

For Follow Up

Here are a selection of websites which form a good starting for further enquiry: wecanbuildourchurch.org.uk; greenchristian.org.uk; operationnoah.org; strawworks.co.uk

GROWING OLD: SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

Paul Beasley-Murray

Growing old is a strange business. In one sense, ever since we are born we are growing older. But growing 'old' is another matter – not that there is any agreement on what 'old' is. True, the Psalmist states that “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong” (Ps 90.10) but, thanks to improvements in modern medicine, many of us can look for even more years of life. As a result, we have upped the retirement age. At one stage it was 60 for women, and 65 for men, but thanks to the collapse of the banking system and the resulting age of austerity, many of us will be working until we are 70. I am in that position – a position freely chosen. In my early 60s, I still felt full of energy and purpose, and so I obtained my church's blessing to remain in post until the age of 70.

On 14 March 2014, I celebrate my 70th birthday, but will I then be 'old'? No doubt to young people in my church, I am indeed old, but I do not feel old – or at least, not old enough to doze through the rest of my life in a rocking chair. I try to keep fit: at least twice a week, I go for a three mile walk at the crack of dawn; and on a Friday morning I go to the gym. If I am honest with myself, I don't have the same energy levels that I had in my twenties – there are occasions when I need a 'power' nap if I am to keep on going until the end of the day – but I still have energy and purpose.

As a result, I shy away from the 'R' word. I prefer to speak about stepping down from leading the church, rather than retiring. Is that just a form of denial? The reality is that after 43 years of serving God as an ordained Baptist minister, I will be retiring from paid ministry. However, I do not see myself as retiring from ministry *per se*. As my new business cards declare, I remain the Chairman of Ministry Today UK, and have recently become the

Chairman of the new College of Baptist Ministers due to be launched in 2014. Psychologically some might argue that the very printing of such business cards is a sign that my identity is too bound up with what I do, rather than who I am – I see the danger, and indeed the temptation, but I dare to believe that I am secure in myself – whatever! So, God willing (and I am conscious of the warning of Jas 4.15 not to boast about the future, and that our lives are but “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes”), I shall continue to serve God, both in leading these two organisations for ministers, as well as doing some teaching and, hopefully, some more writing. But will I be ‘old’?

In one sense, yes. Indeed, for the last ten years I have been old enough to use a ‘Senior Railcard’ – and glad to do so. Nor have I had any qualms in accepting ‘concessions’ for all kinds of cultural events. But am I really ‘old’? Or am I just a ‘senior citizen’ (a delightful euphemism, and so much better than being known as an OAP!)? Or should I see myself as belong to the group of ‘active retirees’ which has all kinds of outings for ‘older people’?

When I look at myself in the mirror, the face that appears is very different from the face I had as a young man. My hair, for instance, is no longer black, but grey, if not white – and in that respect I fit the description of old age in Prov 27.31, where ‘grey hair is a crown of glory’. Physically I am aging – but then, I am told that ever since the age of 25 my body has been in a state of decline! No doubt that is the reason why so many women (and indeed some men) have cosmetic surgery. However, I comfort myself with Paul’s words in 2 Cor 4.16: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day”. It seems as if all the hardships Paul had experienced for the sake of the Gospel (see 4.8) had aged him, but spiritually the new life he had received from Christ (5.17) had re-invigorated him!

The American scholar, David E Garland, commented that the image here is the exact reverse of the plot in Oscar Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There the vain Dorian Gray has his portrait painted; and when it is finished he laments: “How sad! I shall grow old and horrible, but this picture never will be older. If it were I was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old, I would give my soul for that!” But as Dorian Gray discovered, there is more to life than looks! Just as vintage wine has much to be desired, so too has an older person who has grown in grace. In

words attributed to Michelangelo, “The more the marble wastes, the more the statue grows”. So what have I to fear about growing old?

To quote again from the Book of Proverbs, “Grandchildren are the crown of the aged” (Prov 17.6). As one who has seven grandchildren, if that is a sign of growing old, then so be it! There is nothing more wonderful than being a grandfather – and all the more so in that you do not have permanent responsibility for your grandchildren!

But am I really old? Not if General McArthur was right, for he declared: “You don’t get old from living a particular number of years: you get old because you have deserted your ideals”. I remain a passionate follower of Jesus. My life is marked not just by energy, but by a sense of purpose. The bowls club next door is not for me. Rather I dare to believe that the words of an illuminated text handed down to me from my father remain true for me: “God has yet a greater task for you to do”.

On a more sober note, the Swiss medical doctor of an earlier generation, Paul Tournier, maintained that “acceptance of unfulfilment” is one of the great problems of the retired⁸⁰. He went on: “Of God alone can the Bible say (Gen 2.1) that on the evening of the sixth day of creation he had completed his work” . But is that true? Of course, as I ended my ministry here in Chelmsford, there are loose ends – there will be always more to do. And yet in a very real sense I feel that I have completed the task that God gave me to do. The church is on a good trajectory: God willing, my successor will continue to lead the church forward, from strength to strength. Furthermore, as I move into the next stage of life – indeed, into what I term the next stage of ministry – there is still more for me to do.

Yet there is no denying that this new stage will be very different. In a way in which it has not perhaps been true before, I shall be my own man. Thank God I shall be free of the pressures of the trivia of ministry – no more will I have to worry about supplying news of the fellowship for the weekly bulletin! I shall be free, too, of the pressure to be out every night – whether attending meetings or visiting people in their homes. In preparation for this new stage of life, I have set myself the overall aim: “Enjoy the freedom which

⁸⁰ *Learning to Grow Old*, (SCM, London 1960) 169-170.

this new stage of life brings! Continue to grow and develop as a person. Find new ways of serving God and sharing my faith”. I have then set a series of secondary aims (which I have then spelt out in detail): e.g.

- Expand my spiritual life
- Make the most of cultural opportunities
- Keep abreast theologically
- Keep alert mentally
- Keep fit
- Enjoy family life
- Support Caroline (my wife)
- Cultivate relationships
- Develop new IT skills
- Engage with others through blogging
- Produce a new lecture course
- Continue to write
- Engage in ministry
- Travel

No doubt, however, the time will come when the energy and purpose begin to fade -and what then? At this point, Paul Tournier recommends that instead of giving advice, “the old have something better to do – to become confidants. We will open our hearts to those who will listen to understand us, and not in order to judge or direct us”. A little later he adds: “From then on man’s value is judged not by what he does, but by what he is, not by the position he occupies or by his titles, but by his personal maturity, by his breadth of mind, by his inner life, by the quality of his love for others, and by the intrinsic, and not the market, value of what he brings into the world” .

For some, old age would appear to be just the waiting room for death. Although life is so fragile that death can come at any moment, there is some truth in this view, but of course, for the believer, death is not the final destination. To quote Paul Tournier again: “My old age has meaning... because I am on my way to a destination beyond death” . But is it just old age that receives such meaning? I first made my will at the age of 25. I have long ago given thought to the shape of my funeral. In the words of Pope John XXIII, “I have packed my bags and am ready to go”. Yet for all that, I have still not reached the stage where I can say with

Simeon of old: “Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace...” (Luke 2.29). I still am not old. Energy and purpose are still mine!

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

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Working as a minister is challenging enough, but when the context in which you are working is one of decline and the church appears to be unhealthy, the task would appear, at first sight, to be made more difficult. On my journey to ordination as a minister within the United Reformed Church (now statistically one of the faster declining denominations in the United Kingdom), I had the privilege of visiting many churches. I realised early on that there was a mentality within a lot of the churches that was focussed on trying to keep their particular church from closing, or trying to ensure that the way that they (whoever ‘they’ happened to be!) did things should be maintained, as it was, for ever and ever, Amen...

It would have been easy, early on in this journey, and soon after in my subsequent ministry as an URC minister, to be extremely discouraged by this response, and others like it, that have been encountered. For example, in our denomination when invited to preach at another church, you are often sent a letter explaining the normal form of service that is followed by the church, together with a very friendly letter (or e-mail these days) advising that you, the leader of worship, should feel free to change that church’s standard order of service in any way you would like to. In practice, however, if you do change anything you are asking for trouble...! Why is that? In many churches there is a reluctance to do anything different from what has always been done, or what appears to have been always done. However, such a comment indicating a negative approach does not give the whole picture. In the majority of our churches, people have given their lives, and in many cases a lot of their long lives, to faithfully worshipping in those churches, to supporting those churches financially, and in various other practical ways. What has happened is that they have