

HAVE YOU MET YOUR THIRD THIRTY YET?

By Chris Pomfret

Isn't it funny how our lives are full of numbered "phases"? We have the "Terrible Two's", when we start to express ourselves as petulant toddlers. Then, before we know it, we have the "Freshman 15" when 19 year olds in college are warned that they will typically gain 15 pounds in their first year. Then, we start to get more fearful as we hit 40 and phrases such as "Over the Hill" bombard us. Finally, we have the more recent phrase that "60 is the new 40", a testament that we are living longer and hopefully staying "younger" for our age compared with years past.

During the last decade, as I watched my parents live longer than I think they ever expected, I also experienced the many outcomes of their longevity, and not all of them were pleasant or fulfilling. Then I read Billy Graham's book, *Nearing Home* where he reflects on the advanced stages of his life and how he'd never given any thought or expectation to being around on God's Earth for so long. One simple sentence really hit home for me. He says "No-one taught me how to live in the years before I die. I wish they had....."

So, from my experiences with my parents aging, and some of Billy Graham's reflections, I literally had an Epiphany. I realized that *my generation* (the baby boomers) had to embrace the reality that we would likely live a long time, that doctors can't cure everything (yet!) and that being "high maintenance" both physically and emotionally to our children and other family members was not the best plan. So, instead, if we prepared ourselves mentally for the realities lying ahead, and took action at the right times, we could actually have an optimal last chapter of our life. The alternative of ignoring and being in denial of the future was not a smart idea even though most of us, understandably, don't like to talk of getting old or older.

Hence, there is a new numbered "phase" of our lives to add to all those mentioned earlier. When we hit 60, we enter our "**Third Thirty**". First, it is a landmark that we should be proud of as we have made it further on this Earth than many others (to quote from Billy Graham's book again, "Don't resent growing old, many are denied the privilege"). Second, our "Third Thirty" is likely to be a reversal of our "First Thirty" when we were literally growing up mentally and physically at a great pace (see sketch graph). For each of us, our Third Thirty will be as unique as our own fingerprint but it will happen. Preparing our minds for the inevitability will help us to make sensible decisions when the time comes. Those difficult decisions include when to downsize and maybe leave the home of our dreams, and arguably the hardest issue to address will be when to stop driving. Being at peace with these inevitabilities that face us will help us to finish strong in life and remove worries and stress from our children or other loved ones. Another challenge for us is generating the willingness to let our children help us (I call it "being parents to our parents") rather than hurting them by shunning their offers because our pride gets in the way. Maybe the Bible can encourage us in this regard. John 21:16-18 says: "Do you truly love me? Yes you know I do. ...when you were younger, you dressed yourself, and went where you wanted, but when you are old, you

will stretch out your hands and someone else will ask you and lead you where you do not want to go”.

In 2013, soon after my father passed away at the age of 92, I shared my feelings with my very small Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio, and from my conversations, we started a discussion group called “The Third Thirty Group”. Participation was open to all, irrespective of age and typically, some 50% of the Church membership attend for an hour or so after Sunday Worship. Most are in their 40’s to 70’s but we have also had grandchildren attend and who, from the conversations, have realized how important it is to help grandparents with jobs such as getting holiday decorations out of the loft or other tasks that we have been so accustomed to doing and think, perhaps unwisely, that we still can. At our discussion group meetings, everyone has stories to readily share, either about their frustrations and worries associated with their aged parents or the complexities that their parents are leaving for them to “inherit”. These shared personal scenarios give us the strength and motivation to “get it right (or better)”. Some of our senior members have willingly handed their car-keys to their children or moved out of their large homes to something more manageable, citing the Third Thirty Group as enabling them to “see the light”. In all cases, their children have been mightily relieved. Third Thirty meetings are “occasional” rather than weekly, and are round-table discussions with, of course, food!

Starting a Third Thirty Discussion Group is not difficult. For the attendees, it is motivating, insightful and therapeutic. For the leader, it is a subject that doesn’t need formal qualifications as I have found people ready and eager to offer their thoughts and perspectives. If churches need some material or themes to initiate a discussion, please do contact me; I have plenty of material! For all of us who are approaching, or beyond the age of 60, we need to ask ourselves, “Have you met your Third Thirty yet?”

Chris Pomfret is a retired aerospace engineer and business owner who started the Third Thirty concept in 2013, motivated by watching his parents age. He wanted to challenge the conventional wisdom that aging was no fun and best not talked about and thus set about identifying best practices such that aging can be as enjoyable as possible for the individual and their loved ones. He is a former Vice -President of POAMN, has conducted several Third Thirty workshops in the US and overseas, and lives in New Orleans.