

How can your church help people in midlife?

Ch.9 Midlife Spiritual Doldrums

Clearly there are four major things that people in midlife need. The first is to *understand* and work through the discomfort of the transition. The second is to find a '*neutral place*' so they can reflect, unravel their confusions, and hear God afresh. The third is to *explore* their beliefs and theology in this place of change. And the fourth is to identify and take up the *new challenges* that God has for their lives in the season ahead.

1. Help them understand the transition

Many churches these days have developed great ways of helping people in transition. They aim at good youth ministries, they run seminars or groups for those who have been bereaved, or divorced. People are helped as they enter retirement or go through a redundancy. At midlife there is a similar need to be helped to understand and work with the changes that are happening. Some of these changes are very challenging and need a lot of work to progress through them. We have found as we have run seminars, that when people hear the descriptions of what can happen in midlife, a great sense of relief comes to them. "You mean I am normal after all, and not going crazy?" is a very common response. They love hearing from others in discussions, and some read avidly to be well informed. Many shift into a very positive and expectant state of mind once they have grasped why they are feeling disorientated or disconnected. If you can encourage your church to run a seminar every year, or a support group, and if you can have some of the many good books on midlife in your library, you could well avert depression in an individual, or crisis in a marriage, or disillusionment with church causing disruption among you.

Those who are experiencing the doldrums, or a desert or darkness time will need special care. They will be quite unable to flow with the latest thing your church is 'into'. And the last thing they need is to be told to "get more committed", or "not miss what God is doing among us." It is a hard adjustment for others, to accept that previously strong, active, initiating people are now withdrawn, confused and struggling. They will need 'minders', or special prayer partners who have walked this road themselves. I'll talk about this in the next chapter. Always remember the tender, healing heart of Jesus for those who are struggling. He does not "*break a bruised reed*", (Is. 42:3) and we must not either.

2. Help them hear God

Finding a neutral place, the space to reflect, reassess and hear God in fresh ways can be extremely difficult in today's world, and we need to help each other do this. Allowing them a sabbatical time is crucial. The trouble is, we rarely model this in our church life. We focus more on the work to be done than on the way of life to be lived in order that the work can be done well! And we must be aware that there is no set formula for hearing God, for assessing our lives. Some will be helped by quietness, by retreats or time away. Some may need to simply do some fresh, down to earth kind of work that allows the mind and heart to free-wheel as the issues are processed internally. I have a pastor friend who took three years off to work with his hands doing joinery, then returned to his calling with fresh insight and energy. Some may want to do a course of study which will re-set the direction of their lives. Some will need regular therapy or counselling to process unhealthy patterns that need changing. If this time is rushed because we want them to 'get on board again' at church, we will hinder what God is doing in them. Scripture amply demonstrates seasons of neutrality, of letting go, of waiting, of resting. Usually our difficulty in allowing others to do this is because we are afraid they will wander away from the church (and we need what they have to offer and struggle when they step out of responsibilities), or because we are afraid they will wander away from God. (The reality is that some do, but mostly they wander because they become too isolated.) It is possible to keep in touch and be encouraging without pressuring them to get back into the hurley burley that is the average church life!

3. Help them explore midlife theological themes

Charles Sell wrote a very useful book called, "*Transitions through Adult Life*" (Zondervan, 1991.) In the section on middle adults he says they need from their church the following:

Authenticity - "as they grope for meaning and not empty activity."

Freedom - “to grow toward greater dependence on Christ... out of a lessening dependence on others for their faith. They need room to explore in a church that offers respect for choice, questioning, and individual differences.”

Empathy - “Take a midlife person out to lunch... even if you don’t want anything from them.”

Wholism - Midlifers are searching for integration and need “teaching and preaching about the social, political, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realities of life.” Midlife is “an extended teachable moment,” he says. They are ready for a “second look” at the following:

A theology of suffering - many have a lot of questions in the light of their life experiences and all they now know of “evil and suffering in a world ruled by a good God.”

The doctrine of maturity. ‘How come I’m not as mature as I thought I’d be?’ ‘I’ve given up trying to be holy - I seem to be only just hanging on at present.’ They are groping for standards to measure themselves by that will inspire them to go on growing.

The doctrine of grace. ‘I feel a failure in so many ways.’ There is often an acute need to “plunge into the refreshing pool of grace” again.

A theology of society. Many midlifers are turning their focus onto social issues and wanting to be involved in a hurting world. What does the Scripture have to say about this?

A theology of hope. A new awareness of time and its shortness comes at midlife. The midlifer needs a clarity about the future ahead that brings anticipation and not fear. We would add the following areas to explore also:

A theology of mystery. Midlifers may feel less certain about some things, but paradoxically, more secure in a God who is bigger and less definable than they had imagined. Mystery, and saying “I don’t need to know” becomes much more comfortable.

A theology of the desert and the darkness. These are realities that need teaching, interpreting and affirming in some way in church life. We lack authenticity if we avoid them.

A theology of incarnation. This again is about integration. God in all of life. Jesus took human nature and infused every part of it with spiritual life. How do we grow in this?

A theology of diversity in unity. Differences in spiritual practices become less threatening. We are able to honour and draw from other styles of worship and prayer and living. Can your church reflect that?

4. Help them find the new challenge

Some people hear their first call to overseas missions at midlife. Some feel called to a serious involvement in community service, or local government, or politics or a para-church group. I know a gifted musician and worship leader who shifted into chaplaincy. It can be hard for church leaders to release their people into a new role outside of the church, but it is a common direction that God seems to lead people into. Their commitment may well be more ‘kingdom’ than church at this stage. They will bless you if you can encourage and affirm their new place of service rather than weighing them down with ‘how much the church needs them.’

Which of the above ways of helping midlifers resonates with you?