

CoA Conference Call – 23rd October 2024

Ageing: The Unwanted Gift?

Rev. Dr. Keith R. Albans – Chair: Christians on Ageing

Keith began by explaining that the choice of subject was due to a combination of factors. He had recently celebrated reaching 25,000 days old, while an article in the Guardian by Emma Beddington had noted that we may have reached a peak in human longevity. And reading a recently published paper had evoked memories of the 6th International Conference on Ageing and Spirituality held in Los Angeles in 2015. The Conference theme was ‘*Paradox and Promise in the Pilgrimage of Aging*’ and he had led a workshop exploring this idea of an unwanted gift – out of which he had co-authored a paper – *The promise and peril of finite forever: the paradox of ageing*¹

Paradox is a helpful concept in exploring our attitudes to ageing, not least because it allows us to hold together things which are often seen as polar opposites. Thus while many see the extension of the lifespan as something to celebrate unreservedly, the reality is that most people have significant questions around the very possibility of living into extreme old age. This is a profoundly theological issue for people of faith, in that, in effect, we are showing a reluctance to accept a gift from God! Hence the title of this session.

The theology of gift is not something which we often examine, except in this season of Harvest when we declare in gratitude that, “All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, then thank the Lord, for all his love.” At the heart of the concept of gift is the fact that after the point of exchange the giver ceases to have a right of determination over the use of the gift. In one of the stories included in Keith’s book *God, me and Being Very Old* (SCM 2013), we read “*Towards the end of her life Winnie was tired and used to pray every night that God would take her, almost to the point of being disappointed when she awoke in the morning!*”

In thinking about paradoxes and promises, we have to take Winnie’s prayer seriously. And we do so alongside the current reality where scientists and others are apparently working on things which are aimed at extending old age even further, with some claiming that the first person who will live to be 200 is alive today! Where does Winnie’s prayer sit in this kind of world?

On the day of the Conference Call, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) released the latest National Life Tables indicating estimated life-expectancy in England and Wales 2021-2023.² These show that a woman aged 85 has on average a further 6.67 years of life – the figure for men is 5.68 years, while Keith’s Mum, now aged 98 can expect, on average, to live for another 2.35 years. That for many will be an unambiguously unwanted gift!!

With that introduction, Keith took us through the paper, *The fear of old age: a survey of adults in the UK*.³ The author is Fiona Costa from Roehampton University, whose PhD thesis from 2015 is entitled *The Effect of Regular Listening to Preferred Music on Pain, Depression and Anxiety in Older People in Residential Care*. The opening sentence of the paper says this: “*Opinions differ as to whether the increases in life expectancy seen in recent times are a positive development for society.*” And a few

¹ Herbert Anderson & Keith Albans (2018): The promise and peril of finite forever: the paradox of ageing, Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2018.1476281>

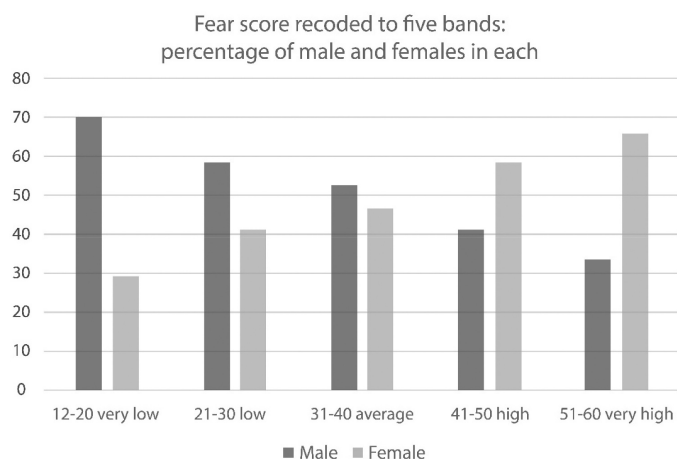
² <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKONS/bulletins/3bd9d36>

³ <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2024.2402056>

lines later she again chimes with things raised earlier – “Increased life-expectancy has not been accompanied by improvements in morbidity – rather multi-morbidity has become the norm in those over the age of 85” citing a 2018 paper from Age & Ageing.

The author introduces the term ‘ageing anxiety’ which is defined as “the concern and anticipation of adverse physical, mental and personal losses during the ageing process.”⁴ and suggests that this is separate from ‘death anxiety’, adding that “for many people their fear of old-age exceeds their fear of death...” Ageism is, unsurprisingly, a major cause of ageing anxiety whereas things such as religious faith and time spent around older people can reduce it. She concludes her introduction by suggesting that “the fear of old age is harmful to individuals and to society. Older adults, seen as harbingers of peoples’ future selves, are shunned. Made to feel unwelcome, they become isolated from their communities and under-valued. This separation of older adults deprives the rest of society of a connection to the past and a sense of continuity and perspective.”

The research project surveyed 3252 people of whom 64% responded. They were asked to consider 49 questions in seven sections exploring their attitudes and factors which might inform



those attitudes. Analysis of fear of 12 conditions associated with older age arrived at scores for a ‘fear of old age’ based on a five-point scale from 1 (for ‘not at all’) to 5 (for ‘a great deal’). A maximum score was therefore 60, and the results showed a mean fear score of 37.5 with 42.2% of respondents having a fear score of above 40. Fear scores were then recoded into five bands (from very low to very high) and the results can be seen in this graph and the following table.

Table. Percentage of high fear scores (‘a great deal’ and ‘a lot’) combined for the 12 conditions.

Condition	Males	Females
Not making a difference	20.7%	28.2%
Financial insecurity	34.2%	48.1%
Poor health	49.0%	63.2%
Loss of independence	49.6%	66.9%
Treated disrespectfully	31.6%	44.0%
Being a burden	34.2%	50.6%
Being unneeded	27.0%	39.7%
Being forgetful	40.1%	53.7%
Being ignored	25.9%	42.9%
Being lonely	32.5%	47.6%
Moving to care home	44.9%	54.6%
Getting dementia	50.6%	64.1%

It is clear that, on all counts, these results indicate that women were more fearful of old age. The paper cites various theories which have been suggested for women’s greater fear of old age.

⁴ Lasher, K. P., & Faulkender, P. J. (1993). Measurement of aging anxiety: Development of the anxiety about aging scale. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 37(4), 247–259. <https://doi.org/10.2190/IU69-9AU2-V6LH-9Y1L>

Cummings et al.⁵ suggest that the burden of day-to-day caring responsibilities for relatives is more likely to be carried by women. Their greater proximity to frail old age may cause distress and give rise to an increasing fear of their own future old age. Barrett and Robbins⁶ argue that as people age, women lose more status than men. Judged more on their appearance, women become aware of their ageing looks sooner than men⁷ and feel pressure to retain a youthful appearance.⁸ This is supported by the finding that women between 35 and 49 had the greatest fear of the physical signs of ageing.

Whilst these findings are supported by previous research, other findings are not. Results showed that parenthood predicts the fear of old age, irrespective of age or gender. 48.2% of respondents with children had 'a great deal' or 'a lot' of fear of old age compared with 27.6% of those without. Contact with older adults was one of the factors predicted to mitigate the fear of old age. However, the findings of this survey indicate that the fear levels of those who had 'a great deal' or 'a lot' of contact, whether with grandparents when growing up or with older people in adulthood were higher than those with only a 'little' contact.

The profession of faith and belief in an afterlife were also predicted to mitigate the fear of old age. These findings suggest the opposite. Individuals professing a faith and a belief in an afterlife had a greater fear of old age. It may be the strength of a person's belief system that makes a difference. Fortuin et al.⁹ found that older adults who were moderately religious had high levels of fear compared with those who were very religious or nonbelievers.

Ageing – the unwanted gift? This paper does underline the sense of ambiguity, and therefore the challenge which ageing presents to society as a whole as well as to each of us as individuals. And although it suggests fear of old age is lower among older cohorts, it is still there. Keith referred to some research which MHA commissioned from Harriet Mowat in 2011 into the place and role of Chaplains within MHA's aged care facilities. Her report contained much that was informative and useful, but by far the most useful was two phrases which she used. The first was this: "MHA Chaplains support and build reluctant communities." The second was: "MHA Chaplains make connections but live with the fractures." The idea of a reluctant community underlines the reality of the ambiguous gift of years which an increasing number of elders experience. And for all of us working in the area of residential aged care, the challenge of that reluctance and those fractures is a recurring one. In his work around the Eden Alternative, Bill Thomas has underlined the debilitating effect of what he calls the three plagues of loneliness, helplessness and boredom for those living in old people's homes, and where those plagues are unaddressed, there can be little surprise if people remain less than enamoured at the prospect of an extended life.

⁵ Cummings, S. M., Kropf, N. P., & Weaver, K. L. D. (2000). Knowledge of and attitudes toward aging among non-elders: Gender and race differences. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 12(1–2), 77–91. https://doi.org/10.1300/J074v12n01_06

⁶ Barrett, A. E., & Robbins, C. (2008). The multiple sources of women's aging anxiety and their relationship with psychological distress. *Journal of Aging & Health*, 20(1), 32–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898264307309932>

⁷ Allan, L. J., & Johnson, J. A. (2008). Undergraduate attitudes toward the elderly: The role of knowledge, contact and aging anxiety. *Educational Gerontology*, 35(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270802299780>

⁸ Chonody, J. M., & Teater, B. (2016). Why do I dread looking old? A test of social identity theory, terror management theory, and the double standard of aging. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 28(2), 112–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2014.950533>

⁹ Fortuin, N. P., Schilderman, J. B., & Venbrux, E. (2020). The search for meaning in later life: On the connection between religious narratives and narratives of aging. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, 32(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2018.1553225>

This topic of unwanted or ambiguous gift also chimes with two very current and, some would say, connected issues of the cost of care and assisted dying. At our recent Conference we discussed the latter – very much with an eye to safeguards which we might look for for older people – and one very clearly was to avoid any suggestion that an older person might feel pressured to consider an assisted death on account of ‘spending my inheritance!’ With the annual cost of care being £55,000 and upwards, this is a significant consideration!

In her book, *The Warmth of the Heart Prevents your Body from Rusting – Ageing without Growing Old* Marie de Hennezel issues an interesting challenge, “*It’s up to us to invent a new art of growing old – which is a paradox, since it means accepting the inevitability of ageing without becoming ‘old.’*”¹⁰ That is quite a challenge – to produce a new art of growing old, and one which draws a distinction between ageing and becoming old! Is that merely playing with words, or does it outline a way of embracing this ambiguous gift? Surely we will have the same feelings as earlier generations though about the inevitability of ageing – fine and acceptable if it is healthy and fit, questionable if it is a time of frailty, limitation and illness.

Another topic from our recent Conference relates to this whole discussion. It was the word mortality – which Joanna Collicutt focussed on – it is a word/idea which defines our humanity and it is central to the gift of life – however long or short that life may be. In the paper arising from the 2015 Conference (reference 1 above) four related metaphors that we use to acknowledge our limits were outlined. Finitude or being finite is one – the condition of being limited that defines our humanness. It is something we share with all creatures. When we age, we are keenly aware of being increasingly limited even while we seek to extend the life span. Being finite is from birth. But finitude is not a mystery. Harvard physician Atul Gawande invites us to think about our mortality in his book *Being Mortal*. That is the second metaphor. Mortality is not mysterious either. Being mortal, Gawande suggests, “*is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology, with the limits set by genes and cells and flesh and bone.*”¹¹ For many older people, their awareness of mortality is sometimes articulated in terms of having been superseded, left behind, the final survivor of a large family or circle of friends. A third metaphor is Frailty, which has many meanings. Frailty balances helplessness and responsibility in human life. Despite extensions in the lifespan, the overwhelming narrative which people bring to their thinking about ageing is that of inevitable and irreversible frailty. Little wonder therefore that the prospect of a lengthening lifespan is viewed as an ambiguous gift desired only if healthy and active ageing is guaranteed. The ultimate limit in life is death. Unlike finitude, mortality, or frailty, death is finally a mystery. The wisdom of ageing is not only in valuing finitude or acknowledging mortality but embracing death in life. In a sermon preached at Harvard University Chapel many years ago, Paul Tillich is reported to have said this in a prayer: “Lord, help me to bring my death into my life lest death take my life from me.” That is wisdom for living. Living with limits, whether as frailty, finitude, mortality, or death, is central to the wisdom of ageing.

It is, perhaps, by focussing on our mortality and on our finitude which helps most in coping with this ambiguous and sometimes unwanted gift of longer life. It helps us accept our interdependence and become more comfortable with increasing dependence, it helps us live in the ‘now’ where

¹⁰ Hennezel, M. de (2011) p2 *The Warmth of the Heart Prevents your Body from Rusting – Ageing without Growing Old* (Rodale)

¹¹ Gawande, A. (2014) p259 *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (Henry Holt & Company)

making our own decisions and making new memories are still open possibilities, it helps us realise that as ‘we can’t take it with us’ giving back is healthy, and ultimately living with finitude makes accepting the finishing line more of a natural ending to be welcomed, not pushed away or ignored.

Ageing – the unwanted gift? Maybe Ambiguous is a better word? Maybe you have other suggestions! That paper on the fear of old age ends with a quotation from Rabbi Julia Neuberger which I had not come across before – but it makes a great rallying cry! *“We need to work out just why it is we so fear growing old. And hammer that fear into the ground, for it makes us both unimaginative and unkind – a deadly combination.”*

Discussion

A question was raised by Joseph as to the diversity or otherwise of those sampled in Fiona Costa’s research, feeling that there is a link between ethnicity and how we feel about old age. Similarly, Joseph wondered whether a distinction had been made between those who considered themselves affiliated to a religion, and those who did not.

In response Keith referred to a Table on page 4 of the paper which outlined demographic information on the participants, of which the relevant lines are reproduced here. There is also some discussion of the significant variables on pages 4-6

Ethnicity	White (UK)	White (non- UK)	Asian/Asian British	Black/Black British	Mixed			
	2490 (82.9%)	234 (7.8%)	167 (5.6%)	70 (2.3%)	41 (1.4%)			
Religion	Christian	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh	Jewish	Other	None
	789 (52.9%)	9 (0.6%)	15 (1.0%)	42 (2.8%)	11 (0.7%)	14 (0.9%)	14 (0.9%)	597 (40.0%)

Marion Shoard suggested that one way of countering the fear of ageing is to remind ourselves of how lucky we are these days in terms of pension income and benefits compared to previous generations. Likewise with disability provision and healthcare. Keith suggested that awareness of our mortality is something we need to learn about, and also referred back to things which militate against the 12 aspects of fear which the paper mentioned. Most are exacerbated by isolation and loneliness – a reminder of the importance of learning our inter-dependence which best supports our ageing. It is a huge battle to persuade society of the importance of learning this earlier in life. This was backed up by one of our number who had worked in rehab hospitals as an occupational therapist. Keith also reminded us of the Creation narratives in Genesis which underline our interdependence.

We explored the issues raised by the gendered differences in levels of fear of ageing. Janet Eldred, whose PhD studies 20-25 years ago had focused on older women, said the results did not surprise her, not least because women of every age carry out the majority of the caring roles within the home, and although it may be a huge generalisation, men tend to assume that their significant support group will be well enough to look after them in older age. This in turn becomes a source of anxiety for the women who feel they must stay well enough to fulfil that caring role. Keith added that the author suggests that such anxiety is exacerbated by current experiences of looking after older relatives.

There was some discussion on the findings as to the effect of parenthood on levels of fear of ageing, with significantly higher scores arising from those who were parents. It was felt that while

there were some factors which helped understand these data, it might also be expected that those without children might have increased fear as to who will look after them. The numbers in this group are also increasing with time.

A question around attitudes toward ageing within churches was raised, and Joanna Cox reported that generally church folk's attitudes in this regard were generally more influenced by the surrounding culture than by their theology, with the latter being held more in theory than put into practise. What is more the general cultural assumption about the value of youth, and the church being panicky about getting older, adds to fear of ageing within the churches.

Of the 12 categories measured in the paper for leading to a fear of ageing, several add up to the fear of the world having left me behind – so as to become irrelevant and invisible. In a world of change – and with a high speed of change, this sense of being overlooked is inevitable.

Having noted the data around the effect of parenting on fear of ageing, the question was raised as to whether being grandparents is likely to have an effect. “Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.”

Joanna Cox – experience of teaching within the Selly Oak Colleges amongst trainee mission partners. There is a lot within that literature which lists things likely to be encountered as ‘culture shock.’ Jo had written a paper in which she relabelled this as ‘adaptation stress’ where what is happening is that you are bereaved of one set of circumstances (which causes stress) and take on another set of circumstances, which also causes stress. It’s a helpful term to add alongside ageing anxiety.

Working at growing old is something which the whole of society has to take on board across all the lifespan. We challenge the oft-heard phrase ‘old people don’t like change’ – all of life is about change! And the next generations’ experience of approaching third age is going to be change from where we are now, as pension age increases. And if we are to emphasise our inter-dependence then we must be aware of growing inter-generational conflict, which may be exacerbated by the up-coming budget. We also noted the link to the question of ‘control,’ which has been to the fore in debates around assisted dying. Working at growing old, and becoming familiar with both our mortality and our interdependence, needs to include reflection on the extent to which ageing involves moderating our need for ‘control.’

P.S. In the chat, Alexandra Drew (Faith in Later Life) shared an article from the Church Times about mid-life ageism. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/18-october/features/features/lessons-from-mid-life-joy-blended-with-sorrow>