will both encourage and equip them for their present and long-term ministries. I recognise that we've just scratched the surface of the issue of retirees in the church. However I hope we've prompted you to at least rethink your church's attitude and involvement with people who are either retired or who will be in the near future.

If you have been able to involve retirees in effective ways in your church, why not drop a line and tell us about it.

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