

Life to the Full

How Local Congregations Can Help Older Adults Thrive

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Despite being a large and increasing demographic, older people can be subjected to ageism, resulting in deep senses of isolation and loss. Older people are frequently under-utilised in terms of the wisdom, skills and personal resources they have to offer. Erik Erikson's ego development outcome for the final developmental stage of life is Integrity vs Despair, and the basic strength is Wisdom. Thus older people, more than others, have a role and a need to impart their wisdom and insights. This paper outlines ways local churches can resource the spirituality of older people in the church and wider community. It considers ways churches can help older people to look back and see their lives as well-lived, with a sense that life has meaning and that they have made a significant contribution, and to look forward with hope and courage. The paper advocates ensuring that older people are involved in meaningful gift-sharing ways in the local church and community.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares that he came so that all “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b NRSV). This abundance of life does not have a use-by date. *Life to the full* is Christ's desired reality for all: old and young, rich and poor. This paper outlines how local churches can provide opportunities and resources to assist older people to live life to the full. In doing so (and in response to the psychosocial understandings of Erik and Joan Erikson)² the paper provides important insights on ways in which churches can help older people to look back and see their lives as well-lived, and to look to the future with hope and courage. It considers ways in which older people can be involved in fulfilling, meaningful and gift-sharing ways in the local church and wider community.

Our Population is Ageing

Ageing is clearly a natural process. Ageing is experienced by individuals and on a societal level as macro-level demographic and social changes occur. Australia, in common with most developed countries, has an ageing population. This is caused by the dual phenomena

¹ With grateful thanks to the people of Pilgrim Uniting Church, Adelaide and to the Ken Leaver Foundation for the opportunity and the funding. (This paper reflects the work and opinion of the author, and not necessarily the opinion of the people of the Pilgrim Uniting Church nor the Ken Leaver Foundation.)

² Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).

of decreasing fertility rates (meaning less children are born)³ and increasing life expectancy (due to declining mortality rates across all age groups),⁴ and is not balanced by the effects of net overseas migration.⁵

In the twenty years to 30 June 2013, the median age of the Australian population increased from 33.0 to 37.4.⁶ The proportion of people aged over 65 years increased from 11.6% of the population in 1993 to 14.4% of the population in 2013,⁷ and is expected to increase to 22% in 2060, and 25% in 2101.⁸ The proportion of people aged over 85 years nearly doubled from 1.0% in 1993 to 1.9% in 2013.⁹ Australia's ageing population, particularly the increased and increasing proportion of people aged over 65 years, presents unique challenges and opportunities to the Church in Australia today.

Older People Frequently Encounter Ageism

Despite this increasing number and proportion of older people, Australia's Council Of The Ageing (COTA) describe ageism, or age discrimination, as "endemic" in Australian society today. They note that ageism is experienced by older people in a variety of ways, including, "in the forms of speech by which they are addressed, in the media where negative and ageist stereotypes are promulgated, and in the health system where health professionals tend to give older people and their illnesses a lower priority."¹⁰ Further, ageism can be seen "in access to employment, in the attitudes of employers to older workers, in access to appropriate training and professional development and in general, in the undervaluing of the skills, experience and wisdom of older people."¹¹

These forms of age discrimination can be experienced personally, or privately (for example in patronising speech, or assumptions about inabilities based on age). In addition ageism can be experienced, observed and/or participated in publically. Such public expression of age discrimination can further propagate ageist concepts, while all forms of age discrimination have the potential to be personally damaging to the victim.

³ Since 1976, the total fertility rate (TFR) for Australia has been below the replacement level of 2.1. In 2012 Australia's TFR was 1.93 babies per woman. Australian Bureau of Statistics, "3301.0—Births, Australia, 2012" (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

⁴ Over the past century, life expectancies at birth have increased by twenty-five years. Boys born between 1901 and 1910 could expect to live for 55.2 years; girls for 58.8. By contrast, boys born 2008–2010 can expect to live for 79.5 years; girls 84 years ("1301.0—Year Book Australia, 2012" [Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012]).

⁵ In the two years to 30 June 2012, Australia's population increased by an average of 1.6% per year. Net overseas migration contributed 56% of this growth and natural increase contributed the remaining 44%. "3222.0—Population Projections, Australia, 2012 (Base) to 2101" (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), 4.

⁶ "3101.0—Australian Demographic Statistics, Dec 2013" (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

⁷ Ibid. It is interesting to note that the proportion of people aged between 15 and 64 years has not changed in the last twenty years: the increase in the population of people aged over 65 years has been countered by a decline in the proportion of people aged up to 15 years (from 21.7% in 1993 to 18.9% in 2013).

⁸ "3222.0—Population Projections, Australia, 2012 (Base) to 2101." (These projections are based on current fertility, life expectancy and net overseas migration figures.)

⁹ "3101.0—Australian Demographic Statistics, Dec 2013."

¹⁰ National Policy Office, "COTA Australia Policy & Position Statements" (Barton, ACT: COTA, 2012), 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

Due to word restrictions, this paper cannot provide a review of the various forms of ageism. Instead it focuses on the positive dimensions of how churches can help older adults live life to the full.¹²

What is Life to the Full for Older People?

Before we discuss what the local church can do to assist older adults live life abundantly we need to consider the unique developmental task of older people and with that the capabilities older people have to offer.

As is the case for all generations, older people face both opportunities and challenges. Psychologist Erik Erikson identified eight developmental stages that individuals progress through, from birth and early childhood, through adolescence to adulthood.¹³ The final developmental stage is that of late adulthood, from age 55 or 65 to death. Erikson called the “ego development” outcome for this stage *Integrity vs Despair*, and the basic strength of this time of life, *Wisdom*. This desired outcome of *integrity* means a sense of “*coherence and wholeness*”¹⁴ and “involves a feeling of wholeness, meaningfulness, and continuity as one regards the end of one’s life.”¹⁵

At this final stage of development therefore, we hope individuals are able to look back and see their lives as well-lived, with a sense that life has meaning and that they have made a significant contribution. The wisdom that older people have to offer needs to find expression and opportunity. Where such integration does not occur, the result can be despair born out of perceived failure and inadequacy.¹⁶ While simply growing older does not make one wiser, every older person has wisdom and strength in some dimension of life that they can impart to others.

Based on Erikson’s psychosocial understanding, it is clear that older people need opportunities to offer and use their skills and wisdom. Unfortunately, as has already been discussed, this is not always the experience of older people.

¹² For more on ageism, see Kim Cheng Patrick Low and Sik-Liong Ang, “Ageism,” in *Encyclopedia of Corporate Social Responsibility*, ed. Samuel O. Idowu *et al* (Berlin: Springer, 2013). For more on workplace age discrimination, see Patricia Brownell and James J. Kelly, *Ageism and Mistreatment of Older Workers: Current Reality, Future Solutions* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012). See also the section entitled “Age Discrimination,” in “Realising the Economic Potential of Senior Australians: Turning Grey into Gold,” (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). To read about one form of media discrimination, see Tom Robinson, Mark Callister, and Dawn Magoffin, “Older Characters in Teen Movies from 1980–2006,” *Educational Gerontology* 35, no. 8 (2009): 687–711.

¹³ Erikson’s wife and research partner, Joan Erikson, added a ninth stage to the model, following Erik’s death, and taking into account both Erik’s later reflections on his work, and their own experiences of ageing. Erik H. Erikson and Joan M. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). In this she noted that “aged individuals are often ostracized, neglected, and overlooked; elders are seen no longer as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame” (144).

¹⁴ Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*, 65.

¹⁵ James E. Marcia, “From Industry to Integrity,” *Identity* 14, no. 3 (2014): 170.

¹⁶ For a recent exploration of this, see the beginning sections of Simon Hearn *et al*, “Between Integrity and Despair: Toward Construct Validation of Erikson’s Eighth Stage,” *Journal of Adult Development* 19, no. 1 (2012): 1–20.

How Can the Local Church Help Older People Live Life to the Full?

It is important to note that helping older people live life to the full is of mutual benefit for the older person, for the church and for the kingdom of God. It is not an act of service towards older people, nor is it an exploitation of older people. Rather it involves a symbiosis of older person and the wider church offering what each has, for the betterment of all.

Aware of this, my research identified several ways churches can help older people live life to the full. The local church can embrace and communicate a holistic understanding of what it means to be human and to be spiritual. The local church can provide resourcing in a variety of areas. Local churches can be places where relationships and connections flourish, as well as contexts in which each person's unique gifts and resources are shared and celebrated.

The Local Church Can Embrace a Holistic Understanding of What It Means to be Human, to be Spiritual

Christian Spirituality has been defined as “the lived experience of Christian faith and discipleship.”¹⁷ In being about “lived experience,” spirituality is best understood in holistic terms. As Albert Jewell maintains, “the spiritual is not one dimension among many in life; rather it permeates and gives meaning to all life.”¹⁸

When we consider what a local church can do to help older people live life to the full, we first need to understand (and promote) this holistic and integrated view of spirituality. This means being aware of the “whole of life” for older people in our churches, recognising mental, physical and emotional wellbeing as integrally related to, and interrelated with, spiritual health.

This works both ways. On one hand, because spirituality is an intrinsic part of our humanity, churches have an opportunity and responsibility to resource the spiritual growth of their members, as well as offering such spiritual resourcing beyond the walls of the church. On the other hand, churches need to be attentive to more than just the spiritual well-being of members and neighbours. Churches can and do express this in a myriad of ways, including through food banks and opportunities for social interactions and by running sports and children's programmes.

While such initiatives can frequently be seen by church members, and sometimes leaders themselves, as peripheral to the church's main business, these programmes are best seen as integrative within the whole that the church has to offer. When people engage with a social service offered by a church, how can the church also enhance the spirituality of that individual? What connections can be made from each particular event or activity and other activities of the church? How can relationships be encouraged and developed between participants in community activities, and also with the wider church? If individuals come with physical or material needs, how can their spirituality also be resourced? These are questions churches should consider of all their programmes and events. In doing so, churches can also be offering clear paths to other areas of involvement in church and

¹⁷ Arthur Holder, “Introduction,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 5.

¹⁸ Albert Jewell (ed.), *Ageing, Spirituality, and Well-Being* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004), 16.

community life. Such involvement can further enhance the holistic wellbeing of church and community members.¹⁹

Another way the local church can be attentive to more than the spiritual dimension, is by celebrating the joys and successes experienced in all areas of life, as well as supporting one another through difficult times. Clearly this can be expressed through pastoral care of church members, as well as celebrating milestones like baptisms, significant birthdays, anniversaries and funerals. Individuals also need opportunities to share the “lesser” events: an achievement of a child or grandchild, a worrying diagnosis, a holiday enjoyed or a family home sold. These are things people carry with them to church, that can be shared appropriately within a caring church community that will celebrate, support, encourage, pray and remember.

Considering older people specifically, Ursula King points out that “spiritual development [is a] process of growth that can still flourish when all other growth has stopped and our physical and mental powers begin to decline.”²⁰ This concept of flourishing draws from the Old Testament (e.g. Hos 14:7; Ps 92:12) where flourishing is likened to the organic growth that occurs in a well-tended garden.²¹ A similar theme is reflected in 2 Cor 4:16: “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (TNIV). This is good news for older people who may be facing decline in other areas of their lives. Our spiritual lives can always be renewed, restored, deepened.

Therefore churches should be attentive to the whole of life; strengthening and celebrating all dimensions of life so individuals and the community can flourish whatever their unique circumstances. Aware of this whole-of-life emphasis and understanding, we turn now to consider specific ways that local churches can provide a range of resourcing to assist older adults live life to the full.

The Local Church Can Provide Resourcing

Churches are uniquely placed to resource congregational members as well as the wider community. There are three particular areas where churches can resource older people, which help them to live life to the full.

Ensuring Existing Resources are Available

It is generally not necessary to “reinvent the wheel.” Several government, private and not-for-profit agencies produce or distribute resources related to active ageing, or ageing well. Churches can assist with ensuring these resources are distributed appropriately. At Pilgrim Uniting Church, an older woman had a particular passion and gift for gathering and

¹⁹ A cautionary note is important here; churches should not view attendance in Sunday worship as the main or sole goal of programmes offered. If churches genuinely desire to resource the whole-of-life of those who attend their programmes, they should be doing so as much as they are able in the programmes that people are coming to, in addition to considering how church worship services may be connective for them, not expecting that their spiritual wellbeing will just be addressed in worship.

²⁰ Ursula King, “The Dance of Life: Spirituality, Ageing and Human Flourishing,” in *Ageing, Spirituality and Well-Being*, ed. Albert Jewell (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004), 131.

²¹ Grace Jantzen argues for embracing a symbolic of natality in terms of Christian theology, in contrast with a Christendom emphasis on death. She sees flourishing as an expression of this natality. Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Manchester Studies in Religion, Culture and Gender (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

distributing a wide range of practical resources. She was given the task of maintaining an area in the church lounge, where the latest material relating to ageing well could be made available. It is obviously important that such a resource area is kept up to date. Inviting a suitably gifted and enthused older person to do this is appropriate practically. This was also in keeping with the insights learnt through this project, of providing a place for the gifts and talents of all people to be shared and enjoyed. Many churches produce a regular newsletter for attenders. The author has developed a set of fifty “active ageing” tips. These can be reproduced in the church newsletter, one for each week of the year.²² By resourcing older people in these ways, the local church helps older people live life to the full, by providing them with access to information that can help them flourish in this later stage of their life.

Filing the Gaps around Transitioning to Retirement

Although there is a large amount of information available in the public sphere about making the transition to retirement, the vast majority of these materials relate to financial planning. Given the dramatic changes that retirement brings to many areas of life, this is a serious deficiency.

As part of my role at Pilgrim, I developed a six week course designed to help people as they made the transition to retirement.²³ Entitled “Living life to the full in retirement,” the course helps people look back and to see their lives as well-lived and to look forward to retirement with hope, anticipation and courage. At the end of the course people are aware of some of the challenges that may be ahead, but more confident that retirement is an adventure to be enjoyed. Whilst including some practical information, the course is considerably more holistically focused, aiming to help people obtain or maintain a sense of vocation, and a sense of God being present in the whole of their life.

The course provides a range of resourcing and reflection tools that assist participants to see the value in their lives to date as well as to anticipate some of the best things that retirement has to offer. It is realistic about the fact that retirement will have difficult times, and it draws on the work of Albert Jewell and the MHA Care Group²⁴ in “twinning” aspects of ill-being and wellbeing, and showing how the wellbeing dimensions can be used to counter those times when the negative is intruding.²⁵ This helps participants to look forward with hope and courage, rather than experiencing the despair that can be a reality of older people’s lives.²⁶ Such a course could be run by local churches for church members as well as for those in the wider community. It resources older people and helps them to explore and discover what fullness of life means to them.

Shining a Light on Fears around Illness, Death and Dying

We live in a life-focused, death-defying culture. Medical advances mean life lasts much longer than it ever has before. While this is positive, the flipside is that death is frequently relegated to a medical event, perhaps even a “failure” to remain alive. Death, whilst sad, is

²² Available from the author.

²³ Contact the author for further information.

²⁴ Founded as Methodist Homes for the Aged, providing residential care in the UK.

²⁵ Albert Jewell, “Nourishing the Inner Being: A Spirituality Model,” in *Ageing, Spirituality, and Well-Being*, ed. Albert Jewell (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004), 23–26.

²⁶ Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*, 65.

a natural and inevitable part of life. A denial of this reality contributes to deaths made difficult for both the dying and those who love them.²⁷

The “Scriptures reveal a God who is extremely positive about the very process of ageing, whilst being realistic about the problems and failures it sometimes brings.”²⁸ The Bible reveals ageing and death to be natural parts of life, and God is shown to be with us in all stages of life, including in death. Churches can reclaim and express a theology of death and dying, one that is infused with hope and anticipation. Such a worldview offers both hope and realism to older people, particularly as they become more aware of their own mortality.

As well as fearing death or dying, older people can be afraid of illness particularly as it relates to mental and physical incapacitation. Again churches can offer hope to those with such fears. Churches can help people see life as holistic and celebrate the ways older people can flourish spiritually even while other areas of life deteriorate. Churches can also remind people that God always remembers them. In addition, churches can help all people to see that their value is not dependent upon their ability to produce particular outputs. Churches can celebrate and utilise the particular gifts each person has. They can also point people to appropriate resources that help them to be as holistically active as possible. Churches can help people develop theologies of illness, death and dying to assist us when we face these in our own lives or the lives of a loved one. Such matters should be talked about in church services and through other resourcing opportunities.²⁹ Thus local churches have a significant opportunity to resource older people in a variety of ways, helping them to look back and see life well-lived as well as to look forward with hope and courage.

The Local Church Can Be a Place where Connections and Relationships Develop and Flourish

As humans we are created for connections, for relationship: with God,³⁰ with other humans and with the world.³¹ Helping older people live life to the full involves helping them build these connections. Local churches can be places where such connections and relationships develop and flourish. Most churches would see helping people grow in their relationship with God as an essential part of what they do. Churches can also be places where human relationships flourish, as well as places that enhance members’ connection with all of creation.

Part of living life to the full is living well in the midst of relationships with others. As the World Health Organisation’s statement on active ageing says, this includes both relationships with peers and intergenerational relationships.

²⁷ Tara Tucker, “Culture of Death Denial: Relevant or Rhetoric in Medical Education?,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 12, no. 12 (2009): 1105–6.

²⁸ Ian S. Knox, *Older People and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 148.

²⁹ In terms of practical examples, Pilgrim Uniting Church addresses this in part through its “Contingency Matters” initiative: occasional seminars which provide much-needed information and support to older people. Hope Valley Uniting Church recently offered a day seminar entitled, “Leaving your mark on tomorrow.”

³⁰ What Schneiders calls the God-human relationship. Sandra Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Walden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 16.

³¹ See the creation stories in Gen 1 and 2.

Ageing takes place within the context of friends, work associates, neighbours and family members. This is why interdependence as well as intergenerational solidarity ... are important tenets of active ageing.³²

Peer relationships can be encouraged and strengthened by the local church as like-minded individuals come together to share faith, spirituality and life. Programmes and groups that occur beyond Sunday worship services serve as opportunities for such relationships to develop and deepen.

In our increasingly fragmented world, where geographic mobility³³ results in different generations of families living in different cities and countries, local churches often offer a rich source of intergenerational relationships. Intergenerational relationships are understood to be of mutual benefit to both the older and younger person.³⁴ Churches have a unique opportunity to formally or informally link people of different generations, particularly those who do not have family living locally. Intentionally encouraging peer and intergenerational relationships to develop and grow (and providing appropriate contexts for this to occur) reduces the danger of social isolation that some, including (and increasingly) older people can experience. In doing so the local church also provides a place to belong.

The Local Church Can Be a Place to Contribute and a Place that Recognises, Celebrates and Utilises Unique Giftings

Local churches should be places that recognise, celebrate and utilise the gifts of all their members. This means valuing what people do best and celebrating their involvement in that activity. It means recognising, utilising and appreciating whatever wisdom older people have to offer. It means offering a place to volunteer, but also celebrating people's involvements beyond the walls of the church. The next section explores this further.

In Doing Whatever They Do Best

The spiritual journeys of all people, older and younger, can be celebrated through the sharing of lives and stories. Churches should be sure to utilise the particular gifts and abilities of people of all ages in both "seen" and "unseen" roles. As well as enjoying their gifts and abilities, these opportunities communicate clearly that people of all ages and stages are welcome and valued.

Ageing can be accompanied by declining health and lessened abilities in some areas of life. Churches can be proactive about realising what individuals can do, rather than focussing on what they can no longer do. Praying for others is one example of something we can always do. Our oldest members may be willing to receive regular prayer requests and to pray diligently for particular needs in the church and wider community. This can be recognised by the church as a wonderful gift that these people are able to provide. Older adults can know they are making a significant contribution when they share their gifts.

³² Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health Cluster, "Active Ageing: A Policy Framework" (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2002), 12.

³³ In Australia, over 300,000 people move interstate each year ("3412.0—Migration Australia" [Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013]).

³⁴ See for example Jeni Warburton and Deirdre McLaughlin, "Lots of Little Kindnesses?: Valuing the Role of Older Australians as Informal Volunteers in the Community," *Ageing and Society* 25, no. 5 (2005): 721–24.

In Eldering or Mentoring

Jewish culture has, since biblical times, recognised the wisdom of the aged.³⁵ There are 175 references to eldery in the Bible, where elders are “marked by moral rather than official authority, not elected but recognized within the community, never alone but representative of a group that reflected the well-being of the whole community.”³⁶

Houston and Parker see the biblical roles of such recognised elders as being “custodians of families”³⁷ and “fully human, seasoned servants of God.”³⁸ As custodians of families, elders are involved in forming and fostering community, with the wellbeing of the community as the goal. This offers an opportunity for older people to proactively work to establish and maintain the sort of community where everyone can flourish. As servants of God they can be about the work of God in the world God loves. Houston and Parker name six ways in which elders act as exemplars or mentors. Elders foster community, minister from the inner person, enlarge a vision of reality and are devoted to prayer. Further, elders are aware of their own mortality, and serve as a living curriculum, resourcing the next generations.³⁹ As “fully human, seasoned servants of God,”⁴⁰ elders have the opportunity to model dependence upon God, commitment to lifelong learning and continued spiritual growth. Elders are ordinary people, living well and blessing others through their everyday lives.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s 1995 book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*⁴¹ grew out of his questioning about his own ageing. He encourages the reader to view older people as sages, with wisdom to pass on to future generations. This offers a rich alternative to an understanding of ageing that focuses on either an embracing of leisure or an inevitable deterioration. In acting as sages or elders, the gifts and wisdom of older people can find expression.

A Place to Volunteer

Volunteering has many positive effects for the volunteer as well as for the organisation or individual they are serving.⁴² Formal volunteering has been found to lower levels of depression in older people. Both formal and informal volunteering have also been found to have positive health impacts on the volunteers.⁴³ Volunteering also has a range of social and self-perception benefits. These include offering a sense of social engagement,

³⁵ James M. Houston and Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 55.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 56.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 64.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 79–90.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 67.

⁴¹ Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (New York: Warner Books, 1995).

⁴² See for example Nancy Morrow-Howell *et al*, “Effects of Volunteering on the Well-Being of Older Adults,” *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 58, no. 3 (2003): S137–45.

⁴³ Zöe Gill, “Older People and Volunteering” (Adelaide: Office for Volunteers, Government of South Australia, 2006), 12–13.

strengthening informal networks and social support systems, providing a sense of worth, and increasing contact with a range of people.⁴⁴

As well as these benefits that are reported in the literature, Zöe Gill highlighted several self-reported benefits from volunteers themselves, including “keeping busy and active,” “feeling like you are doing something useful and active,” “taking responsibility,” learning new skills or developing existing skills and interests, contributing to the decision-making of an organisation and having an opportunity for social interaction.⁴⁵ Therefore, when churches provide opportunities for meaningful and significant volunteering, it can be of mutual benefit to the church, to the particular group served and to the volunteers themselves.

Significance in volunteering can be found when people use their gifts and skills in meaningful ways. This occurs either because they are particularly gifted for the role in which they volunteer or because there is particular significance or importance in the work that is being done by the agency in which they are volunteering. It is essential not to keep people working in roles that no longer bring them a sense of fulfilment. This not only diminishes the effectiveness of their involvement but also restricts the potential involvement of newer people coming into a role. Thus a healthy organisation will have people moving into (and out of) voluntary roles.

A Place that Celebrates Volunteering into the Wider Community

Churches should expect and celebrate the fact that church members will volunteer beyond the walls of the church. Some agencies (Golden Gurus, for example)⁴⁶ help skilled volunteers find opportunities for which they are uniquely suited. Volunteer involvement beyond the church is an excellent way of establishing and maintaining relationships with people not associated with church: an opportunity to be salt and light in the world (Matt 5:12–14). It also enables those with specific gifts and passions to find expression. Churches should celebrate the involvement of church members in volunteering beyond the ministries of the church. This could be done in conjunction with Volunteers Week (held annually in October in Australia). Thus volunteering can help older adults live life to the full, as their gifts and abilities are shared, enjoyed and celebrated.

Conclusion

Local churches are uniquely placed to help older adults live life to the full. Churches can be places of resourcing, of relational interaction and of celebrated voluntary involvement. Ageism has no place in Australia today. Older adults can flourish and live life to the full at all stages of life. They can be helped to look back and see their lives as well-lived and to look to the future with hope, anticipation and courage.

⁴⁴ Gill, “Older People and Volunteering,” 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ To find out more, see www.tinyurl.com/goldengurus.