



# Parish Health Ministry

## **Growing Older Gracefully**

By Jane Thibault, PhD, Gerontologist

People who grow older in wisdom and grace with continued zest for life share many characteristics whether they are still active or very frail. Fortunately, these characteristics can be learned and practiced. The following attributes of vital, growing older adults are based on the large body of evidence of sound aging research and on my own observations over the past 35 years of work with older adults and their families.

1. People aging gracefully are grateful for having had the opportunity to live life to the full, and they live out each day, knowing that they are loved and forgiven by the Lord.
2. They are more concerned with the well-being of others than they are with the details of their own existence.
3. They are curious. Their curiosity helps them develop interest outside of their own lives.
4. They are generous with their time, energy, money, gifts, and spend some time volunteering.
5. They value people over things and enjoy giving and receiving love in its many forms, although they may struggle sometimes with this.
6. They are forgiving of themselves and other people – children, doctors, and even other drivers!
7. They live in the present and the future rather than the past, although they savor the past for what it has contributed to who they are now and for the people they have known.
8. They are flexible, adaptable, and “go with the flow”.
9. They do not seem to think much about how little time they have left on earth.
10. They are reasonably disciplined in the care of their bodies. They eat well and exercise to the extent that they can do so, but do not obsess about diet, vitamins, or health issues. They seem to transcend their pain and go on with life even in significant pain.
11. They have a sense that their life has meaning – that they have a continuing place in society and are needed by others.
12. They have a good sense of humor which is often directed at their own foibles and failures.
13. They are not depressed or bothered by their appearance and how it has changed or with what they can no longer do.
14. They do not feel entitled to special service because of their age. They do not make unreasonable demands on their children or others just because they are older and “deserving”.
15. They welcome their role as mentors and support persons in their families and communities, rather than as up-front leaders and decision makers.

We can enjoy our aging process but perhaps we need a little redirection. We can ask ourselves, “How many of these characteristics do I have? How many of these qualities or characteristics do I need to work on to enhance my experience of later life?” If there are areas that need a little work, some counseling, a support group, or even reading therapy might help.

*Jane Thibault, PhD is a gerontologist and clinical professor emerita in the Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine as well as the spiritual director at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky. Reprinted from The Church Health Reader.*