

An age-old question

If we fail to understand ageing as part of the wholeness of life, we fail to understand ourselves, argues **James Woodward**

Is it possible to move from negative stereotypes to re-construct a paradigm of ageing, one that is not dominated by images of diminishment and decline? Can we see spiritual possibilities within older people and within our own process of ageing? Might there be some energy from transformation as we gradually unlock the God-given potential that is within us all, whether we are 20, 40, 60 or 80?

In training sessions, I often ask people to write down how old they feel inside. It rarely matches their birth age. In fact most feel anywhere between 10 and 20 years younger inside than the date on their birth certificate indicates. If we go further in this exercise of self-analysis we find most of us really don't want to get older; we both fear and deny it. These fears are real, because old age brings many challenges and difficulties.

We are in the middle of a revolution as our greying generation faces old

age in ever increasing numbers. The demographics of an increased number of older people face all our churches, with particular practical and spiritual challenges. I long for the churches to be part of that movement of gerontologists, anthropologists, physicians and philosophers, who want us to change the way we look at and deal with old age.

We need to stop viewing old age as a problem – as an incurable disease – to be solved by spending millions on masking the signs of age, or in medical research that seeks to extend the life span. Rather we might invest in an approach to older people that sees them as a resource, and the ageing process as a time of integration, growth, space for wisdom, creativity and wholeness.

That means we shall have to become conscious of our own ageing and resist our fears and denials. We shall have to challenge the cultural obsession with youth and seek

to replace it with a respect for our own and others' process of ageing. We must face the fact that our churches are ageing churches, but that does not mean they are in decline or facing inevitable death.

Let us become more intentional about recognising and accepting that the ageing process for individuals, families and indeed even churches is a reality. We can make it

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our goal to change the view of ageing that fears it and so relegates it as worthless.

Erik Erikson expressed it in this way: "Lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilisation does not really harbour a concept of the whole of life."

We should not pretend that old age can be turned into a kind of endless middle age. Such pretence does not help us to plan for the whole of our life, gain insight into ourselves, or develop spiritually. Perhaps all of us need to generate a new spiritual map to help us negotiate the changes and transitions as age takes its shape in us. We have to see that every part of our lives has value – even the grey hairs.

Our fears and denials can perpetuate myths and negative stereotypes about old age. One is the assumption that our memory will inevitably decline. Some have demonstrated that the expectation of memory loss can actually help to bring about memory decline. Fear of ageing is the most powerful single agent creating exactly what we fear. Physical, mental and spiritual deterioration are not inevitable. We have some power over our destiny.

I hope that in future editions of *Reform*, we might have the space to reflect further on the shape of our older age and the opportunity that it brings. We can especially do this if we listen to older people and their stories. Let's see how we can become more aware of the new spiritual capacities that can develop as we grow older so that we can become more authentically ourselves. ■

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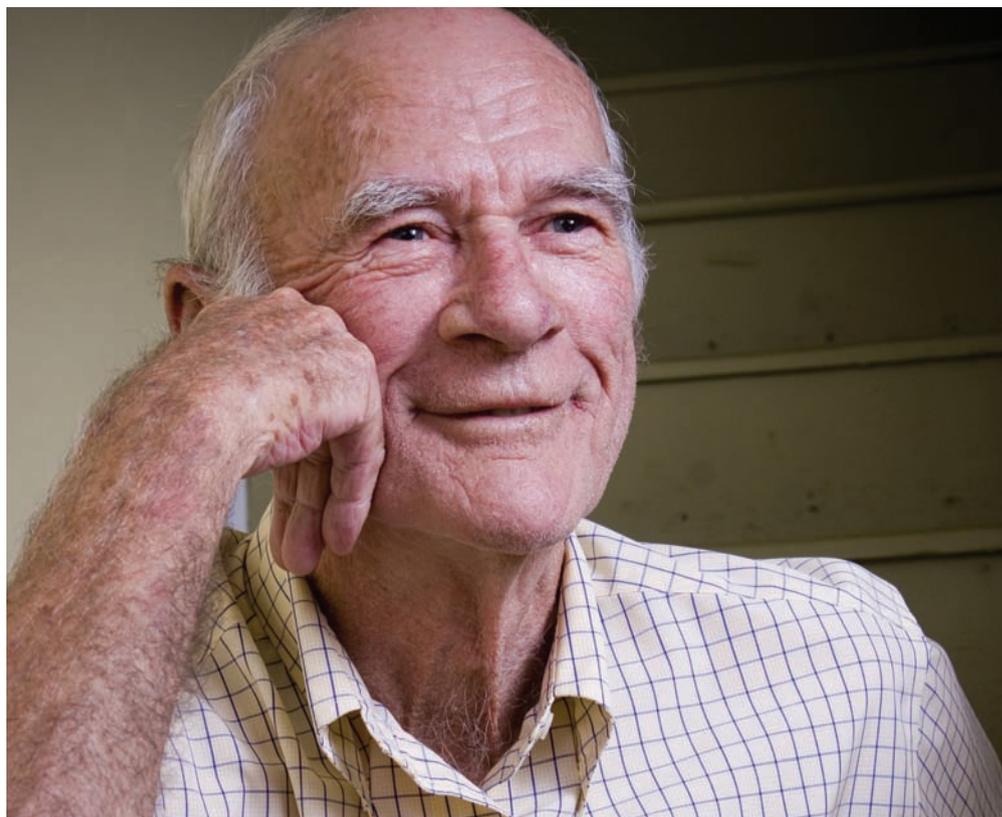


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