

The Old Church

By Jim Elliff



There is no shame in getting old — not for you, or for churches.

It is a bad mistake to demean a person for it, when you are headed the same direction and neither of you can stop it. It's a double shame to defame a person whose halcyon days were in the past, especially if that person is of high character and has maintained a remarkable Christ-like demeanor and interest in others. It is like laughing at your old aunt for being

what you hope all old aunts would be — old and beautifully aged because of Christ, but very different than you in so many ways, and maybe even quaint.

Churches are the same.

Recently I spoke at an older church which had witnessed generations of believers before them. It met in the same church building, almost without change, for many decades. Their walls echoed, though almost undetectably now, the testimonies of many hundreds of sincere believers.

The experience brought memories of Bethany Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri, where I grew up as a preacher's kid. Bethany's strongest years were those I lived through in the 50s when 850 people crowded into the building with no air conditioning, and we raised the roof singing, and heard the "amens" as truths were asserted with passion. Stain glass and organ were there, but the hymns were those peppy gospel hall songs which everyone could sing, with parts, to the top of their lungs. Many were brought to Christ through the church's witness, including some of my siblings and me. Now, as we look back on it with children and grandchildren having come to Christ, we don't demean it, even though we express ourselves differently in our day to our communities than we did in those years of post war optimism, massive movement to the cities, and prevailing rural roots.

This church, with well over a hundred years of history like Bethany, had grown old like an aged oak despite limbs dropping off, in what many would call a transitioning community of older homes. Mainly older people attended, but some younger ones here and there were found. Many in the pews were widowed ladies with sweet smiles who had weathered all those decades of change since the church's golden years when their husbands were its young leaders and their children were at their skirts.

There is a place for such churches, and a future. And there can be vibrancy, as I saw in this one, even with its small numbers and aging population. The work of God does not stop wherever true Christians gather. I felt in its people the life of Christ, and the church was meeting needs and strengthening the saints, and trying to reach out. Praise God for the steady witness of a church over its many years. It is not to be despised. A long life is a good thing and growing old gracefully displays a noble witness to God's enduring effects, even if it is a slighter form of the former.

I was honored to be there among the saints.

Here are a few reminders to such churches:

1. The people you tend to draw may provide a strategy for the future. Old people are people too. I once spoke to a church with perhaps two hundred old people attending. They were vibrant. There were almost no young people, but scores of older people, some up to a hundred, who found the joys of fellowship and likemindedness of mission. They did not say that we are not a good church because we do not draw young families. Rather, while remaining open to all ages, they pursued the friends they actually had and were not ashamed of it. Old people like to be together. These are people who are closer to their final days, have more time to serve, and can have a lot of spunk. I believe they were wise to go with what God had set before them, and let God bring whomever he will, trusting God to gradually bring in those of a younger age if he chooses. It's no sin to do that.
2. Make much of fellowship. You may not be able to offer much in some aspects, but there is no governor on love. You can be the most loving church in the world, if you will pursue it. In so many years of travel, I have noticed that it is a consistent pattern that the older people tend to be the most gracious. Capitalize on that.
3. And meet needs of your people. I recently challenged a lady who was looking for a ministry, to write down the names of ten people. Then I encouraged her to carefully think through what that person's greatest need is. "Set out to meet those needs." There is not a title for this ministry, but it may well be the best one. Is it friendship that person needs? Then provide it. Is it financial help? Then meet it. Is it transportation? Warm up the car and go do it. Is it more Bible knowledge? Then get together to read the Bible chapter by chapter, and talk about whatever becomes important to highlight. Is it overcoming fear? Then offer a daily call. Is it healthy meals? Then pick them up and bring them home for supper; or cook extra and take it to them. You get the idea. What a powerful thing! What if five people did this in your church? What about ten? But what about just one — you?

I will not say that God cannot lead a church to incorporate with others or even change locations. You have to do God's will. But remember, no church is dead if people made alive by Christ are there. God is not through with the old church yet.

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