

# Kindling conversations on aging and spirituality

Moses Falco

I have a clear memory of the day my grade eight teacher turned thirty. My group of friends, who had just recently made it past puberty, poked fun at him, calling him “old man” while pointing out his graying hair. Thirty seemed so old to my thirteen-year-old self. I never imagined how fast it would come for me, but in 2020, I too reached the thirty-year milestone.

Only five years before that, I began my pastoring journey at the age of twenty-five. My home church called me from within, knowing that I would still have a lot of growing to do as a solo pastor. They assured me that we would grow together. I was thrown into the deep end, and I was

terrified. My lack of life and ministry experience was a huge obstacle, and so the wealth of experience within our church became one of my greatest assets.

It took no time before I sat in the living rooms of church members, sharing stories about faith and praying together. By the time I started pastoring, I knew most of the people in our church already, but this opened me up to a side


of them that I never knew from Sunday morning interactions. Our most senior members, who are the most reserved when sitting in the pews, are so full of life and hope that I left every visit feeling encouraged.

I still remember one of the first visits I had to do for someone who had been recently diagnosed with cancer. I wasn't sure what to say to a dying man. I went to his bedside, and to my surprise, he took my hand and said, “We need to talk. This is what's happening in my body.” He went on to explain what the doctors told him and then shared his final wishes with me. A true mentor, he took the reins to start a conversation on aging and death. He knew what we both needed and graciously led the way. I am immensely grateful for experiences like this where I am welcomed into the joy-filled and sorrowful moments of people's lives.



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I wish other young people could have the same opportunities to sit beside people who have lived two or three times longer than them and be able to ask what spirituality looks like at different stages of life. Unfortunately, these kinds of conversation spaces are hard to come by in



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our churches. Although I increasingly hear about fostering intergenerational relationships, we tend to gravitate to our own demographics when we want to delve deeper than foyer talk.

What would happen, though, if we simply kindled conversations? What if the older ones in our churches invited the younger ones to ask whatever questions they would like to ask? What if, on a regular basis, people in our churches knew there was a space where they could

be comfortable sharing what their generation is going through because there would be people of other generations who are willing to listen? Yes, it may seem forced, but if our intentions are truly to learn from one another, rather than seeming staged, our conversations might even become a spiritual practice for our community.

There is no better way to test this idea than to try it, which is exactly what I did in December 2021. I wanted to see what would happen if three very different people gathered around a table for tea with targeted questions in hand: What is it like in your stage of life? What are some of the challenges and blessings of this stage? What spiritual practices have been important for you as you age? What words of wisdom would you have for your younger self?

Susan, who is in her mid-nineties, hosted us for this conversation. Although she is limited by mobility issues, she continues to live independently in an apartment close to the church. A widow for over thirty years, Susan values the relationships with her three adopted children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. She has a deep love for the church community and even learned how to use Zoom on her phone so she can stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. She participates in most of our church events, but her years in leadership and committee work are already behind her.

Betty is in her mid-sixties and works as a counselor for a social services agency in Winnipeg. Although she enjoys her work, she is nearing the

time of retirement and looks forward to the opportunities that may open up at that time. She has three adult children together with her husband and is learning what it means to support them in their stages of life, as two of the three are living outside of the family home. Betty has been an integral part of our church leadership for as long as I have been there and continues to be active in many ways.

Lastly was myself, a pastor in my early thirties. With a two-year-old child and another one on the way, my wife and I are at the beginning of the building phase of life. Our schedules are packed from morning until night with work, church, and family obligations. Although life sometimes seems unstable and unpredictable, we have settled in with a great community of caring people who we want to journey with long term. We are thankful for the chaotic stage of life that fills our house with both mess and the sounds of joy.

With warm mugs, plates full of treats, and an audio recorder rolling, Susan, Betty, and I began the conversation. We started by sharing about our families and how life has been going lately. We immediately realized that we have many things in common. Although our work and recreational activities look different, life is always busy. Betty shared her concern that she might become bored in retirement, but Susan assured her that she herself never is.

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We noticed other similarities as well that crossed over generational lines. We all share a common faith in a God who created all things, loves the world, and calls us into relationship and community. We all believe that God has been

present with us in life until this point and that God would continue to be with us regardless of how life changes. We also shared concerns about the state of our world and what the future will look like.

The main part of our conversation focused on spiritual practices in our varied stages of life. We raised the questions of what has changed over the years and what spiritual practices have become most important. We talked about prayer, Bible reading, singing, going to church, stillness, meditation, and more. What follows is a snippet of our conversation, focusing specifically on the practice of prayer.

**Susan:** Right now, I am more thankful in my stage of life than I've ever been before, because I have so much to be thankful for. I have learned to know the Savior, and he walks with me every day. Sometimes, yes, I do get tired, because I'm ninety-five years old. So then I sit down, and I read, and some of the books are so exciting. Especially the one I'm reading now from Peter Dyck, describing his life. And then I felt, I haven't done enough for the Lord.

**Betty:** I absolutely feel that way too. Oh my goodness, I'm retiring. Am I bailing? Is retiring just taking care of me? What about the families I work with? Not that somebody else isn't going to look after them or take my place, but why am I retiring when there's so much need? I definitely feel that my work was a calling from God, and it's going to be done, and what does that mean about his calling on my life? I am looking and praying: What are you calling me to next? As I retire, how can I still be a servant?

**Susan:** When I wake up in the morning, I talk to the Lord and say, "Help me to be kind and loving to these workers that come here and also to the neighbors through the day." And God has been so good to me. He has helped me. I have wonderful workers from Home Care. There are some Christians, but they're not all Christians. But they are all wonderful.

**Betty:** It seems like you're saying that God continues to provide a ministry for you even if you are more in your own apartment during the day. He sends people to you that you can minister to.

**Susan:** Yes.

**Betty:** I guess it's about trusting God to continue to use me.

**Moses:** I'm trying to think about my prayer, and most often I'm praying things like, "Help me. Just help me get through this. Give me the strength, wisdom, and guidance for whatever it is that life throws at us at that time." At this stage of life, there's just so much unknown. Who knows what could happen or where it could go? There are so many stories of people and families where a spouse passes away or loses a job or they have

to move. Anything could happen at any time. And if there are times that are too stressful, then that's usually what I'm praying for: "God, please help me."

**Susan:** *Even when you pray and sometimes things come into your mind, I often have to say, "Satan, get away from me, I'm talking to the Lord." Often that happens, and you have to really pray that he will not interfere in our Christian lives.*

**Betty:** *Yeah, you talk about spiritual struggles, spiritual warfare. I've been aware of that as well. I think, perhaps, that's one thing I've gotten better at in prayer is the spiritual warfare, calling on the strength, presence, and power of God to remove or manage those things that I think are ungodly or spiritual attacks from Satan. That's probably something that's gotten better.*

**Moses:** *I think for me it's often difficult to be disciplined about spiritual practices because life seems so busy. I always feel like I should be doing more. I should be reading my Bible more, praying more, all these things. Those things are very important for me, but there doesn't seem to be a rhythm. It's sporadic. Sometimes things get in the way.*


**Susan:** *No matter how old you get though, I read this one book that said that when you get older, Satan tries to get you more and more because he'll lose you because you're older.*

**Moses:** *So you're saying those struggles, temptations don't stop?*

**Susan:** *No. They don't stop. You have to really trust in the Lord and say, "God, just help me through this. Help me to overcome." Satan will try till the end of your life. But so far I'm thankful. I'm thankful for the Lord, how much he has done for me.*

**Betty:** *It sounds like being thankful is a spiritual practice that you exercise a lot, and I hear a lot from you. I think no matter how old you get or what age you're at, or how much time you spend in prayer, Bible reading, or devotions, there's a sense that it'll always feel like it's not enough because there's a true longing in us to be with God all the time.*

Our conversation lasted for about an hour, and I left feeling encouraged and supported. Two people, who have lived much more life than I have,



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share some of the same struggles when it comes to our desire to live out our faith. I appreciated their wisdom, care, and vulnerability. I felt thankful to share in their stories through our time together. This kind of sharing, however, does not happen in our church foyer, or even in our Adult Sunday School sessions. I am one of the few people who has the privilege of hearing about people's spiritual

journeys in depth because of my role. Most young people grow up not knowing what questions they can ask, to whom, and in what setting.

If there is one thing I have learned from my few years of pastoral ministry, as well as the visit with Susan and Betty, it is that we need to have more intergenerational conversations. We need to create spaces within our churches where people feel free to ask these questions in an attempt to support each other as we age. Even if it seems forced or staged, one can never be sure how great of an impact a simple conversation can have in someone's own journey of faith. There is too much wisdom and shared experience in our communities that goes unshared when we do not try. My hope is that our kindled conversations will help us to live well, age well, and in the Lord's timing, die well.

### **About the author**

Moses Falco lives in Treaty 1 territory with his family. He pastors at Sterling Mennonite Fellowship in Winnipeg, Manitoba, blogs regularly at [mosesfalco.com](http://mosesfalco.com), and co-hosts a podcast at [themennocast.com](http://themennocast.com).