

# WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT: STARTING OLDER ADULT MINISTRY

By Michele Hendrix

## What is the purpose of an Older/Senior Adult Ministry?

- Create an awareness about the value, need, and the role of older adults and older adult ministry with and through older adults
- Advocate on behalf of older adults and older adult concerns
- Strengthen intergenerational relationships among, children, youth, busters, boomers, builders, and elders by participating in their activities periodically
- Help older adults continue to grow in the faith and be actively involved in the life of the church
- Provide opportunities for worship, learning, fellowship, faith sharing and service
- Educate, to raise awareness about positive aging and quality of life issues
- Shed light on the hidden impacts of issues such as family caregiving, elder abuse on the elderly, and the many challenges to their families.

## Where do you begin?

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.

Our Older Adults are a group of Disciples that are an invaluable resource in the ministry of the church. The practical experience, wisdom, attitude, and example of many older people make them especially valued gifts to the life 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. God calls all of us – every generation as well as the elderly, which enhances the richness of connection in community life within the church.

## Why Older Adult Ministries?

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".

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. The fact is that the church cannot afford to ignore the “hidden treasure” older adults constitute for the completion of the mission of the church.

### **What are the Demographics?**

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
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) - **2001** the medial age = **58**; **2014** the median age = **63**.

### **Who are Middle Adults, Older Adults and Elders?**

*For the purpose of this article Older 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 are confronting 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 caregiving 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.

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 through 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.

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 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.