

Dreaded 'd-' words: Vocabulary of aging

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

In 1974 the University of Chicago Press informed me that it had received a manuscript on the rise of the Celtic church. I was editing *Church History* at the time and had a log of the church historians, so the press asked me to recommend referees who might do a critical reading of the manuscript and advise whether or not to accept it. I called back and told them that Professor So-and-So was good, but quite specialized. Dr. Also-and-Also was also expert, but had a narrower scope than the manuscript covered.

Finally, I said that there was only one North American of whom I was aware who combined special and general knowledge, who was a specialist with scope. "But he's way too old to be asked to appraise the manuscript," I added. Who was he? John T. McNeill. The press person replied, "We have an interesting problem here; you see, Dr. McNeill wrote the manuscript." He was 89 when the book came out.

Sensitive to the terms of living in one's eighth and ninth decade—I will reach 75 and thus be near mid-point of the eighth decade as of February—I've paid attention to those who want us to watch our language in respect to the aged. I recall a time before 1969 when my predecessor in what was then called "literary editorship" at this magazine, Winfred Garrison, came to the office. He was 93 at the time, and still teaching.

On the way he had stumbled on the "el" steps, so the staff did some Band-Aid work on his knuckles while he mused about words he did not like. He objected to the phrase, "Dr. Garrison, you are so well preserved!" by protesting, "I'm not a pickle!" To "Dr. Garrison, you surely are spry," he replied, "Spry is a word used only in fairy tales. I'm real."

All this came to mind as I read Abigail Trafford in the *Washington Post* reporting on a conference sponsored by Civic Ventures. It recommended some terminological changes in words often used in connection with those in the later stages of life.

First, retire “retirement.” One-third of America’s “retired” are doing full-time work, many of them because of dot.com and 9/11 and crooked CEO depletions of their “retirement” funds. Replacements for “retirement”? We pastors and professors, among other professionals, have it easy: we become “emeritus.” But theologically we struggle with that word if we are in the grace-not-merit camp.

Second, volunteer to give up “volunteer.” According to the Civic Ventures conference, the word connotes amateurism and lack of seriousness. It prefers “work” as in “paid work, unpaid work, incentive work, flexible work.” But that can be a bit grim to those of us in the faith-not-works tribe, and misses the element of leisure and play that Christians are to honor. Find another alternative.

“Modify associations with the word ‘old,’” the conference advises. It finds “old” connected with too many “d-” words, as in “declining, decrepit, disabled,” and points to the younger generation’s “d-” word about aging: “denial.” Here the problem has to do not with the word itself, but with some of its connotations. We do cherish old friends, old wines, old collectibles.

The church may have some cleaning up to do, too. Think of the role of the word “elder” in biblical, Presbyterian and other Christian usage. Writing on church administration, the late Tom Campbell dealt with the word years ago. Every pastor and lay progressive, he said, complains about the elders, claiming they put the brakes on creativity, are suspicious, don’t want to try too many new things. His solution? Keep the term “elders” but elect and appoint only “youngers” to be such. Meanwhile, appoint the people in the Morgan, Franklin, McNeill and Garrison age groups to head “committees on innovation.” And get ready for surprises.