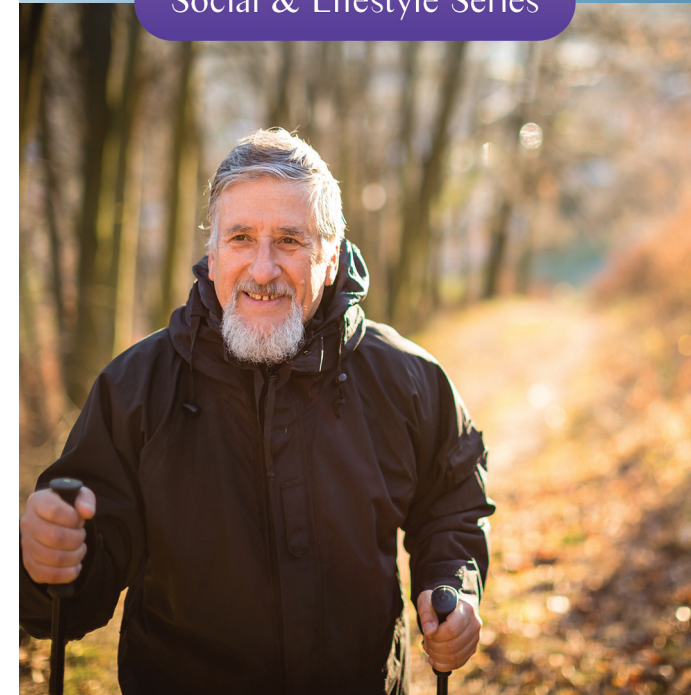


# Finding Fulfillment in Retirement:

## When Christians Retire

### Social & Lifestyle Series



Too frequently, as they get older, retirees feel that they are no longer useful in the church. No one needs them. No one has expectations of them. They see themselves being put on an already crowded shelf. Unfortunately, practices in many churches validate such feelings.

Churches can help retirees see the importance of continuing service and provide the opportunities for it. They can be challenged to serve as volunteers or for a modest honorarium. Seniors can enable congregations to fill positions and establish ministries that they could otherwise not afford. Retirement can be an exhilarating and liberating experience for followers of Christ, a time of enhanced freedom to be and to do.

### All are Ministers

Happily, many retirees understand the biblical truth that all believers are ministers. Many plunge deeply into the continuing ministries of the church—in music, evangelism, hospitality, food services, congregational leadership, preaching, building and grounds maintenance, office and computing work, small group leadership, Christian education, library work, deacon ministry and befriending newcomers.

Many have found important areas of volunteer service outside their local church setting. They have given countless hours to MCC, Christian schools, mission agencies, Christian radio and television, Christian publications and welfare agencies. Many have served with distinction overseas. These people need to be strongly affirmed. They model Christian faithfulness and maturity.

Others, including many who are more elderly, practise Christ-likeness as they serve family members. Ministry as “adoptive grandparents” and as prayer partners are other ways in which seniors serve. These people also need to be affirmed. They too model Christian faithfulness.

In Acts 2 we read that God’s Spirit can indwell both young and old. Fortunately, many retirees model what it means to be faithful, Spirit-filled servants when their regular life’s work comes to an end. Unfortunately, others don’t.

In the years ahead, an ever larger percentage of church members will consist of retirees. Will we as churches and retirees be found wise, willing and faithful as we deal with this reality?

### To Think About

- Retirees are a gift of God to the church.
- Retirees can make invaluable contributions to kingdom ministries.
- Retirees need to be affirmed for service.
- There is no retirement from faithful service to God. God invites faithful service in all seasons of life.
- God does not intend retirement to be a time for self-indulgence in place of Christian service.
- When pursuit of leisure undermines Christian discipleship, something needs changing.
- Just because something is financially possible doesn’t make it the right choice.
- Retirement travel and other pursuits can be combined with Christian service.
- Retirees can serve part-time or full-time, as volunteers or for nominal wages.
- Retirees can enable the church to do what it could otherwise not afford.
- Retirement brings enhanced freedom to be and to do.
- Retirees who continue to serve others and God model Christian faithfulness and maturity. ■

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Faith and Life

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“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree... they will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green.” (Psalm 92:12-14).

Though he wrote three thousand years ago, the Psalmist’s description could fit people like Arnold and Ann Baerg of Waterloo, Henry and Kay Visch of Winnipeg or George and Carol Braun of Lethbridge. Retired from their classrooms and pulpits, these people are only a few of many retirees who have borne much fruit in their “old age.”

The Psalmist’s amazing promise represents both a prospect for retirees and a resource for the church! And it could hardly be more relevant than it is today because a majority of Canadians will live well into old age. In this century, more than twenty-five years have been added to our life expectancy. That’s something to celebrate.

Not only do people now live longer, in general they are also better educated, more skilled and healthier. Retirees can now contribute years, even decades, of significant service to their church. That’s the new reality.

## A Gift to the Church

Retirees rank high among God’s gifts to the church. God expects faithfulness from his children in all seasons of life. For the church, that means providing retirees with opportunities to share their gifts. Retirees, for their part, are called to willingly contribute their wisdom, expertise and talents. That needn’t end with the attainment of a particular retirement age or when financial independence brings long-practised work routines to a halt.

Older persons in the church are privileged people. They have accumulated many years of knowledge and experience. If retirement is viewed as an opportunity for growth and service, then faith will be strengthened and lives enriched. If, however, these years are seen only as a time for self-indulgence, followed ultimately by difficulty and degeneration, then they will be unproductive and disappointing indeed.

Never before has the church faced such a situation. At the turn of the century fewer than one person out of twenty-five reached 65 years of age; now more than half do. Moreover, few people are truly “old” at 65. Many are vigorous and in the prime of life. Significantly, the majority who reach 65 can expect to live into their eighties and beyond. Thus today’s seniors will live almost a third of their adult lives in retirement, mostly in good health.

Yet it appears many of these, including some only 55 years or younger, even if they have a great deal of time and energy, have little left over for the church. So the age group with the most to offer may, in fact, be less involved than retirees of earlier times. How has this unfortunate state of affairs come about?

## Our View of Work

Our view of work has greatly influenced our view of retirement. Many of us see work as little more than a means to an end. The much-anticipated retirement drops the curtain on work and begins the life of leisure. Many people can hardly wait for their last day of work. Such people do not see work as co-creation with God. Rather, to them it’s a task to be done only as long as absolutely necessary. They don’t see how they might contribute to any community or be accountable to any larger group.

Unfortunately, even church members have developed such attitudes. As Christians we know, in theory, that there is no retirement from the Lord’s service, yet many of us are reluctant to accept ongoing commitments in the church after early retirement. They might interfere with newly acquired freedoms.

Jesus viewed work as a lifelong mission, and his mission was to do the will of his heavenly Father. His

whole life focused on the fulfillment of that mission. Is God’s mandate any different for us?

Whether done in a church setting or within the wider society, by our work we glorify God. Work is not a result of Adam and Eve’s fall. It is not a curse. In it we find fulfillment, learn obedience and acquire eternal values. It is not meant merely for material gain or as a route to self-centred early withdrawal from kingdom tasks.

## Our View of Leisure

The creation account tells us that during six days God created the world, and on the seventh he rested. Resting was incorporated into the creation order. Later, God commanded the human family too to rest every seventh day. When Jesus lived among us, he followed his Father’s example. After a tiring public ministry, he usually withdrew to a place of solitude for relaxation and renewal. Thus the Bible underlines the importance of rest and relaxation as well as of work.

While the biblical mandate to rest involves taking a break from our labours, it does not imply that all work should cease whenever an adequate pension enables us to do so. We may end our regular employment, but that is no reason to end our service in the kingdom. Indeed, Christians are repeatedly exhorted to keep on leading productive lives as members of the body of Christ.

The Bible doesn’t prescribe perpetual rest and leisure, unless they are required because of illness or extreme old age. To be sure, as one gets older, the nature and extent of one’s work usually changes, and for some also the geographical location, but it should not cease unless all ability is taken from us. Let’s remember: even when our physical strength is gone, we can usually still pray, or talk or write a letter.

There is no biblical basis for setting aside all congregational or other kingdom commitments so that we can pursue an unending stream of group tours, golfing, cruises, times at a lake, holidays in the sun, winter or summer skiing, boating, tennis,

painting, reading, television watching, team sports, visiting, fishing, cultural interests or whatever else our senses fancy. All of these activities are worthy at appropriate times, but not in place of Christian service. It’s not, after all, a mark of Christian maturity to bury our talents and dedicate ourselves to a continuing sequence of one day of rest followed by six days of self-indulgent leisure.

Just when people have the most to offer to a church—the situation of many early retirees—shouldn’t be the time to cut themselves loose. What is financially possible and widely practised is not necessarily the right thing to do. The priorities and practices of a predominantly secular society can’t be too readily adopted by Christians in their work, play or retirement. When the pursuit of leisure, rest and recreation undermines Christian discipleship, it needs to be modified.

## Attitudes in the Church

Most retirees and older people want to be useful. They don’t want to suddenly end their congregational involvements. They want to serve. But churches must plan how to utilize this reservoir of time, talents and training. They must learn not to send signals, subtly or perhaps even blatantly, that they expect retirees to retire from kingdom service. Many retirees will. Unfortunately, Christian groups often follow the rest of society in setting people aside when they reach a certain age or retire from their workplace.

Often churches do not consider the energy, giftedness and continuing effectiveness of retirees, let alone their experience and wisdom. This bias, even against rather youthful seniors, and a companion prejudice in favour of youth, plays directly into the hands of those who see retirement as the age of self-indulgent living. Churches who adopt such attitudes are reflecting secular patterns of thought.

**Not only do people live longer today; they are also better educated, more skilled and healthier than the generations before them. They have much to give in retirement.**