



RELIGION & RACE

General Commission on Religion and Race

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Ageism: What it Looks Like

Ageism is:

- *stereotyping individuals or groups on the basis of their age (either too young or too old);*
- *patronizing the elderly or younger people;*
- *discriminating against people because they are too old or too young; and*
- *speaking with or about the elderly or younger people in a condescending tone.*

While ageism cuts both ways, this resource focuses on discrimination against persons who are over 65. Here, ageism focuses on stereotypes about, prejudice against, and inequity for persons who have a longer experience with the aging process. In these cases:

Ageism is:

- *prejudice against people who have wrinkles or "look old," are hard of hearing, move*
- *slowly, or require extra time to process information;*
- *debilitation that results when a seasoned (i.e., mature or older) adult internalizes*
- *negative attitudes and allows the mind to trick the body into "acting old"*
- *fear, or denial, of the aging process; forgetting that living IS aging!*

Implicit *ageism* refers to the subconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors one has about the elderly (or young people). In many homes and cultures, negative stereotypes about old age become ingrained early in life. As a result, negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be activated automatically when older persons are present or enter a space. While elderly individuals have different internal reservoirs for coping with life's challenges, older adults as a group may be the object of hostility in many social and institutional contexts, including the church.

Explicit *ageism* is the open, intentional differentiation by age that is designed to accomplish a particular result. Most cultures offer narratives that both denigrate and honor aging. Indeed, the fifth commandment in the Hebrew canon admonished Israelites to honor their fathers and mothers. Yet, at the same time, Israel's leaders created unjust laws so they could seize the property of widows (Isaiah 10:1-2). Greek-speaking widows were overlooked during the distribution of food (Acts 6:1-6). In other communities, most widows and orphans were ignored by religious folk (James 1:27). Such behaviors imply that *ageism*, specifically toward women, was a recurring problem in Israel. This happens even today. Divergent (different) attitudes about older adults often emerge when we consider age along with other identity traits such as a gender, race, ethnicity, physical condition, mental condition, or economic status.

Quick exercise:

Can you name any areas within your culture where older men are perceived more positively than older women? Within your church?

More often than not, beliefs about age-related decline outweigh beliefs about positive aging. Researchers have found, however, that reasoning about complex matters relevant to life does not deteriorate with age. Lindland et al reports, "Aging is distinct from disease and decline... With the right contextual and social supports, older adults can remain healthy and maintain a high level of independence and functioning—even while experiencing some of the natural changes in vision, hearing, mobility, and muscle strength..." (11). Our churches, with intention and care, could very well be the "right contextual and social supports" that create the spaces and opportunities for older persons to experience full, more independent, and participatory lives.

A person's objective (chronological/actual) age may differ from his or her subjective age (self-perception of age). In some cases, as some persons say, you are as young as you feel! In other cases, people might dis-identify with their age group in the face of age discrimination. For, even while stereotypes about aging may hold a kernel of truth, negative stereotypes can have harmful consequences for older adults. Some people will lie about their age (to themselves or others) to avoid the negative feelings, thinking, and self-esteem that can stem from harmful descriptions associated with aging.

Questions for Reflection

1. Is your church guilty of *ageism*? If a church's budget provides little or nothing for ministries with older people, is the church council promoting ageism?
2. Getting to the church and getting in the church are two challenges for some church members. Steps at every entrance, events scheduled on upper floors, and restrooms too small for a wheelchair communicate a negative message. How can your church become more welcoming to people of all ages?
3. If *ageism* is the attitude that frames the conversation as a competition between young and old people, how can your church dismantle *ageism*? What changes in the church's personnel policies for staff or nominations/appointment procedures for lay volunteers would be necessary? What adjustments would be needed in your church's marketing strategy or content?
4. What other steps might your church take to inspire and support people to participate actively in worship, ministry, or service throughout their lives?

This resource is written by Dr. Arthuree Wright

References

- Caldwell, Jacob M. and Caldwell, Diana (2010). Reading Luke for Community Formation Against Ageism. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, 22, 211-219.
- Cook, Fay Lomax (2002). Generational Equity. *Encyclopedia of Aging*. The Gale Group.
- Lindland, E., Fond, M., Haydon, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2015). Gauging Aging: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Aging in America. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 11. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/pubs/mtg/gaugingaging/>
- Minkler, Meredith (1991). Generational Equity or Interdependence? *Generations*, 15(4), 36-42.
- National Research Council (US) Committee on Aging Frontiers in Social Psychology, Personality, and Adult Developmental Psychology; Carstensen LL, Hartel CR, editors. (2006) *When I'm 64*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK83767/>
- Robb, Thomas B. (1993). Ageing and Ageism: Implications for the Church's Ministry with Families. *Church & Society*, 84, 109-121.
- Schroots, Johannes J. F. (2003). Ageism in Science: Fair-play between Generations. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 9, 445-451.
- Stoneking, C. B. (2003). Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging. In S. Hauerwas *et al.* (Eds.), *Growing Old in Christ* (pp. 63-89). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Williamson, John B., McNamara, Tay K., and Howling, Stephanie A. (2003). Generational Equity, Generational Interdependence, and the Framing of the Debate Over Social Security Reform, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 30 (3), 1-14. <https://www2.bc.edu/~jbw/documents/WilliamsonMcNamaraHowling2003.pdf>