

ENGAGING IN AGING THAT IS CHANGING

By Michele Hendrix

In the span of 25 years serving in Older Adult Ministry, I have a longstanding history and experience of advocating for older adults and developing leaders for this growing ministry, now multigenerational – think about it, GI/Greatest Generation, Mature/Silent, and Boomers are all older adults, and now Generation X is knocking at the door and not that far behind. That is three, and now nearly four, of the six living generations in the U.S. today.

We now have six living generations in America today that are considerably distinct groups. Each group usually has different likes, dislikes, attributes, and characteristics. They have had collective experiences as they age and therefore have similar ideas. The person's date of birth may not always be indicative of their generational traits or characteristics, but as a shared group they have common similarities.

GI/Greatest Generation	Born 1901 – 1926
Mature/Silent	Born 1927 – 1945
Baby Boomers	Born 1946 – 1964
Generation X	Born 1965 – 1980
Generation Y/Millennium	Born 1981 – 2000
Generation Z/Boomers	Born after 2001

I often find it ironic that as we are growing older, our culture and churches are always looking for ways we can become younger! If your congregation is older you may be looking for ways to attract younger families, however, the reason the congregation is older is because often it has few or no younger families. In POAMN we are often asked how churches can reach younger families. Below are several ideas that some churches and POAMN members have used to accomplish this goal. Many of the ideas shared in this article come from current and past issues of the *POAMN Older Adult Ministries Planning Guides* and can be accessed at www.poamn.org under the Planning Guide tab.

First recognize that all seniors aren't seniors. Older adults are living healthier, more active, more productive, and longer lives. What does this changing demographic landscape mean for the church? It means that the old ways of doing senior adult ministry must be transformed and reevaluated. Over time even the phrase "senior adult" has become a subject of concern. As more and more Baby Boomers have reached age 65 the stigma attached to the word senior makes it a liability to effective ministry with Boomers. Currently we find that when churches offer a "senior adult" program, at most, only 10 - 15 percent of church members who qualify to be there actually are. Research shows that most do not want to be lumped into the category of senior citizens. New and emerging strategies necessary for effective ministry to "middle adults" and "Boomers" have many implications for programming, evangelism, and scheduling of church activities. The church that is "age-sensitive" will provide a variety of programs to appeal to the diversity of interests, needs, and activities of each age group.

Let's begin our efforts on *Engaging in Aging* with the **"C" word – Change**, and a willingness to change. There is often a resistance to change, as we get older. Rather than embrace change, some older adults tend to disparage the idea of change. When we embrace the idea of change in relation to what attracts younger people into our congregations, we soon find that it is not impossible to let go of some of the things that were simply our preferences. The added gift of accepting change is being in relationship with multiple generations and the richness that adds to our faith community and our faith walk. Is your heart being "me-focused" or "others-focused"? Change is inevitable, misery is optional, and it is all about perspective.

The **"P" word - Prayer**. Do not neglect the most important source for your need - prayer. Are you undergirding your efforts in prayer? Is there a group who prays to help accept and welcome change in your congregation; prayers to bring younger people into the church; prayers to change and expand your focus from a "me" ministry to an "others" ministry, prayers for those in leadership who are providing a basis for change. Gathered together in prayer and Bible study, people can be invited and guided to look at themselves as they practice hospitality with one another, newcomers, young and older members of the communities in which their church is located, and sisters and brothers throughout the world.

The **"R" word - Relationships** are intentional. You cannot simply ask younger generations of people or families to join you at church. You must be willing to listen to them and act on many of the changes they suggest. Who is in your social circle? Have you thought about expanding your social circle to younger people? Who are you inviting to visit your church? We know that relationships are key to reaching people. If we are intentional about connecting with younger persons in our social circles those relationships may soon transfer to the church. If there are already some younger persons or young families in your church, have you made the effort to connect? Are you a hospitable congregation that receives and welcomes others?

Develop an **Intentional Lay Ministry**. Senior citizens have wisdom, truth and humility. Yet they are often neglected. They like to tell their stories, sharing from the heart. They appreciate visiting and enjoy the company of younger people. Focus on being willing to listen to someone who longs to be heard. There are many models that are available as a person or group seeks to be more intentional and to become better-trained caregivers and listeners to others in their congregation. You can find alternatives to Stephen Ministries, including one grounded in Benedictine Spirituality.

Within congregations there are many compassionate lay-persons who with appropriate training and guidance can develop competent and compassionate ministries such as grief groups, divorce support groups, caregiver support groups, support groups for those who care for those special needs children or adults, support groups for adoptive parents, hospital and home visitation groups, calling groups to check on older or frail congregational members, cancer survivor groups, Parkinson or cancer support groups. There are many little support groups and/or communities that can develop around a variety of needs and concerns. These groups offer the opportunity for a depth of sharing and intentional community.

Another “**C**” word - **Care**. Are you a caring congregation? Through leadership do you nurture a shift toward emphasizing the importance of ordinary care?

The caring congregation is a place, a sanctuary, where our human stories are connected with God's story, and where our puzzling narratives find a place in the presence of the One who heals and sustains, guides and reconciles, liberates, empowers and nurtures. In the caring congregation, each person is called to such participation. Caring congregations will discover themselves engaged in God's mission - not only “doing” mission programs, but also being missional at its center.

Mission and Outreach. Many of the ministries I listed above are outside the walls of the church. Older and younger adults can and should be involved in the mission of the church. This is where multiple generations can connect and serve together. There is no doubt that those saints who came before us who are aging in our congregations should be recipients and part of the mission and outreach of the church. How are you making these connections? Many churches are training older volunteers to engage in a unique ministry of mission and outreach.

Younger adults are asked to be “missionaries” to the older congregation by pairing up young families with an older adult for a two-year period. As a result of the success of this ministry many of the younger families were highly intentional about inviting their peers, and the number of younger people and families in the church grew. Create an Adopt-A-Senior program, engage and invite young families whose grandparents do not live close by into ministry by pairing them with an older adult. It will enrich everyone's life.

Or try a new mission adventure by pairing Children's ministry with a one-week visit to group of people at a care facility who are members (and non-members) of your home congregation. Plan a week's activity during the summer months or holiday season and spend an hour where both the residents and children give the gifts of their ministry and both the children and the residents would receive the gifts of their ministry. The day can consist of worship, a gifts hour, quiet time, recreation and food. Both groups grow to appreciate each other and both groups find a way to enrich their own lives. Strangers become friends. A dream becomes a reality. Mission takes on a new face!

These shared ideas are a wonderful picture of ministry to and with older adults and one that becomes intergenerational. Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries (POAMN) mission is to support ministries on aging in our congregations, senior centers, and care facilities that are becoming community focal points that not only provide helpful resources to all generations of older adults, but serve the entire community with information on aging; support for family caregivers, training professionals and students; and development of innovative approaches to aging issues. The church now faces the enormous task of addressing escalating needs, challenges, and changes faced by an aging society in aging congregations; issues such as elder abuse, fraud, loss, caregiving, transportation, finances, chronic illness, and a myriad of many others encountered on the journey of aging.

These are days of tremendous opportunity in the community of faith. People of all ages can worship, serve, and work together side by side, and draw from a rich mixture of skill and experience. Churches that cast a vision for ministry with older adults, middle adults, and boomers will find renewal springing up in the church and subsequent numerical and spiritual growth. Now is the time to make the most of the incredible capacity of the new kind of mature older adults, middle adults, and boomers who are becoming the dominant fabric of our nation.

Church leaders of the twenty first century, perhaps more than at any time in history, must reach out to a variety of age groups. The church should be one of the best sources for volunteers to serve in our communities. If we are to break down the barriers that divide us, we will need to put forth effort to understand the make up of every generation, to dispense grace, and to determine common purpose and mission. Transformation requires intentionality. The church should be at the forefront of being a part of this whole educational and transformation process.

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.