

**BELIEF** By the Rev. Katheryn Barlow-Williams

# Lessons from ministering to an older congregation

In this list I am not suggesting older is better than younger, but it is not worse. Here are 10 things I have learned from serving an older congregation:

**1. Older isn't dead.** In a culture that worships youth, an older congregation is often lamented. How quickly we dismiss the faithful wisdom of our seniors. Their enduring love and generosity is a divine gift.

**2. Choose joy!** One of our 94-year-old members says, "I don't know why I am still here. But as long as I am alive, I am going to do my best to bring joy to others." Every day we can take the time to spread joy.

**3. Try something new.** One of our "70-something" members shared this quote: "When's the last time you did something for the first time?" What an awesome reminder that we are called to be life-long learners.

**4. Have fun!** When my 83-year-old father decided to go zip-lining in Belize, I expressed concern to one of our sage members. She said, "Let him go and have fun. What's the worst that could happen? He won't die young." By the way, he had a blast with his grandchildren and created memories that will last a lifetime.

**5. Life goes on.** There is no easy path through the agony of loss when a loved one dies. It is a slow and arduous journey, but we must take it lest we get trapped in despair. With faith and the support of loved ones



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or a professional counselor, we can continue to discover life after loss.

**6. Forgiveness.** Unless we practice forgiveness, we are doomed to misery. Forgiveness does not condone a wrong. It sets us free to find inner peace.

**7. Celebrate the sunrise.** One of our members who was dying said, "When I open my eyes in the morning and see sunlight out the window, I thank God for the miracle. I made it through another night." Take time to give thanks for the miracle of each new dawn.

**8. Death is a gift.** It reminds us that our time on this earth is limited and precious. When I told one of our active 95 year-old-members that she was amazing, she responded, "Yes. I just hope I don't live too long. I would like to stay active, but that won't happen if I live too long." Death reminds us not to waste time.

**9. Embrace change.** When Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans, an older couple evacuated to their son's home in San Antonio. They had planned to stay only until it was safe to return to New Orleans. However, the damage was so severe, they were forced to relocate to San Antonio. The husband said, "I

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thought after I turned 75, God was out of adventures for me, but I was wrong." Though they had lost their home, they had not lost their faith. Trusting God empowers us to embrace and grow through change.

**10. Wrinkles are wonderful!** This sign of aging diagrams the story of a long life. As a pastor, I am honored to know the life stories of many parishioners. During Sunday worship, when I see all the beautiful faces in the pews, I am inspired by those who have transcended the passing struggles of life with faith and love.

Like any church, we have growing edges. It is a challenge for us to let go of the way we have always done things to reach future generations. But we must rise to the challenge. We have much to learn from young people as we seek to grow in faith, and we have much to share.

Together, young and old — and everything in between — can show the world how to find abundant joy in every season of life.

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