

Ageing gracefully - Leaders' notes

General

You will have already heard some general guidance on the introductory video. I hope these further notes may be of additional help as you run the course. I myself have run the course 15 times (and counting!) and realise that there is need for flexibility, and every course will be different. While undoubtedly the material and course can be engaged on one's own, my experience has been that the greatest value from the course comes out of the conversations stimulated amongst attendees. And the leader must be the judge of just how much discussion time you allow, and the degree to which allow going off on tangents!

For very small groups (perhaps up to 10), then open discussion may work best. For larger groups, discussion is probably best in pairs or threes. Sometimes, especially if attendees are less familiar with church discussion groups, attendees may try to stay in much larger huddles of 6 or 7 people. I have found this is less satisfactory, with the discussions dominated by one or two more confident people, with others remaining silent. But it is not always easy to manipulate this!

When I am teaching with sufficient time, having a whiteboard can be useful to bring feedback comments together eg your fear of ageing, being fruitful in old age, redeeming suffering etc.

Where your timing permits, I think it is helpful to invite comments into the whole group at the end of each discussion time. Those who feel confident enough to feedback in that way often have something very valuable to say, and it may help attendees who struggled to get started on the discussion. But ultimately this is down to your discernment knowing the attendees you have. There are some discussions which are more personal – and indeed you may suggest attendees just quietly reflect themselves on that question.

Ice breakers

I think these are useful to set a tone of informality, and establish the discussion groups. They also may be useful for feedback and just getting people talking. However they could consume quite a lot of time, so the leader must be the judge on this – for example in session 5 people talking about their experience with dementia.

Session One

Like most courses, the first session is intended to be relatively light, and just encourage attendance and sharing together. Amid the usual joking about *Ageing disgracefully*, the session is getting attendees to start facing ageing head on – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Of course, these things will develop further later.

Depending on time constraints, and your confidence with the material as a leader, you may wish to use the study guide, or your own knowledge and experience to add material at each pause in the video. For instance, for those with some medical background, you may explain how the body ages. For those less medical, and perhaps with a pastoral background, you might talk about social ageing – loneliness and loss of social circles for example.

It is good to encourage attendees to bring their bible. Ecclesiastes 12 is read in the video, using the New Living Translation (which is the translation used throughout the course). You could use that passage as part of the response to question one in the video.

Ageism is something just touched on in page 7 of the study guide. While we may wish to be anti-ageist, we also should admit that age does make a difference, and old people are distinct in some ways. Another opportunity for bible study would be to look at Leviticus 27 v.1-8 (an OT realistic assessment of age being different) , and Matthew 20 v.1-16 (which I have suggested we interpret as the less able being hired for just a few hours, but all valued equally for their contribution).

You may be able to elaborate in more detail about Richard Rohr and his book Falling Upwards if you are familiar with his ideas. I have found attendees are slower to latch on to this discussion, perhaps having not thought of this before. But the aim is to encourage recognition of how they are changing in GOOD ways, perhaps after retirement, or other forms of loss. God's redeeming work through loss and suffering, so much an accompaniment of ageing, is something that will crop up several times through the course.

Session Two

I found this the most difficult session to transfer from the original version to the video course. I had chosen 5 themes, but the pattern for the video was having three pauses – I thought five pauses on session two might not flow. The study material in session 2 has 5 questions, one for each theme, instead of the usual 3. When leading the course with videos recently, I decided to pause the video after each theme. You will need to decide what works best for you!

There is biblical material for each theme, while the video asks practical questions around the themes. You might well choose to spend some of the discussion time each time looking at bible passages:

- Question one (Pilgrimage): Philippians 3:13-16
- Question two (Blessing): Genesis 18:9-15
- Question three (Testing): 1 Kings 19:1-18
- Question four (Waiting): Luke 2:25-38
- Question five (fruitfulness): Psalm 92:12-15)

Session Three

I have found the ice breaker about prayer life is possibly best done by general sharing, rather than in pairs – but up to you.

As a retired doctor, I sometimes tire when the only prayers at church are about members' latest hospital appointments! This session is about trying to be rather more specific about what we are praying for, or what we have faith to believe. I admit that at times my medical mind holds me back in praying for a miracle cure. I have tried to be honest in this session about how I myself approach praying for healing in the context of old age and frailty, and hope this may stimulate honest discussion.

On page 30 of the study guide, reference is made to three bible passages about Jesus healing an older person (Luke 13:10-17; Mark 10:46-52; John 5:2-18) The video mentions these briefly in the first section. I have often split the group up into three, with each group studying one of these

passages, and then feeding back to the whole group. You could do this at the first pause, perhaps before going into the question one material.

There is probably much controversy over whether God tests us, or allows us to be tested. With question one, I am hoping to steer the discussion around how suffering brings out some positive things eg makes us see the doctor, stops us in our tracks, turn our life around, brings out our caring side, purifies us etc. This discussion can be slow to start – a white board may be useful here.

Living with unanswered questions and uncertainty is another central theme in my mind. And I feel 2 Corinthians 1 v3-7 is one response to this.

Session Four

Most participants will have had their experiences of giving, or organising care for relatives, and so engagement in this session is likely to be easily achieved, and the challenge may be how to avoid long personal stories. There may be someone who has professional experience in social work or nursing, who may be able to provide insight into service provision in your area.

I had two chief thoughts in my mind with this session – how to lessen feelings of guilt in a carer or would-be carer; and how to realise your need for care and gracefully accept it. If you are in a church setting, then the session may stimulate discussion about the organisation and delivery of pastoral care – a topic that will again be picked up in session five on dementia. The passage in 1 Timothy 5 covers both our responsibility to care, but also responsibilities when receiving care (verse 5 and 9-10). It is good to include bible study of this passage during the session – one option could be to do this after discussing question one.

Our society values autonomy and independence very highly – I have found many people say they believe life would not be worth living if they lost their independence. This session, along with session 6, stimulate us to think about the gradual processes of loss and letting go. The dilemma of when it is right to stand back and respect a refusal of help, and when to intervene, is touched on, but not the focus in any of the questions - so you may wish to pick this up in discussion.

Caring is often unseen, and this session may enable some people to share in ways they have not done before, and hopefully receive mutual support from the group. Likewise, guilt is a great danger for Christians in this area, and I strongly recommend people use Will Van Der Hart's book if this is identified.

Session Five

Church can be a wonderful illustration of inclusivity, but also perhaps inadvertently exclude some older people for lack of appropriate adaptations or facilities. The needs of older people with dementia, or urinary frequency, may be less obvious than mobility impairments. The session talks about the benefit of openly acknowledging the condition, and then it is up to the church to support and accept. Discussion about this can be brought in, perhaps early on, or as part of question 3. You might refer to 1 Corinthians 12 about the weaker parts of the body having special honour.

Question 1 is some amateur philosophy – but it can be fun and insightful to gather “I am because...” phrases on the white board. See how much this emphasises independence, intellect, or relationship.

I continue to hear more stories of a strengthening simple faith and love of Jesus in many older people living with dementia. Yet of course if we are honest there are those for whom dementia brings out a nasty side, swearing and so on. I admit this session does not face this head on, but seeks to provide some hope. Maybe if we age gracefully and faithfully, in the grace of God, then if we do succumb to dementia, our experience, and the experience of those caring for us, may be a good one.

Most groups I have led have engaged with the theological discussion about the soul, which we did not have time for in the video. So if you wish to explore this, the leader will need to introduce some material such as on pages 52-53 of the study guide, and then use the supplementary question. The reason this part is included is to emphasise that our soul remains with us to the end of our earthly life – the person is still there.

Session Six

The first main question in this session is about letting go of control – I think the quote from Kate Picot on page 60 is useful here. Encourage people to share the things they have already let go of – hopefully this may encourage them that they can let go, rather than depress them!

After question one is a good time to explore documentation such as power of attorney, living will, and Do not resuscitate orders. RESPECT forms, a national initiative, have been introduced in many localities – perhaps someone in your group can talk about this, or you can look at the website <https://www.resus.org.uk/respect>.

The extent to which you enter discussion about euthanasia may depend on whether attendees have had other opportunities to do so. Of course the topic continues to be before parliament. There is strong Christian support, as well as opposition, for euthanasia, and so there is potential for heated discussion and controversy.

The last section is in some ways seeking to be a summary of the whole course. While in medieval times, the ars moriendi would be completed over a few days as death approached, for those living in old age, this can be seen as the latter stages of our pilgrimage, and how to age gracefully.

I have drawn a hexagon with these attributes around the perimeter, and with me and God at the centre. It is attached here if you wish to reproduce it for attendees – I usually print them on card.

Bibliography for Ageing Gracefully

General books on ageing

Ian Donald	With a light touch	2021
Paul Tournier	Learning to grow old	1972
Derek Prime	A good old Age	2017
John Wyatt	The final lap	2023
Samuel Wells	Walk Humbly	2019
Rob Merchant	Pioneering the third age	2003
David Price	Ageing faithfully	Grove booklet P174

David Winter	At the end of the day	2013
Muriel Gillick	The denial of ageing	2006
Johann Arnold	Rich in years	2013
Tudor Griffiths	The rest of life	2026

Healing

CS Lewis	The problem of pain	1940
Ernest Lucas	Christian Healing: what can we believe?	1997
Pete Greig	God on mute	2007

Caring

Wanda Nash	Come let us age	2017
Ann Benton	If its not too much trouble	2007
Will Van Der Hart	The Guilt Book	2014

On dementia

John Swinton	Dementia – living in the memories of God	2012
Tricia Williams	God's not forgotten me	2022
Malcolm Goldsmith	In a strange land	2004
James Saunders	Dementia: pastoral theology + pastoral care	Grove booklet P89
Louise Morse	Dementia: Frank and Linda's story	2010
Tina English	A great place to grow old	2021

End of life issues

Anthony Smith	Euthanasia – a licence to kill?	2006
George Pitcher	A time to live – the case against euthanasia	2010
Paul Badham	Is there a Christian case for assisted dying?	2009
Ann Clifford	Time to live – the beginners guide to saying goodbye	2017
John Wyatt	Dying Well	2018

