

Building an Older Adult Ministry Communication Network

By Quentin A. Holmes

“They still bring forth fruit in old age, they are ever full of sap and green.”

(Psalm 92:13)

Many older adults are in our congregations. This article is meant to help you connect effectively with the folks who work with them day in and day out.

BACKGROUND

Most local congregations are already doing older adult ministry – the average age of worshipers across PC(USA) is 61 years. Unfortunately, most people tend to shy away from the label “Older Adult” because our American culture is infatuated with “remaining young”.

However, the Bible regards old age as a blessing from God. Older adults are not a different category of persons, but are simply those persons who have traveled further along on life’s journey. In a very real sense they are “a Hidden Treasure”: they stay longer in a congregation; on average they give seven times the amount of money that younger members give to their church; and, they pray for others. Building an Older Adult Ministry Communication Network is one of the ways to reach out to the folks who are working with older adults in their local congregation and be supportive of them in practical ways.

INTRODUCTION

Churches traditionally have focused on the youth of the church. However, people who are currently in their 50’s and 60’s will find themselves faced with spending more years caring for their parents than they did raising their own children! What is often in short supply is awareness of and an emphasis on meeting the needs and utilizing the unique skills and wisdom of older persons.

REALITY

The most common frustration of Presbyterian clergy today is the lack of dedicated lay people to do the work of the church. Meanwhile, Older Adults average 2-3 times as many available hours for church-related activities as any other age group. Within each local congregation there exist one or more people who already are busily helping the older members of their congregation. These people do NOT think of themselves as “Older Adults.” And, the folks they are helping seldom consider themselves to be “Older Adults” either!

WHERE TO BEGIN

“A trip around the world... ...begins with the first step.”

(James V. Holmes)

- *Start* where you are today
- *Invite* others to help you with create a “Wish List”
- *Interpret* these data, and create a prioritized list
- *Share* the results with your group

- *Select.* IF your group could improve on just one thing, which item might that be?
- *Then try* improving it!

LOOKING AHEAD TO YOUR GROUP'S COMMUNICATION NETWORK

“The biggest temptation... .. is to settle for too little.”

(Thomas Merton)

Ask others to join you and discuss the following items:

- Spiritual Life What supports you, or someone you know who is elderly, in your/their spiritual life?
- Emotional Life What emotional support do you, or someone you know who is elderly, have?
- Physical Needs What kind of physical challenges do you, or your elderly friends, face?
- Educational Needs What kind of educational opportunities would you like to have available to you through your group?

The ideas brought out during this discussion will serve as a guide for your efforts on building an older adult communication network.

ONE EXAMPLE – Older Adult Ministry within Presbytery of the Cascades

In early 2007, Presbytery of the Cascades empaneled an Older Adult Ministries Task Force. The report of the Task Force was given to Presbytery that June, and adopted with gratitude. However, our first year was mostly a “Learning Experience”. In the years since then we’ve made considerable progress.

Key recommendations of the Task Force included:

- Congregational Support Committee shall form an Older Adult Ministry (OAM) Team. The purpose shall be to *“Alert and awaken congregations in the Presbytery to the importance of affirming the unique worth of older adults in the life of the church and to assist congregations in developing programs that contribute to the spiritual, mental, physical, emotional and social well-being of older adults.”*
- The Older Adult Ministry Team *“Shall be composed of eight individuals, two from each of the four regions in the Presbytery.”*

Goals for Cascade Presbytery’s OAM Team included:

- 1) ***To Make Visible*** the Importance of Older Adult Ministry in the Church. The OAM Team is committed to developing a structure that will support older adult ministry in the congregations of Cascades Presbytery.
- 2) ***To Support Research and Programming*** in Older Adult Ministry. The OAM Team is committed to developing a body of successful programs that have application in the congregations.
- 3) ***To Partner at the National and Local Levels*** in Older Adult Ministry. The OAM Team will develop partnerships to advance older adult ministry in the Presbytery.

- 4) **To Provide Training Events** Within the Presbytery. The OAM Team will conceive, develop, and support training events for congregations within Cascades Presbytery.

Our First Year was truly a “Learning Experience”:

- Nobody we talked to regarded themselves as an “Older Adult”
- Our chairperson went to the 2007 POAMN Conference in Lake Tahoe, NV. Then, for personal reasons, could not continue to serve on the OAM team
- The OAM Team had no authorized operating budget
- We did get a number of Older Adult Ministry Representatives from local congregations
- We sent out our newsletter to just the OAM Representatives.

Since then, we’ve made considerable progress:

- An **OAM Team** was formed from people who volunteered at a Presbytery workshop
- A Network of **Congregational Representatives** was established – 61 out of the 120 local congregations in Cascades Presbytery now have a specific individual as their OAM representative
- An informal **Newsletter** for Pastors and OAM Representatives is published, hand-addressed, and mailed out 3 times a year
- A 2 1/2 day **Retreat** at Menucha Retreat and Conference Center in the Columbia River Gorge is held in May of each year.

Important lessons that we learned while building our Older Adult Ministry Communication Network include:

- Build your network from the grass roots up
- Try to use only lay persons as your OAM Representatives – the Ministers are already overloaded.
- Hand-address and mail your newsletter – People will open up, and read, something that is “High Touch” as opposed to “High-Tech.” Also, many older adults do not trust computers!
- Do send your newsletter to ALL of the head ministers – Keep them informed of what the OAM Team, and their OAM Representative are doing, planning, and thinking.
- Whenever possible, help sponsor local events that support one of your OAM Representatives.
- Put on low-cost training events that bring your OAM Representatives together for fellowship and allow them to share what they have found to be effective in their local congregation.

SUMMARY

Many Older Adults are in our Congregations, by the Power of God, plus our Faithfulness, and our Warmth, we *can* Reach Out. Thanks be to God!

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

Among the many books and publications that are available, we have found the following to be especially helpful:

Older Adult Ministry: A Guide for the Session and Congregation

Compiled by J. Simpson, edited by K. Richter, revised and ed. by Miriam Dunson

This is a manual designed to help congregations initiate ministry with Older Adults. It offers suggestions for setting up an Older Adult Ministries Committee, how to educate the committee, how to educate the congregation, guidelines and ideas that can help a congregation develop a ministry with, by, and for Older Adult members.

PDS #702500071 \$10.00

Dimensions of Older Adult Ministry: A Handbook

Edited by Richard L. Morgan

Written for everyone who is over 64 or caring for parents who are older, this handbook takes an in depth look at key issues surrounding the aging process, including learning in later life, nursing homes, retirement community living, elder abuse, late-life depression, Alzheimer's disease, and other things that plague Older Adults.

PDS #1-57152-059-2 \$15.95

The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully

By Joan D. Chittister

Unlike early life – life from birth to age twenty-one – relatively little has ever been known about older age. This book is about life beyond its physical dimensions. “The gift of years come to many more than realize that these later year are gift, not burden. Not everyone who lives them either understands them or welcomes them.” Old age enlightens – ourselves, and those around us as well. In a series of brief chapters this book examines topics such as Meaning, Fear, Joy, Sadness, Mystery, Time, Wisdom, Loneliness, Forgiveness, Faith, Legacy. Each chapter closes with the burden the specific subject poses and also the blessings.

BlueBridge Press, New York, New York (2008)

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