

Flourishing Faith in Later Life

Leader's guide

Presbyterian
CHURCH IN IRELAND

Welcome to

Flourishing Faith in Later Life

Flourishing Faith in Later Life offers six sessions designed to facilitate warm, guided discussions among older believers, especially those navigating the changes of later life while embracing the opportunity for spiritual growth and renewed purpose.

This leader's guide equips you to host hope-filled gatherings where participants reflect deeply, share honestly, and discover afresh what it means to live fruitfully for God in a variety of circumstances common to later life.

Whether you're leading in a home group, church fellowship or care-home setting, these sessions will help you to bring the hope and purpose promised in the Bible and help participants to have a flourishing faith in later life.

About this resource

This set of discussions is primarily aimed at relatively small discussion groups of retired people who have an ongoing connection with a local church.

We assume that these will probably be Christian people, but we are aware that there may be, in any group, one or more people who are at home in the church family but have not yet committed their lives to Jesus.

Timing and patterns

On the basis that small groups tend to meet for around two hours, we suggest that along with providing simple hospitality and giving opportunities to share 'homework', the content of the sessions is around 60 to 90 minutes long.

Please feel free to adapt the timings and the patterns so that they fit with your context. The sessions contain ample material, and depending on the group, there may be more material than you can work through. There is no pressure to complete every section, and the design is such that people can continue exploring each theme at home if they would like to.

Planning and preparation

The material you are reading is only provided to leaders. Participants will not have it in front of them.

Group leaders should look through the questions beforehand, taking time to think of some responses to each question so that they can 'prime the pump' if there are no timely responses from the group. This would be particularly important for leaders of new groups and for groups where people may be slower to share personal issues.

Most of the questions have at least some straightforward answers - there are no 'trick' questions, but we've given a few pointers for some where we feel this may be helpful. Some questions are invitations to a more intimate level of sharing. If group members find this too demanding, group leaders could suggest some answers that the question might prompt in participant's minds, then move on, without further delay.

Any background reading that can be done on the various biblical texts would be worthwhile. For some of the sessions there are also practical things to be done by the leader before the meeting.

Prayer

If you're planning to lead a group in this study, begin to pray and invite God to give you wisdom and understanding, to prepare your heart to share his truths and minister his love. If you know who the group members will be, start praying for them too.

Pray for the group before and after every session.

Leading God's people towards a flourishing faith and sharing Jesus with others is of tremendous spiritual significance, which may not go unchallenged. We recommend you invite others who are not part of the group to pray for you throughout the series.

Sensitivities

In order for people to share openly, it's important that everyone knows that things that are shared in the room will not be shared with others. It's worth regularly being explicit about this with the group and being mindful yourself not to inadvertently breach confidentiality when sharing prayer updates etc with others.

If something that is shared raises safeguarding concerns, please follow your church's safeguarding policy.

Be sensitive to some of the potentially emotional issues raised in the series. These might be very challenging for some. If you don't know already, take some advice from your church leader about how to support someone in this situation.

Expect a wide range of experiences in your group. Ages may span thirty years or more; some will enjoy robust health while others are frailer; a few may find reading difficult due to eyesight changes.

Life stories will vary greatly and can occasionally lead to misunderstandings and strongly held views – including political convictions – which may create tension. Lead gently, keep conversations gracious, and make simple adjustments as needed.

Remember that Christian fellowship has always flourished in diverse settings, and the Holy Spirit delights to give a joyful unity even when we differ.

Content

There are six sessions, each covering a different theme in the Flourishing Faith in later life series:

1. **My identity in Christ:** Who am I now?
2. **Prayer and devotion:** How can I know Jesus more deeply?
3. **Dealing with disillusionment:** Staying the course through loss and change
4. **Strength for the journey:** The hope of heaven
5. **Lifelong purpose:** Joining in with God's mission in later life
6. **A legacy of faith:** Sharing our faith with others

Session sections

Each session follows the same pattern:

Core

Each core section starts with an introduction to the theme and an opening prayer. A suggested prayer has been provided for those who find that helpful, but feel free to pray using your own words if you prefer. *Approximately 5 minutes.*

Experiencing it in my life

We move on to an aspect of the life of a typical older person and think about this for a while. *Approximately 10 minutes*.

Exploring what the Bible says

We then turn to Scripture to listen for what God says in situations like this. *Approximately 25 minutes*.

Expressing what we've been thinking about

We look for an activity or discussion together that will provoke some thinking about how we might put into practice what we have been thinking about. *Approximately 20 minutes.*

A **closing prayer** is included for those who value this. Group members will have the opening and closing prayers in their material, so you may like to invite different members to lead the group through these.

More if there's time

This section gives some more things to think about together, if time allows, before the closing prayer. You need not use this material at all, but, if the discussion dries up too early, there's more to look at, or if the group wants to spend longer together, there's more to keep them engaged.

Explore at home

It is not intended that the group looks at the material in this section together. All sessions are open ended, in the hope that participants will take each topic a bit further after the session finishes either on their own or over coffee with others.

This section gives some suggestions for exploring topics that may well take people into new aspects of thought and discipleship. It is suggested people consider keeping a journal – this can be a simple notebook, where participants jot down reflections both during the sessions and for any *Explore at home* work. You will need to decide whether or not you'd like people to share weekly highlights from anything completed at home, or not.

From session one the series also offers an opportunity to produce a handbook of encouragement for people in later life. You might like to invite a group member to keep track of these encouragements with the end goal of printing something. This is simply a suggestion, see how it fits in with your particular group.

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Session 1: My identity in Christ:
Who am I now?

Aim

To help older people to know, at a deeper level, how much they are loved by God and that knowing this will affirm them in their identity.

Preparation

- Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Luke 15:11–32; pray for each participant by name.
- Bring sticky notes, marker pens, magazines, scissors, glue (for optional collage - see below).
- Optional: Lyrics for 'Loved with everlasting love' (large print).

Pastoral notes

- This theme can touch grief. Keep the pace gentle and positive.
- Be prepared to reframe shame/self-loss kindly: Identity is received in Christ, not achieved by roles.

Experiencing it in my life

You could either explore this section as a conversation, or make it more visual:

- Two to three sticky notes each: Write identity words they commonly use (e.g., teacher, carer, widower, grandad).
- Place under headings Changing/Unchanging.
- Briefly discuss: What has shifted with time? Bridge to Scripture.

Exploring what the Bible says

A few prompts to help you if needed:

- Younger son's "Who am I?" before leaving/feeding pigs/embraced.
- Older brother's "Who am I?" working/hearing music/after father's words.
- What do the father's actions say about our identity? (Saw, ran, embraced, clothed, celebrated, pleaded.)

Expressing what we've been thinking about

This could include evidence in Scripture of God's love for us (e.g. John 3:16), as well as personal testimony, God's blessings to us in nature and at home.

If time and creativity permit, you could extend this to include making a collage of words cut out from magazines either individually or as a group to affirm these truths, with the title 'My God and Father loves me so very, very much'.

More if there's time

How to write a new hymn verse (quick guide)

Form: Eight lines, seven beats per line. Rhyme scheme: 1&3, 2&4, 5&7, 6&8.

1. Start with your theme (e.g., responding to God's love).
2. Draft lines 1–2. Example:

   I am loved, so I will love
   All who live along my street
3. Build lines 3–4 by finding natural rhymes for the final words of lines 1–2:

   By the Spirit sent from above
   Those I'm given grace to meet
4. Refine the quatrain (sense first, rhyme second). It's okay if it's not "great poetry" clarity matters and can spark a thoughtful second half.
5. Write lines 5–8 using the same approach (5&7 rhyme; 6&8 rhyme).

   Example:
   For the neighbour hard to love,
   And the friend I often greet;
   Teach my heart the way of love,
   On the doorstep, in the street.
6. Polish: Read aloud to check seven beats, smooth phrasing and theological clarity.
7. Multiply the idea: Once you've drafted a few verses, you could offer to guide your youth fellowship through the same process so as to hear the perspective of a different generation – then sing the hymn with your new verses the following Sunday.

Session 2: Prayer and Devotion:
How can I know Jesus more deeply?

Aim

To enable people to deepen their devotional life, so that their intimacy with the Lord will continue to increase.

Preparation

- Read Mark 6:31; Luke 5:16; Mark 1:35; Luke 22:39–46; (optional) John 17; pray for each participant by name.
- Bring Bibles, large-print verses, sticky notes, pens; optional journals/timer.
- It would be worthwhile looking up the devotional practices and methods you're not familiar with in case you are asked about them in the group.

Pastoral notes

- Loss of routine, health changes or caring responsibilities can make devotion harder. Be gentle and practical.
- Emphasise grace over guilt: Jesus invites us to come and rest, not to perform.

Experiencing it in my life

- Helpful regular practices and spiritual disciplines are likely to include fasting, prayer, tithing, serving, thanksgiving, sung worship, and studying and memorising Scripture.
- If people find it difficult to talk about their devotional lives, here are some suggested prompts:
  - Would you say that you have a regular devotional life?
  - How have your quiet times alone with Jesus developed through the years?
  - How is your daily time with God today different from earlier years?
  - What do you find most difficult about spending time alone with Jesus?
  - What do you find most beneficial or enjoyable about these quiet times?

Exploring what the Bible says

Within this section group members are invited to consider what Jesus prays about in Gethsemane. Here are some prompts for you:

- "Father, remove this cup… yet not my will but yours be done." (Desire for relief plus full submission.)
- Strength to obey in weakness ("anguish," "being in agony").
- Help against temptation (for himself and the disciples).
- Perseverance through the hour to come (angel strengthens him).

Expressing what we've been thinking about

It may be helpful for you to have the below descriptions to hand:

Examen

A way of taking time, often at the end of the day, used in certain Christian traditions. It involves reflecting on the day – being aware of God's presence, giving thanks for what's gone well, saying sorry, and committing to starting again tomorrow with God's help. There are links in the resources section at the end of this guide.

Christian art

An image of Christ, a gospel scene or a simple symbol. Different Christian traditions will have a variety of views on the use of visual imagery of this kind. This is easy to find online or at your local library. Look at the pictures carefully and see what thoughts or prayers they inspire or what connections with the Bible come to mind.

Poetry and journalling

Writing about what you have read in Scripture and about your life in general can slow your thinking and help to bring the Bible and daily life together. Turning some reflections and prayers into prose can be a beautiful way to be creative.

Solitude

A simple practice of stepping away from noise and company to be with God in the quiet or out in nature – unhurried, attentive and at rest. Choose a quiet spot and a short time, leave the phone elsewhere, breathe a prayer, sit with a verse, listen, and finish with thanks.

Developing a 'Rule of Life'

Developing a 'Rule of Life' used in certain Christian traditions means looking at all aspects of our lives (spiritual, physical, relational etc) and making a commitment to doing one helpful thing every day, one every week, one every month, one every season and one every year. Pin it up on the wall but be ready to take it down from time to time to rewrite it in order to make it easier to follow. Example follows. See resources at the end of this guide for link.

Developing a personal prayer diary

A blank daily prayer diary relates to the *Explore at home* section of the session. It can be photocopied, back to back, on an A4 sheet of paper.

Examples for developing a 'Rule of Life'

My...	Time	Trust	Temple	Temple	Temple	Treasure	Talent
	Spiritual life	*Relationships*	*Health of body*	*Health of mind*	*Emotional health*	*Money/ possessions*	*Work/ calling*
Daily/ regularly	Have my daily devotional time	Talk with my spouse about something other than practicalities	Walk 5,000 steps	Do a Wordle, crossword or something similar	Find something to really smile about	Look at one of my possessions every day and allow it to prompt me to pray	Pray for some aspect of the work that I used to do
Weekly	Go to church	Talk with each of my children (for family living overseas)	Swim	Watch a new tv documentary	Check that I'm getting to bed early enough	Give my offering to my church	Talk to a non-Christian about Jesus
Monthly	Read a Christian book	Have a coffee, meal, walk... with at least three friends	Find something new and healthy to eat	Read a non-fiction book	Find something to celebrate	Donate to a charity (why not set up a regular bank payment)	Babysit for someone to allow them a night out
Seasonally/ Quarterly	Spend a quiet afternoon at a place with a long Christian heritage	Arrange a day trip with my friends or family	Visit the dentist for a check-up twice a year	Visit a museum, art gallery or similar place	Replace an uplifting quotation on my fridge with a new one	When I buy new clothes give at least the same amount of old clothes to a charity shop	Write something encouraging to someone in full-time mission.
Annually	Visit a new place with a long Christian heritage	Celebrate my (or someone else's) birthday with friends or family	Visit the GP for a check-up	Explore U3A or something similar	Have a holiday	Talk over my finances with someone I've known for some time and can trust	Volunteer to help at a youth camp or event

Examples for developing a 'Rule of Life'

My...	Time	Trust	Temple	Temple	Temple	Treasure	Talent
	Spiritual life	*Relationships*	*Health of body*	*Health of mind*	*Emotional health*	*Money/ possessions*	*Work/ calling*
Daily/ regularly							
Weekly							
Monthly							
Seasonally/ Quarterly							
Annually							

Personal prayer diary

Sunday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thank you, Lord for...

Monday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thank you, Lord for...

Tuesday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thank you, Lord for...

Wednesday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thank you, Lord for...

Personal prayer diary

Thursday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thank you, Lord for...

Friday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thanky ou, Lord for...

Saturday

Worship God for one aspect of who he is

Family member

Friend

Church

Neighbour

Nation

World

Something about myself

Thank you, Lord for...

Every day

Special daily prayers for special people, immediate needs, urgent situations and so on...

Session 3: Dealing with disillusionment:

Staying the course through loss and change

Aim

To help older people process loss and change in a Christ-centred way - bringing disillusionment to Jesus, receiving mercy and grace, and renewing hope to keep going.

Preparation

- Read: Hebrews 4:15–16; Mark 5:24–34; Luke 1:28; John 19:25–27
- Pray for participants by name.

Pastoral notes

- This session may surface difficult emotions.
- Let discussion of responses (and shared experiences/advice) unfold but keep the tone gentle and gracious. It's a good moment to gently explore forgiveness.

Experiencing it in my life

- Consider how to begin, "When I was younger, I hoped… / Today, I feel…"
- Gentle reframes: Name common responses (bitterness, unforgiveness, apathy), then invite healthier ones (lament, forgiveness, asking for help, small steps of service).
- End this section on a hopeful note.

Exploring what the Bible says

How do you think the woman's life would have been different after that day?

- Welcomed back into community, reunited with friends and family members, feeling well, dignity restored, improved economic status, a follower of Jesus.

What does Jesus say to us if we are not healed?

- "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- "I am with you always." (Matthew 28:20)

How can we remain steadfast in prayer and hope if health declines?

- Pray the psalms when words are hard
- Hold on to single promise each week
- Ask others to pray with/for you
- Remember your future hope in eternity

How can we apply this to other unfulfilled expectations?

- Name the loss before God; lament honestly, then entrust it to him.
- Ask, "What door might open now?"

- Practise forgiveness where disappointment involves people.
- Practise gratitude.

Expressing what we've been thinking about

It can be helpful after such deep reflection, to turn our attention towards others and consider how our experiences and what we're learning could one day help others.

Session 4: Strength for the journey:
The hope of heaven

Aim

To strengthen hope in Christ as we face ageing, dying, and what lies beyond - resting in Jesus' promise of presence, resurrection and a prepared home.

Preparation

- Read: John 14:1–3; Romans 5:1–5; Philippians 1:20–27; Revelation 21:1–7; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, 54–55; Job 1:21.
- Pray for each group member.
- To make a jar of hope together bring small cards or slips of paper and a clean empty jam jar.

Pastoral notes

- This theme can be challenging. Expect strong emotions.
- Let people know the subject in advance so that they are prepared.
- Be aware that some people have never talked about their own death.
- Be ready to hold mystery and certainty in tension. Scripture offers pictures of heaven, not full blueprints. Keep returning to what we do know: God with us; no pain or sorrow; joy and peace forever; clearer understanding in his presence.
- Big topics. Assisted dying is substantial; if the subject arises, you may want to consult the leadership of your church about the value of a dedicated session. Helpful resource: *www.presbyterianireland.org/livinganddyingwell*

Experiencing it in my life

- Consider your own feelings about this subject prayerfully.
- Be ready to share a few reasons why people don't want to leave this earth – desire to be at special family events in the future, concern about leaving a spouse alone, fear of dying itself.

Exploring what the Bible says

- Hope begins with being put right with God through Jesus.
- Nothing is wasted - even our suffering has an important role to play.
- We have a two-fold Christian hope. Future: with God in redeemed, perfected life with Jesus. Present: by Christ's resurrection power, we can face whatever comes.

Expressing what we've been thinking about

This section opens a discussion on which of God's promises in Scripture people are most looking forward to claiming when the time comes and what else they may be hoping for:

- Revelation 21:1–7 is packed with rich promises of heaven - hopefully the group will be able to draw some out.
- It's good to acknowledge people also look forward to being free of the challenges of this world and seeing loved ones who have already gone to glory.

Consider what to do with your jar of hope at the end of the session – gift it to a group member – or bring it back next week and keep adding words of hope together.

Session 5: Lifelong purpose:
Joining in with God's mission in later life

Aim

We hope that this session will enable people to see that they still have a vital role to play in their family, church and community. Some might identify and take up that role for the first time.

Preparation

- Read: Psalm 92:14, Matthew 28:19–20, Philippians 1:20–26.
- Pray for each group member.
- Decide whether you'll make a collage or a word cloud (see resources at the end of this guide) and prepare accordingly.
- It may be helpful to come to this session with knowledge about serving opportunities in your church at this time.

Pastoral notes

Be prepared to lead the conversation positively with a focus on next steps.

- Ageism in society and in the church has not gone unnoticed by older people – this subject could bring up negativity about the church and different situations when people have felt prematurely excluded or demoted from serving.
- Meanwhile some may say that their time is done or that because they can't do what they used to do, there's nothing for them. Neither is true – God has called us into his mission for life, and he has made us to adapt.

Experiencing it in my life

Here's a list of some things that may be more common among older people than among young people. Often these are learned by experience:

Experience of life in general; understanding of the nature of work; understanding family and parenthood; coping with disappointment; a sense of 'history' i.e. being part of a longer story; wisdom gained through a lifetime of trial and error; a set of values that may challenge young people's values; understanding money; understanding friendship; resilience; knowing what it feels like to be out of my depth (e.g. with technology, popular music etc.).

Exploring what the Bible says

- The Apostle Paul had gained significant experience and understanding about life and faith over the years – these could be helpful to others.
- Paul could help the Philippian Christians progress in their faith by passing on to them what he had learned about being a follower of Jesus – through teaching, mentoring and by example.

- Paul could help the Philippian Christians be more joyful by modelling contentment in plenty or lack, celebrating generosity, and sending encouragers like Timothy and Epaphroditus - turning hardship into shared joy.
- Paul embodied the gospel he preached - his lived witness proved that knowing Christ is better than comfort, security or status – compelling reasons to glory in being a Christian.

Expressing what we've been thinking about

Many older people continue to use their gifts across the whole-life ministry of the church, including toddler groups, Sunday schools, youth ministries, seniors work, welcome and hospitality, giving, preaching and leading services, governance, worship groups, midweek and one-off events, care home services and more.

Those who are no longer able to leave the house are often seen joining in with God's disciple making mission through: prayer, telephone befriending, mentoring and encouraging, and sharing the good news with family members and care givers.

Be prepared to help people consider how their spiritual gifts might be a good match with the needs of the church.

Session 6: Legacy of life:
Sharing our faith with others

Aim

We hope that this session will enable people to be more confident about sharing their faith verbally in their everyday lives and to see the importance of how they love and live as a witness that backs up their words.

Preparation

- Read: 1 Peter 3:15, Romans 10:14-15, John 4:1–42.
- Pray for the group.
- Have a look at the Engel Scale - a model developed to represent the process of a person moving towards Christian faith and maturity. (See link in the resources section.)

Pastoral notes

- Some people may distance themselves from the need to share the good news on account of 'other' spiritual gifts. However, while only some may have the spiritual gift of evangelism, all Christians are called to share the message through their lives and words.
- Be prepared to encourage anyone who feels their previous attempts to witness didn't work out. We don't know what God did through that conversation in them or in us!
- If your group was brought together for this series, consider how you will finish? Will there be an opportunity to stay in touch and encourage each other? Might there be a follow up social event in a week or two? Could this be the basis of starting a regular daytime Bible study for older people?

Experiencing it in my life

There is a link to the Engel Scale in the resources section at the end. It gives some examples of the steps people have taken towards Christ. If people struggle to recall what made them take their first step of faith you could consider this model and explore whether people's faith journey was along a similar pattern or not.

Exploring what the Bible says

What we have in John 4 is a summary of a longer conversation. It might be interesting to imagine what else Jesus and the Samaritan woman might have talked about, especially in light of her comment that 'he told me everything that I have ever done' (v.29).

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman included:

- Starting a conversation in a very ordinary situation
- Making some thought-provoking comments
- Accepting questions
- Saying some very clear things about himself ie the Gospel

Expressing what we've been thinking about

This is an opportunity to talk about how even the simple comments we make can have an impact on the faith journey of others. Many of us sow seeds of faith habitually without even realising it, using expressions such as 'bless you, that's so kind of you'. What else might we say to naturally point to our faith in Jesus?

You could extend this conversation to consider how acts of kindness play an important part in our witness.

As this is the last session, encourage participants to share the particular encouragements they have received throughout the six sessions.

Further resources

There is a whole host of resources on the Faith in Later Life website: *faithinlaterlife.org*