

## Leading an Older Adult to Christ

In the late 1800s, Edwin Starbuck conducted ground-breaking studies on conversion to Christianity.<sup>i</sup> He observed that the average age of a person experiencing a religious conversion was 15.6 years. One hundred years later, in 1991, Virgil Gillespie reported that the average age of conversion in America was 16 years.<sup>ii</sup> Arnell Motz observed that over half of all Christian conversions occur before the age of 29, while only 6.8% of new converts are over age 50 at the time of their conversion, and just 1.2% are over age 60.<sup>iii</sup>

Why such a predominance of conversions early in life...and so few later?

I recently had the opportunity to lead a two-year national study of senior adult conversions. We wanted to learn more about those who became conscious followers of Christ after age 60...and whether we could help churches reach more non-Christians older adults as a result. (A 150-page report entitled *White Unto Harvest: Evangelizing Today's Senior Adults* summarizes the study and implications.<sup>iv</sup>) Concerning the matter of leading an older adult to Christ, here are a few things I discovered in the course of this study that may be helpful:

***Senior adults often come to Christ in different ways than younger adults.*** When one hundred randomly selected men and women are queried concerning their Christian faith, slightly less than half can recall a specific moment in their past when they “made a decision for Christ.” The other half cannot. Though all have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, all are certain that their sins are forgiven, and all know that heaven awaits them after death, half cannot recall an exact time, place, or circumstance when they made a conscious decision to accept Christ.

Interestingly, it is often those who began following Christ at a younger age who more often recall a “conversion experience” associated with an exact time and place. The older people are when they become conscious followers of Christ, the more difficult it becomes for them to recall a specific event where that transition occurred. It’s not that their memory is failing. It is that their “conversion” more likely occurred over a period of time—as a *process*—than at a specific time and place—as an *event*.

In leading an older adult to Christ, I believe an important starting point is to acknowledge that people come to their relationship with Christ in different ways. To try and make every older adult follow certain steps or say certain words in order to authenticate their conversion...limits the number of older adults who will be reached with the Gospel. Indeed, Jesus used many different approaches, from Nicodemus, the religious ruler who was told he needed to be “born again” (John 3:3), to the woman of Samaria who was offered the water of eternal life (John 3:14), to the thief on the cross who asked only to be remembered when Christ came into his kingdom (Luke 23:42). Each situation presented different needs, portrayed different relationships, used different words, brought a different response. Each situation was unique. “We do great harm to the mystery of conversion,” says Gordon McDonald, “when we reduce it to a convenient formula.”<sup>v</sup>

It is also interesting, as we contemplate leading an older adult to Christ, to consider what gerontologists tell us about how our perceptions change as we age...

***Older adults see the world differently than younger adults.*** As we age, the way we look at life changes. This is often referred to as the “developmental process of aging,” and has been widely researched in areas such as cognitive development (Piaget, Montessori), marketing (Wolfe, Dychtwald), and religion (Fowler, Koenig).

This change of our worldview as we age can be characterized as moving from a “black & white” view (which is characteristic of younger adults) to a “shades of gray” perspective as we grow older. Older adults realize that the *context* of our life influences our interpretation of the events in our life. Seniors, by simple virtue of their longevity, have much more context from which to draw when they contemplate the issues of life. As a result, it is more likely that it will be an older adult who is heard to say to a younger adult, “Things aren’t quite as simple as you might think...”

One important implication for evangelizing senior adults, as a result of the developmental changes that occur as people age, is that non-Christian older adults seldom respond to “canned” evangelism presentations. A “one-size-fits-all” approach will be perceived as naively simplistic, and present Christianity as unresponsive to the unique situation of who and where the non-Christian senior adult is at that moment in his/her life.

Wolfe, a senior adult marketing authority, describes the general nature of older adult decision-making when purchasing a product. Listen to the implications of his statement, from a Christian perspective on evangelism:

“Older adults balk at marketing approaches that focus on the attributes of the product...they do not make purchase decisions on why the product is great. Seniors are attracted to approaches that speak to the benefits *they* will receive.”<sup>vi</sup>

The older a person becomes the more unique is their life story. Thus, the older a person becomes the more unique—and individualized—should be the evangelistic approach to them.

***Senior adults prefer gradual change over radical change.*** Gordon McDonald describes an attitude toward conversion that has evolved in some evangelical traditions:

The people of my faith tradition have been highly influenced by several generations of evangelism in which preachers went out across the countryside and proclaimed the Gospel and called for people to come to faith in Jesus...and do it now! People were expected to take all this in, make a decision for Christ, and respond to an invitation to go forward where they would be prayed for and perhaps counseled about what to do next. Many years of this kind of activity have had considerable effect upon the way we have come to believe people first encounter God...<sup>vii</sup>

Such an approach to evangelism—that focuses on an instant change that immediately and dramatically alters one’s entire lifestyle—is, by its very nature, less attractive (and thus, less effective) with older adults.

George Hunter recounts a nearly opposite view of evangelism and conversion as practiced by the successful evangelist John Wesley years ago:

Wesley had three ultimate objectives for people: 1) that they experience the grace of God and the gift of faith and become conscious followers of Jesus Christ; 2) that they be “united with others in a class and a society” [become part of a group that meets for Bible study]; 3) and that upon achievement of 1 and 2, they experience growth toward Christian perfection. It is crucial to point out that the first two objectives could be achieved in a person’s life-history in either order, and the more usual sequence was 2, 1.

That is, most of the people who became Methodist converts first joined a Bible study group and sometime later became conscious Christians! This helps to explain why Wesley, in his extensive open-air field preaching, *never* invited people to accept Jesus Christ and become Christians on the spot! That statement must surely shock those of us whose assumptions about public evangelism have been carved out in the Billy Graham era, as it would shock the evangelical Christians of any generation since Charles Grandison Finney began inviting responders to the “mourner’s bench.”<sup>viii</sup>

An evangelistic approach that is “disciple-oriented” [rather than “decision-oriented”] sees the journey toward Christian faith of ongoing growth and maturity over time. The result of such an approach is that more seniors will be willing to participate in that journey.

***Many non-Christian senior adults have been in the process of conversion for years.*** George Gallup found that 79% of older adults have been exposed to religious training as a child [in contrast to 62% of Baby Boomers and 48% of Generation Xers].<sup>ix</sup> In our research we found that a large majority [82%] of senior adult converts attended church regularly or periodically as a child. In some cases the Christian message they heard early in life may have lain dormant for years. They may have taken steps toward or away from Christianity throughout their life. But just as a seed can lay inert for years and then, with ex-

posure to the right light, heat and moisture, take root and flourish, the Gospel seed can begin to flourish and grow in the life of an older adult when exposed to the right circumstances and surroundings.

James Engle has conceptualized the sequence through which a non-believer moves from ignorance to the tenets of Christianity, to active faith and discipleship. This model is helpful in illustrating the spiritual decision process—how a person moves through essential steps toward and to Christian faith. It illustrates how the seed of the Gospel, when planted in a person’s life, progresses (hopefully) to repentance and new life in Christ. [See the “Spiritual Decision Process” below].

Engle contends that a person, at the beginning of his/her spiritual journey starts at the –8 level, “Awareness of a Supreme Being But No Effective Knowledge of the Gospel.” Throughout a person’s journey toward repentance and faith he/she moves through a series of stages, from –8 to –1. In the process of coming to faith a person progresses through each stage. Sometimes the progress is rapid, other times it may take years—even decades—to move from one level to the next. Engle notes:

Each person’s spiritual journey is a lifelong process. It may begin many years prior to the point when a decision is made and one becomes “born again,” or regenerated in the biblical sense. There is usually a complex of influences in this process and these must be understood.<sup>x</sup>

<b>Spiritual Decision Process</b>	
-8	Awareness of Supreme Being But No Effective Knowledge of Gospel
-7	Initial Awareness of Gospel
-6	Awareness of Fundamentals of Gospel
-5	Grasp of the Implications of the Gospel
-4	Positive Attitude Toward the Gospel
-3	Personal Problem Recognition
-2	Decision to Act
-1	Repentance and Faith in God
<i>New Creature</i>	

Someone who is guiding a person 50+ years old to Christ must realize that non-Christian senior adults will be at different places on this continuum of their spiritual journey. And, as Engle correctly points out, people do not jump from a –8 to a –1 in one step, or at one time. There must be a progression through each stage of the process at their own pace.

**Conclusion**

Christians are called to plant the seed of the Good News in hearts that have yet to believe. We are also given instructions on “effective planting techniques.” Christ taught that there are good approaches to spreading the Gospel that result in a substantial “harvest.” And there are other methods of evangelism that result in a poor return. He tells of the farmer who went out to plant seeds.<sup>xi</sup> Some seeds fell by the roadside and were shortly devoured by birds. Other seeds fell on rocky soil where the sun scorched and killed the young plants. Still other seeds fell in the thorns where the plants were quickly choked off. But some of the seeds fell on good soil where they multiplied 30, 60, 100 times. The observation seems clear: seeds planted in good soil represent the desirable strategy and a good use of resources. The most likely result is a bountiful harvest.

Likewise, good stewards of the Gospel are encouraged to share the message of Christ wisely; to plant the seeds of His Word carefully, in ways that will bring the greatest harvest of new believers. Wise planters will learn from experience about how to sew, cultivate, and harvest the Good News in the lives of a potentially great harvest field—unreached older adults.

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<sup>ii</sup> Edwin Starbuck, "Children's Spiritual Development" (1892), referenced in "The Adult Gospel," by Larry Posten *Christianity Today*, August, 20, 1990, pp. 23-25.

<sup>ii</sup> Virgil Gillispie, *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion* Religious Education Press, Sept. 1991, p. 62.

<sup>iii</sup> Arnell Motz, *Reclaiming a Nation*, Winnipeg: Trinity Western Press, 1990, p. 163.

<sup>iv</sup> *White Unto Harvest* by Charles Arn, is available from Church Growth, Inc. ([www.ChurchGrowth.net](http://www.ChurchGrowth.net)).

<sup>v</sup> Gordon McDonald, *Mid-Course Correction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 42.

<sup>vi</sup> David Wolfe, *Serving the Ageless Market* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 29-34.

<sup>vii</sup> Gordon McDonald, *op.cit.*, 37-38.

<sup>viii</sup> George Hunter, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 35.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert Orr, in lecture to church growth conference, Anaheim, CA, 1999.

<sup>x</sup> James Engle, *What's Gone Wrong With The Harvest?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishers), 45.

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 13:1-10