

OLDER ADULT MINISTRY WITH INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS

By Michele Hendrix

“50+ Members Want To Integrate With The Entire Church”

Remember the surge in a generation of young people in the late 40's through the mid 60's that had a significant impact on national and state demographics? Many of those young people are now in their mid 60's and beyond. History has shown the enormous effect of this generation - known as Baby Boomers - on social services, education, the labor market, the culture, and the church for the past seventy-two years. We are now only halfway through the Boomer Generation turning 65. For the next ten years 10,000 Boomers a day or 7 Boomers per minute will be turning 65.

The youngest members of the Builder Generation are 74 and the oldest are 88. That is well into another of the fastest growing segments in our society, the 85+. Too many churches still see Older Adult Ministry as peripheral, perfunctory or even optional. However, the 50+ and older adult congregations that are thriving are those that the church leadership sees the entire community of faith as central, strategic, and critical to the mission and vision of the church. In developing a robust Older Adult & Intergenerational Ministry it will mean that everyone in the congregation play a strategic and deliberate role.

The church has been in denial about the aging of America for far too long. Congregations need to think through the issues of ministering to a large aging group and a younger generation that is increasingly disillusioned with the traditional church yet longs for community, meaning, and deep spirituality. Each of these are facing issues unique to their generation, from parenting grandchildren, caring for their parents, to dealing with the effects of chronic illness in their lives or other family members, and a multitude of others such as caregiving, isolation, loneliness, and depression. They often have responsibilities for the care of parents and grandparents while still assuming parenting roles themselves. They need the church now more than ever!

Since the Christian vocation has no retirement age, the special contribution of the older adult merits conscious recognition and connection. The experience of all older persons, and the wisdom of many, is a special resource for the whole church. It is also important that we never underestimate the power of the ministry of older adults when it comes to church growth! The sheer numbers of aging adults in our society present potential for church growth. They are currently the largest group in membership in the denomination and in our congregations. However, few churches are really identifying older adults as a “target group” for evangelism and outreach, and not all churches are intentional about connecting the generations within their congregations.

For many years now we have placed the generations in our congregations in silos by continuing to function in a structure that separates rather than connects the generations. Congregations now need to rethink through the issues of ministering to the new younger generations in the church by connecting all generations. Many churches are finding that

by engaging all generations they are more effective in fulfilling their mission. Making this connection and taking on a new focus, adding new purpose, and becoming more outreach oriented, churches are consequently attracting those of all ages that were previously unreached in the church and the community and are welcoming them into the community of faith. People of all ages are involved in serving, and sharing their gifts in every aspect of ministry and in all ministry areas.

These churches are learning a number of principles such as:

- *Invest time and energy in creating opportunities that allow all generations to work and serve together and make it a priority*
- *Encourage the generations to build relationships while participating in outreach opportunities and service projects that engage the community*
- *Finding new ways to serve, worship, and pray together*
- *Creating diversity in ministry with all ages*
- *Integrating 50-plus adults and older adults into the entire life of the church body*
- *Giving traditional ministry models a new purpose*
- *Doing ministry that is all inclusive, including the body, mind, and spirit*

Passion, excitement, and joy are contagious – share it!

Now is a perfect time to find ways to encourage the generations to connect relationally. This may mean investing time and energy in creating thriving small group opportunities where people can get to know each other and feel known. Or creating different outreach opportunities where one can easily join in service projects. Being intentional about creating opportunities available to all, it has a dual benefit of both helping them build relationships while also providing an opportunity to use their gifts to build relationships while building up the Kingdom. The old structure of placing groups in silos and the one-size-fits-all approach to ministry has been replaced with an array of fresh ideas that recognize the multiple needs, interests, and abilities of older adults and all generations in the church. It is time to release that power by being intentional about connecting the generations in our congregations and churches across the country!

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.