

Free Church of Scotland  
General Assembly May 2009  
**Address by the Moderator, Rev Douglas MacKeddie**

Fathers and brethren and friends I stand before you today with a large degree of trepidation, but yet with a heart that is overwhelmed by the trust that you have placed upon me for this task. I would covet your prayers & patience throughout the week and the year ahead.

## **Evangelisation & Ministry with and for the Elderly**

### **Introduction**

As a denomination we are privileged to meet regularly in General Assembly year after year discussing many issues that we believe to be of great importance in relation to the “Great Commission” of Matthew 20:18-20. Much of our debating is consequent upon previous assemblies, reports from the various committees of the church and petitions from Presbyteries.

This year as we gather, we pray and believe, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the General Assembly will discuss issues as diverse as “Home Missions”, Foreign Missions, Welfare of Youth, Finance, Psalmody, Legal matters, Child Protection, Religion and Moral issues, Training of the Ministry & Ministry Report, College Board Report and many other important issues. There will also be a time for meeting and hearing of the Lord’s work going on in other churches and Para-church organizations by respective delegates.

Members of the Assembly often express feelings of disappointment that the General Assembly comes very far short of expectations and as a result go away frustrated that their particular concern or concerns for the church and the way forward has produced little or nothing. Some may think that the changes which they believe are necessary to fulfil the great commission are moving too slowly and that there is a great need to be more “pro-active” in our way forward. For myself I have wondered why there has been little or no reference to the ministering to the elderly throughout a whole week of debate. I stand to be

corrected if my recollection is wrong but I do not remember having specific reference to ministering to the elderly since the closure of Maxwell House.

In the midst of all of the week's debates, which I hope and pray will be accompanied with the blessing of our Lord, I would like to reflect on the evangelisation and supportive ministry to and for the elderly.

At the graduation ceremony of students of the Highland Theological College, Dingwall last year, Professor Gordon Wenham, believing that Scottish Presbyterianism had the same blind spots as English Anglicans, made the following observation:

*"I cannot in the last 65 years remember a sermon that really addressed the issues presented by old age. Perhaps that is because I did not think the message applied to me. But having asked around some older friends, they too find it hard to remember any sermons directed at the old. Why this neglect? Perhaps it is partly ministerial tact; most clergy know they cannot speak from experience about what it is like to be old. But I think there is another reason. Lively churches pride themselves on having lots of young people and families. The old will come to church any way, so we do not have to worry about them. The modern glorification of youth has crept into Christian thinking too.*

*But I think this attitude, often unconscious I suspect, is short-sighted, spiritually insensitive, and unbiblical. It is short-sighted in that there are now more people over 65 in our population than under 16's. So the elderly are a very important segment of your flock."*

Is Professor Wenham right in his reference to these things as pertaining to Highland Presbyterianism (or Lowland Presbyterians for that matter) as well as English Anglicans. Have we got a "blind spot" with regard to ministering to the elderly? Or are we satisfied that the spiritual needs of the elderly are discussed and debated (in General Assembly) sufficiently and are they acted upon sufficiently by our church as a whole?

Jeffrey A Watson (Professor of gerontology at Washington Bible College, Maryland) entitles his book on helping the aging, grieving, & dying, "The Courage to Care" giving suggestion to the idea that we don't demonstrate a courageous biblical ministry to the elderly as we should.

During the past, nearly 27 years of ministry I have become more and more convinced that our ministry has, to a greater or lesser extent, neglected the elderly. Writing from within the Anglican communion Arthur F Creber asks: *"What position does the church take on Ageism (or old age)? Does it challenge the negative view of old age or promote the same stereotypical images as the society in which it is set? I know of no empirical research on this, but my own deliberate and conscientious observations lead me to conclude that Christians have allowed the world to squeeze them into this mould. The church has failed to attack the myths and the underlying fears which cause older people to be pushed to the margins of our thoughts. It has failed to examine its own prejudices towards older people and has perpetuated a negative view of old age.*

It is the belief of many who are involved in ministry to the elderly that, *"For centuries religious communities have struggled to bring value to those who are devalued. Yet we still have poverty, we still have racism, we still have fractured families, we still have hunger and we still have injustice. We have not found peace and we have not learned how to love our brother and sisters in the household of God. Perhaps we should not be so presumptuous as to think that the outcome is any different with regard to the value accorded older persons."*

*"Contemporary images of aging and oldness are dangerous, for they cause us to lower our expectations when we encounter older people. If we see little value in the persons to whom we relate, the quality of our exchange with them has no chance to be anything more than disappointing." (Darrel Watkins "Religion & Aging")*

I do not wish to suggest that there is no evangelization of the elderly within our congregations or communities, especially when we consider that many congregations have over 60% elderly folks sitting under the “sound of the Gospel”. I am also aware of the many activities some congregations run to give support to those who are classified as aged. But when you consider the high percentage of elderly people within and out-with the church who are in a state of unbelief, “without God and without hope in this world” is there not a great need to reach out to them. Should we be appointing workers with a specific remit to evangelise such an ever increasing constituency? It is they, who from a human perspective, that are closer to eternity than any other age group.

What about the elderly saints in Christ! Is there a cry from them that we might not be listening to them? Is it that some might feel like Job when he said, “My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me.” (Job 19:14). Or like David in his old age under many burdens as he prays to God,

*“O God Thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared Thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grey headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed Thy strength unto this generation, and Thy power to every one that is to come.” Psalm 71:17-18.*

Could there be in David here a sense of forsakenness by his family, his friends etc as he come near to the end of his life. Does he, because of neglect of those who were his “familiar friends”, feel worthless (More of this later).

In approaching the subject of ministry to the elderly to his students, Professor J Earl Thomas Jn. (North Carolina) emphatically appealed to them to read the book of Job as he believes that Job *“gives a poetic and profound voice to a wide range of emotions and conditions experienced by many elderly people, then and now. The Book of Job has probably as much relevance to elderly people as any book in the Bible. To reflect on Job’s struggles is to enter the struggles and experience of countless older people.”*

The subject that I am seeking to embark upon here is vast and complex. It is not within my capabilities to be able to cover the wide-ranging aspects of caring for the elder under the remits that have been covered by many writers and practitioners of the subject. What I hope to do is to set before us the subject that to a large extent has been neglected; namely, Ministering the Gospel to those who are senior in our society; within and out-with what may be classified as the visible church.

### **Who are the elderly or How old is old?**

In a recent series of television adverts we have been encouraged when looking at the elderly not focus on the age of a person but on the person as a person; *“See the person not the age”*.

To some people (according to Robert Carlson, talking descriptively about the American view of the elderly) the elderly are a *“bunch of rich old people living it up at the expense of the general economy. For others, they are a pitiful collection of depressed souls who have outlived their usefulness and are waiting to “pass on” in nursing home beds. (This is something I would like to return to later if I have time)*. For a few others, they represent a rich source of knowledge and experience waiting to be tapped. For others they are a nuisance on the highways and a bother for their slowness in supermarket lines. For still others, they are the preservers of valued traditions and family stories.”

We have perceptions of the elderly that are so often based upon some prejudice or another or maybe as a result of impatience in our drive to reach goals that might be hindered by too much attention to their needs. From a theological point of view we might believe ourselves to have a good biblical grasp of “An All Round Ministry”. but our performance is weak.

Society in general uses a word (**ageism**) to describe those at the top-end of the age bracket and is as one has said, “a word used to describe a blatantly discriminatory attitude towards older people. It can be seen in the way that older people are stereotyped in the media, older men are often portrayed as

cantankerous, or useless and role-less. Older women are more often than not shown as silly, or wicked, with connotations of witchcraft...” “Ageism is found in every walk of life, imposing crude and arbitrary restrictions on the lives of millions of people – just because we consider them old.”

It was Robert Butler who first coined the term “ageism” in the 1960s. He defined it as a process of stereotyping and discrimination against people just because they were old, just as racism and sexism accomplished this for skin colour and gender.

“Ageism has a number of dimensions: job discrimination, loss of status, stereotyping and dehumanisation. Ageism is about assuming all older people are the same, despite their different life histories, needs and expectations. Ageism not only affects the lives of older people, but, like ageing itself, it affects everyone from birth onwards, putting limits and constraints on experiences, expectations, relationships and opportunities.

Ageism is important because it affects workers and carers at a personal level. Contact with older people may be avoided because it is viewed as unrewarding or it reminds younger people of their own ageing. This is partly because younger people have no direct experience of old age and therefore have to rely on social stereotypes, which may be quite negative (think of the many negative images of older people we see on TV and in film). These negative images may create perceptions of a future old age as a time of dependency, poor health, poverty and vulnerability, even though this may bear little relationship to the lived experience of many older people.

Ageism is not obvious. Sometimes you may not be aware it is happening. But it may result in you having different treatment at your local GP’s surgery or your local hospital. It may affect you when applying for holiday or car insurance. It may

even stop you getting a job. (this may be about to change under new potential government legislation).

Ageism has a dramatic, detrimental effect on older people but this is often not acknowledged. Age Concern is highlighting this as a major issue that needs to be addressed in order to ensure the fair treatment of older people.

There are a number of theories about what is old in terms of people. As children I am sure that we thought of our aunts and uncles who were in their thirties or forties to be ancient. I remember on one occasion one of our son's friends coming for him, to the back door of the manse, to go out with "the boys". Our son wasn't to sure whether he would be allowed to go out, but the friend responded "ask the old man"; that was me in my very early forties. How old is old!

Age is often defined chronologically, being determined by the number of years people have lived. This is usually linked to the "statutory retirement age"; 60 for women and 65 for men. So if you have your "pension book" or a "bus pass" you have moved into a new experience of life. Moreover it is amazing what that experience triggers especially on the effect it has not just in society in general, but also in the church. This is for many, as they perceive it, the beginning of life's "devaluation". Or put another way old age or ageism is "past the sell by date". Well do we know that this has no place in the biblical chronology of a person's life from cradle to the grave.

The Psalmist in Psalm 31 writes demonstrating the experience felt under the weight of rejection by those whose negative thoughts of old age encapsulates an attitude that ageists believe they have a right to expound:

"Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble:

Mine eye is consumed with grief,

yea, my soul and my belly.

For my life is spent in grief,

and my years with sighing:

my strength fails because of mine iniquity,

and my bones are consumed.  
I was a reproach among all my enemies,  
but especially among my neighbours,  
and a fear to mine acquaintance:  
they that did see me without fled from me.  
I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind:  
I am like a broken vessel.” (Psalm 31:9-12)

Although sin has marred the image of God in man, yet nowhere is it suggested in Scripture that at a certain point in the life of a person do they lose the image of God, certainly not as a result of growing older. Taking the words of Psalm 139, what we have is the human life-cycle. Arthur F Creber says:

*“The human life-cycle approach shifts the focus from definitions of old age to creating descriptions of a person’s history, growth and development. It is vitally important for those in Christian ministry to consider the life-cycle of each individual, rather than respond to older people purely in terms of their age.”*

Robert Carson says, “Remembering that we cannot describe older people by their chronological age, it is important to note that older people differ from one another and thus have different needs as well as gifts to offer. For convenience sake we can divide the elderly into four categories: the active, transitional, and frail elderly as well as caregivers (which overlaps both the active and the transitional categories.”

### **The Elderly and Christian Ministry**

Creber in his book draws attention to one major factor which “feeds ageist attitudes”, it is society’s fear of death. Many believe that ageism is part of a collective and personal defence against our own demise. Creber draws from Piner (1979) who portrays this view in the following way:

*“It is death that haunts and fears us. The old have appeared to be its visible symbol and so have become our enemies. We have shrouded age in myths and stereotypes so as to hide our own deep fear and prejudice.”*

*“If this is the case”, says Creber, “and I think it is, then the implications for Christian ministry both for older people but also for anyone at any point in their life cycle are extremely significant. Surely the Christian Gospel has at its very centre the message of victory over fear and death and is concerned to bring release to those bound by the chains it brings?”*

### **What of those “living near the edge”?**

In terms of the “great commission”, what is our interest in the elderly who are drawing near the end of life’s journey?

Professor W J MacLennan (Edinburgh) says: “I tell my students that any doctor or nurse who is **not** interested in old people is in the wrong profession. The stricture”, he says, “could apply equally to candidates for the ministry or eldership.”

For each of us we ought to spend a large proportion of our time bringing the message of hope and love, through Christ, to that section of our society who are living ever nearer the edge. The present environment, as they grow old, is perceived by many as more and more hostile or at the very least unconcerned. If we take the message of the gospel realising that it is God’s demonstrative care to all who are nearing death we might, as Jeffrey A Watson points out, picture death as a cliff and sense the tenderness of God towards those near the edge. When Christ looked upon the multitude with compassion, what He saw was “sheep having no shepherd”. It is this that ought to be inspirational to us as we consider that many around us are lost souls in need of the redemption that comes by Christ.

“God”, says Watson, “becomes super-actively attentive to them because of their heightened opportunity to quest for spiritual truth.” Some of those who seem to be obvious sufferers in the spotlight of God’s compassion are:

People who are chronically or terminally ill  
People living with suicidal thoughts, plans, or previous attempts  
People brought near to death through accidents, war, or crime  
People who are clinically depressed  
People with permanent physical, emotional, or cognitive handicaps  
People with chronic pain  
People with ageing-related changes  
People grieving the loss of their miscarried, stillborn, aborted, or nonexistent child  
People dying of starvation and drought  
People held in satanic bondage to the fear of death  
People who attend the needs of others near the edge of death  
People living with death threats for their faith  
People on the broad way to destruction: hell

Jeffrey A Watson, reminding us of Proverbs 24:10-12 how God constantly monitors how we respond to people “near the edge”.

“If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.

Deliver those who are drawn towards death,  
And hold back those stumbling to the slaughter.

If you say, “Surely we did not know this,”  
Does not He who weighs the hearts consider it?  
He who keeps your soul, does He not know it?

And will He not render to each man according to his deeds? (NKJ)

“If we don’t try, God sees our strength as small. If we rationalize not doing what we are capable of doing, He reveals our selfish motives. If we choose not to be His agent of grace, we bare the consequences of not being in His will. After all, since God had courage to care for us in our sin, He would have us duplicate His compassion to those who are lost in their sin or who are suffering the painful consequences of original sin”

The gospel imperative for every preacher of the Word of Truth and to all who are witnesses to His manifold grace, is to reach out to those that are unsaved. It is incumbent upon every recipient of the Grace of God to witness to those who are without Christ, and especially to those who are elderly in our communities.

The opportunities abound if we are sensitive to the greatest need of all for all people. To use an old cliché from another context; we have the “MMO”, “**Means, Motive and Opportunity**”.

**The means:** We have the Word of redemption in our hands and in our hearts. We believe in and have first hand experience of that Word and its power as the apostle wrote to the church at Rome:

*“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”* (Romans 1:16-17 NKJ)

Christ gave the promise of the Spirit to the Church so that it might fulfil the great commission. It is that Spiritual equipment for a World-Wide campaign that the Church was assured of immediately before He ascended into Glory.

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in all Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8.

If we are in Christ and if we believe that He has provided the means to evangelise the whole world, young and old, rich and poor. If we know the truth and don’t respond to it as Christ would have us do then we are in danger of gross disobedience. Paul’s fear of coming short in this was expressed in those very familiar and heart searching words:

“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of,  
for necessity is laid upon me;

Yes, woe is me if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16 NKJV)

If we, who own the Truth, don’t proclaim the wonder of Christ’s redemptive love to those who are right on the edge, without hope and without God then we have failed them. Every soul that the Lord has put in our “pathway” ought to be so

precious to us that we would use every means open to us to seek the salvation of the elderly.

**Motive:**

**In the evangelization of the elderly have we lost every ounce of motivation.**

Surely not, after all there is no-one on God's earth who should be so motivated for the salvation of the elderly than those who have been brought back from the brink of a lost eternity. When we consider, as His word teaches us, concerning the fire from which we have been plucked, the eternal damnation from which we have escaped and the condemnation that has been lifted, are we not motivated to cry out to those who are nearing the end of life's journey, "Do yourself no harm..". The Apostle Paul, seeing what life in a world without Christ had done to the Philippian jailer and many others, was so concerned for this man and the eternity into which he was thrusting himself, appealed to him not to kill himself. Oh yes! There's more. The love of Christ so demonstrated in the giving of himself for sinner is motive enough to urge us on to reach out to those on the edge of eternity no matter their age. Peter was motivated by his Lord that he said in his epistle, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promises, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9ff KJV)

The greatest motive of all is the command of Christ. Jesus said, "If you love Me keep my commandments." "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16:15-16 KJV)

**Opportunity**

Jesus said, 'I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly.' The church, therefore, needs to work towards breaking down the barriers of ageism if we are to have abundant life. Older people have a great contribution to make both within the church and within our communities. We should no longer be satisfied with presenting a gospel which encourages people, when they reach a

certain age, to opt out and to think they have reached the position where they no longer need to practice a ministry and be ministered unto. Jesus talks of 'abundant life', and that means a life which is satisfying and fulfilling right to the very end.

The church must take a positive approach to providing spiritual care for older people. Ageism should become a word of the past. It needs to be abolished within the church so that we, as Christians, can learn from the experiences that our older people bring to us, and enjoy with them that abundant life, both here and beyond death, which our Lord himself promised for all those who follow him.

As I have said before we all live in communities where a large percentage of the population are un-churched, but they are not unreachable. Let us pray that the Lord would open doors within our communities. How many elderly do we know of that live in our "back yard" so to speak whom we have never approached with the gospel. Would there be criticism of the local church by many elderly people who believe that the church is not interested in them?

Visitation of the elderly in their home, hospital and nursing homes are places of opportunity to develop a ministry with someone.

What of those who have suffered great loss. For many old people they are crying out to someone to help them in their grief. They are not part of a church which would normally give support to those of their number. In a situation like this most of us would respond to such losses by reaching out for someone to show love and compassion. We reach out to family, other friends, ministers, anyone who might share the burden of sorrow and sadness of life's increasing pain. Do we identify with such situations? Has the Lord ever given us the opportunity to tell the good news to a very frightened lost individual?

"What about", as one writer has put it, "the unloveables? How do we relate to those who are paralyzed, incontinent, stroke victims, or those whose appearance is dirty and unkempt? It was said of one training for the ministry that he was called upon to visit a person in this condition. Later he confessed that he was thrilled and relieved to find the person asleep. And, as he was writing out a note

to leave behind, he suddenly realized he was hurrying to complete it because the person might wake up.

Remember that we were unloveable, but Christ loved us even when the stench of this world of sin was upon us. The greatest fear of many older people is the possibility of becoming unloveable, and as a result, being abandoned by family, friends and society as a whole. But surely, never by the church! It would be a sad reflection on any part of the Church of Christ if age and appearance or personal hygiene of a person was to be an inhibitor to our evangelization.

Why do we spend so little time with the old folks? Why does the church as a whole continue to produce volume after volume and ream after ream of papers on children and youth when over half the membership, in most congregations, is age sixty or older? Why do we as ministers tend to talk about ministry to or for, rather than with, older people? Why are older adults rarely thought of as persons in great need to evangelism-especially at a time when personal losses can occur in rapid succession?

As David B Oliver points out, *“All too often the church approaches older persons out of a sense of duty, with forced courtesy and undue sweetness, or with synthetic smiles and fabricated faces. If we could just realise that people in the latter third of life rarely ask for anything more than to be loved, recognized, included ... to be part of the community, the family, and the church...Perhaps, it is at this time that the knowledge of God’s continuous love-unconditional love- is more significant to our thinking, feeling, and acting than ever before.*

We should be the first to “*reach out, latch-on,*” and make room for the un-churched elderly in our in our zeal to advance the Kingdom of Christ. The opportunities for growth in the Kingdom are there because the elderly surround us.

### **Spiritual care of the elderly saints in Christ.**

Throughout the Bible we learn that God has a deep concern for older people. He even says that they should continue to be guided in the church, so that they too learn more and more about God as they get older.

In old age we are, or will be, still part of his people – part of his church. Although older people may have weaknesses and at times feel like outcasts of society, God never forgets them. He values them and regards them as a vital part of his church.

As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory we must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance. You will be doing the right thing if you obey the Law of the Kingdom, which is found in the Scriptures: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ But if we treat people according to their outward appearance we are guilty of sin. (James 2).

How can we make older people more aware of God’s love and concern for them?

Let me present a case in point, which is repeated over and over again throughout the denominations:

**Helen says:** *“I have one thing I should like your people to reflect on. I am sorry to sound like an oldie but I am now on my eleventh minister and so you might say that I have seen some change in and around the church! My complaints (if that’s what they are) follow:*

*I regret the lack of depth and intelligence in church life. I wish we could work harder at making sense of our experience and struggle more creatively with what faith is for us.*

*As an older person in my church I feel sometimes overlooked- and misunderstood. I don’t feel that people make any effort to understand my pastoral and religious needs. I love the children and would like to help with Sunday School but there are other people in the congregation besides young families. From time to time I wonder whether the church is only interested in me when they want some money...!*

***I wish my church could be more positive about us old ones.”*** (James Woodward “Valuing age”)

**Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III** preaching on Psalm 71, “When I’m 64”, says:

*“This is a psalm of old age. This psalmist is looking back on a life in which he can testify to the fact that the Lord has been there for him since his birth. He*

*cannot remember a day when he didn't know the Lord; he cannot remember a day when he didn't need the Lord; he cannot remember a day when he didn't rely on the Lord; and he cannot remember a day when the Lord failed him. But he's still got troubles, and so he's looking back on the whole of a life lived with God, but it's been a life filled with troubles. And you know what? His troubles aren't abating in old age. Perhaps we dream of troubles going away in old age, but those of you who are there, or who are coming close, and who are passing through it, can attest that troubles are there just as they are when we are young. And so this psalmist finds himself crying out to the same God to whom he has been crying out for years. And he finds that God sufficient, and that God worthy of praise. Surely there's a word for all of us."*

*"And that's where this psalmist is. He's trusted the Lord all his life, and here he is, aging and in old age, and he's still needing to fling himself upon the Lord's strength and protection. And so he reminds himself that it is in the Lord that he has taken refuge, and that it is in His righteousness to deliver him and rescue him."*

Do we as a church continue to support and encourage the saints in Christ with that same testimony. As many grow older with failing health, loss of memory and various progressive illnesses, they need assurance.

### **Old age and ministry**

Old age is a blessing from God. The numerous references to the ministry of the elderly in church abound. Let me quote some Biblical references.

"A hoary head (a synonym for old age in scripture) is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness." (Prov. 16.31)

"You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the Lord."

It was Augustine that wrote:

“Innocence will be your infancy; reverence your children, patience, your adolescence; courage, your youth: merit your manhood: and nothing other than venerable wise discernment, your old age.”

We all need to take and apply the teaching of the Apostle Paul to heart when considering the benefits of the ministering of the elderly:

“..but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.” (2 Cor. 4.16) or as the Psalmist has assured us with respect to the elderly saints in Christ and the benefit of their age and experience:

“But like the palm tree flourishing  
Shall be the righteous one;  
He shall like to the cedar grow  
That is in Labanon..  
Those that within the house of God  
Are planted by his grace,  
They shall grow up, and flourish all in our God’s holy place.  
And in old age, when others fade,  
They fruit still forth shall bring;  
They shall be fat and full of sap,  
And aye be flourishing.”

We have a huge resource of witnesses to the grace of God. Let us use them to the full. They are the most qualified to teach others about God and to pass on the inheritance of faith. The elderly saints in Christ certainly provides the potential for an active witness to the word and redemptive works of God, and the older saints have the wisdom to teach and to encourage at both the personal and community level. Those in later life, who embrace the “unsearchable riches of Christ” have an all pervasive and important contribution to make to our development as a Christian community.

Are there not, within the church of Christ older men and women, who have the same zeal for the advancing of God’s eternal purpose like those of Caleb in the Old Testament who, although advanced in years, had the same enthusiasm for God and His purpose for Israel as he had when he was 45. There was Simeon

whose witness and testimony is a huge encouragement to many, and others who fought the good fight of faith till the very end.

The modern church has tended to “pension off” our elderly saints at a time when the Lord could see the great potential of their ministry. The early church had an order of widows, one of whose tasks was to pray. We meet one of them in Luke 2:36-38.

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, [37] and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. [38] And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

“The experience of Anna and Simeon (says Prof. Wenham) is surely recorded to show us how the elderly can see God’s salvation despite their age and infirmity. Perhaps we should establish prayer groups or times of prayer that the elderly can participate in.”

### **Care Home Ministry**

Although there has been a massive increase in the number of residential and nursing homes in the last 20 years only about 4% of elderly people live in care homes. When the Lord’s people have to give up their home and move into residential or nursing homes it is a huge wrench. For some it means having to move a long distance from their comfortable environs where the church and Christian fellowship was of a primary necessity. Although there are some care homes that provide many of the things to which they were accustomed, (and for this we are extremely thankful to God), especially in relation to spiritual care, these are too few. It has always been a desire of mine that our church would provide such a facility. It is sad to see many of the Lord’s people losing a degree of their spiritual dignity because the church believes it can’t afford such a

venture. It was the Lord who said to John to take care of His mother. The Apostle Paul wanted to make sure that those who laboured with him in the gospel would be cared for in their old age.

I have on many occasions gone into a nursing home or residential care home where a death has occurred. Looking at the folks there going through their loss I have often had that sense of feeling that what is going through their minds is, “who will it be next, will it be me?” What a need there is to bring the comfort of Christ into that heightened, highly charged emotional situation.

Have we the courage to care from “the cradle to the grave”? Have we the vision that would use old as well as well as the young to fulfill the “Great Commission”?

### **In conclusion**

So how should we minister with, too and for the elderly? “How can you make the last years of their earthly life happier and more fulfilled? I am no expert but here are some of the ideas that have occurred to me.

I think older members of the congregation should be used to the full. By retiring from their secular job people lose their place and status in society and many social contacts. ... Indeed in an age when many younger women work there is a need to exploit the talents of the retired to the full to keep the church running. Using the elderly wherever you can will not simply provide vital church workers, but it will help them, providing them with friendship and social contacts.”

(Professor Gordon Wenham)

Brethren and friends, governments are receiving a “wake-up-call” as a result of the, at times, abysmal lack of care for the elderly. Reviews are being done to see how improvements to the care of the elderly might be implemented in our society. What of the church and our denomination in particular? Will we review and implement our spiritual and social care of the elderly within and out-with the church? The challenge is in the “Great Commission”.

*Show us ways in which we can encourage and help older people to discover their ministry within the church, showing them that they still have a vocation to*

*serve you. And Lord, please give your whole church the courage and generosity needed to allow older people to practice their ministry amongst us and those whom they meet outside the church through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (from, "Mission Shaped Church")*