



The Council for Health & Human Service Ministries

United Church of Christ

Conversations on Aging

Rev. Beth Long-Higgins

2020 CHHSM 82nd Annual Gathering: **Justice and Grace – Together**

Evolution of Language



Objectives

- Identify social narratives
- Share alternative constructs
- Research based best practices
- Intro for spirituality of aging

Why it matters....

by: The Associated Press

Posted: Jan 22, 2020 / 05:03 PM CST /

COTTAGE GROVE, Minnesota (AP) — A struggling Minnesota church is asking its older parishioners to leave in hopes of making it more attractive to young families.

Grove United Methodist Church in the St. Paul suburb of Cottage Grove is closing in June, with plans to relaunch in November. The present members, most of them over 60 years old, will be invited to worship elsewhere, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported. The church is asking that they stay away for two years, then consult the pastor about reapplying.

Stella and Jon Knapp of Cottage Grove were the only members with children at the recent service, and they hate the plan.

"If it happened, I wouldn't come here anymore," said Stella Knapp, 34. As six-year members, the couple loves the church and said they didn't mind being the youngest members.



https://frameworksinstitute.org/reframing-aging.html



- AARP
- The American Federation for Aging Research
- The American Geriatrics Society
- American Society on Aging
- The Gerontological Society of Aging
- Grantmakers in Aging
- National Hispanic Council on Aging
- National Council on Aging

Funded by:

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On-the-Street Interviews





Anticipate Public Thinking



On-the-street interviews Surveys Series of qualitative tests

Toward Tomorrow – *Together We Learn, Together We Flourish*

Public Model of Aging: #1

- Self-sufficiency and Staying Active
- Earned Leisure Activities
 - Building Intimacy With Family And Friends
- Accumulating Wisdom



Ideal



Public Model of Aging: #2 Perceived "REAL"

- Deterioration
- Loss of Control
- Dependency
- Reduced Potential



Real

https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html



Ideal \rightarrow

Fatalism

← Real

- Anxiety
- Mutes ability to improve the experience of aging
- The "Ideal" can't win all the time and the "Real" is seen as the only other option



Public Model of Aging: #3 US VS. THEM

- Older as "other"
- Zero-Sum
- Digital incompetence

Leads to sense that any public policy for older adults come at expense of actions on behalf of "the rest of us"



We all are aging.

Ashton Applewhite



Public Model of Aging: #4

- Lifestyle choices
- Financial Planning

The biggest problem among the dominant patterns of public understanding is the common assumption that individuals are exclusively responsible for how they age.



Public Model of Aging: #5 Modern Life is Hard

- Dispersed Family: unfortunate but inevitable part of changing culture
- Economic and Employment Challenges
- Doomed Social Security



3 Solutions per Public View

- 1. Just need better individual choices and planning
- 2. More information and education
- 3. Nothing Can be done



Expert's View



3 Cognitive Holes in Public Thinking

Toward Tomorrow – *Together We Learn, Together We Flourish*

1. Social Determinants

In Ohio there is a **19 year difference in life expectancy** based on the zip code in which you live.

This is NOT because there are zip codes full of people who make poor choices.



2. Affects of Ageism

Ageism is a combination of prejudicial attitudes toward older people, old age, and aging itself; discriminatory practices against olders, and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about them.



Self-perception about aging will influence how you age.

> -Becca Levi, Yale University

Robert Butler

Prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age.

3. Growing Population



The Expert View: Characteristics of Older Adults

1. Aging is **normal**, **lifelong and cumulative**

• Biological changes occur with aging process



2. Aging is **distinct from disease and decline**

- older years bring new opportunities and capacities for growth, contribution and self-expression
- Aging is not something to battle, but to embrace

3. Longevity: permanent & unprecedented

Have economic, social & political impact

4. Olders are heterogeneous:

- Health
- Income
- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- education

NEXT AMERICA

Percent of U.S. Population by Age Group, 1950-2060



PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Opportunity: Civic and social Contributions

- Continuing education
- Mentoring
- Volunteering
- Second careers



Opportunity: Rethink work and retirement

- Working longer: financial survival and meaning and purpose
- Greater flexibility
 (also for carers/
 caregivers)



Opportunity: Make Public Spending more efficient

Experts: "We are wealthy enough" to afford a robust Social Security system



Opportunity: Address Ageism

Olders currently experience lack of access, lack of opportunity and institutionalized and structural discrimination





Opportunity: well-prepared healthcare workforce

- Need to expand and improve geriatric training
- Provide public insurance options for long-term care



Opportunity: Support Carers

- 40 million people provide unpaid care to family and loved ones
- Need better supports for these individuals
- Experts: legal and infrastructural ways that family care can be supported through revised public policy





Embrace

Environments

How should we approach aging?

What determines outcomes and who is responsible?

Important Concern

How big of a concern is ageism?

Plenty

Central

What can be done to ensure wellbeing in older age?

What is the role of public policy?

Nothing Much

Absent from Thinking

Battle

Individuals

Limited Role

The new Frame





<u>Value</u> Justice

Why does it matter? What's at stake?

Value

Ingenuity

Why does it matter? What's at stake?

Reframing the Conversation

Avoid the Traps TRAGIC story \rightarrow Include the social context SYMPATHY \rightarrow Need to treat everyone fairly FATALISM \rightarrow We/Us





"Tidal wave", "tsunami", and catastrophic terms for population of older people



<u>Try:</u>

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "as Americans live longer and healthier lives…"



"Choice", "planning", "control", and other individual determinants of aging outcomes



<u>Try:</u>

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "as Americans live longer and healthier lives..."

Emphasize how to **improve social contexts**: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."



"Seniors", "elderly", "aging dependents" and "other"-ing terms supporting stereotypes



<u>Try:</u>

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "as Americans live longer and healthier lives..."

Emphasize how to **improve social contexts**: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."

Using more neutral ("older people") and **inclusive** ("**we**" and "**us**") terms



"Struggle", "battle", "fight" and similar conflictoriented words to describe aging experiences



<u>Try:</u>

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "as Americans live longer and healthier lives..."

Emphasize how to **improve social contexts**: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."

Using more neutral ("older people") and **inclusive** ("**we**" and "**us**") terms

Building Momentum metaphor: "Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities"


Instead of these words or cues:



Using the word "ageism" without explanation

<u>Try:</u>

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "as Americans live longer and healthier lives…"

Emphasize how to **improve social contexts**: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."

Using more neutral ("older people") and **inclusive** ("**we**" and "**us**") terms

Building Momentum metaphor: "Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities"

Define Ageism: discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes

Instead of these words or cues:



Making generic appeals to the need to "do something" about aging

<u>Try:</u>

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "as Americans live longer and healthier lives..."

Emphasize how to **improve social contexts**: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."

Using more neutral ("older people") and **inclusive** ("**we**" and "**us**") terms

Building Momentum metaphor: "Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities"

Define Ageism: discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes

Use concrete examples like intergenerational community centers to illustrate inventive solutions.

Human Rights: Everyone

DON'T

Talk about aging as a "civil rights issue"

This led people to only think about it terms of offenses that could be litigated



Prompts people to compare it to racism or sexism and conclude that it can't be as bad

Don't refer to older people as "other"



Don't overdo the positivity

"balanced and careful" includes reminders that social context and environments matter to wellbeing



DO emphasize the context

When trying to communicate understanding and support for general cause or specific policy, **avoid using individuallevel examples....**

focus on changes to the decision-making context rather than guiding personal decisions



Individual Responsibility

Healthy or successful aging has been the focus of attention lately. People are looking to improve their diets, start regular exercise regiments, and decrease the level of stress in their lives. They are doing this not only to increase their longevity, but also to increase the number of healthy and active years of life. People are living longer and living healthier due to changes in lifestyle that are being recommended by physicians, promoted at community and senior centers, and considered trendy by the media.

Explanation with Social Supports

We know that to be healthy and well we need opportunities to engage with our communities and access to support. As an integral part of our society, the health and well-being of older Americans improves when there are varied opportunities to stay physically active and socially engaged. We need to do everything we can to ensure that all communities have these opportunities for engagement – such as community centers with programming for older Americans, farmers markets, and chances to volunteer in our schools and libraries. And we need to make sure we give older adults reliable and safe ways to get where they need to go.



Theology of Aging

Through Genesis Creation Stories

Toward Tomorrow – *Together We Learn, Together We Flourish*



Created in the Image of God

We are created to age—

- Aging is normal
- Aging is a gift

We embody the Divine spark from our first to our last day.

We are in relationship with the sacred.



So God Created Humankind In the image of God God created them Male and Female God created them Genesis 1:27

Created to be in Relationship(s)

- Relationship
- with the Creator/Divine
- with creation
- with creatures
- with other human beings



It is not good that one should be alone; I will make them a helper as a partner. Genesis 2:18



The "pendencies"

The fear of **DEPENDENCY**

- Fear of illness
- Fear of loneliness
- Fear of death

The value (and myth) of INDEPENDENCY

- Role of choices and Self-efficacy
- No one is an island

The necessity of **INTER-DEPENDENCY** = Community/system of support





Created to Create: Generativity



And God blessed them. And God said to them, BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY AND FILL THE EARTH

and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

GENESIS 1:28

• Not just about propagating the human race-- Generativity

- Reframe older adulthood
 - Creative potential
 - Opportunity for new ideas and processes

Created for Meaning and Purpose

Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:15

Our meaning and purpose changes with the seasons of our life.

> It is important to know what gets us out of bed in the morning.

Building Momentum



The LORD God took adam and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

Created in the tension of safety and choice



Genesis 2

- Garden was home, safe and secure and all was provided.
- Tension arises when both decide to make their own choiceThey wanted to be wise.
- Expulsion from the Garden: learning to live with consequences of their choice.
- God provides them with second set of "clothes"... not abandoned.

Implications for ALL sectors of society



Need adjustments:

- Employment
 - Health care
- Transportation
- Urban planning
 - Housing
 - Community
 development
 - Churches



Transforming Aging through Engagement Education & Advocacy with Congregations and Community Partners

Rev. Beth Long-Higgins

Blong-higgins@uchinc.org