



DISCIPLESHIP IN LATER LIFE

Why churches should encourage the discipleship journey for those in later life - and some ideas how to.

By Alex Drew

Following Jesus, learning from him through the Bible, and doing what he calls us to do is a lifelong quest. Discipleship should never be something that we used to do.

In later life we become more reflective; perhaps harbouring regrets, or evaluating our life's achievements, asking questions about our grief and our disappointments, and perhaps even doubting what we believe.

This represents both challenges and opportunities for Christian discipleship.

We need to help people navigate this terrain through the lens of the Bible, helping people into lifelong discipleship rhythms that will not only sustain them through the stages of later life, but even prepare them for fruitfulness then.

My friend Iris had followed Jesus as her Lord and Saviour from the age of 11. Seventy-eight years later she suffered a massive stroke which left her almost unable to move or speak.

She was severely disabled during this time; she was by no means living the life she planned or had previously enjoyed, and yet during the last and most difficult years of her life she exuded the glory of Jesus with every fibre of her being.

Without words or movement Iris engaged in worship, prayer, and readings from the Bible like she was sitting at the feet of Jesus. And in her interactions with visitors and those who cared for her, Iris showed kindness, patience, and always a beautiful smile; continuing to bear witness to Jesus.

It was an extraordinary lesson for me of the value of discipleship that sustains. I have no doubt that what Iris was experiencing and 'shining out' during the most challenging time of her life, was the fruit of a lifetime investment in her relationship with Jesus - discipleship.

Iris had been a committed member of her local Baptist church, where she worshipped and served until her stroke. She was dedicated to her daily Bible

readings and prayers, and she responded to God's call to help those in need financially and practically.

Iris was by no means perfect, but in later life these habits, which she'd been building since she was 11 years old, were well practised, deeply rooted, and enabled her to simultaneously endure hardship and glorify God; what an incredible example.

How we invest in discipleship throughout our lives will affect us in later life and, far from being something that can take a back seat post-retirement, knowing Jesus and following in his footsteps should become increasingly intentional in our later years.

That's why it's important for churches to consider how they'll support people in their walk with God through transitions like retirement, bereavement, accepting disappointments, and increasing dependence. All of which are magnified as the years advance.

Affirming people through these stages of life by providing resources and activities that encourage the discipleship journey through these transitions can not only see spiritual lives sustained, but can see them improve with age, and even soar. Praise God that he will not stop the work he began in us until it is completed!

You'd think that with the promise of retirement, for example, it would be automatic for our relationship with God to deepen as we have more time to spend with him, in his word and with his people. But at Faith in Later Life, we hear of people suffering an identity crisis at the point of retirement, struggling to carve out a routine for

devotion, overwhelmed by the expectations of grandchildren and neighbours, suddenly perplexed at the many ways in which God 'might' be calling them to serve now, and unclear as to the way ahead.

We also hear of older people feeling invisible and undervalued in their churches as the focus is firmly on celebrating youth, while their lifetime of experience is often overlooked and sidelined. Over time this has the knock-on effect of seeing older people become recipients rather than participants in the life of the church, and their spiritual fervour dips.

With such a plentiful harvest and few workers, can we afford to limit and prematurely shelve our most experienced workers in this way?

Churches who are intentional about helping people follow in Jesus' footsteps for the whole of their lives continue to encourage and facilitate in older people a deepening relationship with Jesus through scripture reading, prayer, worship and service. They're also helping people to have a clearer theology around issues such as forgiveness, eternity, suffering, and dependence.

There are several resources which can support churches in helping people through some of the transitions of later life, including:

- LICC's *RePurpose* is a six-session discussion guide to help those wanting to grow as disciples in retirement
- Knox's book *Finishing Well: A God's Eye view of Ageing* encourages and challenges readers to embrace later life from God's perspective

- *Kintsugi Hope Wellbeing Groups* facilitate conversations around issues like disappointment, loss, anxiety, anger, perfectionism, shame and resilience
- *Evangelistic series* such as *Hymns We Love*, *Alpha*, and *Christianity Explored* help Christians return to the roots of their faith, fostering confidence for the road ahead

Older people everywhere continue to bear the fruit promised in Psalm 92 as they engage with lifelong discipleship, responding to God's good news through challenging times, receiving his hope, and bearing witness to his goodness through the gifts he has given them.

In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright...



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