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The Rev. P. Kingsley Smith served Trinity Church, Towson, Maryland, from his ordination in 1956 until his retirement in 1995, 13 years as assistant and 27 years as rector. He was also a chaplain in the United States Naval Reserve, and taught courses at Goucher College and Towson University. He wrote *Towson Under God*, a history of the churches in central Baltimore County, and serves as historiographer of the Diocese of Maryland.

About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Welcome to “Old-Old” Age

By the Rev. P. Kingsley Smith

Two physicians at the Johns Hopkins Division of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology made an interesting point in an article on the use of statins for older adults:

The... issue revolves around the age-old question of “who is old.” Clinical guidelines have started considering older adults in three stages — 65 to 74 years, 75 to 84 years, and 85 years and older (as young-old, middle-old and old-old, respectively) — to acknowledge physiological differences, relevant clinical data, and life expectancy issues.¹

Gail Sheehy, the author of *Passages*, describes folks over 65 as “sages,” which is nice, especially for retired clergy.

As parish clergy, we typically work about 60 hours a week. We are always on duty even on “days off” and vacations. Then, when the checks start coming in from The Church Pension Fund, we gladly reformat our lifestyles. With some, this means inertia, but most of us follow the counsel of Dr. Alex Comfort (yes, *The Joy of Sex* author) who wrote in his landmark book, *A Good Age*, “A good retirement lasts a week, two weeks at most; then you get to work.”

After I retired, I was blessed to be called to a series of interim ministries, most of them as priest-in-charge of congregations struggling with change. As do many retired priests in our diocese, I worked half-time for quarter-time pay. I was grateful to be able to share my long experience — and I did not just repeat my old sermons! Generally, I have been blessed with good health, but when I had open heart surgery to replace my aortic valve, I found that returning to the parish I had been serving was part of my recovery.

My most recent interim assignment ended last year when a new rector had settled in. I still get to do some Sunday supply and occasional funerals, although not many baptisms or weddings anymore. But for the first time in 56 years, no one pays for me to attend diocesan conventions or clergy conferences. I guess they can go on without me.

¹ Zieman, Susan J., and Pamela Ouyang, “Statins for Primary Prevention in Older Adults: Who Is High Risk, Who Is Old, and What Denotes Primary Prevention?” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 152, no. 8 (2010): 528-530.

I am still involved in a lot of community and church activities. One is serving as the historiographer of the diocese, researching and writing occasional articles, helping with parish histories, attending the meetings of the National Episcopal Historians and Archivists and helping our bishops and others answer the many “How come?” and “So what?” questions that arise. (I thank God for Mary Klein, our wonderful archivist, who presides over the F. Garner Ranney Archives of the Diocese of Maryland.) And I’m glad to worship at different churches just about every Sunday.

But I am definitely downshifting. From 60 hours a week, I went to 40, and recently to about 25. I spend at least six hours a week in pretty vigorous exercise, at home and at a fitness center. I get lots of sleep (not many 8AM services anymore). I follow a simple low-fat, low-sugar, low-salt, basically vegetarian diet, healthy and tasty, thanks to Breezy, my wife and “live-in chef” of 62 years. We took the plunge recently to adopt a Border Terrier; she takes us for lots of walks and makes me laugh out loud at her antics at least twice a day.

We also are surrounded by a great cloud of family: our “Gang of 21,” counting children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and spouses-in-law. They are scattered over four states but we usually manage to get together en masse twice a year. As of now, none are in hospital or in jail, and they all talk to one another.

So what’s the issue with being old-old? It centers on two questions: Am I all that important anymore? And who cares anyhow?

Answers came from a number of sources. First, there is my extended family. I take comfort in their love and their desire to stay connected with us despite distance and their busy lives. I may not be ‘important’ in the worldly sense but I am still an important part of their lives and for that I am grateful.

Second, there is Breezy, who has enriched my life for more than six decades. The church world may not ‘care’ as much as it used to, but Breezy’s caring and love is more than enough for me. As the poet Robert Browning has Ben Ezra, a wise old rabbi, say:

*Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith “A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!”²*

Third — and perhaps most important — there is my faith. Last year, I was prompted to meet The Bible Challenge to read the whole bible. When I got to Ecclesiastes, I found the Preacher’s vivid description of old age:

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’ (Ecclesiastes 12:1)

I am grateful that despite entering the years of old-old age, I do not feel that “I have no pleasure in them;” in fact, I feel quite the opposite.

Here is how the Preacher wraps it up:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Now *that* gives me something to work on while I progress on my pilgrimage through old-old age.

² “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” in *Dramatis Personae*, 1864.

