

# **CONEY BOYS: A UNIQUE MINISTRY FOR OLDER ADULT MEN**

By Gene Swift

## **Origins:**

Every Tuesday, a rustic little pub in our village serves delicious, coney-dogs (also known as chili-dogs), for a buck and it became my custom to eat lunch there, every week. On one such occasion, in 2010, I sat reflecting upon a senior gentleman in our congregation who had recently lost his wife. My thoughts soon migrated to others like him who, for whatever reason, might be longing for male companionship. That day, I made a commitment to share my Tuesday aloneness and my love for coney dogs with them. I targeted the retired men of our congregation, envisioning a group consisting of men with wives who needed time alone, men fighting boredom or depression and others who simply missed the companionship they enjoyed at their former workplace. Initially, a half-dozen men responded to my email invitation to gather at one o'clock, for food and fellowship. Our numbers have increased steadily ever since. In the summertime, we average sixteen men and in mid-winter, when outdoor activities are limited, our numbers swell to nearly two-dozen. Tables are reserved to accommodate our group and Mary Kay, our dedicated and attentive waitress knows every man by name. (And, she bakes us cookies, at Christmastime!). After paying the tab, all surplus dollars that remain are donated to a local food pantry. In 2014, we contributed over \$400. Because several Coney Boys have introduced friends from outside our congregation, I believe it is fair to say, Coney Boys is also an outreach program.

## **Description:**

Coney Boys is a gender-specific, social group, modeled after the Red Hat Society: we have no officers, no dues, no by-laws, no agenda, no mission statement, etc. This formula succeeds because there are no encumbrances or expectations of its members, whatsoever.

## **Objectives:**

The goal of the Coney Boys ministry is to provide a safe, comfortable environment where senior church men may meet regularly to enjoy camaraderie with their peers, share a meal and engage in friendly discussion. They share joys and concerns, discuss their interests, celebrate birthdays and celebrate life, in general. The Coney Boys' Grace describes the lighthearted timber of a typical gathering:

“Oh Lord, we give our thanks this day for family, food and friends...  
and lift our thoughts in praise to You, from whom all good descends.  
The Coney Cronies gathered here are grateful to our God...  
for the gracious gift of another day, on the green side of the sod!”

## **Guidelines:**

- Select a name for the group and elect a 65+ year-old Elder to launch and facilitate the project.
- Meet at the same time and same venue each week, to avoid confusion.
- Reserve tables and ask for a dedicated waitress, if possible.

- Limit sessions to one-hour.
- Demand nothing of participants: allow them to show-up, as desired.
- Ask the last person to arrive to offer the blessing.
- Introduce first-timers and ask each regular participant to say his name.
- Mail a paper placemat adorned with humorous comments, a smudge of mustard and the signature of all in-attendance to members who are ill or have missed consecutive events.
- Round-up the tab, tip and tax for each participant and collect the money.
- Donate surplus dollars to a local food pantry to encouraging generosity.
- Encourage laughter and loud conversation.
- Discourage joke-telling. It can get out-of-hand, if allowed.
- Avoid discussing politics.
- Never allow one individual to dominate a session.

### **Endorsements:**

Coney Boys is posted in our church's Sunday bulletin and has its own account number. Our pastor attends regularly and promotes Coney Boys by inviting other pastors. This project is endorsed by our Adult Nurture Committee's Task Force on Aging and has prompted the formation of a senior women's group. Coney dogs play an important role but the actual key to Coney Boys' success is a simple, loose format and the opportunity for fellowship that it presents. Coney Boys is the first men's group to survive, in our church's 50-year history. The steady growth, the fact our members return week after week and the noise level at a typical Coney Boys session offers the best evidence of its success and prompts me to encourage other churches to develop a senior, men's ministry of their own, based on this model.

***Gene Swift** is a retired Ford motor Company Engineer. He lives in Grosse Ile, Michigan, a small, island community, twenty miles south of Detroit. He is a 22-year member of the Grosse Ile Presbyterian Church (GIPC). Gene and his wife, Lynne, have two adult children (one a pastor) and eight grandchildren. Gene has served on several church committees, is a past Board of Deacons Moderator and past Mission & Stewardship Commission Chairman. He currently serves on a task force on aging called, "The York Connection" and writes bi-monthly articles for the GIPC newsletter, addressing senior issues, called, York Tips. He also relishes his role as "Chief Coney Boy."*