

## **A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO PLANNING**

By Nancy J. Clark

When my pastor approached me about three years ago with a request to form a group that would address concerns of older members, I enthusiastically agreed to take on the challenge. After all, I was one of those older members and felt the need myself to explore issues that were now becoming relevant in my own life and the life of my husband. But where to start?

Relying on my experience in other churches and communities, I began searching for models of programs to use as patterns. I found advice about forming a committee (as good Presbyterians always do), gathering information about the number of older adults served by the church, taking a survey of what programs already exist for older adults - all good advice. But when I took this plan to the pastor, she advised me that in her experience so far in our relatively small congregation of under 400, I would have better luck just offering a class or two and going from there.

So that's what I did - but not before I took my own one-page interest survey! The survey listed 10 general topics: Loss and loneliness, Financial concerns, Staying independent as long as possible, Redefining who I am, Leaving behind a legacy, Prolonging life vs. quality of life, The gifts of aging, End of life issues, The role of the church in ministering to older members, and What happens after death? At that time there were three active senior groups in our church that met regularly: two women's circles and an exercise class. I went to each of them and distributed the survey, using the results to guide my choice of topics for the new group and to determine the day and time of the meetings. Thus was born Coffee and Conversation, a group that has now met regularly 8 or 9 times a year on a Monday afternoon for an hour or more since February 2015, with an attendance varying from 6 to 22, depending on the topic.

Some of our sessions have been built around the sharing of our own experiences and resources on topics such as remaining independent as long as possible, redefining who I am, what to do with all my stuff, serving others, sharing my faith journey, and leaving a spiritual legacy for my family. A retired pastor and member of the group has led discussions on dealing with grief and relating to our adult children.

I have also brought in a variety of speakers from the community. The director of the local senior center reminded us of all the services available through their center. A speaker from the Area Agency on Aging shared valuable information about community resources for living arrangements, in-home care, and many other services. The volunteer coordinator from the local Salvation Army brought us up-to-date on the many services provided by their organization and the ways we could help support their mission. One of the more popular programs was the one on frauds and scams presented by a regional representative of the Better Business Bureau!

Since health concerns become paramount in the lives of many seniors, we have devoted many programs to health-related topics. Our own local hospital's Community Health and Wellness program was a great resource for sessions on heart health, strokes, stress management, and eating healthy. I was also able to find a YouTube

presentation on the aging brain by one of their doctors, complete with handouts. The community ambulance service gladly offered their program on responding to medical emergencies. And a team from a nearby hospital gave an enlightening program on heart health the Ornish Way.

The most popular program so far was the luncheon on planning your own funeral, an idea borrowed from another group. We offered a simple soup and sandwich lunch and then had a speaker from one of the local funeral homes talk about the laws and regulations and decisions surrounding funerals and burials. Our own pastor shared the religious meaning behind funerals and provided an outline of a funeral service, with choices that could be made for scripture passages, prayers, and hymns.

Although the programs for Coffee and Conversation have not followed any strict organizational pattern, they have seemed to meet the needs of those who are attending. I took another short survey just before the end of two years to get more feedback on what direction the group wants to go. And I have been following up with those suggestions this year, but am trying not to plan too far ahead in order to be open to any current suggestions the members may have. In the near future, I am also hoping to expand our membership by inviting seniors from neighboring churches to join us on a regular basis.

For those who want to try a flexible program like this, I would encourage you to listen to the older adults in your congregation. Explore their interests, their concerns. And then build a program around what works for them. It may or may not look anything like what worked for our church. Explore and use the resources in your congregation and your community. They are out there and eager to share information with you that will help your seniors stay strong in mind, body, and spirit!

***Nancy J. Clark*** is retired, having had several different careers. Among them were college English instructor, senior services coordinator, grant writer, and director of a volunteer center. Raised in a Congregational church in Ohio, she has been a Presbyterian since her marriage 51 years ago to her husband, Harry, a now retired Presbyterian pastor. She currently serves as an elder at the First Presbyterian Church in Niles, MI, is chair of the Christian Education Team, and secretary of the Lake Michigan Presbytery Committee on Preparation for the Ministry.