

Addressing Ageism in our Faith, Religious, and Spiritual Communities

Americans are living longer, which means our communities, including our faith, religious, and spiritual communities, are getting older. In many cultures, age is a positive thing, and older adults are honored for their accumulated experience and wisdom. In some communities, older age and aging are devalued and older people are dismissed or excluded. Unfortunately, our faith, religious, and spiritual communities are not immune. This resource addresses ageism toward older adults.

What is ageism? Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and/or discrimination of individuals on the basis of their age. Ageism shows up in:

- How we **think**—that aging is bad and ugly
- How we **feel**—being scared of looking or feeling older
- How we **act** toward adults who may be older, frail, or less engaged

According to a 2020 University of Michigan poll, 82% of the adults age 50 to 80 who were surveyed reported experiencing ageism in their day-to-day lives.¹

What are the impacts of ageism? The impacts of ageism are far reaching. People who experience ageism are more likely to experience **depression, social isolation, and chronic health issues**. Ageism results in **tremendous healthcare costs**, because ageism makes it harder for older adults to seek and receive appropriate care. It also **harms financial well-being** through discrimination in hiring and fewer professional growth opportunities. Ageism **negatively affects our economy** as a result of involuntary retirement, underemployment, and unemployment of older workers.

What does ageism look like? Ageism can be as simple as equating a memory lapse to a “senior moment.” It is a health care provider who assumes an older patient won’t be able to understand the treatment plan, so instead they speak over the older adult to the person who accompanied them. Ageism is a physical therapist who assumes that older adults can no longer gain strength. Ageism is using condescending or patronizing language when speaking with older adults. It is making assumptions that older adults are too old to be interested, capable, or knowledgeable.

Is there ageism in our faith, religious, and spiritual communities? Sometimes negative attitudes in the surrounding society can seep into how we treat older adults. Despite our best intentions, we may find ourselves speaking loudly to older adults or making assumptions about their abilities if they use a cane or a wheelchair. We may inadvertently exclude older adults by planning meetings after dark or in rooms that are not accessible.

Ageism in our faith, religious, and spiritual communities can be a conundrum. Most faith traditions teach that older adults should be respected for their wisdom and experience. Older adults have greater perspective, stronger patience, deeper gratitude, and clearer priorities as a result of their longer lives. Despite our deeply held values, however, older adults are sometimes taken for granted or ignored.

Ageism happens when:

- Programming is age-segregated and the opportunity for fostering intergenerational activities and connections is missed
- The focus is on growing the community with younger members and families to the exclusion of older adults
- Younger leaders are dismissive of older leaders, are frustrated by their “old ways,” or are aggravated when they “can’t keep up”
- Leaders make assumptions about what older adults need and want without consulting them
- Older leaders are pushed aside to bring in younger leaders

How are faith, religious, and spiritual communities uniquely positioned to change the narrative? Faith communities already include many older adults. In fact, the Pew Research Center states that more than 80% of older adults in the U.S. identify themselves as faith-based.² Many older people find identity, meaning, healing, and support in their faith communities. Also, in an increasingly age-striated world, faith, religious, and spiritual communities are one of the last spaces that are multi-generational.

How can faith, religious, and spiritual communities change the narrative? While our sacred communities may contribute to ageism, they can also be an **ideal place to take action** against ageism and push back against social norms that undermine faith-based values.

Faith leaders can:

- Help their communities understand aging through a culturally relevant lens and emphasize the growing meaning and purpose that comes with aging
- Strengthen the belief that aging is a gift to be embraced, a “passage of discovery and engagement”³
- Celebrate the aging journey experienced by older adults, their younger family members, and the community as a whole
- Use their prophetic voices and moral authority to speak out against ageism

Faith, religious, and spiritual communities can:

- Learn more about aging and ageism
- Provide avenues for older adults to express their gratitude, strength, and purpose
- Support older adults as they experience the stresses of aging
- Include older adults in planning and consult them regarding programming, building improvements, spiritual needs, and more
- Plan activities in accessible spaces and at convenient times
- Nurture a volunteer carpooling network to help with transportation

Ageism is bad for older adults, but it is also bad for everyone. If we are lucky, we will all age, so stopping ageism in its tracks now is in everyone’s best interest. Also, if we are to live into our highest religious and spiritual values, it is important to treat everyone with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Endnotes

1. Allen, J. O., Solway, E., Kirch, M., Singer, D., Kullgren, J. T., & Malani, P. N. (2022). The everyday ageism scale: development and evaluation. *Journal of aging and health*, 34(2), 147-157.
2. Wormald, B. (2015). Religious landscape study. *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, 11.
3. Palmer, P. (2018, June 25). *Welcome to the brink of everything*. On Being. <https://onbeing.org>