FACING AGEISM: TOWARD A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

by

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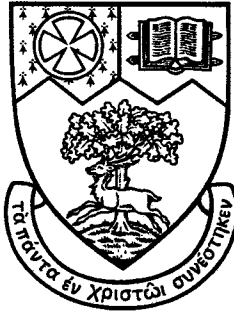2014

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ABSTRACT

Facing Ageism: Toward a Christian Response

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Most people in Western culture are inclined, if not obsessed, with the need to maintain

perpetual youthfulness in their actions, attitudes, and image. This cultural ideal is fueled

by inner fear as well as age-related stereotypes, prejudice, media messaging,

consumerism, and lifestyle strategies. Most of these age-related factors are connected to

"ageism," a 1969 term coined by Robert Butler. While the majority of people display

various ageist attitudes, often it is without awareness. In a culture that is so profoundly

accepting of such a phenomenon, individuals and the church should consider an

appropriate Christian response in light of ageism's impacts that include discrimination,

loss of self-worth, fear of aging, and judgment of self and others. Once aware of its

prevalence and impact, this thesis proposes that the church can respond by raising

awareness of ageism and its implications, and modeling a "better way" in its daily life

and ministry.

For my loving and supportive husband, Gary, who sees laugh lines as nothing more than evidence of joyous memories.

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Illustrations

Introduction

The term ageism was coined in 1969 by Robert Butler, the first director of the

National Institute on Aging. It was his opinion that the stereotypes, discrimination, and

negativity around aged people were similar to concerns found in sexism and racism.

While contemporary Westerners are often unaware of ageism's scope, most are confident

that they are not guilty of discriminating against older members of the population. While

this may be true, we often show ageist thinking in unconscious ways. Common

depictions consider old people as frail, hard of hearing, and incapable. Seeing an older

person driving on the highway immediately stirs thoughts around safety and spotting an

old person at the front of the grocery line makes us wonder how much slower this line

will be as a result. For those who are willing to even celebrate birthdays, "hilarious"

cards poking fun at aging and the aged abound—in truth they are derogatory and

demeaning. Expressions such as being "over the hill," or "having a senior's moment," are

negative depictions of aging. In the marketplace, shoppers are assured that by using "anti-

aging" products they can avoid aging, or at least create such an illusion:

> We in our culture abhor becoming aged. And, for good reason {sic}.
> Frequently, the elders have been stripped of their resources, functions, and
> intimacies. For many, the future is more the holder of things feared than
> things promised. The ultimate challenge of the elderly is the inescapability
> of death.[1]

While we might be able to identify with ageist language and ways of thinking, we

readily dismiss them with justifications such as: "We don't mean anything by it—it's

funny!" "Everyone does it!" "No one has a problem with it," or "It's commonplace

everywhere—at work, at home, on television, in the movies, in advertising—what's the

big deal?" While negative racial comments and derogatory statements about one sex or

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[1] Holman, "Ageing as a Spiritual Journey," 283.

the other are now cause for alarm, there was a time when they were common and

acceptable in our culture.[2] When we stop and consider how these shifts have lead to a

better world, we must be honest in our assessment of what a culture could look like if

ageism were reduced, if not eradicated. There has been increased awareness and

considerable attention given to the study of racism and sexism:

> ... but comparatively very little research... has been directed to what some
> refer to as the 'third ism;' ageism... But why the lack of interest? There
> are a myriad of possible reasons, but perhaps the most obvious is that age
> prejudice is one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of
> prejudice in the world.[3]

Is a conversation on ageism relevant to Christians and the church? While one

author says there is "probably less ageism"[4] in the church another says that it is

"widespread not only in the marketplaces but also in religious circles."[5] By simply

observing those who are involved in our local church, it is probable that we will

recognize both conscious and unconscious evidence of ageist attitudes and behaviours as

well as the influence of the anti-aging attitude that pervades our culture. While there are

many reasons why a conversation on ageism is important in the church, one of the

primary concerns is the spiritual impact that it has on the lives of our brothers and sisters.

There is a connection between "ageist thoughts and attitudes" and a "fear of aging."

These become motivators of anti-aging thinking and establish youth as the ultimate ideal.

If these fear-infested values take root in our lives, spiritual and theological implications

may include two things: 1) fear and insecurity as we face aging rather than accepting life

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[2] Culture is a difficult word to define. For the purposes of this thesis, it will encompass a broad range of
things that characterize a society including social structures, social practices, arts, customs, beliefs, values
and codes of behaviour. See Jonathan F. Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford
University, 2011), vii-viii.

[3] Nelson, *Ageism*, ix.

[4] Seymour, "Churches," 71. He proposes that this is because of three factors: increased number of older
members, intergenerational activities, and younger families who foster isolated elders.

[5] Gentzler, "Is Your Church Ageist?" 1.

as a gift of God, and 2) confusion about where we find our value as people. It is important to address these binding, culturally imposed beliefs and minister to the people of God with life-infusing truth. As aging people it is in all of our best interest that we take this seriously. Of racism, sexism and ageism, ageism "is the only one in which the members of the in-group (the young) will eventually join the out-group (the old)."[6]

It is important that the church face this cultural phenomenon and see its potential as a change agent—to use its influence and relationships to increase awareness of the issue and impact of ageism and walk alongside its congregants as they all move toward a liberating and theologically informed approach to aging. As a first step in a complex issue, the church can intentionally contribute to reducing ageism by increasing awareness and setting a new trajectory that edifies people of all ages.

This thesis will show that ageism is a complex, prolific, and powerful force in contemporary Western culture. Ageism affects people of all ages through language, attitudes, and actions that instill a fear of aging and reflects the presupposition that youth is the ideal time of life. It contends that those who are influenced by this cultural phenomenon can be trapped in a unique type of self-inflicted oppression where older age is resisted and fears associated with aging have deep-seated roots in a distorted source of personal validation. This thesis will present a theologically informed view that may move us toward a freer and more contented approach to aging in spite of current cultural messaging and proposes that the church can be a catalyst for change by intentionally countering ageist attitudes and perceptions through ministry, word, and church life.

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[6] Seth, "Ageism: Its Origins and Effects," 507.

Research Methodology: The Pastoral Cycle

This thesis will draw upon The Pastoral Cycle approach to practical theology that, having been rooted in liberation theology and having an *orthopraxis* focus, has extended its influence "far beyond the immediate impact of liberation theology."[7] The Pastoral Cycle involves "bringing the 'horizon' of social context (poverty, racism, oppression) into contact with that of theological world-views."[8] Juan-Luis Segundo first used the term 'hermeneutical circle,' identifying that *orthopraxis* results from interpretation that is fueled by practical engagement.[9] His circle—now called The Pastoral Cycle—"embodies the method at the heart of theology as *praxis*"[10] and consists of four movements or stages that start with practical engagement and end with the same: immersion/experience, social analysis, theological reflection/hermeneutics, and *praxis*/pastoral planning.

The first movement requires immersion in the context that is being addressed. The Pastoral Cycle begins with "actions and struggles and works out a theoretical structure to throw light on and examine these actions."[11] In this thesis we will begin with our shared experience in the contemporary culture of ageism replete with negative attitudes and anti-aging sentiments. Early commitment to the desired change includes recognition of our own involvement with ageism —as well as an honest examination of our own fears and misplaced values.[12]

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[7] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 188.
[8] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods,* 188.
[9] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods,* 188. Graham cites Juan-Luis Segundo for this idea, from *The Liberation Theology,* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, [1976] 1982.
[10] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods,* 188.
[11] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods,* 189.
[12] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods,* 189.

The second movement "probes beneath the superficial or received accounts into a deeper understanding"[13] that investigates what is accepted as the cultural norm—in this case, ageism and youth as the highest ideal. In this thesis, the cultural and historical analysis will provide us with a deeper understanding of why and how these attitudes affect us. The processes will be guided by the principle that most people are implicitly or explicitly ageist.

The third movement seeks voices that speak to the experiences shared by aging persons in light of their context through the use of Christian values that "are tested against the contemporary situation."[14] It aims to discover the "bonds of affinity between the biblical texts and contexts and their own contemporary struggles."[15] In the case of treatment of the aging; scripture, theology, and a variety of social science voices will speak to existing paradigms of thought that are present within modern North American culture when it comes to aging.

The final movement takes us back to faithful practice, now informed by the "values of the theological reflection"[16] and results in a "theology of *praxis* insofar as it leads to social action [as well as] a broader spectrum of faithful discipleship."[17] In this case, the readings, reflections, and interpretations also matter "because they serve to excavate the theological values by which faithful practice is to be guided."[18] In the case of living in an ageist society, the methodology will result in new actions and ways of

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[13] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 189.
[14] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 190.
[15] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 190.
[16] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 190.
[17] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 190.
[18] Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 190.

thinking for faithful disciples of Jesus as well as a proactive ecclesial response to the cultural and theological analysis that will positively impact the community of faith.

Thus the methodology offered by the Pastoral Cycle will enable the thesis to effectively address the issue of aging in our culture from a theologically informed perspective, and provide insight into how the church can offer a response to it.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter One

Chapter one will introduce aging and ageism and explore its dominating, yet relatively unnoticed influence. By defining and expounding ageism, the reader will get a clearer understanding of its many layers, its depth, and its prevalence. Marked by stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination that are often aimed at older people, ageist thinking is reflected in language, assumptions, and unjust treatment. It "has been called the ultimate prejudice, the last discrimination, the cruelest rejection… Like racism and sexism, it is prejudice or discrimination against a category of people—in this case older people."[19] This thesis proposes that ageism is a very real and powerful pattern of thinking and action that is detrimental to the people of God and that goes hand in hand with the widely accepted view that youth is our cultural ideal.

This is an important topic for the church as well as for each aging person within it.[20] Whether we realize it or not the vast majority of us unknowingly participate in ageist actions and attitudes as evidenced in one study that found "95% of the participants had negative views of old people; this is a higher proportion than for implicit racism or

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[19] Palmore, "The Ageism Survey: First Findings," 572. Palmore cites Robert Butler for this concept and takes it from his article "Ageism," *The Encyclopedia of Aging* (New York: Springer, 1995, second ed.), 38-39.

[20] I now recognize how much I am a product of my culture and how ageist my own thoughts and behaviours are.

sexism."[21] Awareness is important and like racism and sexism, steps toward any sort of eradication begin when we "become aware of not only the blatant forms of ageism, but also its more subtle forms that operate within us all."[22] Understanding our experience and identifying it by name prepares us to further analyze it in chapter two.

Chapter Two

Chapter two will further investigate what lies beneath the surface of this cultural norm in order to give us a deeper understanding of its roots, the ways in which it influences us, and how it causes us to react. The historical review begins with the Medieval Era's holistic view of life and then outlines how advancement in science and medicine caused a "profound shift in the late eighteenth century."[23] Longer lives began to associate death with old age and, "as a result, fear of aging and fear of death merged."[24] Additional highlights include the nineteenth Victorian Era and the twentieth century's scientific movement, which ended with a resurgence of the anti-aging phenomenon that saw aging as "an abhorrent disease that must be eliminated."[25]

Chapter two goes on to present ageist thinking in contemporary culture as continuously reinforced and perpetuated by media advertising, anti-aging consumerism, and the successful aging paradigm whose problematic term "risk[s] buying into an exclusionary, ageist, and even discriminatory perspective."[26] Fall-out from such popular thinking stems back to the question of value and worth as Christians struggle to find

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[21] Levy, "Eradication of Ageism," 578.
[22] Levy, "Eradication of Ageism," 579.
[23] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging," 70.
[24] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging," 73.
[25] Haber, "Anti-Aging: Why Now?" 13.
[26] Dillaway and Byrnes, "Reconsidering Successful Aging," 717.

acceptance in the eyes of the culture. Chapter three continues the discussion of ageist thinking as it pertains to individuals and the body of Christ.

Chapter Three

Chapter three provides input from social science, Christian scriptural, and Christian theological perspectives that address the existing paradigms of thought affecting individuals, the community of faith, and the culture at large. Social science voices from experts elucidate four common stereotypes about older adults, identify their inaccuracies, and show how increased awareness about stereotypes and diversity can contribute to the reduction of ageism.

Relevant scripture—notably 1 Cor 12:12-26, which provides excellent ageist-applicable teaching for the twenty-first century church, asserts that Paul's use of the "body of Christ" metaphor shows the importance of unity, diversity, and interdependence in the church. As ageism is considered, this text addresses issues influenced by stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Theological perspectives contribute to the larger questions of who we are, how we interact with others, and how we face changes in life that include fears surrounding loss of independence. God's love, which is a key source of freedom and self-worth, will also be explored.

Chapter Four

Based on the experience and analysis of aging in the midst of an ageist society and after considering the many voices that speak to it, chapter four seeks to develop *praxis* that addresses both reflection-based discipleship and social action through the church. Paradigms should shift and new values emerge in how we see ourselves and others when we recognize and accept the seriousness of ageism, become aware of

ageism's influence in Western culture, acknowledge its potential negative impact on individuals and the body of Christ, and better understanding stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Understanding that we can contribute to the reduction of ageism requires a response.

Chapter four presents the church as a place where ageism is not only acknowledged but discouraged, and where acceptance, honour, and respect for people is paramount. It can be a place where people go to escape the ageist attitudes of the world around them. By example and through teaching, the church can model and encourage personal reflection, present the anti-ageism message simply, show how community and life is better without ageism, connect the importance of reducing ageism to Christian beliefs, and model a better way to engage in ministry that is inclusive while aware of the culture's influence. Churches have a unique role because they "can influence more people than any other type of institution."[27] The church can be a catalyst for change by utilizing their resources and influence.

It is hoped that this thesis raises a three-fold awareness of ageism, evaluates it in light of the Christian worldview, and offers hope. The first part of awareness demonstrates that ageism is prolifically present in our society and consequently it is often present in the lives of individuals and the practices of the church. Second, this thesis hopes to illuminate both the obvious and subtle damage that ageism can cause to individuals (others and ourselves). Third, this thesis is hope-filled because it seeks to empower individuals and the body of Christ as they face the truth of this unacceptable 'ism" through reflection of self and church, by seeing the problems in light of Christian faith, and by offering suggestions for a better way.

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[27] Palmore, "Reducing Ageism," 259.

While the social sciences have done some work on ageism, it is still relatively unknown to many people. Theological writing on the issue is extremely sparse. This attempt to raise awareness of ageism in light of a Christian worldview seems to be a suitable addition to the good work started by Butler and continued by other researchers and writers. My *hope* is that this thesis begins conversations that challenge this societal norm in the name of justice, love, and respect, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. My *dream* is that twenty-second century history books will record our part of the story as a time where everyday ageism was challenged within the church and consequently set a new trajectory toward an ageist-free society.

Chapter One: Ageism in Western Culture

Evidence of ageist stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination are ubiquitous in our Western culture.[1] Because "age prejudice is one of the most socially condoned and institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world" it goes relatively unnoticed much like racism and sexism did decades ago.[2] While racism and sexism are far from eradicated, in many parts of the Western world they are moving along a trajectory toward equality and acceptance that ageism is not. This chapter will take a closer look at what ageism is, evaluate its broad and narrow perspectives, and consider explicit verses implicit forms. The chapter will culminate in a proposed definition of the term "ageism" which will determine how the term is being used throughout the thesis. This chapter will also investigate the interconnected elements of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination which act as origins of ageism. Finally we will look at Terror Management Theory which proposes a subconscious reason for our ageist ways.

1. Ageism

A negative perception of people who are old—even the concept of getting old itself—is reflected in how we feel, what we believe, and how we act toward them.[3] These

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[1] For the purpose of this thesis, ageism will refer to those people residing in the Western world, with a particular emphasis on those in Canada and the United States. Ageism is not necessarily equally present in all parts of the world, nor is it probable that it is equally represented in all areas of Canada and the United States. Todd D. Nelson suggests ageism is more prevalent in the West because there is less emphasis on tradition and because cultural values include individualism, personal control, and innovation. In some Canadian and American regions and people groups these values may not be embraced and it is possible that in those places ageism is less present or not present at all. This may be the case in native Hawaiian families or Inuit people groups. Nelson's comments are in "Ageism," *The Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, edited by Todd D. Nelson. (New York, NY: Psychology, 2009), 436-7.

[2] Nelson, *Ageism*, ix.

[3] Old can have a variety of terms such as "elderly," "old-old," "young old," or "older." There is no standardized approach to determine age labels and the terminology is rather fluid. For example, when the average life span was around 50 years of age (1900), someone who was 40 would have been "old" because they were considered to be ten years from the average age of death. Currently in Western culture people are judged to be "old" based on chronological age as well as how "well" they are aging (see page 2). Because in many ways "old" is in the eye of the beholder, this thesis will leave exact numbers and perceptions to

negative feelings, beliefs, and actions are often expressions of ageism.[4] After considering

sexism, racism, and the social issues around aging, Robert N. Butler coined the term

"ageism" and described it as "a process of systematical stereotyping of and

discrimination against people because they are old."[5] More recently it has been defined as

"the biased and unfavorable attitudes people hold of aging adults"[6] or "prejudice and

discrimination against older people based on the belief that aging makes people less

attractive, intelligent, sexual, and productive."[7]

Narrow versus Broad Ageism

In 2005, Bill Bytheway broke ageism into a narrow and broad scope. In a narrow

sense, ageism is "discrimination against older people on grounds of age. Just as women

are disadvantaged and oppressed as a result of sexism, just as Black people and other

minority ethnic groups are oppressed by racism, so older people suffer from

discrimination as a result of ageism."[8] In this narrow sense, people are treated and

perceived differently based on *chronological* age. It is not difficult for people in our

culture to associate aging issues, such as discrimination, with chronological age.

Ageism can also be seen in a broader sense where people's reactions may be

connected to the fear of aging. This fear can cause judgment of others based on *how* they

are aging. For example, if an old person maintains a youthful image and has a busy and

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the readers discretion with a general understanding that "older" is intended to indicate that the person/people is/are past their middle years and past typical retirement age. If it is necessary to determine the very old, special designation will be made. Context, personal experience, and individual beliefs will factor into the readers perspective. "Aging people" refers to people of all ages who are progressing in years. While terms like "old" are often best put in quotes to alert the reader to the awkwardness and unclarity of the label, for ease of reading the constant use of quotation marks will be excluded.

[4] "Ageism" and "aging" will occasionally have alternate spelling in this thesis. Correct spelling in Europe and found in European quotes will be "agism" and "ageing."

[5] Butler, "Why Survive?: Being Old in America," 12. This description was given in 1969.

[6] Montepare et al., "A Social-Developmental View of Ageism," 77.

[7] Wilkinson and Ferraro, "Thirty Years of Ageism," 340.

[8] Bytheway, "Ageism and Age Categorization," 361.

active life, he or she is considered to be aging "well" which is judged positively. However, if a person— irrespective of *chronological* age, is either looking old or is not busy and active, he or she may be judged as *not* aging "well." "So in the narrow sense, we experience ageism through being judged to be [chronologically] *old*. In contrast, we experience it in the broader sense through being made aware of age and through being judged according to *how [well or not well]* we are ageing."[9] Often times these outcomes are influenced by stereotypes that dominate our cultural psyche.

Explicit verses Implicit Ageism

Some people are *explicit* in their ageist attitudes and behaviour making it easy to identify. However, identifying ageism is not always that straight forward because, for others, ageist attitudes and behaviours are *implicit*, that is, "without conscious awareness, control, or intention to harm."[10] They exist in the "everyday thoughts and feelings, judgments and decisions of ordinary folk" who are completely unaware of their presence.[11] Becca R. Levy reports that in one study "95% of the participants had negative views of old people"—it is probable that many of those participants would not have considered themselves ageist.[12] All people are affected by implicit ageism to one degree or another; in fact, all age groups have a tendency "to have negative implicit attitudes toward the elderly and positive implicit attitudes toward the young."[13]

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[9] Bytheway, "Ageism and Age Categorization," 362. Italics to the word "how [well or not well]" are mine, however "old" was italicized by Bytheway.

[10] Levy and Banaji, "Implicit Ageism," 50.

[11] Levy and Banaji, "Implicit Ageism," 51.

[12] Levy, "Eradication of ageism," 578.

[13] Levy and Banaji, "Implicit Ageism," 55. It is also interesting to note that when explicit attitudes were tested, the older the participant was, the more they responded favourably to older people.

Proposed Definition

Ageism can be defined as a combination of broad and narrow perspectives that create negativity toward those who are chronologically old as well as those who *appear* old based on the youthful standards of our culture. Whether explicit or implicit, this negativity is fueled by, and demonstrated in, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. These are not only damaging to the older person, but they also impact the unconscious thoughts of those not yet old with the fear of *becoming* old themselves. That fear impacts the words they speak, thoughts they have, and lifestyles they lead. Together, the culture and its people perpetuate ageist attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours.

2. Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

Stereotypes

Stereotypes can be defined as "a set of inaccurate, simplistic generalizations about a group that allows others to categorize them and treat them accordingly"[14] or "a generalization, usually exaggerated or oversimplified and often offensive, that is used to describe or distinguish a group."[15] An example of group stereotyping is the belief that *all* older people require speech patterns be slowed and voices be raised when speaking to them. This example assumes that all older people are in a state of decline and that there is no individuality and diversity between them. While it may be true that some older people would benefit from slower, louder speech, others may be wondering why they are being yelled at. Just as young people have varying needs and abilities, older people do as well. Therefore, one older person might benefit if the pace is slowed down but have no problem hearing the speaker, and another requires absolutely no adjustment in speech

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[14] "Stereotype." *Collins English Dictionary.*
[15] "Stereotype." *The American Heritage Dictionary.*

patterns. Stereotypes make broad generalizations about a group of individuals rather than recognizing that each person is unique and has his or her own abilities, needs, and interests.

Stereotype Formation

Whether they are "accurate or not, stereotypes guide our social behavior and often govern what information we seek, heed, and remember… At the root of stereotyping is our impulse to assign objects, events, and people to meaningful classes, about which we have established beliefs and expectations."[16] It is normal for us to group objects and events together based on their similarities—it helps us make sense of the world and not be confused or overloaded. For example, if we were to enter a school we would categorize people into students, staff, and visitors. It is both natural and automatic that we do this for objects and people.[17] Each person, however, may or may not necessarily fit the category traits. When we apply "exaggerated views or conceptions about a person or a group based on simplistic generalizations," the individual characteristics of a person are missed.[18]

While grouping people together is normal and useful at times, it is the precursor to stereotype formation. As distinctly different people—each with varying skills, interests, abilities, needs, and traits, are grouped together based on initial outward appearance, those outside the group do not see any diversity, but rather see them as homogeneous. For example, teenagers may perceive all older people as enjoying the same things, having similar personalities, and moving at a set speed. Similarly, older people may do the same to the teenage population. The person doing the grouping of

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[16] Cuddy et al., "Doddering but Dear," 4.
[17] Cuddy et al., "Doddering but Dear," 5.
[18] Ory, "Challenging Aging Stereotypes," 165.

others sees themselves as part of a group too, which they consider the "in group" (us), and each member of their group is understood to be distinct, making the group diverse. Other people they group together, such as older people, are considered the "out-group" (them) and that group is perceived as having no diversity. With regard to evaluation, the young group always makes "favorable in-group comparisons to older counterparts, evaluating the in-group more positively on relevant trait dimensions, such as attractiveness and wit."[19]

Popular Stereotypes of the Older Person

The stereotyping of groups is a root issue of ageism. In the case of older adults, Susan Krauss Whitbourne and Joel R. Sneed categorize the general public's popularly held negative stereotypes in the following four ways.

The first stereotype is that older adults are lonely and depressed. In comparison to younger adults, they are understood to have insufficient friends and family and manifest more mood disorders. Second, stereotypes negatively posit that older adults become more and more similar as they age—that they are all alike and move in the same direction. Third, older adults are considered sick, frail, and dependent, which is reinforced by the term "frail elder." Lastly, in keeping with the idea that aging ends in senility, older adults are seen as cognitively and/or psychologically impaired.[20]

Stereotypes and ageism move hand in hand and, while societal perceptions of aging have been changing over the last few years with new images of active, youthful

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[19] Cuddy et al., "Doddering but Dear," 6.
[20] Whitbourne and Sneed, "Paradox of Well-Being," 248.

agers, new stereotypes also form and potentially continue to deceive us. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

Prejudice

Large portions of the general population embrace negative stereotypes about older people. Whether a person is aware or not, accepting such stereotypes is typically accompanied by beliefs and attitudes, called prejudice.

Prejudice can be defined as "the holding of derogatory attitudes or beliefs, the expression of negative effect, or the display of hostile or discriminatory behavior toward members of a group on account of their membership in that group."[21] Consequently there is an important link between stereotypes and prejudice. As Laura Jennings notes, "Stereotyping is thought to play an important role in the formation and maintenance of prejudice."[22] Braithwaite agrees: "Negative stereotypes of old people are likely to fuel prejudice toward the elderly and vice versa."[23] She goes on to suggest three sources of prejudice: one, socialization that encompasses cultural history and social norms; two, a manifestation of internal conflict and the displacement of hostility onto less powerful groups; and three:

> … the importance of specific experiences and the interpretation of those experiences in relation to the negatively evaluated group. Common to all these perspectives is the relevance of threat, of feeling deprived, frustrated or hurt in some way by the presence of the other group.[24]

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[21] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 315. This quote is attributed to L.A. Zebrowitz, "Prejudice" in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology,* edited by Tony Manstead and Miles Hewstone, 450-455. Oxford, UK: Blackwell).
[22] Jennings, "Prejudice," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online,* § 2.
[23] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 315.
[24] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 315. She suggests that their importance is poorly understood.

Like stereotyping, prejudice "involves the attribution of certain characteristics to a person based on his or her membership in a particular group."[25] Prejudice is "remarkably resilient and subject to change over time in response to changes in social norms," can be based on illusion or reality, and "can either overrule or be overruled by evidence to the contrary."[26]

Not all thoughts and feelings toward elderly people operate consciously and "every socialized individual who has internalized the age stereotypes of their culture is likely to engage in implicit ageism."[27] Negative stereotypes can also generate unconscious anxiety and fear about the future. Often attributed to old age are fears of losing independence, good health, cognition, people, memory, or attractiveness.[28] "These fears affect how we react to people of great age. Butler argued that ageism allows younger people to see older people 'as different from themselves' and as a result they 'subtly cease to identify with them.'"[29] Distancing from older people can be psychological or physical and be reflected in the use of derogatory or prejudicial language or thoughts.[30]

As prejudice abounds, one might ask why it often goes unchallenged. In *Sins of Omission*, S. Dennis Ford suggests that the problem is indifference, which he defines as a "failure to see, to acknowledge, or act on behalf of others."[31]

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[25] Jennings, "Prejudice," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*, § 2.
[26] Jennings, "Prejudice," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*, § 2.
[27] Levy, "Eradication of Ageism Requires Addressing the Enemy Within," 578. Based on a 1999 survey, 95% of participants held "negative views of old people" (578). Additionally, most age stereotypes tend to be negative ergo implicit ageism also tends to be mostly negative" (578).
[28] Bytheway, "Age Prejudice and Discrimination," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*, § 3.
[29] Bytheway, "Age Prejudice and Discrimination," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*. § 3.
[30] Greenberg, et al. "Denying the Face of the Future," 39.
[31] Ford, *Sins of Omission*, 12.

Seeing is becoming aware of, and having knowledge about, an issue. In the "see, acknowledge, act" sequence, a person cannot act until they have both seen and acknowledged. Ageism's wide acceptance and social condonation might suggest that much of Western society does not yet see the problem.[32] Ford writes, "Without information and knowledge about what is going on… or without a sense that things should be different… I remain blind and thus ultimately indifferent to the fate of others."[33] Seeing can be obstructed because of busy lives; cultural norms may lull us into a pattern of apathetic thinking; stereotypes may be unknowingly accepted as truth; and indifference can set in.

The second, and perhaps more difficult part of this sequence, is the ability to acknowledge. Acknowledgement becomes personal and points out that:

> …discrepancy between what is and what might be is related to or somehow connected to me, to my life... I can pity those who are hungry, but until I recognize my participation in the creation or perpetuation of that hunger, in a life-style that is dependent on meat and such cash crops as coffee and tobacco, my moral duplicity will remain unacknowledged. Moral commitment frequently means I cannot have things both ways…[34]

Ageist prejudice is complex and prolific, yet a person may fail to acknowledge a connection to either the prejudice or its effect. He or she may deny participating in ageist thinking or behaviours thereby rejecting any personal involvement. When culturally immersed, acknowledgement may be hindered by "conventional 'everybody does it' morality" that keeps us at arms length from the harshness and pain that ageism causes.[35]

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[32] Nelson, *Ageism*, ix.

[33] Ford, *Sins of Omission*, 12.

[34] Ford, *Sins of Omission*, 12. This also applies to situations, such as natural disasters, for which a person may have no direct responsibility. However, that does not dismiss obligation where concern to ending unjust treatment are concerned.

[35] Ford *Sins of Omission*, 107.

This may impede movement toward action and disallow envisioning the way things ought to be.

"The unself-conscious 'decision' to remain indifferent, not to see or acknowledge a moral obligation" and thus fail to act, may be due to exhaustion or cowardice, however, more often it is because indifference is a social phenomenon.[36] It is further compounded because ageism itself is both personal and societal. Indifferent people are products of their culture inheriting ideas, myths, stories, or methods that "foster or legitimize indifference rather than commitment. We acquire indifference in the same way that we acquire language: unself-consciously, without deliberation or malice, almost innocently."[37]

Ford goes on to explain that indifference allows the middle class not to get involved. He says:

> If my local environment becomes polluted with hazardous chemicals or crime, I can move away. If the local school does not teach my children what I wish, I can put my children into private schools. If I am threatened by the specter of nuclear war, I can protest, write letters, and watch the Redskins on television. Doing nothing carries no immediate penalty; I can remain indifferent with complete impunity.[38]

Written in 1990, Ford suggests he can simply "watch the Redskins on television." Is his own reference to the "Redskins" an example of indifference? For many years, Reverend Graylan Hagler—and more recently a large group of lobbyists—has identified the name of the Washington Redskins football team as racist and in need of change.[39] According to Ford's theory, his apparent indifference in freely using a name that is now considered by

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[36] Ford, *Sins of Omission*, 13.
[37] Ford, *Sins of Omission*, 13.
[38] Ford, *Sins of Omission*, 16.
[39] This is addressed more fully in chapter four. Reverend Hagler is presently part of a large movement lobbying for change.

many to be a racial slur may suggest that twenty-four years ago it was not seen as problematic. This debated issue is a current example of how prejudice can go unseen yet later transition into a viable concern where people see with a new perspective, acknowledge a connection to it, and are moved to act on behalf of others.

It is only when we see and acknowledge that we can respond in action. Fueled by cultural norms, ingrained thinking, and habitual response, the conclusions that people draw can vary. Reactions may include justification, finding it humorous, or simply ignoring the problem. In spite of a tendency to be indifferent, some people will successfully see, acknowledge, and act on behalf of others, which is always the ultimate goal.

Age-Prejudiced Language

Failing to see or acknowledge may contribute to the perpetuation of age-prejudiced language. Keeping distance from the "out group" is often reflected in language that is rooted in age-based stereotypes. Ageist prejudice is found in common expressions such as "old-coot," "old-fogey," "old maid," "old-fashioned," "over the hill," "all washed up," or "past your expiry date." While these are easy to spot, derogatory comments are sometimes hiding in less noticeable expressions such as referring to older people as "my old dears" or reassuring someone by saying they simply had a "senior's moment." Usually these carry no intentional disrespect and are intended to be endearing. However, in each of these examples people are being marked out and "defined by their age and infirmity, rather than by their individual personalities."[40]

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[40] Thompson, *Age Discrimination*, 13.

Sometimes even encouraging words can have ageist overtones. Recently this cartoon circulated on social media with comments on how "sweet" it was.[41]

low others see you, is not important..
low you see yourself means everything.

Figure 1: Social Media Cartoon

Upon further evaluation, what was probably intended to be encouraging and endearing is, in fact, a good example of ageism existence. First, the "old" woman is perfectly stereotyped with a full-length housecoat, pink slippers, old-styled glasses, and grey hair secured in a bun. She is sitting in a wheelchair (presumably from age, not injury), and in the background is an old phonograph. Second, the expression, "How others see you is not important. How you see yourself means everything," has at least three ageist implications. One, the artist is implying the old woman sees herself as incomplete, inadequate, or less happy than she was in her younger years. Is the artist suggesting she cannot possibly be as happy and as content in her old age as she was in her youth? Two, one must ask, "How *do* others see the old woman?" The artist is suggesting "others" see her as undesirable in some way, but she should not worry because that is not important. Three, what *is* important is how you see yourself. If you see yourself as either youthful or younger than others see you, then you will be happy. Ageist messages are sent to young

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[41] Viewed on Facebook, March 15, 2013.

and old readers alike regardless of the artist's intent. If ageism was not prevalent in our culture, the statement would likely never be written because old age would not be perceived as negative. If this was now transitioned into sexist or racist terms, most people would be appalled to see the same words with the image and reflection changed to a woman seeing her reflection as a man, or an African-Canadian person seeing his or her reflection as a white Anglo-Saxon person.[42] While there may have been a time in history when such thoughts would be deemed culturally acceptable we are now appalled and such images are unfathomable—hurtful, arrogant, and prejudiced.

Another good example comes in personal conversations that demonstrate ageist attitudes in both the sender *and* receiver. A good example is the ageist "compliment," "You look so good for your age!" or "You can't possibly have children of that age—you look far too young!" These comments are age prejudiced in two ways. First, they imply the person should be thankful they don't look as old as they "should" because in our culture older is always less desirable. Second, their intended compliment shows they have derogatory beliefs about the aging process. If they were not influenced by age-related prejudice, a comment based on age would likely not even cross their mind. However, they know being young is preferential and that the comment will be readily accepted as complimentary.[43] On the other hand, "You look much older than that!" is socially unacceptable and would be less than well received because old is considered bad and undesirable. Telling someone they look older than their chronological age is considered

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[42] It is difficult to even write this because it is highly disturbing, however, in earlier (more) sexist and racist generations such an image may have been seen in the same way that our ageist culture sees the "old woman" scenario.
[43] Chapter two will go into greater detail on youth as the ideal.

an insult.[44] Expectations of what a specific age should look like and whether a comment is deemed complementary or insulting reveals ageist attitudes in both the giver and receiver.

People carry ageist attitudes and prejudice with them even when they go to church. Church-specific ageism reveals youth as an ideal in conversations that include "sentiments like, 'the church is dying because we have so many old people in [it],' 'If old people would just get out of the way,' or 'If older adults just accepted change.'"[45] People describe their churches with age-defining terms, such as the coveted "young church" or the "grey-haired church," which implies impending doom. While some youth-dominated churches seek the diversity of age others wear "youth church" as an idealized badge of honour.

Humour

Our perception of appropriate or inappropriate attitudes in areas such as ageism, sexism, racism, or even how we simply speak to others, is influenced by erroneous stereotypes and cultural norms.[46] A significant example of how culture influences ageist thinking is in humour. Ageist humour can be seen everywhere; on television, in comic strips, in movies, in conversations, and when we walk down the card aisle in a store.

A simple peruse through the birthday cards is all it takes to connect derogatory comments to beliefs about old age. The selection of "humorous" birthday cards is vast. The front of one card reads: "Whenever you start forgetting stuff and sounding confused

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[44] The question of what a chronological age is *supposed* to look like is an interesting and unusual concept in itself.

[45] Gentzler, "Is Your Church Ageist?"

[46] How we speak of other people refers to general language and labeling of someone different than ourselves. It could include someone from a different geographical region or culture (Newfoundlander, Native Canadian) or be based on random things such as hair colour (blonde), weight (too heavy, too thin), or someone with cognitive, physical, or other challenges.

and crazy, I promise to tell everyone you're drunk so they don't think you are old."

Another reads, "The top 25 ways to tell you're getting older" and includes aging

signposts such as "Your car battery goes dead because your turn signal was on for two

weeks straight, Your sweetie says, 'Wanna neck?' and hands you a piece of chicken! You

sit down to breakfast and hear 'snap, crackle and pop,' and you haven't poured milk on

your cereal yet, and the Tooth Fairy has more of your teeth than you do."

In our culture, these are accepted as funny. Why would we buy these and why

would "card makers put such a message on a card that is ostensibly meant for a

celebration?... Try that same message on another stigmatized group, and you are likely to

arouse not laughter in the card recipient, but anger: Sorry to hear you are overweight!

Sorry to hear you're handicapped!"[47] These attitudes would "no doubt be considered to

be offensive rather than funny" in a culture where aging and older people are venerated.[48]

Perhaps they represent a people who disguise disrespect, ungratefulness, dishonour, and

degradation as a joke.

While prejudice is often affected by culture, it resides in the attitudes of people,

even people who are faithful Christians who would reject prejudice as unchristian. In our

cultural unawareness, our prejudice interacts with stereotypes and can lead us to hold

negative attitudes toward aging and older people. Many times this unknowingly involves

discrimination.

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[47] Nelson, "Ageism," 432.
[48] Thompson, *Age Discrimination*, 17.

Discrimination

While stereotypes erroneously generalize and prejudice stigmatizes, "discrimination divides and excludes."[49] Of the three, discrimination is quite possibly the easiest to demonstrate. It "refers to the differential, and often unequal, treatment of people who have been either formally or informally grouped into a particular class of persons."[50] It is "the process, or more accurately set of processes, which has the effect of disadvantaging some individuals or groups. In its most literal form, the word just means to differentiate or mark out as different."[51] However, when that differentiation is a disadvantage, then it is called being discriminated *against*.

In the Workplace

Common examples of age-related discrimination are compulsory retirement (regardless of ability or health) and failing to get or keep a job because of your age. Canada's labour laws no longer specify a retirement age and the Ontario Human Rights Commission has, within its act, established assurances that you cannot be discriminated against because of age in the workplace.[52] Regardless of that assurance, individual beliefs can overrule. For example, a racist person can adopt politically correct language when they are with other people yet continue to harbour racist thoughts and attitudes. Similarly, Canadian law can set parameters that protect the older employee from discriminatory actions in cases of hiring, promotions, and training. While the decision maker must adhere to that publically, he or she may still favour a younger person because of age.

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[49] Bytheway, "Age Prejudice and Discrimination," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online,* § 4.

[50] Law, "Discrimination," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online,* § 1.

[51] Thompson, *Age Discrimination,* 3.

[52] "The end of mandatory retirement (fact sheet)," 2006. The Ontario Human Rights Code (Ontario Human Rights Commission) prevents discrimination on the basis of age for anyone over eighteen years of age. This includes decisions about hiring, promotions, training opportunities, termination, and/or mandatory retirement. The caveat to this is for those under the Courts of Justice Act or those where retirement can be shown as an occupational requirement.

Unwanted staff—including those considered "too old" or stereotyped as "less competent" simply because of age— can be eliminated through restructuring, new job descriptions, and lay-offs.[53] An older person who is being discriminated against may resort to remove dates from resumes, to dress differently, or colour their hair in an effort to look younger and increase their chance of employment or promotion.

Successful lawsuits launched by plaintiffs who accused their employer of discrimination demonstrate that ageism in the workplace is now being recognized. Robert McCann and Howard Giles survey how age-related discriminatory language has impacted American courts.[54] While not all seemingly derogatory names were considered discriminatory, many were. Remarks such as "the old woman," "that old goat," and "too long on the job" were considered intent to discriminate. Other examples that were considered discriminatory are categorized as "young blood" cases: "We need young blood around here," "We need new blood—new and younger…." and "Let's bring in the young guns."[55]

In the Church

It is worth noting that such language is often present in ecclesiastical circles as well. It is not uncommon that churches want to replace older pastors for younger pastors. While illegal, some churches follow procedures that expose not only the age of a candidate but their personal, family information such as marital status and number and ages of children. If a candidate does not reveal his or her age, these additional details

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[53] Cuddy, "Doddering but Dear," 12.

[54] McCann and Giles, "Ageism in the Workplace," 180-183.

[55] McCann and Giles, "Ageism in the Workplace," 180-181.

provide plenty of helpful information.[56] In some churches, the call or hiring process seems to have a greater opportunity to age-discriminate than secular employers.

A current and exposed example of age-based discrimination in the church is a recent article in *Christianity Today*. They reported the Texas Conference of United Methodists have "proposed new guidelines for candidates entering ministry. The guidelines encourage those over the age of 45 'to pursue other expressions of lay ministry,' and they aim to recruit younger clergy"[57] to which one reader commented, "So, at last, the Methodist Church comes right out and says what many others had only hinted at…, at 58, I'm done as a pastor. I'd been tempted to think I was just hitting my stride— wiser, stronger, more patient and compassionate, with a clearer vision of God. How foolish of me!"[58] The church is not immune to temptations to discriminate on the grounds of age nor are they exempt from potential lawsuits. This is the primary purpose of the present study; there is an ageist message being sent to God's children, both younger and older in the church.

Aside from pastoral employment issues, churches can also be ageist in practices involving unpaid ministry servers. For example, *Christianity Today's* article, "The Invisible Generation" reported the following:

> One woman told me about how she had led worship at her church for
> years. But when a new young pastor was hired, he wanted a cooler band to
> get more young people in the door. First thing to go? Older women. 'No
> one wanted to see older women on stage'… so she was replaced with
> young women in their late teens and early twenties.[59]

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[56] I am basing this on personal observation at two different churches/denominations.
[57] Steffan, "Methodists May Discourage Those Over 45," para.2.
[58] Steffan, "Methodists May Discourage Those Over 45," May 21, 2013 commenter.
[59] Bessey, "The Invisible Generation," para. 5.

Another older woman had a seminary degree and excellent teaching record but never got teaching opportunities. She noted "every teacher in her church's education program was a young, charismatic man with half her education, let alone experience."[60] Discrimination exists both inside and outside the church. At times, it is difficult for a person to recognize their ageist culture and ageist attitudes and as awareness increases they may be shocked to learn they are entangled with an "ism" that is less than honourable, respectful, and loving. How could this be? What theories might help explain such a response?

3. Theoretical Perspective: Terror Management Theory

When considering the entities of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination that are connected to ageism and ageist attitudes, one might wonder what theory might explain them. Todd D. Nelson suggests the Terror Management Theory (TMT) as a promising explanation to the subconscious factors driving ageism in a particular person and society.[61]

TMT proposes that each human has two realities: first, a desire for survival and second, the understanding that death is inevitable. Once combined, they create the potential for an inner perpetual anxiety that people strive to manage.[62] In *The Dying Animal*, Philip Roth writes, "In every calm and reasonable person there is hidden a second person scared witless about death."[63] The "calm facade is accomplished by way of psychological defenses enabled by the same sophisticated cognitive abilities" that made

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[60] Bessey, "The Invisible Generation," para. 6.

[61] Nelson, "Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Feared Future Self," 213.

[62] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 224.

[63] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 224. Martens credits this to P. Roth's book, *The Dying Animal*. (New York: Vintage, 2001. p. 153).

us aware of the initial two realities.[64] TMT suggests that these anxious thoughts are buffered by cultural and religious systems of belief that set standards and establish order and meaning. In each culture, standards help people find the personal value and self-esteem needed to defend against mortality-based anxiety. Different cultures have different standards. For example, one culture might prize being a spiritual healer, another a mighty warrior, and another a good Christian. "In short, terror management theory proposes that death represents a potent threat to the human psyche and that people defend against this threat by clinging to cultural systems of belief and striving to maintain a sense of self esteem."[65]

Implications

There are three theoretical implications of terror management for ageism. The first implication is the threat of death. To the younger person the elderly person is a threatening reminder of their own death and inevitable mortality. Second is the threat of animality.[66] TMT proposes that, to the young, older people signify "a deterioration of the physical body."[67] As a result, some ageist attitudes—such as disgusting thoughts when considering an aged body, are reactions to that physical vulnerability of decline and death.[68] Third is the threat of insignificance. Elders can threaten younger people because culture prescribes value and significance in the very things that we believe will diminish in all people as they grow older. Stereotypes tell us that *all* old people will lose mental agility, work productivity, competence, strength, quickness, and physical beauty. The

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[64] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 224.

[65] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 224.

[66] Animality is a person's animal nature exhibited in their physical body that decays and dies as opposed to a person's intellect or spirituality.

[67] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 227.

[68] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 228.

more frequently younger people find "self-esteem from attributes which diminish with age, the more likely it is that elderly people will be potent reminders of the transitory nature of our bases of self-worth."[69] In addition to the defense of striving to maintain self-esteem, other reactions include physically distancing oneself from elderly people, psychologically separating from elderly people by identifying them as different, and failing to see elderly people as individuals.[70]

This is cyclical and a key in understanding ageism. People fear death, decay, and loss of self-worth as a result of their perceptions of older people. Prejudice increases and older people are seen more negatively. Additional negativity results in more fear of death, decay, and loss of self-worth in the younger person. The cycle continues to repeat itself.[71]

Nelson offers this assessment; "Martens and his colleagues make a compelling argument… that our thoughts of our own mortality spark feelings of intense anxiety (tied to our fear of dying) and that we will try to distance ourselves from anything (or any person/group) that reminds us of our mortality. In so doing, the young perceiver convinces him/herself that such a fate is not in his/her own future, thus alleviating the anxiety."[72]

4. Conclusion

This is an important topic for the church as well as for each aging person within it. As proposed, the vast majority of people unknowingly participate in ageist actions and

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[69] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 229.

[70] Greenberg et al., "Ageism: Denying the Face of the Future," 37-39. Identifying elderly people as different includes labeling them as "old people" or using other derogative terms. Elderly people are deemed to be very different, even in attitudes, interests and personality. Exaggerated differences are often the characteristics or conditions that the younger person fears the most.

[71] Martens et al., "Terror Management Perspective on Ageism," 236.

[72] Nelson, "Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Feared Future Self," 214.

attitudes and Christians are not automatically exempted from that cultural norm.[73]

Awareness is important and, like racism and sexism, steps toward any sort of eradication

begins when people "become aware of not only the blatant forms of ageism, but also its

more subtle forms that operate within as all."[74] Is the church willing to accept that its

very essence, the people, and even the practices it employs are prone to ageism and may,

in fact, already be ageist to some degree? Further, are individuals willing to look more

deeply at ageism's influence in culture and on people? Will individuals and the church as

a whole be willing to respond to this new awareness? Chapter two takes a deeper look

into Western society's ageist reality.

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[73] Levy, "Eradication of Ageism," 578.
[74] Levy, "Eradication of Ageism," 579.

Chapter Two: Digging Below the Surface

In this chapter we will complete the social analysis of ageism in our contemporary Western society. We will investigate what lies beneath the surface of this cultural phenomenon by proposing a deeper understanding of its roots, its influence, our reactions, and its threat to people and our culture. A historical investigation from the Medieval Era to the twentieth century will highlight two key centuries where significant shifts in thinking laid the foundation for what we now call ageism. From there we will look at various theories on the impact of media, which will preface an assessment of the presence of media in our daily lives. This analysis will be followed by a snapshot and consideration of print and television advertising, focusing specifically on anti-aging messaging as it pertains to selling the concept of "youth as the ideal" to a fearful consumer. The chapter will conclude with a critical analysis of the Successful Aging paradigm.

1. Historical Overview

History helps answer the question, "How did we get where we are today?" This section will briefly survey ageing and its influence on ageism through the Medieval Era, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. We will summarize the attitudes that these periods had toward ageing and note the contribution they make to the development of ageism.

Ages of Life: The Medieval Perception

History has a lot to tell us about perspectives on aging. In our contemporary understanding, chronological age is an important factor and marks key transitions from one stage of life to the next: children go to school at five, youth head off to university at

eighteen, and older people retire in a window between 55 and 65. Reaching these chronological ages establishes a "pattern of rules, expectations, and events ordering activities over a lifetime"—an important Western institution.[1]

Prior to the mid-sixteenth century, however, numerical age was irrelevant, and most people did not know their actual age.[2] While this seems surprising, it posed no problem because the concept of age was built around "ages in life." Throughout life, each phase was defined by "rights of passage—the rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death."[3]

A fourteenth-century piece of Christian art gives an example of this early perspective on the ages of life.

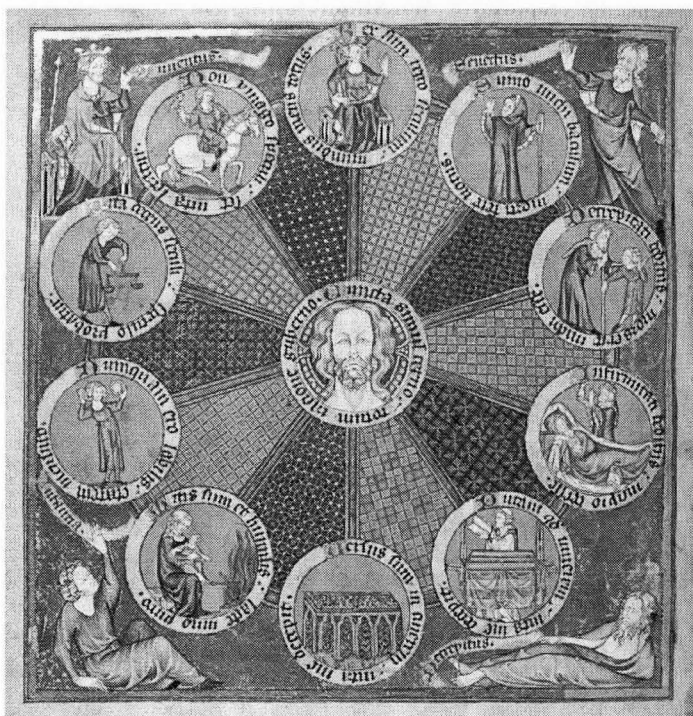Figure 2: Christ-centered *Wheel of the Ten Ages of Man* "from a Psalter (1339) belonging to Robert de Lisle of Yorkshire. (MS Arundel 83, fol. 126v., British Library, London)."[4]

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[1] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 3.
[2] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 11.
[3] Cole, *The Journey of Life,* 11.
[4] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 14. This image was retrieved from the Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts from the British Library.

The *Wheel of the Ten Ages of Man* depicts life with Christ at the center. Circling his image is the message: "I perceive all ages at once, I rule all with reason" (*Cuncta simul cerna totum racione guberno*). Each spoke ends with a circular medallion illustrating a different time in life.[5] The Medieval message was that Jesus was the center of life and made all time sacred. Life was not linear, but circular, which provided daily comfort in an era that made no promises of longevity. It provided a "sense of eternal turning as the life of natural man progress[ed] from season to season until death [broke] the cycle, opening the passage to eternal life. Each age was seen as equidistant from God, who stress[ed] their subordinate but equal status."[6] It sent the message that, as God's children, "all ages of life were equal in God's eyes."[7] Although time on earth was considered sacred, it was merely a shadow compared to eternity.[8]

The concept that earth was simply a shadow of eternity was prevalent to medieval people. They lived under a looming fear of death because they were never quite sure of their eternal salvation or at what point in time their life would end. For them, fear of death was not associated to dying *specifically* at old age because "plagues, famines, epidemics, and infectious diseases prevented most people from growing old."[9] The church taught that dying was to gain a better life in heaven; therefore, "longevity was vanity."[10] Troyanski notes that Catholic writings that addressed aging:

> ...had curiously little to do with age; rather their topics were death, judgment, paradise, and hell. The reader was reminded that such were the ends of life for all, king and subject, the scholarly and the uneducated, rich and poor, young and old. The cause of death was not illness or accident

[5] Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts, British Library. This picture can also be found in Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 14.
[6] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 15.
[7] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction," 74.
[8] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction," 74.
[9] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 11.
[10] Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime*, 86.

but original sin. Under such circumstances, longevity was beside the point.[11]

This began to change throughout the Medieval Era. The images that depicted "ages of life" as both sacred and belonging to God were impacted by economics and business practices. Until that time merchants functioned using natural cycles which may have included the sun's shadow, seasonal or weather patterns, tides, or astronomy.[12]

> Once commercial networks were organized, however time became an object of measurement. The duration of a sea voyage or of a journey by land from one place to another, the problem of prices which rose or fell in the course of a commercial transaction,... [and] the duration of the labor of craftsmen and workers... all made increasing claims on his attention and became the object of ever more explicit regulation.[13]

The details of time became critically important to the running of business. In order to conduct business more effectively the announcement of time was rung into the community. For example, in Aire-sur-la-Lys, a newly constructed belfry bell was used by merchants to announce start and finish times for businesses and their workers. Country churches, whose bells tolled the rhythm of the religious offices based on crude sun dials or water clocks, were overshadowed by newly constructed clocks that rang the hours. The perception of time changed. It was now associated with daily life, and "out of this awareness grew the modern notion that time was a precious commodity to be used before it fled.... Symbols of time merged with those of death, decay, and destruction [and] by the late fifteenth century, Father Time appeared as a destroyer, brandishing a scythe in one hand, [and] holding an hourglass in the other."[14] The circular images of time—like the Christ-centered *Wheel of Life* were gradually "replaced with rising and falling

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[11] Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime*, 88.
[12] LeGoff, *Time, Work, & Culture in the Middle Ages*, 35.
[13] LeGoff, *Time, Work, & Culture in the Middle Ages*, 35.
[14] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 15.

staircases… ladders and slides, even waterfalls."[15] (See figure 3, *Ten Ages of Man*.) With the change in image, the ages of life soon became the steps of life (later "stages of life"). In the case of the staircase, one is born, ages, hits a peak and then goes downhill to death. (See figure 4, *Stages of Woman's Life*.)
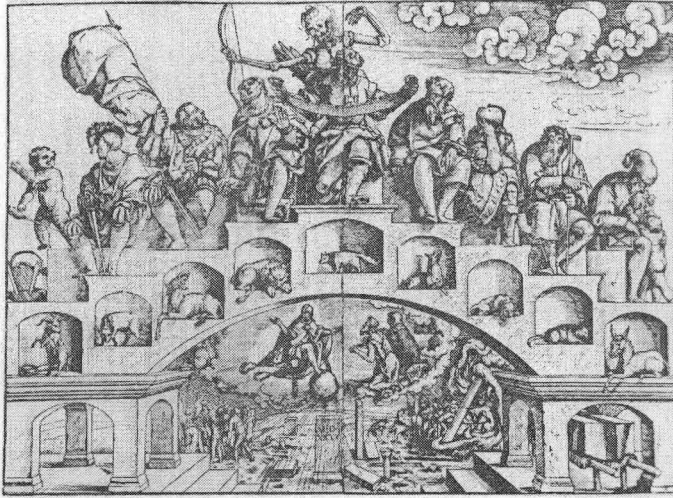
Figure 3. *The Ten Ages of Man* is an engraving by Jorg Brue the Younger (Augsburg, 1540).[16]
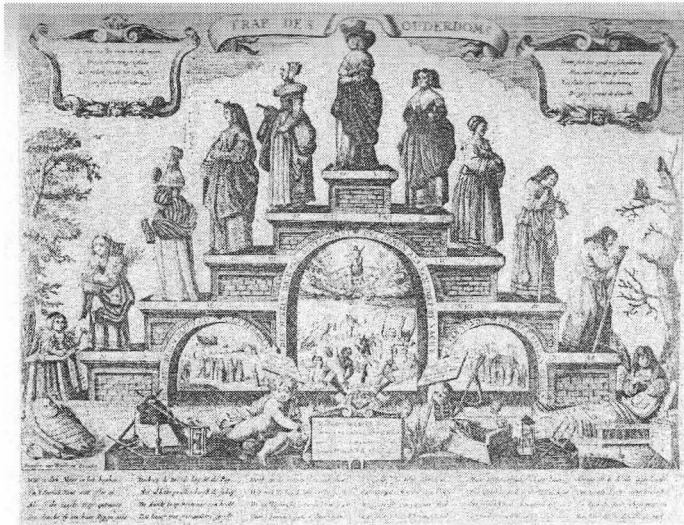
Figure 4. *Trap des Ouderdoms* (The Stages of Woman's Life) is an engraving by Francois van Beusecom (Amsterdam, 1650).[17]

Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century, there was a radical change in research, science, and philosophy that impacted how life was understood. From this century forward, new

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[15] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction," 74.

[16] Cole, *Journey of Life*, 19.

[17] Cole, *Journey of Life*, 26

cycles might have included completing school, finding a job, getting married, having children, remaining alive with your spouse till at least age fifty-five, becoming "empty nesters," and perhaps widowhood.[18] As family and individual cycles became aligned and uniform with other friends and family in their community, the:

> ...boundaries drawn around participation in public life were tightened. Chronologically triggered public pension systems marked the beginning of retirement and the end of one's participation in the adult word, the cultural definition of full humanity. Age-at-death was also transformed from a pattern of relative randomness to one of predictability; as average life expectancy rose dramatically, death began to occur primarily in old age, not at varied points in the life cycle as had been the case in the past. As a result, fear of aging and fear of death merged.[19]

Moral and spiritual connections to aging were overruled by research and medical intervention that could address physical decline. The increasingly lengthening lifespan, coupled with the marking of chronological age had a greater impact than may have been suspected. The resulting fear of aging, now coupled with the fear of death, appears to be a significant moment in the history of ageism.

Nineteenth Century

Prior to 1800, settlers in the Northern United States were rooted in a theology that connected aging with God's grace. They believed even in age related struggles, God's grace was revealed through his steadfast faithfulness, the strengthened individual, and the loving care of others.[20] They understood that aging involved both positive and negative

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[18] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 4.

[19] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction." 73. While this began in the late eighteenth century, it continued to become more and more engrained that age-at-death was not random, but associated with old age. After 1900 life expectancy soared and by mid 1900s old age was highly consistent with death (Cole, *Journey of Life*, 3).

[20] The Puritans perceived age as containing both challenges and blessings, such as loss *and* hope for life. Calvinists saw age as deterioration in all areas and disease as a punishment for the sin of Adam. However, should one be healthy, useful, *and* experience prolonged age they attributed it to God's favour, for not all experience such health in longevity. In all cases, God was to be depended on and the only means of hope. While God did not alter the signs of aging, his grace—revealed in "the Lord's righteousness, support and

aspects and held traditional ideas about human imperfection and divine omnipotence.[21]

Aging was understood to involve connections with others and it was perfectly acceptable

for an individual to both give and receive care.

The 1800s challenged these perceptions about God, aging, and people. People and

the church embraced the prominent Victorian themes of morality and the prominent

virtues of "independence, health, [and] success, [which] required constant control over

one's body and physical energies."[22] These virtues lay in opposition to the lived

experience of an aging person—positive ideals of health and success were diametrically

opposed to the seemingly negative realities of sin, dependence, and/or disease. Western

Protestants embraced the new Victorian virtues and the moral code that stemmed from it.

Thomas R. Cole wrote that dependence on, and finding hope in God was fading. As a

result, he says, glorifying God was replaced with the formation of virtuous people who

would be honest, sober, industrious, faithful and thrifty.[23] It appeared they no longer

accepted frailty and decay from which they once sought growth and strength. The

variegated experience of aging as "a source of wisdom *and* suffering, spiritual growth

and physical decline, honour *and* vulnerability" vanished and was replaced by a culture

that separated the two—striving for one and despising the other.[24]

The will of humankind became elevated and, coupled with perfectionist ideals,

drove them to:

> ...master old age, rather than accept it, [which] generated a rigid dualism:
> anyone who lived a life of hard work, faith and self-discipline could

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the comfort of friends"—transformed their meaning as one became strong and took pleasure in a time of weakness (Cole, "The Enlightenment View of Aging," 35).

[21] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 78.

[22] Cole, "The Enlightenment View of Aging," 35.

[23] Cole, "The Enlightenment View of Aging," 36.

[24] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging," 70. Opposing poles are discussed in a contemporary context in chapter two.

preserve health and independence into ripe old age, which would be
followed by a quick, painless, natural death; only the shiftless, faithless
and promiscuous were doomed to premature death or a miserable old
age.[25]

In the meantime, scientists were challenging the idea of a "vital and meaningful

senescence.... [and] had come to define old age as a disease to be hated and feared."[26]

Hospital studies concluded "illness and old age were inseparably intertwined, if not quite

synonymous."[27] Old age as a disease impacted how the culture at large came to view

aging—"not as a fated aspect of our individual and social existence, but as one of life's

problems to be solved through willpower, aided by science, technology and expertise."[28]

According to Cole, this century was a significant key to the origin of ageism

because of the "emergence of a society committed to the limitless accumulation of

individual health and wealth... and the ideological and psychological splitting apart of

negative and positive aspects of growing old."[29]

Twentieth Century

In the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century medicine,

science, and technology continued to advance in an effort to possess longer, healthier

lives. One medical example is the "Steinach Therapy Against Old Age" which sought a

more youthful state. In this procedure, the *vas deferens* was tied off in order to redirect

sperm from the testicles to the body. Reports indicated a seventy-five percent success rate

positively affecting the following areas: concentration, energy, insomnia, blood pressure,

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[25] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging," 71.
[26] Haber, "Anti-Aging: Why now?" 10.
[27] Haber, "Anti-Aging: Why now?" 10.
[28] Stoneking, "Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging," 69. Although written specifically about Northern American culture, it is highly probable that Canadians shared this perspective.
[29] Cole, "The Enlightenment View of Aging," 36. Cole attributes the restrictiveness of aging that the Victorian era introduced with more rigid stereotypes about old age.

hair growth, skin condition, vision, and hearing.[30] Other therapies promised to eradicate

aging with unusual combinations of injections.[31] For example, a surgeon from California,

L.L. Stanley, injected a crushed testicular substance into 50,000 men for rejuvenation and

reported good results.[32] In 1928, Albert Schneider proposed human efficiency would

improve and an "active and physical life could be prolonged by at least fifty percent"

through gland transplants, which were done on 5,000 willing male and female inmates.[33]

Aside from such medical and scientific researchers, businessmen were eager to sell their

age-defying products. One such businessman, El Zair, sold an "elixir of youth," which

turned out to be Epson salt and vinegar. He, along with others, was "charged with fraud

for swindling a gullible public."[34]

The scientific management of aging had good intentions as it worked to gain

support for older people who were in need. However, "between 1909 and 1935, social

reformers, academics, and helping professionals often stereotyped old people as sick,

poor, and unable to support themselves. The myth of healthy self-reliance [from

Victorian era] was replaced by its opposite."[35] It was this image that was challenged in

the 1960s and 1970s. The 1990s saw a resurgence of the anti-aging movement sending

the message that aging is an "abhorrent disease that must be eliminated. Clearly the

movement speaks to aging baby boomers… Bombarded by messages from the media

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[30] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 181. Success rate was measured by one to six years of improvement. Although presented as a new idea, ancient Taoist sexual techniques, used to increase longevity by increasing or conserving the *ching,* included a similar method for redirecting semen (see Gerald J. Gruman, "A History of Ideas About the Prolongation of Life: The Evolution of Prolongevity Hypotheses to 1800." *American Philosophical Society* 56, no. 9 (1966), 45).

[31] Haber, "Anti-Aging: Why Now?" 11. One such injection included a combination of semen, bull's testicles, calf's liver, and calf heart.

[32] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 180.

[33] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 181.

[34] Haber, "Anti-Aging: Why Now?" 11.

[35] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 232.

about the importance of being young, those in the anti-aging movement share the fear that aging will ensure their own obsolescence.

Summary

There have been significant changes in how aging has been perceived since the sixteenth century when life was considered a circular event where all ages were equal and death could come at any time. With greater sensitivity and urgency to time, the comforting circular image of life was replaced by linear images of life that included ascending and descending ladders that peaked at middle age then plummeted to death. The eighteenth century provides insight into the roots of ageism. Due to increased research, science and longevity, a new perspective on death was introduced—longer, healthier life happened more frequently and resulted in death at *old* age, thereby linking fear of death with fear of aging. The Victorian Era's influence is a key to ageism. People adopted values such as self-control that fueled individuals to seek unlimited health and wealth while waging war with sin, dependence, and disease. The strong work and life ethic dominated the new enemy: the disease of old age. The twentieth century continued to solve this "problem" with the scientific promise of eliminating the "disease of old age." The work done in the early 1900s found new life as it resurged in the 1990s and continues to flood our contemporary culture with the help of media. To this development we will now turn.

2. Media Messaging: Print, Television, and Anti-Aging Consumerism

History sheds light on the roots from which our contemporary issues stem. For what appears to be the first time, in the eighteenth century citizens merged fear of aging and fear of death as a result of living longer and consistently dying at older ages. This

connection is an initial pointer as to why we resist aging and it also ties into the fears associated with stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviours. Nineteenth century polarization and individualistic self-reliance for the attainment of wealth and health shifted perspectives and introduced a strong perception toward aging as a disease, which is still evident in contemporary culture. Fear of aging is rampant, ageism is flourishing with or without our awareness, and anti-aging messaging comes at us from all directions. This section will begin by surveying media messaging theories and media exposure followed by print, then television advertising. Subsequently there will be an assessment of advertising's effect. The last section will look at anti-aging messaging that reaches potentially exploited consumers through distinctly anti-aging advertising. We will also investigate the selling of "youth as an ideal" and discuss potential negative effects on the aging Westerner.

Pertinent Theories

Media and advertising are powerful agents in our culture that interact with ageism and its related issues. Many studies have evaluated these correlations and two pertinent theories exist: the *Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory* and *Cultivation Theory*.

The *Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory* considers the strength of a societal group. A group's strength—or vitality, is "defined by [its] status, institutional support, and demographics."[36] Vitality determines if groups are worthy of respect and attention by considering both their "institutional support, and support and representation in the media."[37] When a group is not represented in media sources, it speaks to their lack of

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[36] Zhang et al., "The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 266. Where ethnolinguistic groups are concerned, vitality is an indicator of potential language survival or extinction.
[37] Zhang et al., "The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 266.

societal vitality. As recent and current media is reviewed, consideration will be given to how this theory could be applied to the findings.

The *Cultivation Theory* suggests "the more time individuals spend consuming media (e.g. watching television), the closer their views are to the 'world' created by media."[38] With ongoing exposure, media influences the way a viewer thinks and perceives society and, over time, the viewer adopts the media-driven messages as real. This theory asserts that the influential power of executives, directors, and advertisers is great. Not only influencing viewers on what to watch and what product to buy, *Cultivation Theory* asserts that they are actually homogenizing differing views and changing perceptions.[39] As media is discussed in this chapter, one should consider their effects in light of this theory.

Media Exposure

If media is as influential as the theories suggest, and if we are exposed to media through intentional and unintentional ways, we must take seriously the impact that it can have on both individuals and our culture.[40] Our exposure to media is staggering. The

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[38] Zhang et al., "The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 265. The original work is by George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An overview," *Mass Communication & Society,* Summer/Fall, vol. 1 Issue ¾, (1998), 175-94.

[39] Zhang et al. also note in addition to this theory, "other socialization theories also emphasize in broad terms how people, especially children, learn about the world (e.g. sex roles, age stereotypes, and cultural values) through cumulative exposure to media" ("The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 265).

[40] The influx of media via the internet opens up other digital media venues to consider where impact and ageism are concerned and includes things like blogs and podcasts. This will be a significant area to study since Canadian children have access to the internet at home, school, friends homes, on cell phones, and in public places such as the library. In the home environment, fifty percent of children access the internet "at least one hour every day, most with no adult supervision or basic household rules regarding Internet use." ("Canada's Children in a Wired World: The Parent's View," by *Awareness Network Media* and prepared for Industry Canada, Health Canada, and Human Resources Development Canada. 2000. Online: http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWI-parents-view.pdf) While some preliminary assessment has been done with regard to youth and the internet influence on mental and physical development, how it impacts societal perceptions is yet to be studied. The same might be said for adult impacts. Video games could be another particularly powerful source of ageism worth studying. *The Economist* cites Tim Cross as saying that "video games are the most exciting and fastest growing form of

average Canadian spends 1,347 hours a year watching television.[41] If we factor in

additional media sources such as radio, internet, newspaper, or magazine to our patterns

of use, our intentional media exposure totals 3,099 hours each year.[42] Because our

statistics are very similar to those of our American neighbours, it is reasonable to

consider that the number of *advertisements viewed* may also be closely related.[43] The

average American—or Canadian, views approximately 37,000 television commercials

per year, and when combined "with other forms of media are exposed to approximately

500 advertisements per day, 182,000 per year, and millions in a lifetime."[44] Given such

large numbers, we will look only at media in the form of print and television

advertisements and consider how they interact with ageist thinking, aging issues, and

personal perceptions.

Advertising Media: Print

Researchers are guided by the understanding that there is greater power to

advertisements than merely selling brands, products, and services. Perpetuated by media

ads, advertisers can influence our perceptions and attitudes toward different social groups

(e.g. age, gender, and cultural groups).[45] Advertising agencies and corporations selling

products and services are typically driven by the bottom line—making money, but with

such far-reaching influence ethical practices should be at the forefront of all they do.

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mass media over the coming decade." See "All the World's a Game," *The Economist*, December 10, 2011. No pages. Online: http://www.economist.com/node/21541164.

[41] Television Bureau of Canada, "PPM Audience Data: Television Viewing Statistics," 2013. This includes those twelve years and older.

[42] IAB Canada, "2012 Blurring the line. The 2012 CMUST Report," 1. Media sources used in this statistic use the Television of Bureau's statistic for television viewing (as per above footnote), as well as radio, internet, newspaper, and magazine for 2012 and includes only those *eighteen* years and older.

[43] According to *Media Now: 2012 Update*, 4, annual American media consumption on the same media source categories averages a total of 2,915 hours of comparative use per person. Excluding television statistics, variables in comparisons note that Canadian numbers include only those eighteen years and older, and some American numbers represent those twelve years and older.

[44] Zhang et al., "The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 264.

[45] Zhang et al., "The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 265.

While our population shows a steady growth in older people, they are

disproportionately represented in print advertisements. In a 1999 study, results showed

that, in 1956, the elderly comprised 17.7 percent of the population and appeared in 8.3

percent of print ads—a clear under-representation in the presence of elderly people in

advertisements. Yet forty years later (1996) the same population segment rose to 21.6

percent and the print ads further reduced to 6.6 percent.[46] A similar situation exists in

television advertising where "older consumers were not represented as frequently as their

younger counterparts, even when compared to the percentage the mature constitute of the

total population."[47]

A study of print advertising from 1959 – 1999 also showed an "increase in

negative portrayals of elderly images and a reduction in positive portrayals."[48] However,

more recently, images are increasingly positive, and in many cases they have transitioned

into timeless, positive aging:

> We don't see older people much in the mainstream media, but when we
> do, the images are indeed of robust people with good haircuts and
> gleaming teeth. Their stories and image abound in certain venues: …
> Sunday newspaper supplements, pop 'anti-aging' books, ads for exotic
> treks and tropic cruises, descriptions of 'vibrant' retirement
> communities…[49]

These new and improved images may be a positive change from the formerly negative

portrayals, but are not without their own challenges. Presenting an image of a timeless,

positive ager is appealing to many viewers because they have a "cognitive age that is

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[46] Miller et al., "Stereotypes of the Elderly in Magazine Advertisements," 333.
[47] Peterson and Ross, "Individuals in Television Commercials," 431.
[48] Miller et al., "Stereotypes of the Elderly in Magazine Advertisements," 333. Seventy percent of the negative depictions were directly related to the promotion of medicinal products.
[49] Gullette, *Agewise*, 23.

younger than their chronological age."[50] Such a self perception is in line with ageist

thinking that says old is bad, young is the ideal, and a youthful image must be

maintained. Advertisers may have simply replaced images of older adults with

excessively positive and younger images to generate funding from an ever-young aging

population.

Advertising Media: Television

Specific to the presence and use of older adults in television advertising, a 1983

American study found only 3.1% of television commercials used older actors and that

less than 1% included women or people representing minority groups.[51] A more recent

study (1997) showed "substantial evidence indicating that they [older consumers] were

not utilized as frequently, even for brands which appear to be directed toward the

mature."[52] Another 1997 study found that only 6.9% of all commercials contained older

adults.[53] In 2007, and based on the demographics of their region, an American study of

older adults in television advertisements revealed a more proportional representation of

older adults in general, but a significant under-representation of women. In

advertisements with older adults, only 38 percent were women where 82 percent were

men.[54] Of additional interest are the roles and product placement to which they were

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[50] Katz, *Cultural Aging,* 196. Professors Dale A. Lunsford and Melissa S. Burnett report this in a paper, "Marketing Product Innovations to the Elderly: Understanding the Barriers to Adoption," *Journal of Consumer Marketing.* 9:53-63, p. 56. The "new age elderly" are likely in the 50 or 55 and over age category.

[51] Zhang et al., "Older Adults in Advertising," 267. This study included those over sixty years of age.

[52] Peterson and Ross, "Individuals in Television Commercials," 431. In this 1997 study, "older" constituted those over forty-five years of age.

[53] Zhang et al., "Older Adults in Advertising," 267. This study took place in 1997. Yan Bing Zhang et al. list four additional studies (1983, 1987, 1998, 2004) that concur with findings that there is under-representation of older adults, particularly women in television commercials.

[54] Lee et al., "Representation of older adults in television advertisements," 28. In "Representation of the Elderly in Advertising: Crisis or Inconsequence," Alan J Greco argues that under-representation exists not because of ageism or a lack of care on the part of the advertisers, but because they question the ability for

connected. It is understood that advertising's role is to make money; therefore, they intentionally match products, services, and actors with the buying viewer. In the case of this study, advertisements where older adults had prominent roles included:

> ...medications, medical services, food products, cars, and financial and legal services... but [an] implication is that these depictions reinforce stereotypes of older adults as being overly concerned with declining physical functions and financial/legal vulnerability. While it may be true that older adults have medical and financial concerns, they also have a wide range of other interests, experiences, and concerns that make up the lifestyle of many older adults."[55]

Like print media, television advertising under-represents and stereotypes the older adult.

Effects of Print and Television Advertising

There are negative consequences when older adults are under-represented and depicted with traits rooted in negative stereotypes. Society's image of older people becomes increasingly negative as does the self-image of the older adult.[56] Advertisers have the ability "to furnish a social service by portraying mature citizens as important members of society and as capable and knowledgeable individuals."[57] On the other hand, the more recent popular and positive portrayals "do not eliminate ageist messages."[58] The older, viewing audience may resonate with this portrayal because it is the very image that they desire for themselves even though it may be nothing like their personal reality. They may not have a robust lifestyle and may lack the required resources to have great hair, gleaming teeth, go on exotic cruises, and live in retirement communities. Naomi Richards suggests this has become "a new stereotype on the opposite side of the spectrum to the

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an older person to appeal to either a younger or older buying audience (*Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Winter 1989; 6, 1, 42-3).

[55] Lee et al., "Representation of older adults in television advertisements," 28.

[56] Peterson and Ross, "Individuals in Television commercials," 432.

[57] Peterson and Ross, "Individuals in Television commercials," 432.

[58] Wilkinson and Ferraro, "Thirty Years of Ageism Research," 345.

'negative' images of dependence and decline."[59] Overly positive images of aging are both

inaccurate and uncommon and can "lead to inaccurate feelings and perceptions of older

individuals."[60]

While these positive images may be helpful to some older people, they may be a

discouragement to, and judgment on those who are vulnerable and who see themselves,

or are seen by others, as not emulating a similar positive image. Many critics doubt that

simply publicizing positive images in advertising is helpful for those facing financial,

health, or like scenarios that make them more vulnerable in our society.[61] These

"oversimplified generalizations… tend to create sanitized portraits and idealized

images."[62] Older people are no more "perfectly healthy and wonderful than they are

feeble and ridiculous."[63]

If the *Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory* is considered, under-representation could be

tied to a lack of vitality and be a sign that there is a general lack of respect and support in

the community. *Cultivation Theory* would suggest that a person's perception of society is

influenced by the ongoing lack of representation of older adults and the presence of

stereotyping (negative or positive) in advertising. Negative images reinforce a fear of

aging and a need to avoid it at all costs, while ageless images feed into the "successful

aging" framework that leaves little room for a lifestyle that includes contemplation and

rest; natural age-related changes; or health, financial, and security limitations.[64]

According to *Cultivation Theory*, this continuous messaging will cause people to believe

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[59] Richards et al., "The challenge of creating alternate images of ageing," 77.
[60] Zhang et al., "The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising," 278.
[61] Gullette, *Agewise*, 23.
[62] Miller et al., "Stereotypes of the Elderly," 321.
[63] Miller et al., "Stereotypes of the Elderly," 321.
[64] A closer look at the "successful aging" paradigm will follow later in this chapter.

these images are their future reality. When similar messages are also present in our schools, churches, and conversations, the odds of believing them as truth are even greater.

Advertising: Anti-Aging Messaging Meets Consumerism

In the previous section, this thesis proposed that the positive images we see in both print and television advertising continue to contribute to ageism and, as a result, can negatively impact the perceptions of individuals and a culture. We now turn to the ways advertising is a conduit for media that promotes anti-aging thinking and lifestyles. It contributes to ageism and fuels prolific and successful marketing strategies for anti-aging products and services targeted to men and women of various ages.

When considering images, Stephen Katz suggests that the newer positive images of aging:

> ...have come to be used to promote a widespread anti-aging culture, one that translates their radical appeal into commercial capital. In doing so, and aided by powerful rhetorical and marketing practices, anti-aging culture is effectively reinventing notions of maturity, aging, and elderhood with ideals of timeless living and growing older unburdened by the signs of aging.[65]

According to *Cultivation Theory*, this repetitive and consistent pattern will eventually convince us the images and lifestyles that are presented are normal and should be attained by all.

When the term ageism was first coined older people were consistently portrayed with negative stereotypes such as being frail, dependent, and senile. While efforts to change those images by depicting younger-looking, vibrant, and timeless older people have been made, they have not combated ageism, they have simply reshaped it. These

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[65] Katz, "Growing Older Without Aging?" 27.

efforts "reinforce the belief that old age is repugnant and promise relief to those who can pay enough."[66] This promise of avoiding the disgusting version of aging puts pressure on both men and women.

While advertising images depict older men as potentially youthful, and "manly," products are promoted that offer their assurance that men can keep up.[67] "To maintain status in relation to younger men, aging male bodies must 'play hard' and 'stay hard.'"[68] Men are pressured to maintain their youthful performance both publicly and behind closed doors and products are presented as the cure-all for anything that stands in their way. Like men, women must continue to cast the illusion of youth; however, pressure is often less about producing and performing and more about beauty: skin, hair, weight, and fashion.[69] "Beauty" is a marketer's dream. "If it firms, brightens, smoothes, fills or plumps we're interested. If it has antioxidants, botanicals and increases 'glow' or radiance, we're ready to plunk down our credit cards."[70]

Selling "Youth as the Ideal" to a Fearful Consumer

In advertising, the models that dominate anti-aging beauty products are young, attractive, and photo-shopped—the epitome of how culture insists every aging woman

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[66] Calasanti, "Ageism, Gravity, and Gender," 11.

[67] The depiction of men as "manly" has its own problems, including in Christian circles. Real men and manliness is depicted by the advertising industry as rugged, tough, and muscular which is an inaccurate portrayal of the wide range of men God has created. Just as we face challenges when it comes to buying into media messaging on aging it is likewise important that we do not buy into their images on what defines a man and a woman.

[68] Calasanti, "Ageism, Gravity, and Gender," 11.

[69] In this paragraph generalizations about media's depictions of the anti-aging crisis for men and women does not depict the author's personal view on men/women generalizations. Both men and women vary in the importance they place on looking young and/or youthful performance and production. For the purpose of this argument and for ease of reading I will adopt the cultural generalizations that suggest it is primarily women who wrestle with the need for anti-aging beauty products. When the totality of anti-aging products and services are discussed it is understood that both men and women are active consumers.

[70] Jeffries, "The New Face of Beautiful Aging," 44.

needs to look.[71] Occasionally, however, a company will use an older Hollywood star to present a more natural image. For example, in 2006, *L'Oreal* used Diane Keaton, 60, who claimed that no photo-shopping was done on her images.[72] However, Denise C. Lewis believes that the use of older women celebrities sends the message that aged persons can be accepted when they are wealthy and famous. In the case of other aging celebrities such as Courtney Cox or Sarah Jessica Parker, they are still being used in the context of agelessness or anti-aging messaging.[73]

The industry readily admits that "products that target the skin, hair and makeup concerns of women (over) 40 have been around for decades, but the dramatic increase in the number of products available at every price point show just how powerful this consumer demo is to beauty brands…. Thousands of new anti-aging options a year get our attention."[74] Women flock to purchase these products that just might prolong youth, prevent aging, hide their reality, or temporarily quell the fears around their own movement toward "old."

Contributing to these fears and associated purchases are many of the estimated 500 advertisements we are exposed to each day. However, the scope of these advertisements is not merely for beauty. Margaret Morgenroth Gullette paints the bigger picture:

> The heady rush of 'anti-aging' is commercial. 'Rejuvenation' is repackaged as post human transcendence of decline: botulin [Botox®] parties, solutions to 'the midlife crisis' from kayaking to Buddhism, penis enlargers, toothpaste with 'rejuvenating effects,' all in the rhetoric of

[71] Seigel, "The Lash Stand," 2. Through quotes form company advertising representatives Seigel confirms that re-touching is an industry standard with every single company. Concerns around misleading claims of products can be raised by the watchdog group—US National Advertising Division, however compliance by advertisers is voluntary.
[72] Despite this claim we see from the previous footnote that this is near impossible.
[73] Lewis et al., "Awakening to the desires of older women," 108.
[74] Jeffries, "The New Face of Beautiful Aging," 43.

'health,' 'choice,' or 'take ten years off your life.'…Websites, daily e-mails, the health tabloids, media, books, lectures, spas-with-conferences attached, are pumping product. 'Youth restorers' turn 'someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having corrected a particular blemish.' Americans wouldn't need such 'hopes' if aging really equaled progress. Younger people would be tattooing wrinkles on themselves or highlighting their hair with gray.[75]

All of this transposes to a massive dollar value. A 2011 *USA Today* article reported that in the Unites States alone, the projected sales of anti-aging products will be $114 billion by 2015.[76] The more we believe we can control aging through product promises, "the pressure to not 'look old' increases exponentially."[77]

Westerners are all Aging

Advertisements and marketing strategies aside, no anti-aging product or service is actually going to *prevent* aging. Fifty-one research scientists gathered to examine anti-aging and enhanced technologies and agreed unanimously that aging is not a disease to be fixed by being younger, nor does anti-aging medicine have an influence on aging itself. Optimum lifestyles, inclusive of exercise and dietary discipline, "may contribute to life expectancy and prevent age-related disease but in themselves do not increase longevity or alter the process of age… so scientists conclude with a warning urging the 'the general public to avoid buying or using products or other interventions from anyone claiming that they will slow, stop, or reverse aging.'"[78] Thus the term anti-aging is a misnomer.[79]

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[75] Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 22.

[76] Crary, "Boomers will be spending billions to counter aging," para. 2.

[77] Calasanti, "Ageism, Gravity, and Gender," 11.

[78] Katz, *Cultural Aging*, 193. This scientific perspective of these fifty-one researchers on aging is not the only one. Dorothy Boorse identifies that there are three groups in the scientific community: one, scientists who believe that primary longevity is not possible and that there would be a moral issue based on its global effects if it were; two, scientists who hold that life will be extended in the future via medicine but limit their promotion of this concept to a few hundred years; and three, scientists who see death as rare. It is there contention that by 2100 some people will be living for four to five thousand years and beyond, and that immortality is a moral responsibility. Each presents a series of humanity-based, environmental, and

Ageism affects both the old and the young alike. No part of society is exempt from ageism because it is socially constructed from within. Anti-aging messages fuel a fear of the natural processes of aging and can thereby damage people's self esteem.[80] However, holding on to this youthful image for a time may provide a temporary boost to self-esteem, self-worth, and positive affirmation or acceptance from the watchful eye of our culture. As people move from middle age into the early years of old age, the hope is to be one of the revered ones—one who ages well and maintains youthful prowess and beauty. However, the problem continues to exist because, as Toni Calasanti writes, this approach:

> ...simply forestalls the point at which individuals' bodies become marked as old and hence deserving of exclusion... It doesn't eradicate ageism but instead prompts people to expend increasing amounts of time, money and effort into being 'not old'. Because this venture is doomed to failure as bodies will age, it increases both the burden of activity and our guilt for having the bodies that we have.[81]

We *will* eventually become old—which, ironically, is something that we desire. Therefore, it is logical—for the sake of our future self and for the sake of everyone else who will someday be unable to abide by media's messages of "forever young"—that we take ageism and the powerful anti-aging messaging seriously. While everyone is sure this does not affect them, we are all subject to the power of the culture in which we are immersed. Based on history, media influence, and anti-aging messaging, it is probable that the majority of Western people unconsciously fear aging and death. As a result, they strive to be youthful in an effort to maintain a positive self-image, and to be accepted in

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theological implications that must be considered. ("Anti-aging: Radical Longevity, Environmental Impacts, and Christian Theology," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 57, 1, 2005. p. 56.)
[79] Gullette, *Agewise*, 34.
[80] Lewis et al., "Awakening to the desires of older Women," 108.
[81] Calasanti, "Aging, Gravity, and Gender," 12.

society. In the meantime, companies continue to get rich on the back of the willing,

wealthy, fearful buyer and inadvertently influence individuals and society. Should ageism

matter to the church and if so, what can a Christian worldview offer?

3. Adapting Lifestyles

Critique: Successful Aging Paradigm

In the 1950s, gerontologists emphasized the importance of active lifestyles to

ensure people could make healthy adjustments in old age instead of encountering illness

and decline. This continued into the 1960s and 1970s with messaging that touted a need

for retirement life to be busy, creative, healthy, and mobile.[82] In the late 1990s, these

familiar thoughts were introduced, published, and popularly adopted with the label

"successful aging." This new label had a two-fold impact. It identified a way to "shift the

focus from declining health to healthful aging"[83] as well as acting as a dominant "antidote

to negative stereotypes about aging and old age."[84] In their article, "Successful Aging,"

John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn present it as "multidimensional, encompassing three

distinct domains: avoidance of diseases and disability, maintenance of high physical and

cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities."[85]

Growing old within this framework places the emphasis on the *individual,* who can avoid

a negative aging experience by maintaining high physical activity well into old age. The

framework also espouses participation in activities that challenge cognition, such as

doing word puzzles or learning a new language, and enable social interaction. However,

in addition to *simple* activity, a person "must go beyond their potential for activity to

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[82] Katz, "Busy Bodies," 125.
[83] Kane et al., "Pastoral Care Professionals," 4.
[84] Rozanova et al., "Seniors and Portrayals," 376.
[85] Rowe and Kahn, "Successful Aging," 439.

'behaviour that is productive.'"[86] Such productivity often takes place in post-retirement (or similar age) work that is either paid or volunteer. According to the model, this busy lifestyle provides a person with pleasing and positive aging conditions. The successful aging framework posits that older people need to be as busy, physically active, productive, and socially engaged as they were in midlife. Calasanti writes:

> As Rowe and Kahn put it, "Just keep on going." To the extent that middle age serves as our implicit yardstick, successful aging means not aging, not being old: "The unspecified but clearly preferred method of successful ageing is, by most accounts, not to age at all, or at least to minimize the extent to which it is apparent that one is ageing, both internally and externally…The implications are that physical changes that accompany the passage of time would therefore be fought, and the old should develop strategies to appear "youthful."[87]

The message is clear: keep going, continue to stay youthful, do not let on that you are aging, or simply try not to age at all. Fight the physical changes that come with time and appear youthful at all costs.[88]

Four Problems

Issues around aging and ageism are rooted in history and have "maintained much of [their] cultural power today."[89] Regardless of this long-standing influence and the potentially positive impacts the successful aging paradigm might contribute, there are some sensitive ageist challenges within—many which present problems in light of the Christian worldview.[90] A Christian consideration of these problems will be addressed in chapters three and four; however, here we will consider four problematic issues:

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[86] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 200. This directive is credited to the work of John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn in their book, *Successful Aging* (New York, NY: Dell, 1998), 40.

[87] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 200.

[88] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 201.

[89] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 231.

[90] Kane et al., "Pastoral Care Professionals," 4.

continued ageism, polarization of aging into "good" or "bad," marginalization of others, and self-reliance, blame, and superiority.

First, and similar to advertising images, the attempt to curb ageism with new ways of living and attitudes around aging does not help—ageism continues. Renegotiating old age does not really address the negative views of aging and old age. Defying old age by developing a "new you" that stays active, fit, productive, and young merely asserts that the disparaging label of "old" does not apply to you.[91]

> Rather than countering ageism, then, the stress on activity as an antidote or protection against being labeled 'old' simply pushes that negative appellation onto those who are chronically impaired, or who prefer to be contemplative… The negativity of 'old' itself remains unchallenged![92]

Second, polarized ageism is firmly rooted in our culture. While not a new concept, successful aging acts as a positive conceptual response to the negative perceptions on aging.[93] This polarization consists of positive and negative poles. The positive pole is "good" aging that is characterized by wellness: health, self-reliance, and activity—with extra value assigned to "economically productive activity."[94] Socially and morally, "good old age is legitimized by an ethic of busyness… that envisions older adults pursuing active leisure… vigorously and purposefully."[95] This framework holds that good aging "can be attained through individual choice and effort."[96] It postulates that it is desirable and normal to age well, despite an array of potential preconditions a person might have and in spite of the actual outcomes experienced.[97] The opposing negative pole is "bad" aging that is characterized by sickness, dependency, and premature death.

[91] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 201.
[92] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 201.
[93] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 230.
[94] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 200.
[95] Rozanova, "Seniors and Portrayals," 376.
[96] Calasanti, "Theorizing Age Relations," 201. Calasanti is quoting Rowe and Kahn.
[97] Rozanova et al., "Seniors and Portrayals," 378.

Because successful aging dictates that good aging can be attained through personal choice, it also implies that "bad" aging is the fault of the aging person who has not done enough to prevent such an outcome. Polarization dividing into "good" or "bad" is discriminatory in nature and "indicates an attitude of exclusion by distinguishing those 'successful' agers from those 'unsuccessful' agers."[98] Heather A. Dillaway says the concept excludes most people anyway because "successful agers," "tend to be male, white, relatively affluent, better educated, and healthier" than those who are considered aging "less successfully."[99] Unfortunately, it is often the most vulnerable older adults with few personal and economic resources that fall into this category. Additionally, many who are not aging "well" are unmarried or unattached, are women, have precarious health issues, and have fewer supports in place.[100] A second result of polarized ageism is that it creates stereotypes of what good and bad looks like. Stereotypes "may further devalue and segregate these more vulnerable older adults, reinforcing the social, economic, and cultural differences between those who do and those who do not 'age well.'"[101]

Third, the successful aging framework denies the natural changes to an aging body and advocates "an unrealistic cultural ideal of 'agelessness'... [which] could produce self-denial and self-hatred" especially among the disadvantaged people in our society.[102] Those who are *not* considered to be aging "well" are often marginalized and

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[98] Liang and Luo, "Toward a Discourse Shift," 328.
[99] Dillaway and Byrnes, "Reconsidering Successful Aging," 707.
[100] Rozanova et al., "Seniors and Portrayals," 375.
[101] Rozanova et al., "Seniors and Portrayals," 376. Rozanova credits this concept to Gunhild O. Hagestad and Peter Uhlenberg. ("Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism," *Journal of Social Issues* 61, 2, (2005), 343-60).
[102] Liang and Luo, "Toward a discourse shift," 328.

devalued compared to those who are younger.[103] For a person facing feelings of emptiness, the busyness of the successful aging framework can backfire and "actually mask, rather than diminish" feelings of loss that may accompany changes in life.[104] Rarely considered are disparities in health that are "correlated to income, ethnicity, gender and geographic location" that greatly impact the ability to fit the model and keep up with what the culture perceives as normal. [105]

Fourth, successful aging posits that individuals can be in charge of denying and defying aging without fail. As they chronologically age, they must age "well" or they are subject to scorn and even blame. Michael N. Kane et al. considers a Darwinian influence—that these aging perspectives may be "tacitly advocating the survival-of-the-fittest and suggesting that individuals who do not age healthily are culpable and accountable for the manner in which they do age."[106] This self-reliance presumes that negotiating the process of aging allows the aging person to "avoid pitfalls that exist and to which the weak succumb."[107] Because the strong are credited for maintaining their capacities (physical, cognitive, spiritual, producing), so those who fail to keep up are discredited and held responsible for their supposed weakness, incapacity, or inferiority

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[103] Rozanova et al., "Seniors and Portrayals," 376. This can also occur as older adults assign themselves to the "successful" group because they are *certain* that they are not truly "old" like those in the "unsuccessful" group (382).

[104] Katz, "Busy Bodies," 139.

[105] Kane et al., "Pastoral Care Professionals," 4. In "Reconsidering Successful Aging," Dillaway and Byrnes indicate that those who fit the successful aging paradigm are what they call the "young old" (younger than 65 or 75); however, they "tend to be male, white, relatively affluent, better educated, and healthier than those who aged less well." Those who they call the "old old" (75 or older) simply cannot meet such expectations. The successful aging terminology speaks only to a select group of people based not only on age but race, sex, affluence, education, and health, which makes the whole framework exclusionary and problematic as something that can be applied to a broader scope.

[106] Kane et al., "Pastoral Care Professionals," 2.

[107] Kane et al., "Pastoral Care Professionals," 4.

thus making the strong superior.[108] With a framework that holds this philosophy there is a

risk of discriminatory treatment and inferiority attitudes toward those who fail to age

successfully.[109] Within this framework, there is little consideration given to people who

have health, financial, or other limitations. There is little room for those who prefer

passivity, acceptance, rest, and contemplation—those who prefer their *inner* worlds, as

opposed to the *active* world that our culture deems so valuable.[110]

4. Summary

The fear of aging and fear of death are understood to be key drivers of ageism,

influencing people to desire a youthful self by looking young and living a lifestyle that

does the same. It inevitably creates struggles around growing older, impacts treatment of

older adults, and creates the potential to judge, shame, and blame any aging person who

cannot, or chooses not to, maintain a life of youthfulness.

The "Proposed Ageism Cycle" (figure 5) attempts to summarize patterns of ageist

thinking that occur at the conscious and unconscious level. Stages and order are not firm

but suggest a general cycle of beliefs, behaviours, and actions. As already discussed in

chapter one and chapter two, these stages have hurtful, harmful, and damaging effects on

not only older people, but on the aging person to whom the cycle applies.

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[108] Kane et al., "Pastoral Care Professionals," 5. Victorian era ideals blamed the poor for being weak, unmotivated, or lazy, which has similarities to this contemporary example.
[109] Dillaway and Byrnes, "Reconsidering Successful Aging," 708.
[110] Katz, "Busy Bodies," 139.
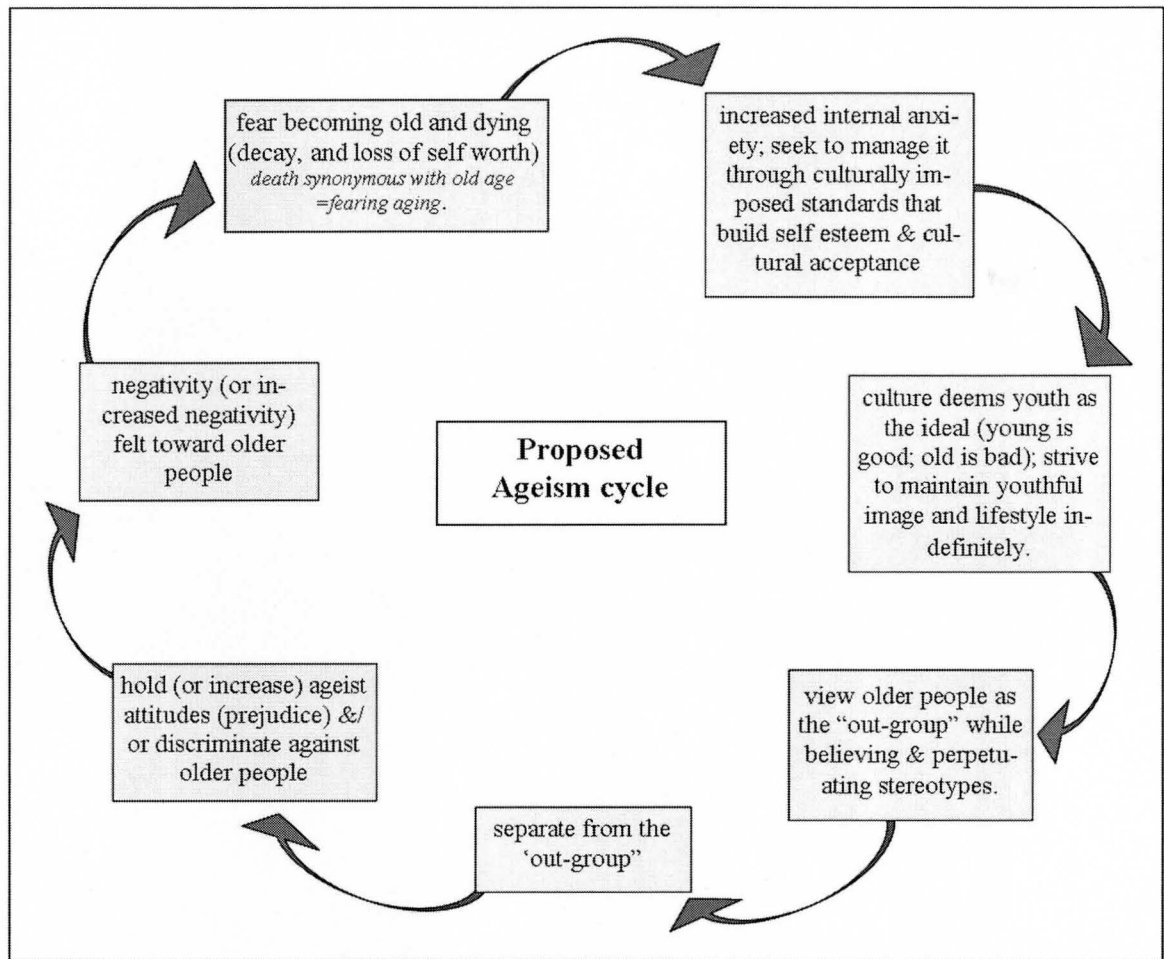
Figure 5. Proposed Ageism Cycle.

For those immersed in daily Western life, recognizing the cultural presence of ageism can be a challenge, but recognizing ageist tendencies in oneself can be very troublesome and arduous. It is humbling to face inner motives and admit being influenced by something that creates as much vulnerability as does fear. When ageism is dissected and connected to habits and behaviours, often people can better relate. One can assume, based on the information presented, that most Canadians are influenced by anti-aging consumerism, hundreds of daily advertisements, cultural stereotyping, negative thoughts about those who are aged and aging, the goal of successfully aging, and our youth ideal. Facing ageism may raise some questions. Which of my lifestyle choices are driven by a

fear of aging? In what ways are they fueled by cultural standards that promise to ensure self-esteem and acceptance by others? In what ways is the youth ideal affecting my thoughts and actions toward others both in and outside the church? How much of a grip does ageism have on my life and the lives of those in my church, and how can the church help? Is my church community a place where people can worship, serve, and have fellowship apart from the ageist attitudes and cultural ideals that are hurtful and fear-filled? Is my church intentional about how we think about aging issues? Does it really matter? Answering these types of questions requires honesty and deep reflection. In chapter three, voices from social sciences, theology, and scripture, will consider some of these queries.

Chapter Three: Voices to Consider

Eugene C. Bianchi writes that it is vital "to face our own abhorrence of elderhood. Unless we confront this sentiment, almost taste it, our attempts to cope with old age risk superficiality."[1] Filling time with leisure activities and programs without reflection is much easier than considering our ageist experience in light of social science research, Christian scriptures, and Christian theology. Chapter three will reflect on ageism from the perspective of these three and consider how they might influence the reduction of ageist attitudes and actions. First, data will clarify the inaccuracies of the four commonly held stereotypes about older adults that were presented in chapter one and suggest concrete ways they, and consequently ageism, can be reduced. Second, an examination of 1 Cor 12:12-26 will be presented as a relevant text for the twenty-first century Western church living in an ageist culture. Paul's use of the "body of Christ" metaphor will show the importance of unity, diversity, and interdependence in the church. This scripture shines a light on separation, prejudice, and discrimination that are part of the proposed ageism cycle. Third, theology will address fears of change—changing bodies, circumstances, or abilities, as well as the fear of losing independence. Christian teaching on change and dependence will be followed by the message of God's love, which is a source of freedom and intrinsic worth.

1. Social Science Voices: Debunking Common Stereotypes

Stereotypes, such as those presented in chapter one, are a powerful force in the proposed ageism cycle. They become accepted as truth and they influence younger people to distance themselves from older adults thus fostering prejudicial thoughts and/or

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[1] Bianchi, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*, 131.

discriminatory action. When left unchallenged stereotypes increase negativity toward older adults and either maintain or intensify a person's subconscious fear of growing old.

Two common problems arise as a result of older adult stereotypes. First, believing stereotypes about older adults tends to segregate age groups, causing lack of interaction between one group (such as young people), and the older adult.[2] This can perpetuate stereotypes, ageism, and further negativity. Second, the older adult tends to perform tasks in keeping with the negative stereotype simply because they are told that it exists, thus perpetuating stereotypes and stereotypical behaviour.[3] Investigating the four commonly held stereotypes posited by Whitbourne and Sneed can help contribute to reducing ageist thinking and help break ageism's perpetuated pattern.

Four Misconceptions

The first stereotype is that older adults are lonely, depressed, and unable to cope. In each case this is refutable. The weight of evidence supports the "view that older adults are high on psychosocial resources, both personal and interpersonal"[4] and Canadian statistics indicate 85 to 90 percent of older adults will never experience depressive symptoms and/or clinical depression.[5] Whitbourne points to data which reveals older adults "are not inherently less flexible in terms of attitudes or personality styles than are younger adults. Furthermore, older adults have a wealth of coping resources that allow

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[2] McCann, "Ageism in the Workplace," 167.

[3] Bevy, "Implicit Ageism," 62. These studies suggest the same for cognition, behavior and health, even when the stereotypes are implicit. While positive *characteristics* of older adults can improve performance, as a *stereotype* they remain problematic.

[4] Whitbourne and Sneed, "Paradox of Well-Being," 247. Whitbourne credits this data to two studies: Cooley, S. et al., "What practitioners should know about working with older adults," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 29, 1998, p. 413-427; and Whitbourne, S.K. *Adult Development and Aging: Biopsychosocial Perspectives*. New York: Springer, 2001.

[5] Edwards and Mawani, "Healthy Aging in Canada," 6.

them to manage stress—personally and interpersonally, in more effective ways than do young adults.[6]

The second stereotype is that older adults become more alike as they age—typically with negative connotations. Chapter one outlined how, when groups of people are stereotyped, they are often seen as homogeneous. Like most groups, Canada's older adults are actually "a highly diverse group... and are heterogeneous, reflecting diverse values, educational levels and socioeconomic status."[7] Differences can also include things like thought patterns, cognitive ability, health or economic status, activity preferences, family and social situations, spiritual beliefs and practices, living conditions, and/or friendliness.[8] Studies also support this and reveal their psychological, physical, and social scores vary and show them as distinctly different one to another.[9]

Third, older adults are stereotyped to be sick, frail, and dependent—reinforced by the use of the term "frail elder." While this may be the case for some older adults, it cannot be applied to older adults as a whole. In addition to the 300,000 older adults in the Canadian workforce, almost half are volunteering an average of 15.4 hours a week at a national value of $60.2 billion each year.[10] Most are healthy enough to engage in normal daily activities and "over 90 percent live independently in the community and want to remain there... Currently, only 7 percent of seniors live in long-term care facilities,

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[6] Whitbourne and Sneed, "Paradox of Well-Being," 248. On flexibility Whitbourne credits Schaie, K.W. "The course of adult intellectual development," *American Psychologist*, 49 (1994), 304-313. On coping: Diehl, M. et al. "Age and sex differences in coping and defense across the life span," *Psychology and Aging*, 11 (1996), 127-139.
[7] Edwards and Mawani, "Healthy Aging in Canada," 2.
[8] Hooyman and Kiyak, *Social Gerontology*, 7.
[9] Whitbourne and Sneed, "Paradox of Well-Being," 248.
[10] Edwards and Mawani, "Healthy Aging in Canada," 8. Volunteerism statistics are from 1998 and amount to 44 percent of those over 65. Working older adult statistics are from 2001.

although this increases to 14 percent for those over age 75."[11] Poor health and disability

does exist for some but it is typically a result of "chronic diseases and conditions (such as

problems with vision and hearing) and injuries resulting from falls."[12] According to

Eerdman B. Palmore, more older persons have chronic illness but "elders actually have

less than half as many acute illnesses as do younger persons." [13]

The fourth stereotype is that older adults are impaired in cognitive and/or

psychological realms, which will deteriorate and end in "senility."[14] Generally speaking,

"older people are capable of learning new things, and continue to do so over the life

course. This relates to cognitive vitality as well as the adoption of new behaviors."[15]

Furthermore, those aged 65 and older have limited memory defects and can learn and

grow at impressive rates—"perhaps one in five people … have mild or moderate mental

impairment. This means the overwhelming majority of older people have no mental

impairment at all."[16] In Canada, dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, affects "8

percent of seniors over the age of 65 and more than 25 percent of those over the age of

80."[17] Like memory defects, the overwhelming majority of older adults do not suffer

from dementia or Alzheimer's disease, thus disallowing it as an appropriate descriptor for

the category called "older adults." Lastly with regard to older adults in the workplace,

McCann and Giles write that:

> …it is erroneous and even cruel to tag all, or even most, older workers
> with labels such as senile or out to pasture... There is little change in
> intellectual function for individuals throughout adulthood except in

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[11] Edwards and Mawani, "Healthy Aging in Canada," 3. Statistics are credited to the 2005 National Advisory Council on Aging.
[12] Edwards and Mawani, "Healthy Aging in Canada," 5.
[13] Palmore, *Ageism*, 21.
[14] Whitbourne and Sneed, "Paradox of Well-Being," 248.
[15] Ory et al., "Challenging Aging Stereotypes," 165.
[16] Moody, *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, 138.
[17] Edwards and Mawani, "Healthy Aging in Canada," 6.

> matters pertaining to speed and reaction time... Brain activity in healthy people in their 80s is comparable to that of people in their 20s.... Nevertheless, stereotypical beliefs about the mental decrements of older individuals are ubiquitous and are well documented in the research literature.[18]

Drawing attention to these misconceptions reminds us how important it is to recognize each older person as an individual. Negative and positive stereotypical traits will appear in older adults, just as *some, yet not all* teenagers are lazy and *some, yet not all* are irresponsible. Common negative stereotypes can be countered by equally problematic positive stereotypes that are promoted in the context of media, the anti-aging industry, and the successful ager as well as traits that imply all older adults are kind, wise, dependable, or affluent.[19] Most people believe a mix of positive and negative at the same time. Palmore writes, "Any stereotype is erroneous in the sense that it is applied to all members of a category of people, but almost no trait is true of all persons in a category."[20] How can the problem of stereotypes be addressed?

Reducing Stereotypes

Whether we stereotype to avoid the hard work of engaging with a person and discovering their interests, needs, and capacities; or to build personal value by positioning older adults in an 'out-group' that is homogeneous, less valued, and with less status, stereotypes cause real damage.[21] One way ageism can be reduced is by challenging stereotypes. With no challenge or intervention, they easily perpetuate as a result of cultural influence and personal acceptance. If unaddressed, they can lead to separation

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[18] McCann and Giles, "Ageism in the Workplace," 167.

[19] Palmore, "Stereotypes," 302. Palmore summarizes his work on identifying positive and negative stereotypes, indicating that they are problematic. A few examples of his positive stereotypes are presented here.

[20] Palmore, "Stereotypes," 301.

[21] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 315.

and disengagement from older adults, resulting in ongoing ageist attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination. As negative attitudes continue, our subconscious fear of becoming old ourselves continues, which influences our personal habits. Now that we have debunked some myths around stereotypes and the older adult, there are four ways we can move forward.

First, continue to learn about stereotypes, become aware of those attributed to older adults, and maintain a heightened sensitivity to them.[22] Second, alter stereotypical language and messaging. Avoid broad comments about older adults that imply they are a homogeneous group. Ensure language counteracts—or at least does not include, false stereotypes or exaggerated characteristics that may be considered the norm for older adults. Balance negative and positive characteristics including benefits that come with age.[23] Third, take diversity seriously and recognize it by engaging with older adults. Engagement potentially presents people with "stereotype-incongruent information which could force us to see older people as a more variable group... Under certain conditions [this can] curtail discrimination against the elderly."[24] Therefore, by engaging, we "become people who get to know people as diverse individuals"[25] and move forward with new perspectives and better responses in future interaction with older adults.[26] Fourth, demonstrate to others how diversity is found in all age groups. Just as young adults and middle-agers are diverse so are older adults. Similarly, "many stereotypes about elders are actually shared to varying degrees by all ages (such as memory, hearing, and vision

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[22] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 331.
[23] Palmore, "Stereotypes," 302.
[24] Cuddy, "Doddering but Dear," 18.
[25] Moody, *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, 12.
[26] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 331.

problems)."[27] There are people of all ages who require vision care or know what it is like to misplace car keys.

Identifying inaccurate stereotypes and intentionally preventing their perpetuation is paramount. Through such measures stereotypes, as well as ageism itself, can be reduced. The church can be a conduit for change as it identifies and attempts to prevent stereotyping in its congregational life.

2. Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

The responsibilities to love, care, encourage, and enact justice for those who are in need or oppressed is part of faithful living. In 1 Cor 12:12-26, Paul adopts the "metaphor of the 'body of Christ' as a model for community identity—and relationships—according to which every part serves an integral function that is essential for the benefit of the whole: young and old, weak and strong, elder in the faith and new convert together."[28] While the "body of Christ" is not the only image he uses for the church, it is well-known and "used by Paul when there are problems of disunity (cf. Romans 12)."[29] As we reflect on the experience of living in an ageist culture, this metaphor may become helpful.

True Unity Requires Diversity

The "body of Christ" expresses themes of diversity and oneness. Gordon Fee believes the initial verses (v. 12-14) set the stage for what follows and clarifies a potential misunderstanding. The text is not saying that we need to tolerate one another's differences and that "the body is one *even though* it has many members, thus arguing for

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[27] Palmore, "Stereotypes," 303.
[28] Knowles, "From Vulnerable to Venerable," 5.
[29] Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 948. Ephesians and Colossians also reference the body of Christ noting Christ as the head of the body. Sampley says 1 Cor shows Christ and the "believers belong to one another, and the believers are the members of Christ's body" (948).

their need for unity despite their diversity."[30] Rather, he says, it is reversed: *"even though the body is one*, it does not consist of one member but of many, thus arguing for their need for diversity, since they are in fact one body."[31] In order to establish a firm foundation in this image, it is important to understand the primacy of the one body, which comes first, and its dire need for each member as they are. "Paul's concern is for their unity; but there is no such thing as true unity without diversity."[32]

Disunity: Feeling Second Class

"It is an affront to Christ if a self-effacing or vulnerable Christian is made to feel second class or alienated, perhaps because he or she does not have what others see as the 'right' gifts. It is a betrayal if such a person reaches the point of saying, 'I do not belong to the body' (12:15)."[33] Each part of the body is important and in need of the other (v. 17). As one body, they are arranged by God (v.18) and each is valued for his or her diversity (19-20).

This text suits a discussion on ageism. Because of its cultural dominance, ageism can exist, even undetected, in church life. If Paul wrote a letter to a twenty-first century Western church in which stereotypes, ageist jokes, and exclusion from church life or ministry existed, it would not be surprising if he reinforced the "body of Christ" metaphor as a model for community and for relationships therein. Given the presence of ageist thoughts, language, and behaviours that likely exist in our congregations, feeling second class and/or alienated may be more common than we suspect—particularly when vulnerable or self-effacing people are not likely to speak up. The text is both an

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[30] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 601. Emphasis by Fee.
[31] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 601. Emphasis by Fee.
[32] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 602.
[33] Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 208. Verse 16 also illustrates the same.

encouragement and a teaching. All parts of the body matter—young and old, active and

contemplative, fit and frail, trendy and dated, healthy and ill. Paul gives this special

attention and insists "that all the members are equally important to the well being of the

body of Christ. No one is less important. No one brings less to the body of Christ."[34]

Therefore, if we are all important to the body, things that cause a person to feel

excluded, offended, or judged should be considered in light of Paul's letter to the

Corinthians.

Disunity: Feeling Elevated

Antithetical to the person feeling second rate is the person who appears to be in

the preferred position. This may be ascribed by oneself or by the community as a whole.

Through the lens of ageism, this heightened importance might be granted to a young

person or even an aging adult who is successfully keeping up with culture's "forever

young" ideal. They may then be considered better or stronger, or even more beautiful,

gifted, or valued than others. Paul's first-century message is relevant today as the

potential for pride and self-sufficiency can still get "to the point of saying, 'I have no

need for you'" (v. 21) and can lead to prejudice and discrimination.[35] Those who elevate

themselves with supposed preferential gifts or cultural status "may turn out to be less

indispensible than the faithful, humble, hard-praying or hard working 'members' whose

value may be overlooked by the power seekers"[36](v.22). Paul makes it clear that:

> ...every member is equally important to the well-being of the body... God
> orders the body in such a way as to ensure that members have proper
> concern for one another, sharing not only in honor but also in suffering
> (vv. 23-26). Jürgen Moltmann argues that Christian believers who bring
> with them disabilities, privations, or experiences of suffering may be the

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[34] Sampley, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 948.
[35] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 613.
[36] Thiselton, 1 Corinthians, 210.

most precious and 'charismatic' part of the body, because every church
stands in genuine need of such to live out and to teach the character of the
gospel.[37]

"Paul's concern [is] for diversity, on the one hand, and for mutual concern in the body,

on the other" is applicable to us today and speaks to several of the issues surrounding

ageism.[38]

In 1 Cor 12:12-26, God paints a picture of his church through Paul's metaphor of

the "body of Christ." In contrast, ageism reveals attitudes and behaviours that do not

build the body, create unity, or perpetuate the valuation of individuals and their diversity.

One can assume that Christians and church leaders desire that their community be

healthy, caring, and godly. It is under this assumption that ageism and its

manifestations—blatant, subtle, or implicit, be weighed for significance and seriousness

in light of scripture. First Corinthians 12:12-26 is one example of how scripture can

illuminate the negativity of ageism. As the body of Christ, a church who takes seriously

unity, diversity, and the value of each person can be a place where all people of all ages

and in all stages can flourish.

3. Theology: Change, Dependence, and Being Loved by God

Terror Management Theory proposes that our fear of becoming old and dying

creates internal anxiety that is managed through culturally imposed standards that build

self-esteem and cultural acceptance. In an ageist culture that holds youth as the ideal, this

is often expressed by indefinitely maintaining youthfulness in thought, actions, and

attitudes. This can be problematic for those who either chose not to, or who can no

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[37] Thiselton, 1 Corinthians, 210. The Moltmann quote is cited to *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation.* (Eng.tr. London: SCM, 1992), 192-93.

[38] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* 616. Fee writes that 12:15-26 is "ready-made for present-day application."

longer, maintain such an ideal. Loss of self-worth, self-esteem, and personal insecurity, as well as negative judgment from others, is plausible. Fear is also a dominant force that can lead to ageist thinking and generate an aversion to growing old as changing bodies, changing circumstances, and thoughts of losing independence are considered. However, the Christian worldview presents another way—rooting our value not in what we can do, but in who we are as God's beloved children. In light of ageism, this section provides theological reflection on issues of change, dependence, and God's love.

Change

As evidenced by the general desire to defy the aging process, the experience of living in an ageist culture seems to compel us to resist change. Viewing change through the lens of Christian theology may be helpful.

Ebbs and Flows

At all ages, people are jolted with new circumstances that require change because "life itself is a process of change, with ebb and flows… As Ecclesiastes says, 'to everything there is a season (Eccl. 3:1)."[39] Henri Nouwen writes:

> Every time life asks us to give up a desire, to change our direction, or redefine our goals; every time we lose a friend, break a relationship, or start a new plan, we are invited to widen our perspectives and to touch, under the superficial waves of our daily wishes, the deeper currents of hope. Every time we are jolted by life, we are 'faced with the need to make new departures.'[40]

Thoughts of change that accompany aging can make people fearful and resistant. Change itself is not necessarily undesirable—for example, change makes life better when a couple celebrates the arrival of a new baby, or when a person pays off their student

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[39] McCaffery, "Needing to Make Room for Change," 40.
[40] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 172. Nouwen quoted from Paul Tourier, *Learn to Grow Old.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 67.

loan. Christian discipleship also encourages change, such as producing new fruit because of changed hearts and lives (Matt 3:8) or changing into the image of God (2 Cor 3:18). Sometimes change that is unwanted and seemingly negative can turn out to be surprisingly positive, such as losing a job only to later acquire a far more rewarding one. Even Paul had undesired change when, as Saul, he lost his sight on the road to Damascus. Little did he know that this unwanted change would lead to his healing, conversion, and profound impact on Christianity. Ageist thinking only considers the negative changes, but sometimes what appears as loss often turns into something quite different bringing new passions, knowledge, or insights that one would never expect. The types of changes in the future are not guaranteed. Some will be positive, others negative. Some will be enlightening, growing times and others may be times of pain and sorrow. Regardless of the types of changes encountered, they are best faced with God.

God's Faithful Presence

Life brings change, but thankfully God—with whom we are deeply connected, transcends generations (Exod 3:6), and does not change (Jas 1:17, Heb 13:7-8). He identifies himself "as the one who continues—the 'I AM!' not the 'I WAS!'"[41] In Exod 3:14 God, who creates and causes all things to be, "bespeaks his power, fidelity, and presence… This God is the one who will be present in faithful ways."[42] Whether change is by choice or by force, great or small, permanent or temporary, God is stable and rest can be found in him. We are "linked to a faithful unchanging God [who] can help to bind our hearts and change our perspectives on the tentativeness and instability that accompanies our own aging process and cause us to focus on him. God loves us even

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[41] Gorman, "The Dilemma of Aging," 98.
[42] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," 714.

when we doubt our own worth and feel we have little to give back."[43] Who we become is

more important than what we have done and the changes we have faced. Who we become

is also a reflection of "God's continuing care."[44] Because of his care and love, "He

unveiled 'what it eternally means to be God and what it temporally means to be

human.'"[45] In Christ, God experienced the human conditions of suffering, death, change,

and the passage of time—God experienced aging:

> If God in Christ shares our human aging, suffering and death, then the
> very process of aging itself must also be radically reinterpreted. Whatever
> aging means, its meaning must be sought in relationship with God. If God
> uses the medium of time to shape us into God's image for God's purposes,
> then even in the face of the relentless erosion of aging, it must be
> celebrated as God's good gift of life. Aging can bring us to God.[46]

Remembering

The process of aging as a gift from God includes remembering. Deuteronomy

"contains repeated exhortations to 'remember' what the Lord has done to create the

nation of Israel... To the extent that they remember the past, God's people remember the

source and contours of their own identity."[47] Remembering helps us see who we are and

how we live, particularly when we reflect on the difficult times in our past and consider

how we made it through. "Re-examining previous decades uncovers cause for gratitude

and resolve for the future."[48] As remembrance and reflection are done in dialogue with

God, "the meaning of the past is transformed and the Spirit is set free to re-contextualize

previous experiences and grant new hope and creative energy to the person in the present

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[43] Gorman, "The Dilemma of Aging," 98.
[44] Whitehead, "Religious Images of Aging," 60.
[45] Gorman, "The Dilemma of Aging," 99. No source provided for the quote.
[46] Gorman, "The Dilemma of Aging," 99. Internal quote by Ronal Cossley in "Aging with God: Old Age and New Theology," *Church and Society*, Vol. 89, January/February (1999).
[47] Knowles, "From Vulnerable to Venerable," 4. See Deut. 8:2-10; 5:15; 15:15; 32:7-12.
[48] Fischer, "Teach Us to Number Our Days," 46.

and the future."[49] Remembering is not something to be done when a certain age is reached but is a means by which people of all ages can deepen their gratitude for God's ongoing presence in their lives and give confidence, courage, and earnestness for the gift of years to come.

Ageism creates, perpetuates, and stirs up fear; however, we have dispelled the myth that all older adults will experience an abundance of negative changes. The changes that each person faces, or does not face, will be unique to their own journey—a journey that can draw us closer to the heart of God. "The Christian conception of immaturity—is the refusal to grow, the inability to cope with an open and indeterminate future (that is, the future itself), in effect the rejection of life as a process. The 'experience of change in aging can be interpreted as an invitation from God to continue the process of growth toward full human maturity.'"[50] Regardless of the changes we encounter, we can trust in our constant, stable, and faithful God. Reflecting on our past, we move forward with hope and confidence, into the gift of life ahead.

Dependence

Because the experience of living in our culture reflects a resistance to human weakness, dependence is another area that can cause ageist related tension. We strive to be independent because "to be dependent... is seen to represent a loss of dignity as well as of self-determination."[51] It is taught from childhood, imposed on adulthood, and losing it is detested. Thoughts of losing independence as our future selves contribute to ageist thinking because they remind us of our finitude and reinforce a fear of aging. We are reminded of this when we encounter older adults who need assistance with travel,

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[49] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 173.
[50] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 180.
[51] Knowles, "From Vulnerable to Venerable," 4.

housing, or care. Older adults themselves react when they refuse to "bother their children" and insist on paying their share in order to assert their independence. While people want to believe they are the masters of their own destiny, finitude ultimately reveals that everyone is dependent.

When examining independence in light of faith, tension arises. Christian faith includes being aware of, and embracing, a "fundamental dependence on God."[52] For people of faith, dependence is "at the heart of created existence" because Christians believe and declare the Apostle and Nicene Creeds which say that all creatures—in existence, sustenance, flourishing, and life itself—"owe their being to God."[53]

On God

Dependence on God is a result of an acknowledged insufficiency, which promotes a discipleship that is willing "to sacrifice for each other, to give up 'rights,' to assume care for one another, to cease demanding our own way, to receive what life brings including hardships as realistic by unable to separate us from the love of God."[54] Being dependent on God unites us with his grace—free and unmerited– and deepens our faith. Such dependence, while often uncomfortable, is a sign of Christian growth and maturity—and he or she attains "spiritual maturity when he or she comes to realize that existence is not in one's own hands."[55]

On Others

Christians accept dependence on God, but Julie Gorman identifies another aspect of dependency:

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[52] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 174.
[53] Christiansen, "A Catholic Perspective," 407.
[54] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 174.
[55] Christiansen, "A Catholic Perspective," 407.

> God has designed this same inter-connected dependency for members of the body to experience together with one another. As all are dependent on their common God, so each is interdependent with the other... 'community' and intimacy, while sought after in emotional fantasies are avoided as reality.[56]

When taken to the extreme, independence "makes us forgetful of our interdependence and social connectedness."[57] Scripture, however, "places a high value on *inter*dependence: on mutuality, community, and interrelationship within a covenant fellowship. In the world of which Scripture speaks, identity itself is social and corporate as much if not more than it is individual."[58] A certain amount of vulnerability, honesty, and courage is required in order that we can accept that we are imperfect people who need one another.

In an on-line interview on *The Work Of The People*, Parker J. Palmer responded to a question about staying weak. He spoke about his own experiences with dependence, weakness, and our need for other people:

> We *are* weak; we don't have to *stay* weak. I think it starts, for me, with acknowledging my own weakness and my own neediness... and my own need for other people... and my need to be honest with myself and with them about who I am and what I struggle with. I've written nine books... but the one piece I've written that has gotten the most response by far... is my acknowledgment of weakness... it's my capacity to be vulnerable— which has made me more friends than whatever capacity I have to be smart and strong... in the great Leonard Cohen song...
>
> > Forget your perfect offering
> > Ring the bells that still can ring
> > There's a crack in everything.
> > That's how the light gets in.
>
> ... this is part of who I am! I am darkness and I am light. I am graced and I am fallen. I am all of the above. And... when you start understanding wholeness not as perfection but as embracing everything you are, then you

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[56] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 176.
[57] Gorman, "New Significance and Identity," 174.
[58] Knowles, "From Vulnerable to Venerable," 4.

become more able to talk about it and to invite other people to share...
those same pieces of their own lives.... It's not about courage, it's about
staying whole. It's about reminding myself of who I am and inviting
others to embrace who they are.... Whole in a personal sense and whole in
that more communal sense where you want to say, 'Welcome to the
human race.'[59]

In the Epistles, Paul wrote about both "person and individual—relationship and
fragmentation—in referring to how 'we carry things holy in broken vessels.' Our
brokenness and our need for relationship go together."[60] When examining fears about
dependence and aging and how they may be a factor in ageist attitudes, this theological
perspective might aid in assessing how dependence fits in a Christian worldview.
Coupling acceptance of God's grace and love with intentionally living in sacrificial and
vulnerable relationships may help us balance independence and dependence as well as
reduce fears associated with loss and aging through the whole life course. Christian
teaching identifies our need for one another and reflects "God's belief in humankind...
but most importantly our relationship with one another and with God," which is rooted in
love.[61]

God's Love

While Westerners living in the midst of an ageist culture strive to procure those
things culture deems esteem-building, Christian teaching on God's love exposes them as
false assurances. God's unfailing love suggests the "real basis of one's worth is beyond
'good works'—beyond one's productivity, vigor, or wealth."[62] God's nature is to love—

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[59] Palmer, "Welcome to the Human Race." Selected excerpts.

[60] Coleman, "Ageing and Personhood in the Twenty-First Century," 76. Taken from Anthony Bloom, "The Whole Human Person: Body, Spirit and Soul" In B. Osborne, ed. *To Be What We Are: The Orthodox Understanding of the Person* (London: Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh, 1997), 7.

[61] Coleman, "Ageing and Personhood in the Twenty-First Century," 76. Inside quote cited to Anthony Bloom, "The Whole Human Person: Body, Spirit and Soul." In B. Osborne, ed., *To Be What We Are: The Orthodox Understanding of the Person* (London: Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh, 1997), 7.

[62] Whitehead, "Religious Images of Aging," 59.

"love is the fundamental 'attribute' of God... and likewise the fundamental characteristic of God in relationship with creation."[63] Even as we are loved by God it is often set aside in favour of achieving cultural acceptance based on cultural standards.

Closely connected to God's love is his faithfulness. Although Israel was often obstinate and disobedient, God continued to love them:

> In the midst of enumerating their lacks, God assures them, 'I the LORD do not change' (Mal 3:6). Israel's changing condition does not change God's nature. His unfailing love is not limited by the worthiness of the subject nor dependent on a response. The transient field flowers and the anonymous birds are objects of this care just because he intends it.[64]

Jesus demonstrated this love in his own life with those he encountered. He loved because "he was a loving person, not because he found attractive qualities in those he loved."[65] As God incarnate, he demonstrated that "love depends on the nature of the lover rather than the beloved."[66] Regardless of what our ageist culture says, it's not about our worthiness; it is about God's nature to love.

Beloved

According to Nelson, a cultural source of self-esteem comes as "we try to distance ourselves from anything... that reminds us of our own mortality,"[67] such as keeping up the youthful ideal. Many people, either consciously or unconsciously, believe they will find acceptance, worth, and value as they convince themselves and others that they are younger than their chronological age or are aging in a "successful" manner. In a broad sense, Nouwen countered this by teaching that a person's intrinsic worth and value

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[63] Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 72. For a more thorough look at the nature of God's love, see page 71-74.

[64] Gorman, "The Dilemma of Aging," 99.

[65] Morris, "Love," 492.

[66] Morris, "Love," 492.

[67] Nelson, "Ageism, Prejudice against Our Feared Future Self," 214.

actually rest in God and his unconditional love for us as his beloved children. Just as God

called Jesus "his beloved" at his baptism, he believed that "human beings are [also] the

beloved sons and daughters of God: 'the spiritual life requires a constant claim of our true

identity. Our true identity is that we are God's children, the beloved sons and daughters

of our heavenly Father."[68]

The Christian church already teaches about God's great love. It is read on

stickers, sung in songs, and heard as it is proclaimed in sermons. Why, then, do so many

struggle to embrace it in the midst of cultural messaging? How can such love be grasped

in a world that convinces people they are not good enough, attractive enough, youthful

enough, athletic enough—simply not "enough?" There is an understanding that the

"relationship with self has to be based on the unconditional love of God, not on the

fulfillment of the expectations of others" but it is often hard to live.[69] Nouwen's

experience seems similar. He wrote about the challenge of accepting God's deep and

unconditional love:

> My tendencies toward self-rejection and self-depreciation make it hard to
> hear these words truly and let them descend into the center of my heart.
> But once I have received them fully, I am set free from my compulsion to
> prove myself to the world and can live in it without belonging to it. Once I
> have accepted the truth that I am God's beloved child, unconditionally
> loved, I can be sent into the world to speak and act as Jesus did. The great
> spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God that I can
> be free in the world—free to speak even when my words are not received;
> free to act even when my actions are criticized, ridiculed, or considered
> useless; free also to receive love from people and to be grateful for all the
> signs of God's presence in the world, I am convinced that I will truly be
> able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its
> boundaries.[70]

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[68] Lee, "Suffering and Healing," 26. The interior quote is credited to Henri Nouwen, from *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 163. According to Random House Dictionary (dictionary.com), beloved simply means to be greatly loved, or to be a person who is greatly loved.
[69] Lee, 'Suffering and Healing," 26.
[70] Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror*, 69.

Nouwen wrote that this is a *spiritual battle* where Gods deep and unending love for us needs to be claimed. Our "preciousness, uniqueness, and individuality" are not given to us by those we meet in our daily life, but by "the one who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity."[71] As we face this struggle we can consider the following three things. One, "keep unmasking the world [around us] for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and, in the long run, destructive." [72] The world lies to us about who we are and we "simply have to be realistic enough to remind [ourselves] of this."[73] Two, spend time alone and with others. Alone—in quiet, contemplative prayer—and with others in places where the truth about our deepest identity as being a beloved child of God is taught and shared. While this could be with a variety of individuals, it seems that the local church would be a logical place to hear this message. There we can engage with people who, through their lives and stories, call us back to truth. Three, celebrate that God chose us as his beloved which means constantly being thankful to God and others. Gratitude reminds us that we are not an accident, but divinely created by a loving and faithful creator. Gratitude makes us more radiant. As love begets love, so gratitude begets gratitude. In time, the truth of our belovedness will take root. Rather than thinking ourselves more accomplished, special, or valuable than others, we will desire to reveal the same to others—a "response to God's prior love, a wholehearted response to all that God is and

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[71] Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved,* 58.
[72] Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved,* 59. To get a fuller understanding about being and living life as the beloved, read *Life of the Beloved.*
[73] Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved,* 59.

has done for us."[74] "That is the great joy of being chosen: the discovery that others are chosen as well."[75]

Paul Johansen writes about the challenges of many evangelicals who spread the "news that 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,' many of both leadership and rank-and-file are realizing they have not experienced the love of God for themselves."[76] He shared an email from Glen Soderholm, a Presbyterian minister after attending a presentation by Nouwen who wrote:

> As he continued, he spoke of Jesus' own life as the life of the beloved Son of the Father. What he wanted us to know was that we too had been given this identity as the beloved children of God; it seemed to me that he believed this to be true more than anything else in the world... I remember my eyes welling up over and over again as my spirit received this staggering gift, which had been hinted at through the years, but which now found its way to the core of who I was. It both shattered and restored me as the rhythms of grace flowed around.[77]

Truly embracing that we are chosen and deeply loved will counter the ageist cultural messages that bombard us and attempt to influence our thinking and actions both with ourselves and with others.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter we have reflected theologically on ageism considering social science research, Christian scripture, and Christian theology and linked each to ways in which ageism might be reduced. First, social science insights identified commonly held stereotypes as inaccurate and provided concrete ways to reduce further perpetuation thus disrupting the proposed ageism cycle. Second, an examination of 1 Cor. 12:12-26 revealed a highly relevant message for the church today, particularly in light of ageist

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[74] Morris, "Love," 494.
[75] Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 63.
[76] Johansen, "What a Friend We Have in Henri," 42.
[77] Johansen, "What a Friend We Have in Henri," 43.

issues. Paul's use of the "body of Christ" metaphor emphasized unity, diversity, and interdependence within the body. By heeding this scripture, there is hope that ageism can be further disrupted because it counters separation, prejudice, and discrimination. Third, theology spoke to fears of changing bodies, circumstances, or abilities and the fear of losing independence. These issues perpetuate ageism as it relates to maintaining the cultural ideal of youthfulness and the illusion that self-value and worth can be found therein. Through this theological reflection change and dependence were confronted with Christian teachings, and God's love was presented as the true source of freedom and intrinsic worth. Having reflected on these experiences, chapter four will offer ideas that aid in personal reflection and make practical suggestions to the church.

Chapter Four: The Church and Her People: Toward a Response

In 2013 social psychologist Dr. Christena Cleveland wrote a blog post entitled, "Everything I Know about Racism I Learned at Church."[1] In it she describes a Vacation Bible School that she and her brother, both African-Americans, attended in an all-white church. The theme, "God loves all the children in the world," was shattered when the teacher yelled across the church property to "'Get in here, niggers!!'"[2] Her experience led her to believe that the church taught that God only loved white kids. Later in her Christian school she was stereotyped as being the one who must be the best at rapping. She was told that she was "over sensitive" when seeing a confederate flag hanging on her pastor's wall, and learned that racism was okay if it was in the context of a joke. While working in a Christian organization she learned that racism was only real if the majority of a culture agrees. It is hard to imagine that Dr. Cleveland experienced such things in the context of a Christian church, school, and workplace. While racism and ageism are not the same, they do have similarities. After delving into the extensive presence of ageism in our society and the church, we can see striking comparisons between Dr. Cleveland's story and the story of any aging person based on examples given in chapters one and two. Older people might be addressed with condescending names, be stereotyped, be the object of hurtful humour, be accused of oversensitivity to ageist prejudice, or be unheard and under-represented in a culture where youth rules.

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[1] Cleveland, "Everything I Know about Racism," August 5, 2013.
[2] Cleveland, "Everything I Know about Racism," August 5, 2013. I hesitated to use this exact quote because of the inappropriateness of the word and the pain it caused the author; however, the author wrote the expression as such and out of respect for her writing and her obvious intent to share the crassness of the comment, I have put it in as a direct quote.

Ageism should be of concern to Christians and the church. The church, its

leaders, and its congregants may be influential in either affirming 'isms' such as racism,

sexism, or ageism, or may be a place of healing and hope. The church, its leaders, and its

congregants can present a better way of living in human community.

Living ageist free involves "raising ageism consciousness, cleansing subtle ageist

stains from our own hearts and minds, [and] uniting on behalf of a new covenant of extra

carefulness."[3] This chapter brings *praxis* to the forefront and proposes ways in which we

can address subtle ageism in our hearts and minds through personal reflection, raise

awareness through communication and modeling, and take an official stand against

ageism through church practice and policy. This is presented in five sections: Engage in

Personal Reflection, Present Simple Messages, Show How Life is Better, Connect to

Christian Beliefs, and Model a Better Way.[4] The chapter concludes by considering how,

as a place of hope, the church can be a catalyst for change.

1. The Body of Christ and Influence

As the experience of Dr. Cleveland demonstrates, the church and its people can

cause pain and reflect what is wrong with the greater culture. However, it can also be a

beacon of justice, freedom, and love. As an example, in the 1950s and 1960s, the

American Black Churches played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement. While

some ministers were eager to support the movement and coordinate nonviolent activities,

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[3] Gullette, *Agewise*, 17.

[4] Elements two through five are based on the concepts presented in "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality" by Mimi Haddad and Alvera Mickelsen. This is found in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy.* Edited by Ronald W. Pierce and Revecca Merril Groothuis. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 482-93. The authors credit the basic theory to the work of Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 7-8. He presents the basic elements needed for a new idea to be accepted or change to happen.

others were chided by Martin Luther King as "apathetic" and "otherworldly."[5] The

movement did not rise from the church, but the church played an important role.[6] The

church shaped the African American community regarding religious matters and taught

"the revolutionary message of equality before God."[7]

A current example concerns an American professional football team called the

Washington Redskins. For many years, Reverend Graylan Hagler of Washington has

been identifying the local, beloved team name as racist. One way he challenges his

congregants is by asking if calling a team the "N-word" would be acceptable. Over time,

many members of his congregation changed their perceptions and now agree the team

name must change. "In all honesty," says one church member, "I never thought it was a

problem."[8] As a long-time fan, she still struggles with parting with her paraphernalia but

understands that it should change.[9] Church influence is gaining momentum as nearly one

hundred area pastors are now committed to addressing this racial injustice and are

reaching thousands of people each week. Like racism, ageism is concerned about issues

of respect, equality, inclusion, and societal acceptance.

It is encouraging from the examples cited above, to see how certain types of

discrimination have begun moving in new trajectories, away from prejudice and

exclusion and toward respect, care, and justice. Attitudes are more likely to change when

there are "positive individual interactions [that] occur in a climate which encourages

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[5] Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock," 172.
[6] Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock," 172.
[7] Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock," 172.
[8] Brady, "DC Church Pastors Urge 'Redskins' Name Change," 1.
[9] Brady, "DC Church Pastors Urge 'Redskins' Name Change," 1.

prejudice reduction. A vital component of such a climate is leadership support for change" and sanctioning by authority figures.[10]

Ageism "is to the twenty-first century what sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism were earlier in the twentieth—entrenched and implicit systems of discrimination, without adequate movements of resistance to oppose them."[11] It is now time for ageism to see some advancement. There has been some movement forward, such as in the workplace; however, there remains little awareness and an overall acceptance of ageism and ageist practices. Despite the work being done in social science circles, there is a sparse amount of writing on ageism as it pertains to the church. While this thesis is not proposing that ageism becomes a core teaching in the local church, it does propose that it be openly discussed and the lessons learned from its study and reflection inform who we are, how we live our faith, and how we function as the body of Christ. What follows are five suggestions that may help the church as it moves toward ageist-free living and ministry.

2. Engage in Personal Reflection

Nelson Mandela faced many challenges and accomplished great things as the anti-apartheid revolutionary and South African President. According to Stephen Wallace, of all the "remarkable challenges Mandela faced—both in and out of prison—the one he identified as most significant was creating change; change not for his country, though that was abundant, but rather of himself... Might it be a truism that in order to transform people and places through leadership we must first learn to change ourselves?" [12] Jesus' "vivid word-sketches" in Luke 6:41-42 and Matt 7:1-5 concur with the need to deal with

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[10] Jennings, "Prejudice," *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online,* §4.
[11] Gullette, *Agewise,* 15.
[12] Wallace, "Leading from Behind," December 2013.

our selves before others—perhaps it was this very teaching that inspired Mandela.[13] These verses shine a light on the "inclination to condemn others for their faults and failures" and instruct us to deal with the log in our own eye before pointing out the speck in the eye of another.[14] Luke 6:42 and Matt 7:5 make the assumption that "occasions occur within the community when ethical discernment and community discipline are called for… [however,] they must be made by those aware of their own failure and God's forgiveness."[15] Therefore, the journey toward reducing ageism might best begin with self-reflection.

Asking questions

Acknowledging personal complexity invites deeper reflection. Such reflection may be revelatory, resulting in either a calm assurance or in unsettledness that urges one to seek new perspectives. Ageism is broad and the potential for asking questions is equally wide; therefore, while raising ageism consciousness will include others, it might also include "cleansing subtle ageist stains from our own hearts and minds."[16] Delving into ageism can be unsettling, to say the least. Some areas are straight-forward, such as understanding stereotypes, their formation, and clarifying myths. Other areas have proven to be more difficult to process, such as those that intertwine with the anti-aging phenomenon. These are often dismissed with the common response, "That's not ageism."[17] For example, I have spent a few months wrestling with the fact that I colour my hair. There are so many questions surrounding something that has never given me a second thought. Is colouring my hair ageist? Simply asking, "Why do I do it?" or "Is it

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[13] Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 76.
[14] Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 152.
[15] Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," 212.
[16] Gullette, *Agewise*, 17.
[17] Gullette, *Agewise*, 7.

ageist?" is not sufficient in either discovering an answer or formulating a response. The impact of ageism is far reaching and everyone who finds it disturbing will begin to ask questions about their own stories. Whether it is colouring hair or wondering about a commitment to productivity, fitness, or wrinkle avoidance, once someone becomes familiar with ageism and its complexity, the questions come quickly.[18] Some possible questions include:

- Is this used as a tool to maintain an image of youth that I am creating for others to see and for myself to believe?
- Is it because it is enjoyable, a hobby, or helpful?
- Do I believe this is something I must do to be valued and accepted in the eyes of myself, others, or the culture at large?
- Am I doing this to deceive others, perhaps for a better job?[19] Is it a justified way to fight discrimination?
- How does it align with my Christian worldview?
- Is this a reaction to culture's message that the *problem* of aging can be fixed, and is this one of those fixable problems?
- Is it a venue for drawing me closer to God or others?
- Is the money I spend on keeping a youthful image compatible with my stewardship convictions, values, and beliefs?
- Is it possible I do this to build self-esteem in order to quell fears of death and aging? How will I cope when this means of finding value and self-worth is no longer possible?
- Is this a response to a health problem?
- Is it of service to someone else?
- Does this make me feel superior to those who do not, or cannot, do the same?
- Is there an innate tension that exists within? For example, is it like money, which can be both good and bad depending on our motivation and/or how it is used or abused.

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[18] This list of questions is not exhaustive, nor will all questions be pertinent to every example. Questions were formulated based on ageism research, theories, and the impact ageism can have on an individual, other people, and the community at large. They are intended to be probing, challenging, and thought provoking. In many cases, there is no simple answer and additional questions may arise.

[19] Kathy Bernard from Getajobtips.com says the following for those over fifty: "Physical and attitudinal weaknesses – You can't roll back time, but if you are looking or acting older than necessary, update your dress, hair style, glasses, shoes, etc. Improve your posture and become physically fit. But not only that, choose to have a more youthful attitude." As suggested in chapter one, looking younger is the key when facing discrimination, so showing your grey and linking that to your true self may have economic consequences.

Asking questions is beneficial as one considers potentially ageist attitudes and actions. Although time consuming, it may lead to freedom or to further contemplation in the journey of facing our own deeply embedded thinking.

Finding Answers

Is colouring my hair ageist? Maybe it is and maybe it is not—only I can answer that. No one can answer for another and no one can determine if, and how, attitudes and/or behaviours should be adjusted. It is fairly straight forward to assess and respond to blatant ageism such as workplace discrimination based on age, communicating in a hurtful manner, or stereotyping all older people as overly positive or negative. However, more complex ageist related activities, thoughts, or behaviours require honesty, a willingness to be vulnerable, and time for personal reflection in light of our faith and with the help of the Holy Spirit. In the end, there could be many possible responses to these more subtle ageist tendencies. You may identify with one of these four possibilities.[20]

The first possibility is to inadequately self-reflect and quickly justify or dismiss potentially ageist attitudes and behaviours. Second, after an honest assessment of thoughts and motivations, it is determined that the question at hand is truly unrelated to ageist thinking and that it does not negatively affect you or others and nothing changes. A third possibility is that the assessment results in the belief that the behaviour is ageist and it is stopped completely. A fourth possibility involves honest reflection that concludes that the action is driven by ageist attitudes and may also negatively impact you or others. For example, self-worth may be found in the ability to participate in an athletic activity; however, upon self-reflection it is noticed that an attitude of arrogance or superiority is

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[20] In these four proposed responses, "it" refers to any ageist thought, activity, or behaviour that is assessed. These possible responses are suggestions only and do not represent an exhaustive list.

sometimes present when around people who are unable to do the same. While the athletic activity is continued for the good it offers, closer attention is paid to self-righteous attitudes.

Simply saying "stop it" is not helpful and can actually make things worse.[21] Taking time to reflect on challenging issues and asking provoking questions in light of a Christian worldview, biblical teachings, past experiences, rational thought, scripture, tradition, and even the culture that influences such thoughts, can change the trajectory toward a life that is freer. Focusing on "the positive values of diversity, fairness, and non-prejudice" with an open mind to the potential advantages of an ageism-reduced life are more effective ways to see personal growth and change.[22] "May our body-minds receive the help they need to age well. May we heighten the resistance to ageism, lessen the irrational fears we have of aging, and learn to know the difference between the two. May our children bless us for redeeming the life course."[23]

3. Ecclesial Influence

Present Simple Messages Using Story and Examples

One way to communicate a message is through effective presentation that is suited to the hearer or reader. In *Discovering Biblical Equality*, it is suggested that reaching people involves keeping things simple and using language that is suitable for the audience.[24] Mimi Haddad reminds us that Jesus kept things simple and used examples

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[21] McGonigal, "Why Trying Not to Be Prejudiced Backfires," para. 1.
[22] McGonigal, "Why Trying Not to Be Prejudiced Backfires," para. 4.
[23] Gullette, *Agewise*, 41.
[24] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 483.

and stories to which people could relate.[25] If a message is too complex and lofty, the rate

of adoption is lower.[26]

Stories about other "isms" earmark ageism as an important social issue requiring

attention. As awareness is being raised, true or fictitious stories about social interactions

that are now considered unacceptable may capture the attention of the hearer. For

example, people who at one time were exposed to workplace sexism and sexual

harassment are now protected by laws and such behaviour is considered unacceptable.[27]

When speaking to people who hold equality as a value and believe in fair, dignified, and

respectful treatment to both men and women, a story of how things "used to be" might

help understand how shifts in thinking occur. Similarly, most twenty-first century

Western Christians shudder to hear about racism's previous societal acceptance. There is

a gasp when faced with the appalling conditions read about in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,

seen in movies like *Mississippi Burning* or *12 Years a Slave,* or imagined when visiting

historical sites like southern plantations or the Underground Railroad. While not totally

eradicated, sexism and racism are socially unacceptable. Now ageism begs to be

considered.[28]

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[25] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 482.

[26] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 482. This quote is cited to Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 242.

[27] Langtry, "Sexual Harassments Persists in Canada," Canadian Human Rights Commission. Canada first recognized sexual harassment as a form of discrimination when it was added to the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1983 and confirmed by the Supreme Court in 1989. While not fully eradicated, sexual harassment is unlawful. Examples of harassment can include unwelcomed remarks or jokes, threats, intimidation, physical contact.

[28] Levy and Banaji, "Implicit Ageism," 50. There has been a "notable change in recognition of social disadvantage and the need for action" for other groups—at least in public discourse—yet not where ageism is concerned (50). However, it is firmly accepted as a category worthy of attention for the study of stereotype and prejudice (49).

Even though "fears about aging are so deep that ageism will probably never disappear," reduction is quite possible.[29] If it is addressed and significantly reduced, one can only imagine the response that future generations will have when watching movies or television shows, reading birthday cards and magazines, or learning about lawsuits centered on age-based discrimination. Simple messages and the use of stories may help people grasp and desire change where ageism is concerned.

Show How Life is Better

There are two key elements involved in helping people see how life can be better when they address prejudices: imagining and re-framing.

Imagine

Life seems much better when it is envisioned without ageism. Since Western society has not embraced it fully and little change has occurred, imagining what it might be like gives hope. Hope is found in movement from oppression to freedom and when good triumphs over evil. Hope appears in the stories of people who were bought for the purpose of slavery and were finally freed, in the stories of people once living in racist communities who are now recognized as equals, and in the stories of women who faced sexual harassment in the workplace and who, along with their male counterparts, are now legally protected. Racism and sexism have not been fully eradicated, but significant forward movement has made life better for everyone. Their example ignites hope that life could be better without ageism, as well. This is important because for people to embrace

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[29] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 312.

innovation or an idea, it needs to be "perceived as being better than the idea it supersedes."[30]

"One of the unique features of ageism is that age, unlike race and sex, represents a category in which most people from the in-group (the young) will eventually (if they are fortunate) become a member of the out-group (older persons)."[31] Since everyone is moving toward old age, it may be helpful to consider three personalized questions. First, if you live to old age, do *you* want to be stereotyped, experience prejudice and discrimination, and be under-represented or poorly represented in the media? Second, as a person who has not yet reached old age, would *you* prefer to go through each day never comparing yourself to media images, never considering growing old as undesirable, and never spending money on anti-aging products (which would not even exist)? Would *you* prefer simply to *be* your age and never need to look younger, act younger, or feel younger?[32] Imagining helps create a vision of life without ageism.

Re-Frame

Life is better when messages are re-framed. The following was recently posted by a Canadian facility that provides both retirement and long-term care: "We all know seniors are undervalued in Canada today. Seniors are looked at as frail, burdensome,

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[30] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 484. This quote is cited to Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 212.

[31] Nelson, *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons*, x.

[32] It would clear up confusion around what an age "feels like." Most people are certain that whatever age they are they do *not* feel *that* old. It seems almost everyone feel younger. It is confusing to think that a sixty year old feels fifty, but when they were fifty they felt forty, and when they were forty they did not feel a day over thirty. It is a bit of a conundrum, then, to determine what sixty, fifty, or forty feels like. This may be connected to Kevin McHugh's proposal of 'masking age—when a "person's coherent sense of (youthful) self is masked or hidden beneath an ageing face and body… [which] speaks to the denial of old age and mortality in a society that adulates youthfulness." See "Three faces of ageism: society image and place," *Aging & Society*, 23, (2003), 169.

uncreative, and unproductive members of society, and we know this is wrong."[33] This

appears to be countering ageist attitudes about stereotypes, but it suggests that *all* seniors

are active, independent, creative, and productive. While these characteristics are valued

by Western society, they are troublesome for many people. Re-framing reconsiders how

messages are presented. This example suggests reformatted wording that welcomes older

adults as diverse individuals:

> We all know seniors are undervalued in Canada today. We often
> stereotype all seniors as frail, burdensome, uncreative, and unproductive
> members of society, but that's not true. They are individuals—each with
> their own interests, challenges, and abilities. Regardless of whether a
> person is active or contemplative, creative or unimaginative, self-reliant or
> dependent, productive or relaxed, each has value and worth. It is our goal
> to get to know each resident and meet their individual needs.

This re-write may better capture what the writer truly believes. This becomes a more

desirable place to live because it recognizes the diversity of its residents.

As a church attempts to show how life is better without ageism, attention to how

information is communicated reaches beyond ministry promotion and includes other

mediums such as sermons, personal conversations, music, and blogs. Carefully crafted

communication can set the trajectory toward greater inclusion, increased encouragement,

and sanctioned diversity.

Connect it to Christian beliefs

It is difficult to convince some people that ageism has negative and harmful

outcomes. Old ideas, in this case ageist thinking, will "serve as the standard to which a

new idea is evaluated and interpreted."[34] Common ground, such as Christian values and

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[33] This quote in a subsection called "Seniors are Undervalued" is posted by a facility with a full continuum of care. The next sentence goes on to say that the facility is home to people who defy those descriptions. See http://www.voteforchristiegardens.com/

[34] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church," 487.

beliefs, can become an important measuring tool in evaluating ageism and subsequently pursuing its reduction.

Initial conversations about what ageism it is and how it affects people can be difficult because of its wide acceptance. Even though the Bible does not address twenty-first century ageism in direct terms, scripture and theology illuminate its incongruity with a Christian worldview. Scripture such as 1 Cor 12:12-26 and theologies based on age-related fears of change, dependence, and the perceived loss of value and worth illustrate this incongruity and provide spiritual care to those who are struggling. Social science research presents the injustice of prejudice and discrimination and illuminates the cultural acceptance of anti-aging consumerism and lifestyles such as successful aging, which can be problematic for many and therefore troublesome for a person who holds Christian beliefs and values.

Increasing awareness by connecting the issues of ageism to corporately held Christian beliefs will help people accept ageism's prolific presence, recognize its incongruity with the Christian worldview, and pursue its reduction.

Model a Better Way

Modeling a better way combines observation and trial. "'Observability is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others.' For people to accept a new idea they must see it in use."[35] Finding out "how it works… dispels uncertainty about the idea."[36]

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[35] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 489. Haddad is quoting Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 244.
[36] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 491. Haddad is quoting Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 243.

This section offers suggestions that might help model a "better way" in the daily life, business, and ministry of the church. Each church is demographically different and faces unique challenges, strengths, and weaknesses; consequently, the categories of Full Participation, Use of Images, Intergenerational Ministry, and Policy/Declaration will be more applicable to some than others.

Full Participation

In *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Haddad says "living models of biblical equality [are needed] in our churches and our homes... this is an important part of communication. We all need models to understand an idea fully."[37] According to Haddad, increased visibility of women in various roles accomplishes biblical equality modeling among the genders. Similarly, inclusion of a diverse range of older adults in various positions and ministry settings would model a more inclusive, less ageist community. This could include participation on committees and boards, involvement as greeters, Sunday school/Bible study teachers, worship leaders, pastors, care team members, or small group leaders. People should be put in positions because of their desire, call, and gifting rather than their youthful appeal. Rather than approaching this with a negative view, such as *not* discriminating, it might be better to take a positive perspective, such as celebrating the diversity of the body of Christ and being thankful for each unique person.

Use of Images

Images should be used carefully. Websites, flyers, displays, Facebook pages, and even pictures from past events should be approached in a thoughtful manner consistent with ageism awareness. While the theories discussed in chapter two were not written for

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[37] Haddad and Mickelsen, "Helping the Church Understand Biblical Equality," 490.

church settings, one might suggest that their principles can be applied. If so, when any one group is under-represented, the *Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory* suggests the group is considered by the institution—in this case the church— to be unworthy of respect and lacking support. Similarly, the *Cultivation Theory* would suggest that consistent under-representation or older adult stereotyping will impact the viewer's perception of aging, and possibly of the church. Practically speaking, if stereotyped images are used in the promotion of older adult ministries it may deter participation of church attendees who do not think they fit the image. Additionally, those outside the church might be deterred from visiting, attending, or inquiring about spiritual matters if they feel that they would not belong. The use of images that represent diversity in age, interest, and ability will influence individuals and the congregation as a whole.

Intergenerational Ministry

Valerie Braithwaite recognizes the importance of coming together. She believes that one way of reducing ageism is to create spaces "where young, middle-aged, and elderly people from all walks of life can get to know each other enough to build mutual respect, develop cooperative relationships, and reignite the norm of human–heartedness."[38] The church is thus presented with an opportunity because of its uniqueness as "virtually the only institution in our society that is consistently intergenerational. Schools, the workplace, and often residential areas tend to be age-segregated."[39]

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[38] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 332. She also suggests that we need to address "competition for dominance, efficiency and ritualized outputs" (332) that create activity but without addressing the real problems that are found in all "-isms." Together with ageism, other "isms" can be considered.

[39] Huber, "The Church in the Community," 290. In some cases this is not true. As discussed in chapter one, some churches focus solely on the young while others struggle to engage them; however, as an institution, it is generally a blend and everyone is typically welcomed.

Intergenerational "implies the involvement of members of two or more generations in activities that potentially can make them aware of different (generational) perspectives. It implies increasing interaction, cooperation to achieve common goals, a mutual influence, and the possibility of change (hopefully a change that entails improvement)."[40] The church can take advantage of its unique, intergenerational design to create exceptionally beneficial ministries. For some churches this will come naturally, but for those lacking in age diversity or where ministries are segregated by age, it can be a more challenging endeavour.

Intergenerational ministry concepts require the support of more than one person. Concepts should be supported by staff, leaders, and groups of all ages who strive to adopt it as a church value. This will help move a congregation toward *being* intergenerational rather than simply *doing* an intergenerational activity.[41] Together, and as a congregational value, decision makers from all age groups can determine how it is best integrated into the existing church structure in balance with existing and effective age-specific ministries.[42] Intergenerational ministry provides "opportunities for Christians of all generations to engage each other in experiences that build relationships and a deeper sense of the Church as one body in Christ."[43] Of the many possibilities, this could include mission trips, camps, or retreats; bible studies or other learning opportunities; art experiences; worship; mentoring; linking families/single people together; seasonal events; or fellowship. Brian Kirk writes:

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[40] Villar, "Intergenerational or Multigenerational?" 115.
[41] Griffin and Snailum, "Intergenerational Ministry beyond the Rhetoric." This site has a more detailed assessment of intergenerational ministry and how the local church can best approach its integration.
[42] Griffin and Snailum, "Intergenerational Ministry beyond the Rhetoric."
[43] Kirk, "10 Ideas for Creating Cross-Generational Youth Ministry."

What a great morning it had been! Most of our congregation gathered in our Fellowship Room for an intergenerational event we call "Advent Around the Tree".... The room bustled with church members of all ages gathered around tables, engaged in various craft activities, writing greeting cards to our shut-ins, munching on bagels, and exploring various prayer stations. And in the midst of all this, a sight captured the entire spirit of cross-generational ministry: Over at the side of the room was a low table with little chairs set up for our children to work together coloring in a large drawing of the nativity. But there were no children at the table. Instead on one side sat two men who are well into their 70s and on the other side two of our teenage boys. And there they were together, two generations, engaging in the childlike ritual of coloring while talking with each other and enjoying fellowship.[44]

The "quality of life for persons of all ages is enhanced by intergenerational contacts. Particularly in the church, which exists to help people come to grips with values and the meaning of life, such contacts are needed."[45] Interacting with older adults and seeing them in a variety of social roles aids in the reduction of stereotyping[46] and when there is flexibility and openness to establishing a positive relationship, prejudice may also reduce.[47] In addition to establishing value and meaning in life, reducing stereotypes, and diminishing prejudice, "intergroup contact among age groups and interdependence among young, middle-aged, and old people may [also] restore a sense of respect, as well as liking, for all age groups in their glorious human variety."[48] Each congregation will have strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities where considering increased intergenerational ministry is concerned. The evidence seems to point to its value and importance, particularly where combating ageism is concerned. Such an investment can

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[44] Kirk, "10 Ideas for Creating Cross-Generational Youth Ministry."
[45] Huber, "The Church in the Community," 290.
[46] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 315.
[47] Braithwaite, "Reducing Ageism," 316.
[48] Cuddy, "Doddering but Dear," 19.

reshape young minds [49] and positively influence all participants bringing healing, joy, and freedom to the body of Christ.[50]

Declaration

When a church or denomination attempts to formally express their beliefs about a social issue such as ageism, it can result in a policy. Churches might consider the benefit of adopting appropriate policy that ensures adherence to non-ageist ministry practices; however, an alternate approach might be to broaden its scope by creating a "declaration" about aging and ageism. Declarations would vary from church to church based on doctrinal differences, existing policies, and congregational needs.[51] Not only could a declaration include statements that oppose ageism and outline best practices as they pertain to the church community, but it could also include theological perspectives on aging and related issues.[52] Policies and statements made by other churches may assist as ideas are generated, and declarations are being drafted. Examples from the United Church of Canada, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Episcopal Church in America are provided. These examples are followed by a more detailed discussion about theological statements.

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[49] Montepare and Zebrowitz, "A Social-Developmental View of Ageism," 83.

[50] Griffin and Snailman, "Intergenerational Ministry beyond the Rhetoric." In addition to helping the issue of ageism, it is proposed as a solution to the problem of youth who have only had exposure to youth ministry being unable to transition into "adult" church life. Many are leaving the church and their faith is not intact. Youth ministry alone is proving unsustainable.

[51] A longer, more thorough version may be considered the church's official declaration with a condensed version used for common distribution and/or posting. Content and structure of the document, including a theological component, would be at the discretion of the writers, in collaboration with the church officers and/or congregation.

[52] Best practices may include things such as ageism awareness in how images are used, encouraging full participation, being an intergenerationally-minded church, etc.

The United Church of Canada has a document called, "Seniors: An Ethical and Theological Statement on Aging."[53] In the category, "to love and serve others," ageism is addressed: "We repent [for] the ageism that infects our society and ourselves as part of society. It affirms newness, wellness, and youthfulness as 'the only good' and negates the value of the later stages in life."[54] While little else is said about ageism, the document addresses the theology that supports aging—particularly old age—and would be helpful in a conversation about ageism.[55]

While it does not specifically mention age, the Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks directly against discrimination. While not explicitly listed, ageism would fit such a statement and thus legitimize it in the church. It says, "The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: every form of social or cultural discrimination in the fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design."[56]

The Episcopal Church shows us an example of covenant language as it pertains to racism. When replacing "racism" with "ageism" one can see its potential relevance. With such a replacement, it would read: "We covenant, therefore, with one another to join forces in combating... [*ageism*]... in church and society. Through this covenant we propose to hold each other accountable by reporting our faithfulness, rather than our successes, as we seek to fulfill this mission."[57]

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[53] United Church of Canada, "Seniors: An Ethical and Theological Statement on Aging." There has been little to no success in finding similar documents, or documents that address ageism in particular.

[54] United Church of Canada, "Seniors: An Ethical and Theological Statement on Aging."

[55] This document is directed to "Seniors" and not the wider scope of aging and ageism.

[56] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: #1935.

[57] Episcopal Church in America, "The Sin of Racism: A Pastoral Letter," 5.

Theological Perspectives

A theological approach to ageism is not a special theology, but rather biblically-based theology that is applied to the topic of aging as it pertains to ageism-related concepts.[58] There are several theological components that a congregation could choose to include in a declaration. Each should support the process of aging in the context of ageism and consider both the individual and the corporate life of the community.[59] While options are vast, components of the declaration might include theological statements that place the aging person in the context of creation, of a fallen world, and as one anticipating the return of Jesus and the new creation to come. Other statements could identify roles the Trinity and of the local church. In addition, the declaration could address common concerns of aging people—four examples follow.

One theological statement might revolve around God and time. God created all people and, through Jesus, experienced the passage of time. As time passes, God shapes people and invites them to join in his ministry. One of the blessings that come to those who are graced with a long life is to reflect on all of "life and its inner journey—all the relationships, all the experiences,… all that we know to have been authentic and all that has formed and changed us, and made us what we are."[60] Time matters. Aging matters. Each day is another opportunity for us to love and serve God and others, seek meaningful and enjoyable moments, and recognize that we are being shaped into our future selves.

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[58] Lyons, *Toward a Theology of Aging*, 33. Lyons is referencing theologian Martin J. Heinecken as he assesses a theology of aging. He says that "there is only one biblically and confessionally based theology which is applied to the problems of older adults." Therefore, it might also be appropriate to apply his rationale to theological perspectives that address ageism and each aging person's perspective.

[59] The United Church of Canada structured their document on "A New Creed" http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed

[60] Woodward, *Valuing Age*, 194.

Second, Western culture tends to value independence and fear its loss. A Christian confesses his or her insufficiency and puts his or her trust in God, who is full of grace, mercy, and love. Often missed though, is scripture's value on *inter*dependence. Throughout life, there will be times when a person will readily *give* help, but there will be other times when a person *requires* help. For many, receiving help is associated with weakness or dependence thus being unwanted or shamefully accepted. However, the Christian worldview requires dependence on God and values interdependence with others. We do not have to do it on our own. Thanks be to God.

Third, a theological statement might focus on our intrinsic value. Ageist thinking often leads to self-evaluation that reveals that a person is "not enough"—perhaps not young enough, active enough, or productive enough. God has a deep and unending love for his children regardless of the "forever young" standards that influence Western thought. Our value and worth rest not in measurements determined by our culture, but in who we are as the beloved daughters and sons of God.

A fourth statement might revolve around faith and change. Life is a process of change that includes both welcomed and unwelcomed experiences—"a complex mixture of harmony and dissonance."[61] God is faithfully present through all of the vicissitudes of life. "I AM"—the God who spoke to Moses, remains our source of strength through these times of harmony and dissonance. We find confidence in God's presence when we realize how he has been with us in our past and are filled with hope and assurance that he will continue to be with us in the future, regardless of what change comes our way.

Declarations can include various components and each church determines what is suitable for their needs.

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[61] Woodward, *Valuing Age*, 190.

<u>A Living Document</u>

While it may be presented by a church representative, it is the all the people of the

church who need to embrace and engage with a declaration in a meaningful way. As a

living document, it is not merely sitting on a shelf, but is open to additional ideas from,

and interaction with, members of the church community. Using the examples of the

United Church of Canada's theological approach to old age, the Catholic Church's

generic anti-discrimination language, the Episcopal Church's use of covenant language,

and the inclusion of pertinent theology, the twenty-first century Christian church can

continue its journey of modeling a better way with declarations that guide church life and

ministry decisions.

Churches can build on the good work they are already doing as they consider full

participation in their congregations, how images are used, enhancing or beginning

intergenerational ministry, and creating or revisiting declarations on ageism and aging.

Conclusion: Hope, the Church, and Resisting the Status Quo

In 2013, The Barna Group did a survey on how Americans describe themselves

and their futures. This was compared to data collected in surveys between 2000 and 2002.

In the survey summary, Barna's President, David Kinnaman said, "The research points to

many opportunities for the Christian community—the original social network—to

provide genuine responses to the needs of today's' culture."[62] He points out that a healthy

church can address a wide range of issues and, like Jesus' teachings about not being

anxious about tomorrow, must respond to the "fearful realities of the future with wisdom

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[62] Kinnaman, "How the Last Decade Changed American Life," § 5.

and love."[63] Ageism is a culturally-rooted social issue that stems from and creates, fears around aging. The church can be influential in addressing these issues.

The church and its people have been a catalyst for change in the past, are in the present, and can be in the future. Ageism should be important to the church because it can be very damaging to people. Through personal reflection, simple and engaging presentation of the message, a vision for a better life, a connection to Christian beliefs and modeling a better way, the church can minister to a hurting, ageist-bruised world. There is hope of being a beacon of light in an ageist world.

Dr. Cleveland's blog post did not end with "Everything I Know about Racism I Learned at Church." The next week she posted this redemptive title, "Everything I Know about Reconciliation I Learned in the Church." Dr. Cleveland tells how she went to a church whose wise pastor had a reconciling spirit. What did he do? He "led the congregation in the practice of radical, cross-cultural solidarity by preaching it, modeling it and prioritizing it. As a result, the church excelled at honoring the image of God in diverse people."[64] She shared the many things she learned through this experience. First, she learned that she belonged, that her perspective was valuable, and that her identity was rooted in the love of God and the church. Second, she learned that reconciliation takes time, effort, and intentionality. Third, she learned that because it is a people-based problem, everyone needs to be involved. When people engage in this new thinking, it creates diverse groups that are strong and effective. What hope for racism. What hope for ageism as well. The body of Christ can be a model, hope-sharer, and redemptive place for people of all ages.

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[63] Kinnaman, "How the Last Decade Changed American Life," § 5.
[64] Cleveland, "Everything I Know about Reconciliation," para. 4.

Conclusion

Using the pastoral cycle, this thesis introduced the phenomenon of ageism and proposed its complex, prolific, and powerful force in contemporary Western culture. Chapter one entered into the first movement of the pastoral cycle: immersion. It reviewed ageism's presence and surveyed how stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are prevalent perpetuators that are subtly reinforced through language, assumptions, and unjust treatment. Chapter two probed toward a deeper understanding as it identified key historic moments and our contemporary experience where ageist thinking is continually reinforced and perpetuated by media advertising, anti-aging consumerism, and the successful aging paradigm. Chapter three sought voices that speak to the experiences shared by aging persons in light of context and Christian values. It corrected four commonly held stereotypes based on social science research and considered 1 Cor 12:12-26 which, as a model for the church, reveals the importance of both unity and diversity in the body of Christ. In addition, theological perspectives addressed age-related fears associated with change and dependence, and reinforced God's love as a true source of value and worth. As the final movement, chapter four focused on *praxis* that involved action and discipleship. It suggested five ways in which the church and its people can be agents of change. These included personal reflection, use of simple messages, showing how life is better without ageism, relating it to Christian beliefs, and modeling a better way.

Imagine a world without ageism where age did not define you. These four points highlight the changes we might experience in daily life. First, at all ages people would be accepted, respected, and valued because age-related stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination would not exist. Consequently, interaction and interdependence of

different age groups would occur more readily. Second, no longer would we be caught in the busyness of activities in order to feel young, look young, or act young. We would be free from age-related cultural sources of validation and would similarly free others from the same. There would be no "over the hill" comments and no need for age-based compliments. Third, as a widely-accepted group of diverse people, the journey of aging would include both positive and negative experiences. No one would fail by not aging "well" because idealized standards of aging would not exist. No longer would we need to deny "feeling our age," or "looking our age" because we would simply *be* our age. Diverse activities, both active and contemplative, would be equally respected. Fourth, we would be free from the fear of aging that grips us and turns our eyes from finding validation as God's beloved. We would be more gracious and accepting with ourselves and others. Our lives as Christians would be freer and allow us to live more wholly as followers of Jesus.

The picture of an ageist-free world is desirable but until people see and acknowledge ageism nothing will change. While the church cannot immediately solve all the problems of the culture at large, it can create an ageism reduced environment. Is there a better place to start? The church can be a place of refuge and a catalyst for change. May future historians look back and identify how, during this period of time, ageism was confronted and change occurred—and may the church be part of that story.

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