Conversations on Aging

Rev. Beth Long-Higgins
Objectives

- Identify social narratives
- Share alternative constructs
- Research based best practices
- Intro for spirituality of aging
COTTAGE GROVE, Minnesota (AP) — A struggling Minnesota church is asking its older parishioners to leave in hopes of making it more attractive to young families.

Grove United Methodist Church in the St. Paul suburb of Cottage Grove is closing in June, with plans to relaunch in November. The present members, most of them over 60 years old, will be invited to worship elsewhere, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported. The church is asking that they stay away for two years, then consult the pastor about reapplying.

Stella and Jon Knapp of Cottage Grove were the only members with children at the recent service, and they hate the plan.

“If it happened, I wouldn’t come here anymore,” said Stella Knapp, 34. As six-year members, the couple loves the church and said they didn’t mind being the youngest members.
https://frameworksinstitute.org/reframing-aging.html

- AARP
- The American Federation for Aging Research
- The American Geriatrics Society
- American Society on Aging
- The Gerontological Society of Aging
- Grantmakers in Aging
- National Hispanic Council on Aging
- National Council on Aging

Funded by:
Anticipate Public Thinking

On-the-street interviews
Surveys
Series of qualitative tests
Public Model of Aging: #1

IDEAL AGING

• Self-sufficiency and Staying Active
• Earned Leisure Activities
  • Building Intimacy With Family And Friends
• Accumulating Wisdom
Public Model of Aging: #2
Perceived “REAL”

- Deterioration
- Loss of Control
- Dependency
- Reduced Potential
• Anxiety
• Mutes ability to improve the experience of aging
• The “Ideal” can’t win all the time and the “Real” is seen as the only other option
Public Model of Aging: #3

US VS. THEM

- Older as “other”
- Zero-Sum
- Digital incompetence

Leads to sense that any public policy for older adults come at expense of actions on behalf of “the rest of us”
We all are aging.

Ageism in the USA: The paradox of elderly prejudice

Ashton Applewhite
The biggest problem among the dominant patterns of public understanding is the common assumption that individuals are exclusively responsible for how they age.

--Lindland et. Al 2005, Frameworks
Public Model of Aging: #5
Modern Life is Hard

• **Dispersed Family:** unfortunate but inevitable part of changing culture

• **Economic and Employment Challenges**

• **Doomed Social Security**
3 Solutions per Public View

1. Just need better *individual choices* and planning
2. More *information* and education
3. Nothing Can be done
Expert’s View

3 Cognitive Holes in Public Thinking
In Ohio there is a **19 year difference in life expectancy** based on the zip code in which you live.

This is NOT because there are zip codes full of people who make poor choices.
2. Affects of Ageism

Ageism is a combination of prejudicial attitudes toward older people, old age, and aging itself; discriminatory practices against olders, and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about them.

Self-perception about aging will influence how you age.

-Becca Levi, Yale University

Prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age.
3. Growing Population
The Expert View: Characteristics of Older Adults

1. Aging is **normal, lifelong and cumulative**
   - Biological changes occur with aging process

2. Aging is **distinct from disease and decline**
   - Older years bring new opportunities and capacities for growth, contribution and self-expression
   - Aging is not something to battle, but to **embrace**
3. **Longevity**: permanent & unprecedented
   - Have economic, social & political impact

4. **Olders are heterogeneous**:
   - Health
   - Income
   - Gender
   - Race/ethnicity
   - Education
Opportunity: Civic and social Contributions

- Continuing education
- Mentoring
- Volunteering
- Second careers
Opportunity: Rethink work and retirement

- **Working longer:** financial survival and meaning and purpose
- **Greater flexibility** (also for carers/caregivers)
Opportunity: Make Public Spending more efficient

Experts: “We are wealthy enough” to afford a robust Social Security system
Opportunity: Address Ageism

Olders currently experience lack of access, lack of opportunity and institutionalized and structural discrimination.
Opportunity: well-prepared healthcare workforce

• Need to expand and improve **geriatric training**

• Provide **public insurance options for long-term care**
Opportunity: Support Carers

- 40 million people provide unpaid care to family and loved ones
- Need better supports for these individuals
- Experts: legal and infrastructural ways that family care can be supported through revised public policy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embrace</th>
<th>How should we approach aging?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environments</td>
<td>What determines outcomes and who is responsible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important Concern</td>
<td>How big of a concern is ageism?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenty</td>
<td>What can be done to ensure wellbeing in older age?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>What is the role of public policy?</td>
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- Battle
- Individuals
- Absent from Thinking
- Nothing Much
- Limited Role
The new Frame

Value
Justice
Why does it matter? What’s at stake?

Value
Ingenuity
Why does it matter? What’s at stake?
Avoid the Traps

**TRAGIC story** → Include the social context

**SYMPATHY** → Need to treat everyone fairly

**FATALISM** → We/Us
Metaphors

Redefine Ageism

Always define ageism when using the term. It disrupts the “othering” of older people and sends the message that older age, like any other time in life, involves both challenges and opportunities.

Social Structure

Move aging to a public policy level: it is not just about personal choices, but health care policies, tax policies, transportation, housing etc.

Building Momentum

Aging society as an untapped resource (as opposed to “fighting”, “battling” or “staying young”)

...
Instead of these words or cues:
“Tidal wave”, “tsunami”, and catastrophic terms for population of older people

Try:
Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: “as Americans live longer and healthier lives…”
Instead of these words or cues:

“Choice”, “planning”, “control”, and other individual determinants of aging outcomes

Try:

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: “as Americans live longer and healthier lives…”

Emphasize how to improve social contexts: “Let’s find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age.”
Instead of these words or cues:

“Seniors”, “elderly”, “aging dependents” and “other”-ing terms supporting stereotypes

Try:

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: “as Americans live longer and healthier lives…”

Emphasize how to improve social contexts: “Let’s find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age.”

Using more neutral (“older people”) and inclusive (“we” and “us”) terms
Instead of these words or cues:

“Struggle”, “battle”, “fight” and similar conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences

Try:

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: “as Americans live longer and healthier lives…”

Emphasize how to improve social contexts: “Let’s find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age.”

Using more neutral (“older people”) and inclusive (“we” and “us”) terms

Building Momentum metaphor: “Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities”
Instead of these words or cues:

Using the word “ageism” without explanation

Try:

Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: “as Americans live longer and healthier lives…”

Emphasize how to improve social contexts: “Let’s find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age.”

Using more neutral ("older people") and inclusive ("we" and "us") terms

Building Momentum metaphor: “Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities”

Define Ageism: discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes
Instead of these words or cues:

- Making generic appeals to the need to “do something” about aging.

Try:

- **Talking affirmatively about changing demographics**: “as Americans live longer and healthier lives…”

- Emphasize how to **improve social contexts**: “Let’s find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age.”

- Using more neutral (“older people”) and **inclusive** (“we” and “us”) terms.

- **Building Momentum** metaphor: “Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities.”

- **Define Ageism**: discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes.

- Use concrete examples like intergenerational community centers to illustrate inventive solutions.
DON’T

Talk about aging as a “civil rights issue”

This led people to only think about it terms of offenses that could be litigated

Prompts people to compare it to racism or sexism and conclude that it can’t be as bad
Don’t refer to older people as “other”

We
And
Us
Don’t overdo the positivity

“balanced and careful” includes reminders that social context and environments matter to wellbeing
When trying to communicate understanding and support for general cause or specific policy, **avoid using individual-level examples**....

focus on changes to the decision-making context rather than guiding personal decisions

**DO emphasize the context**
Healthy or successful aging has been the focus of attention lately. People are looking to improve their diets, start regular exercise regimens, and decrease the level of stress in their lives. They are doing this not only to increase their longevity, but also to increase the number of healthy and active years of life. People are living longer and living healthier due to changes in lifestyle that are being recommended by physicians, promoted at community and senior centers, and considered trendy by the media.

We know that to be healthy and well we need opportunities to engage with our communities and access to support. As an integral part of our society, the health and well-being of older Americans improves when there are varied opportunities to stay physically active and socially engaged. We need to do everything we can to ensure that all communities have these opportunities for engagement—such as community centers with programming for older Americans, farmers markets, and chances to volunteer in our schools and libraries. And we need to make sure we give older adults reliable and safe ways to get where they need to go.
Theology of Aging

Through Genesis Creation Stories

Redefine Ageism
Building Momentum
Social Structure

Toward Tomorrow – Together We Learn, Together We Flourish
We are created to age—
• Aging is normal
• Aging is a gift

We embody the Divine spark from our first to our last day.

We are in relationship with the sacred.

So God Created Humankind
In the image of God
God created them
Male and Female God created them

Genesis 1:27
Created to be in Relationship(s)

Relationship
• with the Creator/Divine
• with creation
• with creatures
• with other human beings

It is not good that one should be alone; I will make them a helper as a partner.
Genesis 2:18
The “pendencies”

The fear of **DEPENDENCY**
- Fear of illness
- Fear of loneliness
- Fear of death

The value (and myth) of **INDEPENDENCY**
- Role of choices and Self-efficacy
- No one is an island

The necessity of **INTER-DEPENDENCY** = Community/system of support

Redefine Ageism
Created to Create: Generativity

- Not just about propagating the human race-- **Generativity**

- Reframe older adulthood
  - **Creative potential**
  - Opportunity for new ideas and processes
Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:15

Our meaning and purpose changes with the seasons of our life.

It is important to know what gets us out of bed in the morning.

The LORD God took Adam and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.
• Garden was home, safe and secure and all was provided.
• Tension arises when both decide to make their own choice …….They wanted to be wise.
• Expulsion from the Garden: learning to live with consequences of their choice.
• God provides them with second set of “clothes”… not abandoned.
Implications for ALL sectors of society

Need adjustments:

• Employment
• Health care
• Transportation
• Urban planning
  • Housing
• Community development
• Churches
Transforming Aging through Engagement
Education & Advocacy
with Congregations and Community Partners

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