

ENGAGING NEW SENIORS AND OLDER PERSONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

By Michele Hendrix

An older adult or new seniors ministry offers individuals the opportunity to serve in ways that are unique, meaningful and life-changing. The church should be one of the best sources for volunteers to serve in our communities. If you are convinced that developing an older adult or new seniors ministry in your church is essential, use the information in this article to get things started.

First, bring together interested parties to begin the discussion. Next, enlist the support of leadership in your congregation, and recruit leadership from within each age group. Establish your purpose, mission and vision. Enlist the assistance of advocates. Utilize outside resources that can help you develop successful older adult ministries. Be sure to share with your congregation the nine benefits of establishing a new senior and/or older adult ministry:

1. expands the church's existing ministry by reaching entire families, including grandparents and homebound seniors;
2. shows the community that the church is a vital part of community life;
3. builds overall church activity;
4. increases worship attendance;
5. instills scriptural truth in the lives of seniors and helps them face the challenges of a changing and often deteriorating society;
6. provides enriching experiences close to home;
7. helps meet the need for senior care;
8. provides an opportunity for older adults and multi-generations to serve side by side;
9. provides an opportunity for youth, young adults and families to serve.

Further, an effective new senior and/or older adult ministry will

- use the talents of older adults in ways that strengthen and revitalize both church and community;
- include those left out of the mainstream because of age discrimination, combined with discrimination based on race and/or gender;
- help people become skilled advocates on their own behalf;
- provide opportunities for different generations to learn together and from each other;
- cooperate with community efforts to meet older people's physical, social, spiritual and economic needs;
- support and encourage development of in-home Christian care services, and seek out a wider range of housing options that reduce the need for institutional care; and
- minister to those in community nursing homes and those restricted to their homes to encourage a more holistic approach to their needs.

As you plan for intentional older adult ministry, keep in mind that each older adult is an individual. One ministry idea won't meet all needs. Be sure to identify needs and plan your ministry accordingly.

Listed below are ministry ideas with older adults:

Adult Day Services: Develop a one-day or several-days a week Adult Day of Care at your church for older adults who need specialized care for working caregivers. Ours is called The Gathering.

Advertise in Local Theatre & Senior Citizen Center: Advertise your older adult ministry in the local theatre, Senior Citizen Center, local restaurants, and other places older adults congregate.

Annual Older Adult Picnic: Invite older adults from your church and community to participate in a summer picnic. Include those members who are able to participate from care facilities around your church. Provide transportation, entertainment and games.

Art-Painting Classes: Offer an art class once a week to be led by a volunteer artist from your congregation. Watch the personal styles develop and bloom. Hold a once a year Art Show at the church and display their works. This is a good event for Older Adult Sunday followed by a luncheon.

Caregiver Support Group: A supportive community for caregivers who meet once or twice a month. Volunteers facilitate the group. Volunteer leaders are trained facilitators.

Caregiving/Care Teams: Older adults provide direct care for people having difficulty with activities of daily living (ADLs): walking, dressing, getting to/from bed, going shopping, and preparing meals.

Children of Aging Parents (COAP): Provide support, networking opportunities, and resource information for adult children of aging parents. Companion Services: older adults escort other older adults for visits to the doctor, dentist, pharmacy, grocery store, etc., helping them along the way.

Classes/Activities: Offer various classes of interest throughout the year. These can be Computer Classes, AARP Defensive Driving, Scrap Booking, Duplicate Bridge, Digital Camera Classes, Home Repair Workshop, Genealogy, etc.

Coffee Connection: A ministry of hospitality on Sunday mornings. Volunteers set up an informational display in the fellowship hall to greet visitors, new members and each other as they answer questions about the senior activities or ministries.

Day Trips: Each month a daytrip is scheduled to special places of interest. Older adults take educational and informational, recreational, mission study, or work mission trips.

Day Trip Committee: This group of four to five volunteers is the planning committee for the daytrips. They meet quarterly. A daytrip wish list is compiled and ideas are shared.

Exercise and Fitness Classes: Older adults participate in "low impact" aerobics class, "Body Recall," Kick-Boxing, Pilates, Yoga, Jazzercise or some other form of exercise designed for older adults.

Extended Travel: This can range from a one-week trip to a 1-3 overnight adventure. Publicize your travel adventures and offer a six-month payment plan.

Flowers for Homebound and Nursing Home Residents: Following worship services, altar flowers are taken to homebound and nursing home residents.

Foster Grandparents: Older adults share their lives with children and youth who have few or no extended family members living in the community.

Game Day: Once a week or monthly, hold a game day for older adults (include games that involve mental stimulation).

Helping Hands: *Home Maintenance and Minor Repair.* A group of volunteers who give their time and talents to the varied tasks and small home repairs that are often difficult for the older person to manage.

House Sharing: Older adults share housing with college students in exchange for chore service, minor home repair, cooking, and laundry, etc.

Intergenerational Retreat: Invite older adults and youth to participate in a retreat together. Plan for games, meals, Bible study, and sharing.

Library: Resources on Aging Issues: Place in your church library older adult reading material, including audio and large print books.

Life Review: Older adults participate in life review and reminiscence classes.

Living History: Older adults share their life journey and faith story on tape (video and/or audio), in writing, and orally in worship and Sunday school class.

Lunch Partners: Invite older adults to eat a meal once a week with a homebound member in his/her home.

Marriage Enrichment: Older married couples lead and participate in marriage enrichment programs (both intra-generational and intergenerational).

Manna: A fellowship of men and women with a love for cooking and sharing. Their hospitality extends to everyone in the church who is in need. Volunteers give part of their time for food preparation and availability to deliver a meal to a congregation or neighborhood household.

Manna Thanksgiving Meals: Manna volunteers prepare Thanksgiving meals for members of the church and community who are full time caregivers. Volunteers from the congregation pick up the prepared meals at a set time and deliver a warm Thanksgiving meal to the family.

Manna Meal Delivery: Older adults deliver Manna meals for homebound, following hospitalization, participate in Meals-on-Wheels, group meal programs, etc.

Mentoring: Invite older adults to serve as mentors for children, youth, and other adults (e.g., youth during confirmation, and for new church members).

Movie Day: Periodically throughout the year individuals gather to share in fellowship while watching a movie from the past or a current release.

Multigenerational Study Groups: Invite children, youth, and adults to study and learn together. This might include Bible topics and/or current events.

Mutt Ministry: Many older adults love dogs, cats, and other small animals yet are unable to care for them. This ministry shares the love of gentle animals.

- Nursing Home Sunday School Class or Circle Group:** Invite older adults to participate in a Sunday School class or Circle group in nursing homes and Assisted Living settings.
- Nursing Home VBS:** Invite older adults to lead Vacation Bible School for residents in nursing homes and in Assisted Living settings.
- Older Adult Choir:** Invite older adults to form a choir. Sing at church, nursing homes, retirement communities, and for homebound. Plan special events such as Christmas caroling throughout the community.
- Older Adult Hand Bell Choir:** Begin a hand bell group for Senior Adults. A wonderful way to learn a new skill while improving eye-hand coordination and memory skills.
- Older Adult Newsletter or E-blast:** Create a newsletter or e-blast especially for the older adults in your congregation. Invite older adults to submit articles and include announcements about meetings and events.
- Older Adult Sunday Recognition Service and/or Luncheon or Dinner:**
The congregation sponsors a special dinner, worship service, or other celebration to honor the faith, wisdom, ministry and service of older adults. PC(USA) designates the month of May as a special time to recognize older adults
- Parish Nurse Ministry:** Provide a health care ministry for older adults.
- Peace x Piece:** A group of individuals that meet once a month to knit prayer shawls for members of the church and community.
- Powerful Tools for Caregivers:** An educational program designed to help family caregivers take care of themselves while caring for a relative or friend. This class series meets once a week for six weeks.
- Primetimers:** Older adults participate in an “Elderhostel-type,” volunteer in mission program, including faith development and faith sharing (a program of the General Board of Global Ministries).
- Program Committee:** This group meets quarterly to plan programs that are offered monthly. A program wish list is compiled and ideas are shared and scheduled. Often programs are matched to a special event or holiday.
- Ritual for Older Adults Moving from their Homes:** Older adults visit with others moving from their home to long-term health care facilities. Share in prayer, scripture, song, Holy Communion, and words of remembrance and thanksgiving for the years spent in the home. Follow up in new home.
- Santa to Seniors:** Older adults bring a little joy and brighten the Christmas season for a Senior homebound member with a Christmas card, phone call, or visit. Set up a Christmas tree with the names of homebound members during the Advent season.
- S.E.N.I.O.R.S. Ministry:** Congregations involve older adults in spirituality, education, nutrition/fitness, intergenerational, outreach/mission, recreation, and service opportunities.
- Senior Bulletin Board:** Place a large bulletin board in a strategic location where older adults congregate in the church. Post announcements about events, job opportunities, and photos of recent activities and events on the bulletin board.

- Senior Expo/Health Fair:** Sponsor a multi-generational Senior Expo/Health Wellness Fair that is open to the church and community. It is an excellent opportunity to obtain first-hand information on products, goods, services, and health care options. Offer various screenings and testing along with on-site flu shots. Exhibitors will provide information and free give-a-ways.
- Senior Yearbook:** Invite older adults to create an annual yearbook, include photos and pictures of activities they have enjoyed and participated in throughout the year.
- Sew Blessed:** A group of volunteers that meet once a month to quilt small lap quilts for senior adults with limited mobility or baby quilts for a homeless shelter.
- Shepherd's Center:** Older adults participate in ecumenical ministry meeting needs: life maintenance, life enrichment, life reorganization, life transcendence.
- Short Term Mission Service:** Older adults participate in short-term mission projects (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, etc.)
- Social Networking with Seniors:** Start a blog, Facebook page, or other social networking activity with older adults.
- Sunday Afternoon Worship for Homebound:** Monthly, quarterly, or twice a year, conduct a special Sunday afternoon worship service (include Holy Communion), for homebound members in the church sanctuary.
- Sweater Drive:** In December select a shelter and during the month collect sweaters or jackets that are gently used or new. Set up contribution boxes and have a volunteer/volunteers take these to the shelter.
- Telephone Reassurance:** Older adults make daily telephone calls to others.
- Visitation Ministry:** This is a vital ministry to the homebound members of the church. Older adults visit other older adults who are homebound, lonely, hospitalized, institutionalized, and dying.
- Volunteer Opportunities:** A small group of volunteers provide information about volunteer opportunities in the Senior Adult ministry and others needs in the church. Also offer volunteer training for specialized ministry areas for seniors.
- Weekday Bible Study:** Invite older adults in your church and from your community to participate in a weekday Bible Study (include refreshments, joys and concerns, singing and prayers).
- Writing Letters and Sending Cards:** Older adults write personal letters and send birthday, anniversary, and special remembrance cards to others.

The above list is a broad range of programs and activities that enable senior members to remain connected, enter, engage in, or maintain full participation in the life and leadership of the total church community while continuing to address the specific needs of senior adults, as well as encourage the entire church community to serve, recognize and employ the gifts of older adults.

In order to build and develop these ministry opportunities you will need to develop leaders. I suggest you begin with a **Leadership Committee**, a group of volunteers who co-lead and head up the specific ministry areas you wish to develop. This group of

volunteers will meet six times a year to plan and report on programs and events that contribute to the spiritual, emotional, physical and social well-being of older persons and those who care for them.

There are several ministry specific programs and committees that help meet the needs of older persons who are facing the challenges and transitions of aging. These ministry opportunities address the needs of the homebound, frail elderly, or their caregivers who can no longer be actively connected to the life of the church but are a vital part of the body of Christ – the church.

For additional information about developing an older adult ministry, enlist the resources and expertise of the Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries Network (POAMN). POAMN is a network of individuals, congregations, governing bodies and retirement communities committed to the spiritual, emotional, physical and social well-being of older persons and those who care for them. POAMN advocates and supports the Christian view that the lives of older persons are to be affirmed and accepted, their needs respected, and their contributions sought and used to the fullest.

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RESOURCES

Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century, by David P. Gallagher Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002. Learn insights and strategies for ministries with people who are 50 or older.

Older Adult Ministry: A Resource Guide for Program Development

A manual with strategies, program plans and theological reflections for churches seeking resources for older adult ministry. Order through Presbyterian Distribution Service, 800-524-2612; item 085429; \$5.95 plus shipping.

The Graying of the Church, by Richard H. Gentzler Jr. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2004

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.