

THE YORK CONNECTION: A LEGACY FOR OLDER ADULT MINISTRY

By Susan Hurst and Kathleen Rankin

Anne York was a retired school teacher and an active member of Grosse Ile Presbyterian Church (GIPC). She regularly attended adult nurture classes and, when asked, taught classes herself. One of Anne's continuing concerns was the lack of programming for older adults. Oh, yes, certainly there were programs of interest to older adults, but there wasn't any programming that intentionally targeted the specific interests and needs of older adults.

During Anne's lifetime, this concern was never addressed to her satisfaction. Anne was persistent and absolutely committed to her idea of older adult ministry, to the extent that, when she died, her will contained a bequest to the church to be used specifically for older adult programming.

Although POAMN past-president Helen Morrison is a long-time member of GIPC and has long been an advocate for older adults, GIPC did not have a formalized older adult ministry or, in fact, know much about the subject. Anne York's bequest forced us to begin to think seriously about this very specialized area of ministry.

In addition to Helen Morrison's support, we were fortunate to have two other members who boldly stepped up to the challenge to learn as much as possible, as quickly as possible, about the basics of older adult ministry. Adult Nurture Elder, Ilona Macek and Associate for Christian Nurture, Jan Holmes attended their first POAMN Annual Conferences and identified resources and contacts to help us launch and sustain our new programming initiative for older adults.

We formed a task force of people interested in the subject and started brainstorming. Who were our "older adults?" How did we define the term, and, in fact, what was the most sensitive way to refer to this demographic group? What had we heard from them in terms of likes and dislikes? What did we discern as unique needs of the group? Based on the answers to these questions and our own perceptions, we began to develop programs and activities tailored to the needs and preferences of our older adults. It's worth noting that while we program for older adults, we welcome all ages and love intergenerational participation.

An interesting aside is that our first major decision was what to call our new ministry. We spent quite a lot of time discussing and debating and eventually settled on what now seems the obvious name ... *The York Connection*, after our benefactor. We have been intentional about promoting our "brand" so that The York Connection is a familiar entity in the congregation.

The York Connection activities fall into two broad categories: on-going programs and special programs. On-going activities include our Wednesday afternoon game days for cards and dominoes; Feeling Fit Yoga on Thursday mornings, a low-impact class focusing on strength and balance; Friday Flix, a movie afternoon (with free popcorn!) once a month; and the Emergency Contact program which encourages everyone to

keep their emergency information updated with the church office. All of these programs, with the exception of yoga (\$5 per session), are free to participants and operate on a “come when you can basis” to accommodate busy schedules and seasonal travel.

The yoga classes and Friday Flix are attended by people from the community, in addition to our congregational members. We are very pleased with this outreach component of our OAM programming.

Programs offered on a one-time basis have included a safe driving presentation from AAA; fire safety in the home, presented by our local fire chief; trips to the Detroit Institute of Arts for special exhibits; a guided tour of our community with lunch at a local yacht club (we do exist on an island, after all!); and a Life File project designed to help seniors organize and document the important details of their lives for the future use of their family members. From finances to funeral preferences, the completed Life File provided a comprehensive “picture” of each participant.

The York Connection has also sponsored a grief support group called “Finding Hope.” Susan Hurst has guided three different classes through the ten-week course, and the feedback has been very positive.

The newest group under The York Connection auspices is the JULIETS (Just Us Ladies Interested in an Event Together). The group was formed, in part, to give the women a Coney Boys-style social experience (see 2015 Older Adult Ministries Planning Guide), but, equally important, to provide our ladies with opportunities to enjoy one another’s company in a variety of settings, from movies and live shows to dinners and summer pool parties. JULIETS is guided by a steering committee that meets about once every six months to plan events for upcoming months. Members of the steering committee take turns chairing each event. Most JULIETS events involve a cost or fee, but that hasn’t seemed to diminish interest or participation.

The York Connection Task Force is fortunate to have Sue Ashley as one of its members. In her role as church librarian, Sue has been able to reserve library space and appropriate materials in a section for older adults. Sue also edits the church newsletter and serves on the communication commission and is able to be our liaison for both. Speaking of the church newsletter, Gene Swift, the original Coney Boy, writes a monthly “tips for seniors” column from The York Connection Task Force.

Despite what older adult ministry might sound like or what we expected when The York Connection Task Force was formed several years ago, we have found it to be quite varied, very busy (like our older adults), and, definitely, more fun than we imagined!

Susan Hurst is a retired nursing home administrator. She is a great-grandmother and has been ordained as both a ruling elder and a deacon at Grosse Ile Presbyterian Church.

Kathleen Rankin, also retired, worked for an accountant and (many years ago) for an advertising agency. Kathleen is an ordained ruling elder and a National Volunteer with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.