

# OLDER ADULT MINISTRIES 101: A PRIMER IN THE MINISTRY BY, WITH AND FOR OLDER ADULTS

By Cindy Wright

**Why OAM?** You may be wondering why churches need a specific ministry for Older Adults? There are several reasons!

- God loves older adults! He created us in His image and loves us unconditionally; at all ages and stages of our lives.
- We are called to serve Him all the days of our lives. There's a great cloud of witnesses that go before us to model service in later life. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Caleb, Joshua, Simeon and Anna, Lois, Eunice and Paul to name a few.
- There's a boatload of older adults out there and many more getting older every day! In the US, those 65+ have grown from 3 million in 1900 to 35 million in 2000. By 2030, those 65+ are expected to grow to more than 55 million. There's no shortage of people to love, serve and invite into the kingdom!
- It's no secret that our churches are graying. We must continue to serve, and provide opportunities for older adults to serve in the church.

**Who are these older adults?** Three different phases of older adulthood have been identified. Please keep in mind that chronological age does not necessarily coordinate with these phases. Some who are in their 90's may feel and act much younger, just as some in their 60's may feel and act much older.

- **Go-Go's (Active):** May work part time, start a new career, volunteer, travel, engage in many leisure activities, are generally healthy and active.
- **Slow-Go's (Passive):** Energy and health begin to decline. Travel may become shorter, closer visits, a passive lifestyle, and decrease in physical activity and increase in health problems. If one spouse falls into this passive category, the couple often becomes "Slow-Go's" as caregiving duties emerge.
- **No-Go's (Final):** Mostly homebound - except for medical related appointments, may seek alternative housing (or get a caregiver in home), extreme frailty, slower mentally.

## What are the Building Blocks of OAM?

It is a ministry that should be very intentional, comprehensive, founded in Christ's love and for His glory. Here are some suggestions in how to get started:

- **Leadership:** Gather a team made up of those with a heart (passion) for Older Adults, and not necessarily all Older Adults. Having the support of the church leadership (pastors and session) and resources (space, administrative assistance, funding) are crucial. Shared vision, creativity and commitment are essential.
- **Needs Assessment:** Identifies your church's demographics & personality (profile) as well as what you do (or don't) have in place. There are several assessment tools available to assist you in your planning. The Rev. Dr. Richard Gentzler produced a ministry assessment tool that enables you to categorize the

three stages of aging as well. (*Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century* by Reverend Dr. Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., 2008 Discipleship Resources, Nashville, TN.) Gentzler's assessment tool helps identify the strengths and gaps in a variety of areas of ministry at your church. The categories: Spirituality, Enrichment, Nutrition (Wellness), Intergenerational, Outreach, Recreation, Service, come together to form "S.E.N.I.O.R.S."

- Spirituality: worship, spiritual retreats, Sunday School classes, Bible Study, Prayer Groups, Healing Services, end-of-life issue classes.
- Enrichment: Learning opportunities, seminars on topics of interest to seniors.
- Nutrition/Wellness: Parish nursing, health ministry, exercise, cooking classes, home delivered meals.
- Intergenerational: Intentionally connecting generations through retreats, Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, Bible Study, and service.
- Outreach: Evangelistic measures toward Older Adults in the community and involving Older Adults in this important, peer outreach.
- Recreation: Play and leisure, travel, fellowship.
- Service: long and short term mission projects, transportation, visitation, office assistance, home repairs, meal deliveries, etc.

### **How do you get this ministry off the ground?**

When you've got your team and have identified your church's profile and done a needs assessment, the next step is to develop a purpose or mission statement, goals, and an action plan. Ask yourself, are the goals **SMART** (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic, **T**ime-bound)? Are there gaps in the S.E.N.I.O.R.S. grid? Is the ministry intentional, intergenerational and meaningful? What are the possible funding sources? Perhaps a POAMN Mission in Ministry Grant is possible! Finally, when the ministry is up and active, an evaluation is necessary. What is working? What isn't? What changes need to be made?

Blessings abound in Older Adult Ministry! It's rewarding, enriching, satisfying and invaluable. Join others who are involved in Older Adult Ministry at the POAMN Conference in October each year. You'll be energized, encouraged and filled with new ideas for working by, with and for God's oldest children. You'll be glad you took the plunge and followed God's call into Older Adult Ministry!

### **Suggested Reading on Older Adult Ministry:**

- *Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century*, by Reverend Dr. Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., 2008, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, TN
- *Dimensions of Older Adult Ministry: A Handbook*. Edited by Richard L. Morgan, 2006, Witherspoon Press, Louisville, KY 800-524-2612
- *Older Adult Ministry A Guide for the Session and Congregation*. 2000, Presbyterian Distribution Service, Louisville, KY 800-524-2612

- *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century: Step by Step Strategies for Reaching People Over 50* by Dr. David P. Gallagher, 2002, Group Publishing, Loveland CO [www.grouppublishing.com](http://www.grouppublishing.com)
- *Pilgrimage into the Last Third of Life: 7 Gateways to Spiritual Growth*, by Jane Marie Thibault and Richard L. Morgan, 2012, Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN
- POAMN's PNN (newsletter) available online or in print. Go to [www.poamn.org](http://www.poamn.org) for more information.

***Cindy Wright*** has served as the Director of Mature Adult Ministries at Solana Beach Presbyterian Church for over 24 years. Her passion is serving with and advocating for God's oldest children in the church as well as reaching out to them in the community. She holds a BS in Sociology from Northern Arizona University and a Master's Degree in Education/Human Resource Management from Boston University. Married to her "Mr. Wright" for over 30 years and they have two grown sons, a beautiful daughter-in-law, and the absolute joy of their lives....grandson, Karson!