

REFLECTIONS ON STARTING AN OLDER ADULT AND CAREGIVER MINISTRY IN 2019

By Pat Baker, Director of Older Adult and Caregiver Ministries / St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Tucker, GA

I was fortunate to be a member of a Presbyterian congregation in the early 1980's, which from the choir loft, appeared to have many older members. I approached the Senior Pastor with the challenge of budgeting for an older adult ministry as 25% of the congregation was older and the church offered nothing to this age group. The "powers that be" in the church accepted the challenge and as a lay person I started a nine year ministry for two different churches. Times changed and I needed more financial resources so I went back to working for the government in Aging Services in 1990. That work came to a close upon my retirement in June of 2018. Through the years I felt the pull to return to older adult ministry. In January 2019 I began another Older Adult and Caregiver Ministry for a Presbyterian congregation.

Nearly thirty years have passed since my last older adult ministry and I have become an older adult myself with a different perspective on life. This short article is about that journey and how I'm approaching this ministry in 2019. A follow up to this article will be in 2020 OAM Planning Guide when I write about my successes and challenges during my first year back in ministry.

I'm lucky to have a good pension and could offer to do this ministry for and with my own congregation as my tithe for 2019 and the future. I'm very grateful that they were interested in having me start this ministry since I'm familiar with this congregation and will not have to encounter many new people I don't know. I've committed to work an average of 40 hours per month.

In the late summer of 2018 I made an inquiry of the POAMN Executive committee looking for surveys that others had used in congregations to find out the needs of this age group. Being that one of my areas of expertise is working with family caregivers I added that aspect to the overall ministry program. Please note that POAMN members are a great resource for this type of request.

I revised one of the surveys I received hoping to discover the congregation's needs around ministry to and with older adults as well as persons who have the responsibility of caring for a family member, parent or spouse who is facing a disability or some frailty or disease. My hope was to get members of all ages to fill out the survey so I would not only know what the older adults and caregivers wanted but it was important to get the input or vision from our younger members. I received back a respectable sampling from the congregation, mostly older adults and several from the 40 to 60 age range. Well over one-half of the responders were over the age of 70 and one-half were caring for another family member. One of the differences today that I didn't have in the early 1980's was the number of people over age 75 who are still very active in the life of the church. The second biggest difference was the activities they felt the church could offer older adults and caregivers; interaction with others, spiritual growth and support /

information in areas such as health, finance, transportation, respite, visitation, etc. They related in their responses that they were interested in the church helping them to keep serving. In the 1980's socialization activities were key to a successful older adult ministry which most churches already have in place today. Our congregation is no exception.

My early plan is to convene an advisory committee which I will meet with on a regular basis for feedback. Especially this first year I want to make sure I stay on course with what the congregation desires from this ministry. I'm also planning to be at the church at least one day per week as a resource to older adults and caregivers who need one-on-one assistance, support and information.

My first big project will be to look further into the transportation needs of some of our members who are not attending church on Sunday's or other occasions because of lack of transportation resources. I'll also work in the early months with the deacons to see what the needs are of those who are unable to attend church due to illness, being homebound, or living in long term care communities.

I'm well aware of the challenges this ministry could bring since I will potentially be serving persons between 40 and 100+ years old. I'm excited to see what twist and turns lay before me in this endeavor always remembering that God is in charge and will lead me where I'm needed.

If you are reading this article and have a fairly new older adult and/or caregiver ministry I'd love to hear from you and exchange experiences and ideas. I can be reached at pat@sapctucker.org

Pat Baker's career in the field of aging spans over 45 years in both the private and public sector. Most of her career has been directing government programs funded under the Older Americans Act in Texas, Oklahoma and Georgia. She served as a lay leader of older adult ministry in Texas in the 80's. She recently retired as the Director of Health and Human Services/Senior Services for Gwinnett County, GA. Her dream in retirement was to return to Older Adult Ministry, so in early 2019 she took a position at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, GA where she is the Director of Older Adult and Caregiver Ministries. Pat has been involved with POAMN since its inception and has served in various officer positions. She started the Older Adult Ministry Certificate Program at Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in the Spring of 2019. One of her passions is working with family caregivers and she currently facilitates three caregiver support groups. She laughingly says that she "has failed at retirement!"