

Guidelines for pastoral care of older generations



*“Even to your old age
I will carry you”*

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for ministers, elders, pastoral care workers, pastoral care team members and anyone else who has a pastoral care role with older people, for example, leaders of small groups for older people. Most of the content of this resource is directly about helping individuals pastorally care for older generations, but there is also some content on different ways in which to provide pastoral care that could be considered by kirk sessions and pastoral care teams.

There are downloadable discussion questions to accompany this resource on the Presbyterian Church in Ireland website. The discussion questions are designed to further equip those involved in pastoral care for older generations and to help those in leadership think about the best ways to arrange pastoral care.

The title, *'Even to your old age I will carry you'*, refers to words in Isaiah 46:4 and is intended as a reminder that pastoral care is first and foremost an expression of God at work in the lives of the people for whom we care. The part we play is to allow God to use us to bring His loving care to them.

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Chapter *One*

Introduction: Understanding Aging

Everyone needs pastoral care.

There are many pastoral concerns common to all generations. This resource provides guidance on how to bring pastoral care to the specific concerns of older generations.

In this resource the term ‘older generations’ is used because people in their late 60s will probably not think of themselves as elderly and in many ways they are from a different generation to those in their late 80s. We should avoid the temptation to treat older generations as one group.

The issues covered in this booklet will not all apply to everyone, although some will be more prevalent as people get older. Physical aging actually starts from when we are in our 20s or 30s through various changes which become more noticeable as we get older.

Aging is essentially about change and pastoral care is about helping people through these changes. For example, one major change is retirement. It can be useful to refer to people in their late 60s and 70s as ‘retired’. Often they will have retired from a paid job and become very busy with other things such as grandchildren or voluntary work. Another significant life change is declining health, which requires practical care and support.

Because we live in relative safety and because of advances in health care, more and more people are living longer. In Northern Ireland the population of over 65s increased by 23.1% between 2004 and 2014 compared to an average increase in the total population of 7.4% – three times as high an increase.¹ The situation is similar in the Republic of Ireland. As a result, the need for pastoral care for older generations is increasing.

It is important that the kirk session and anyone else involved in overseeing pastoral care knows who in their

¹ Source: ‘A profile of older people in Northern Ireland – 2015 update’ from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister – page 5.

congregation are in particular need of pastoral care because of their age. If you are not an elder or in a pastoral leadership position, you can assist them in their leadership by communicating to them the pastoral needs of older generations.

Bear in mind that there are those who will not say they have a need and therefore it may require discernment to see the need. All those involved in pastoral care, whether of older generations or others, should act prayerfully with empathy, sensitivity and wisdom. This booklet covers many issues but it cannot cover every possible situation, which is all the more reason for these qualities to be present in those who deliver pastoral care.

There are four dynamics at work in the lives of people as they age into the older generations. ‘Dynamic’ is a useful description because this is about ongoing change. Not all these changes happen at the same rate for everyone but they nearly always require some thought when delivering pastoral care. *The four dynamics of aging are:*

1. Spiritual – the other three dynamics describe a decline but the spiritual dynamic for older people is often about growth. Older Christians will often have had many years of walking with God and will therefore have much spiritual wisdom to offer. Being able to share their story of life of faith well-lived allows the older generations to bless the younger generations – and each other. At the same time, aging may raise spiritual questions for which there are helpful biblical answers. For example, the question of what faith is in the face

of death, especially for those who had not considered that reality before. These questions are addressed in chapter two in order to help the pastoral carer bring biblical support and encouragement to the older generations as well as to help them be a blessing to others by sharing their walk of faith.

2. Biological – as we age we start to experience changes in the level of our health such as a decrease in mobility and weaknesses in hearing, sight or memory. Anyone providing pastoral care for the older generations needs to be familiar with how these changes affect different people in different ways. Chapter three outlines some practicalities of which to be aware when delivering pastoral care for people who are experiencing failing health, whether gradual or more sudden.

3. Psychological – people in older generations often have common experiences which impact them emotionally. Becoming isolated is a problem for many people as they advance in years, with significant people in their circle of friends and family dying and also as infirmity leads to them becoming housebound. Increasing deafness or failing eyesight can also contribute to a feeling of isolation. A change in role, for example retirement, can have a greater impact than expected. A major change that has psychological impact is bereavement, especially the loss of a spouse after many years of marriage. Chapter four gives some practical ways to help people in these changing personal circumstances.

4. Sociological – people who enter the older generations today have lived through huge societal changes. Technology has changed, the way people think has changed and church has changed. One aspect of this type of change is that retired people often have a smaller income and rely on navigating the government’s means of providing extra financial support – sometimes with great difficulty. Chapter five gives some advice on how to pastorally care for people in the older generations in a changing world.





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