

STARTING FROM SCRATCH: OLDER ADULT MINISTRY 101

By Michele Hendrix

Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform, and Treasure
Prayer, Planning, Preparation, Programs, Patience, Presence,
...repeat!...repeat!...repeat!

Our Older Adults are a group of Disciples that are an invaluable resource in the ministry of the church. Now is the time for the church to offer ministry to its increasing numbers of older adults and to benefit from ministry they can offer. The practical experience, wisdom, attitude, and example of many older people make them especially valued gifts to the life of the Church. Since Christ calls everyone to proclaim the Gospel, he calls all of us - the elderly as well, which enhances the richness of connection in community life within the church.

Why Older Adult Ministries? The statistics are mind-boggling:

The senior-citizen cohort is growing three times faster than the rest of the American population. Of all those who have lived to age 65 - in the history of the world - two-thirds are alive. As life expectancy has increased (30 years in the past century), the age range of what most churches call older adults can now be 40 years or more. Older Adult/Senior Adult Ministry has become Intergenerational! The buzzword in the church today!

In addition to extended longevity, there are at least two other dramatic changes occurring in today's older-adult generation. Forward-looking churches will do well to consider both in their strategic planning. The first change is that today's "new seniors" are much different from their parents or grandparents in attitude and behavior. The second change is the emergence of an entirely new generational slice of the pie within the traditional older adult population - "middle adults."

It would benefit us to address these questions:

1. How can we find meaningful ways for our older adults to live as faithful disciples through liturgy, study, service, witness and community?
2. How do we recognize, honor, and utilize the experience, wisdom, and gifts of "older" adults?
3. How can we make ministry of and for this population easy?
4. How do we develop ministries that integrate and weave multiple generations together spiritually?
5. How do we cultivate Christ's message of hope and service for older adults, families, and their caregivers?
6. How do we examine, explore, and create innovative and contemporary liturgical, spiritual, and service ministries by, with, and for all generations in the Body of Christ?

People at each stage in life have unique goals, challenges, and priorities. Some creative churches are restructuring their adult educational ministry around these life-stages with staff, classes, support groups, and outreach targeting each life-stage. For the purpose of this article Older Adult or Senior Adult ministry has been delineated into three groups:

- **Boomers:** Ages 55-72 - This is a time in life of growth and positive challenge, when people devote themselves more directly to their own interests and talents.
- **Builders:** Ages 73 and up - This is a time of some general physical slowing down, yet many with minds as sharp and quick as always.
- **Elders:** Ages 80++ - Those who live very long lives and possibly the wisest members of the community. Many have experienced some form of physical or cognitive slowing down. They might need our care, but we need their wisdom. As a society, we have the most to learn from this group, because they paved the path where we walk. We stand on the shoulders of giants!

Aging (maturation) is as much a spiritual growth process as it is a psychological and physical growth process. Successful older/senior adult ministry includes:

- A shift in thinking, away from a “senior group” mentality and toward a “maturing adult ministry” mentality.
- Speaks’ to everyday, real life issues, and to times of personal transition of maturing adults.
- An honor of diversity...of age, stage, personality, ethnicity, and spirituality.

Maturing adults need a new vision of aging that:

- *Lifts them up*
- *Accents the positive purpose of later life and*
- *Connects them with God’s abundant grace.*

The effects of aging encompass the emotional, physical, social, financial, and spiritual aspects of a person. Older Adult Ministry can provide a comprehensive plan to raise awareness and address the emerging crisis in health, caregiving, and faith issues that will cross generational and economic lines with emphasis on support of congregational programs for older adult ministry. As you begin it is a good idea to determine what is already available, and to ascertain what is needed.

According to statistics, the “baby boomer” generation is becoming the largest older adult population in world history. Our older adults are living longer and want to maintain their active and productive lives. As this unique generation of Baby Boomers age, and our congregations become grayer, attention is being drawn to both the reality of aging in general and to the implications that aging will have on the importance of all generations within the church.

In our roles as leaders, we often confront ageism and the perception that those who are aging are mostly a burden on the church. A common stereotype about older adults is that they are caretakers, not caregivers; resource consumers, rather than resource providers. The truth, however, is that older adults represent considerable value to a local church. We must boldly address the moral issues related to caring for them,

provide examples of successful older adult ministry and care-giving programs, and challenge the church to restore broken connections across the generations.

Active Older Adults can take responsibility for their own learning and want their life experiences to be valued and integrated into this learning. Frailer older adults may not be able to be active participants in their congregations, but they do have a continuing need, and responsibility to learn and to teach. When planning for an Older Adult Ministry, keep everyone in mind.

Older adults have different levels of faith formation just as other ages do. We begin by being open to the Holy Spirit leading us in ministry, and we must not be afraid of where this may take us. As you begin, ask older members to take on a servant ministry. Find ways to encourage them and give them the opportunity to share their stories with the entire congregation. Seize the moment to reach out and explore, with our older members, ways to continue our life-long learning and faith development pilgrimage. Traditionally, the role of older people in congregations has been limited, either by choice or circumstance. Society has viewed older adults as a liability rather than an asset. Congregations have seen aging as a time of decline rather than a time to see the potential for a renewed ministry. However, many of the myths and stereotypes of aging and older persons are changing.

Today's demographics and insights are compelling for clergy and lay leaders to consider:

- Today over 14.5% percent of the U.S. population is age 65+.
- By 2030, the 65+ age group will comprise 20% of the population.
- Within 10 years, the high-risk age 85+ population will increase by 40%, exacerbating a crisis in caregiving and a rise in adult abuse.
- For every reported incident of elder abuse, neglect, exploitation, or self-neglect, approximately five go unreported.
- A substantial percentage of leadership, gifts and services are provided by older adults, the fastest growing age group everywhere.
- The unprecedented rapid growth of the older adult population nationwide, and worldwide, and the resultant challenges to the social and economic system, demands responses from the church.

The purpose of an Older/Senior Adult Ministry is to educate, to raise awareness about positive aging and quality of life issues, as well as to shed light on the hidden impacts of issues such as family caregiving, and elder abuse on the elderly, and the many challenges to their families. To begin you must determine programs currently being offered by your congregation. Also those within your community, then establish a method of sharing this information. Explore ways that the church can expand ministries by, with, and for older adults and pursue ways to connect with one another in intergenerational opportunities.

We know that young adults act different from older adults. They think differently; they hold different values; they pursue different priorities. These changes are not

generational, but gerontological. Think, talk, and pray about the new opportunity your church may be facing. It is the opportunity of creative new ministry and outreach to the aging Boomers, Middle and Older Adults, and our Elders.

This is a time of new opportunity in the life of older, senior, and retiring adults. In truth, it is now no longer perceived as the end of an old life, but the beginning of a new one. It is about one's perspective and this is a chance to engage in new endeavors, meet new people, make new friendships, gain new experiences and insights, grow spiritually, support new causes, and serve others and the church or community in new, challenging, and rewarding ways. Today's new retirees, older adults/senior adults, and elders have a new view of aging.

It is now of paramount importance that we offer new ministry opportunities that will attract and appeal to new retirees and all senior/older/elder adults. The standard Older Adult Ministry programs and activities of the past (often geared to the more active adult) will not appeal to the new retirees, senior adults, and older adults of the present and the future. Older Adult Ministry must be presented in a new manner that engages, excites, motivates, inspires, encourages, appeals, and attracts the multi-generations that are now our senior/older adults. They are seeking more than activities, play, and travel. An effective Older Adult Ministry will be responsive, receptive, accessible, inclusive, enriching and engaging for today's new senior/older adults. An in-depth description for many Older Adult Ministry opportunities can be found in the 2014 Older Adult Ministries Planning guide at www.poamn.org.

Older adults are here; and more are coming each year. While some senior ministries reflect a culture of bygone years, yours can be a model of invigorating new life and growth. More and more churches are realizing that the graying of America presents new possibilities to influence and reach adults who truly are receptive to the good news. Why not join the excitement? I urge you to invite, ask, and encourage our new retirees and older members into ministry, and I believe you will be surprised and overjoyed!

Ms. Michele Hendrix has served two terms as the President of POAMN. She has worked for over 25 years to advocate, educate, involve, and motivate people in the process of aging and self-care; and to recognize the connections among church, health care, non-profit, community, state, federal, and local agencies while encouraging adults of all ages in managing their self-care, chronic conditions, respite, and caregiving roles. Michele has focused her work on intergenerational and interfaith programs for adults, evidence-based health promotion, ministry programming and development, respite for caregivers, and fall-prevention programs. She is a Deacon, Stephen Leader, Caregiver Specialist, Speaker and Trainer with expertise in Older Adult Ministry, Intergenerational Ministry, and Caregiving for all ages.