



# If I've Told You Once . . .

By Charlotte Johnstone

Forbearance's Christian education committee thought it a splendid idea when Geneva Rademacher, the director of religious education, proposed that the older members of the church be asked to compile a handbook of wisdom, so to speak, for the edification of Forbearance's young people. "It seems to me," Geneva told the committee, "that the start of this new century would be a perfect time to record the wisdom accumulated by our elders during the last century. Rules for life, perhaps, or things they wish someone had told them when they were young. I don't know what the response might be, but we can try it out and see what comes of it."

And so they did—with notices in the church newsletter and Sunday bulletins that on a designated date "all members of Forbearance Church over the age of 65 are invited to participate in a project called 'Bridging the Gap: Wisdom for the New Century.' (Alternative title: *If I've Told You Once, I've Told You a Thousand Times . . .*) Come and help us with a handbook for living!"

Well, about 40 people showed up—some because Geneva buttonholed them and they couldn't refuse, and some because they were just plain curious. Of course, some weren't there because they refused to admit they were over 65—like Mabel Hitchcock, who has been in a holding pattern at 59 for almost 20 years. Most of the group were long-time members of Forbearance and had known each other since women wore hats to church.

Anyway, after Geneva thanked them all for coming, she explained that the educational project they were about to

undertake would be an invaluable contribution to the church's young people. "You have, collectively, hundreds of years of experience, and that translates to hundreds of lessons learned in the course of your lifetimes. What a wonderful thing it will be to distill those insights into a small book of wisdom that will be a beautiful legacy to the children and grandchildren of Forbearance Church."

Now, while Geneva didn't tell them that their contributions had to be strictly religious, she did expect the tone of their bits of wisdom to be somewhat elevated—modern proverbs, perhaps, to inspire and uplift. Geneva, if truth be told, suffered from that occasional malady of the professionally religious—an assumption that virtually everyone spent at least some time pondering the great questions of the universe. And, like many people in their twenties, she somehow assumed that people in their seventies and eighties were so close to eternity that their thoughts were bound to be slightly supernal.

Well, she was about to learn that few people are as plainly practical as that segment of the population who have lived long enough to value pragmatism over idealism. Long enough to prefer what works over what might have been. The group seated before Geneva had worked hard, celebrated achievements and suffered disappointments. They had loved with joy, and they were acquainted with the long shadow of grief. They had lived through profound changes in the culture and themselves, and the easy assumptions of youth—health, ambition, time—had been replaced by a literal "coming of age" when past

dreams and present realities must find a way to fall into step together for the path still ahead.

They were old enough to be suspicious of easy answers to life's big questions, and they no longer felt driven to master all of life's uncertainties. And yet, they had done a more difficult thing—they had mastered themselves, which is, you have to admit, more than most of us can claim at the moment. They were, in short, a group of sensible men and women with a seasoned knowledge of how to proceed through life without inflicting needless damage on themselves and others.

"What we should be looking for here," Geneva told them, "are things you have learned that would be useful for younger people to know."

"You mean like survival tips for people who should have listened when we told them the first time?" asked Earl Ralston, which prompted Jake Moran, a retired plumber, to complain that the only legacy he was leaving to his children was what he had already given them—his sanity, most of his money and all of his youth.

"Oh, quit your grouching, Jake," said Miss Lily, a Forbearance institution of formidable stature, "I've never known you to hold back in the advice department, and this is an opportunity to put into writing some of what you like to call horse sense."

And, with that, they were off—slowly at first and then, with gathering enthusiasm for their task, they put into words the byproducts of their own successes and mistakes. In matters great and small, they began to have their say . . .

If you are lavishly praised, enjoy the taste, but don't swallow it whole.

When someone tells you that what he's about to say is "for your own good," expect the worst.

Don't sweat your mistakes or faux pas. They make up for all the things you got away with that nobody knows about.

When you are less sure of yourself, trust God more. Better yet, learn to trust God no matter how you feel.

If you wouldn't want to see it in a headline, don't do it.

If someone says, "I know what I mean, but I just can't say it," he doesn't know what he means.

Beware of a preacher who refers to his congregation as "MY people"—he may have himself confused with God.

If you want to hide candy bars from your children or grandchildren, put them in the freezer in a paper bag labeled "Fish."

It's a proven fact that zipping up a small child's snowsuit causes her to wet her pants. There is no known cure for this, which is why God invented sighing.

The only receipt you don't save is the only one you'll need later, which is why God invented teeth to gnash.

Avoid eating in diners hung with fly strips.

Do not marry someone who thinks it funny to flush the toilet when you're taking a shower.

When you get old, deny that you have a hearing problem or that you can't see properly. Your children will get so exasperated that they'll buy you the necessary "appliances," and you'll save a lot of money.

After a certain age, if you say something outrageous, everyone will think it's cute. Take advantage of this.

When your children finally leave home, buy a small car so you won't be expected to haul all the stuff they left behind in your attic and basement—the stuff that has caused your home to settle somewhat over the years.

When you get older, skip the Health section of the newspaper. It has been reliably determined that everything you ever ate or did is bad for you—so how come you're not dead already?

Don't waste time trying to be your own best friend. You can't pat yourself on the back and it's unsatisfying to cry on your own shoulder. Get a real friend instead.

Learn early to be kind and practice it with abandon.

Talk less and ask questions more. Laugh a lot.

Stay on speaking terms with God. You don't want God asking to see your name tag when you die.

And . . . well, the group found they had so much to say that they agreed to continue for several more weeks. Geneva is hopeful that the book will be finished soon, but Earl says the group is just getting warmed up. So, if you want a copy, you'll have to practice patience, which is, as Miss Lily expounded to the group last week, an irritating virtue that is both underused and overrated. In fact, she said . . . oh, never mind . . . Geneva tells me it's in the book.

Charlotte Johnstone is a member of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She wrote many "Dispatches from Forbearance Presbyterian Church" for *Horizons*, the magazine for Presbyterian Women.