

S . E . N . I . O . R . S . MINISTRY

First United Methodist Church sponsors a regular monthly luncheon for older adults. In addition to the covered dish meal, a speaker or program entertains, informs, and/or inspires participants. Normal attendance averages about twenty-five people. However, there are several hundred older adults both in the church and in the surrounding community. The pastor would like to get more people involved in this particular program. After all, it's the "only" ministry the church has for older members...

By Richard H. Gentzler, Jr.

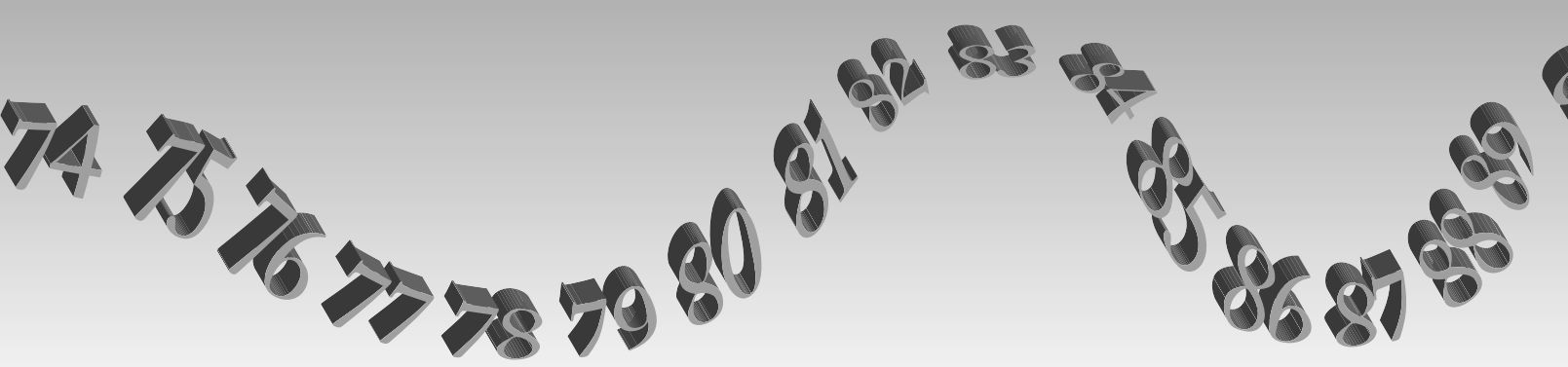
People are living longer than ever before. Medical advances have greatly reduced infant mortality and death from childhood diseases. As a result, people have a greater chance of making it to adulthood period, and then new medical knowledge, life-sustaining technologies, and a greater awareness of, and desire for, healthy life-styles have also helped lengthen the lives of adults into old age.

In 1900, life expectancy in the United States was forty-seven years. Today the figure is closer to seventy-eight and people are likely to remain active and in good health for most of that time. Although more people are living longer lives, the real revolution is yet to be felt. Beginning in 2011—when the first wave of Boomers begin turning sixty-five—and continuing to 2030, the United States population aged sixty-five and over is expected to grow by 75% to nearly seventy-two million. At least one in five Americans will be sixty-five years of age or older.

Likewise, The United Methodist Church is experiencing an increase in older membership. While this may be a result of fewer

younger people joining the church, it also reflects the increased longevity of adults. Indeed, many churches are experiencing the “graying” of their congregations. The explosion of the aging population should not be unsettling to us, however. It is important for the church to understand that The United Methodist Church is not an “old church,” but rather, The United Methodist Church is blessed to have so many older members!

Aging is changing. While more people are living twenty to thirty years or more beyond the “normal” retirement age, they are spending most of these later years in generally good health. When I served as a chaplain in a nursing home some thirty years ago, the average age of admission was about sixty-five. Today the average age of admission is closer to eighty-five. People want to age in place, within their own homes and communities, and most are able to do so. Because aging is changing, the nature of ministry with older persons is also changing. Intentional ministry with older adults is not “maintenance” ministry, nor is it something that is done only in nursing home settings.



Churches genuinely concerned about the faith development of all God's people will want to be intentional in developing vital ministry by, with, and for older adults. That means without regard to age, stage of life, ability, or setting. Unfortunately, when older adults see little interest directed at them by the church, they gradually lose their sense of value and worth, which dampens and diminishes their faith development.

One helpful model for congregations seeking to develop a comprehensive older adult ministry is the **S.E.N.I.O.R.S. Ministry** model. Having seven components, this model is both an intentional and holistic approach to older adult ministry. The seven components are **S**piritual, **E**nrichment, **N**utrition (Wellness), **I**ntergenerational, **O**utreach, **R**ecreation, and **S**ervice. As you review this list of ideas, know that there are many more options than this brief article allows. You may quickly and easily identify many other options as you read through this list.

Spiritual – I don't know anywhere in the Bible where it says that God takes away God's blessing when a person reaches the age of sixty-five. God does have much to say in Scripture about aging, which is a gift from God and has a purpose. As the Proverb states, "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life" (Prov. 16:31).

While we are all spiritual beings, not all older adults are religious. Helping older adults in their spiritual journey is vital for the later years. Worship, Bible study, prayer groups, church school, journaling classes, and healing services are just some of the many ways congregations can be encouraging and instrumental in their faith development. Consider holding special Sunday afternoon worship services for the homebound, with home communion and friendly visitors, to remind those members that they are still part of the community.

Enrichment – Older adults, no less than other people, want to continue learning. And, in our rapidly-changing society, older adults need opportunities to continue the lifelong process of learning and growing.

Churches can be intentional in helping older adults learn and grow by providing information and classroom situations related to their needs and concerns. Issues around health and finances are important, as well political concerns and the environment. Learning about computers, the Internet, and the latest technology can be especially endearing to many seniors. Opportunities for expanding horizons through travel and mission trips can enable the personal enrichment of older adults and help provide a sense of meaning and purpose.

Nutrition (Wellness) – As we grow older, our recuperative powers diminish. Thus, we accumulate a distressing collection of

chronic conditions. Some of these are no more than a minor nuisance, and we adapt as best we can. Some conditions are more serious, involving severe disability and pain, and may eventually become life threatening.

The church plays an important role in the physical well-being of older adults. Providing meals, exercise classes, and adult day services are just some of the many ways congregations can contribute to the well-being of older adults. With changes in health care, pensions, and federal insurance programs, congregations need to train volunteers to serve as congregational care teams, an increasingly necessary task of the church. Many congregations also have on staff a parish nurse who not only takes regular blood pressure checks but also helps educate the whole congregation about wellness.

Intergenerational – When congregations place an emphasis on the faith development of older adults, this does not suggest that we are less concerned with persons of other ages. Intentional ministry with older adults does not negate our concern for all ages and all people. We need one another, and this need expresses itself in healthy relationships as nurturing and caring opportunities. No generation or group of people holds all knowledge, faith, or wisdom. Old and young alike should be encouraged to work, play, and study together.

Older adults should be invited and equipped to serve as volunteers in programs serving other age groups, such as mentoring youth and young adults, tutoring children, or being a foster grandparent. Younger and older people can be teamed up together to provide particular ministries, such as working to clean up the environment, visiting people who are homebound or in prison, participating in short-term mission projects, or attending a weekend spiritual retreat.

Outreach – The mission of the church as defined in the *Book of Discipline* is "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." In doing so, the church involves older adults in reaching out to other people in their communities, as well as the church reaching out to other non-churched older adults.

Training and equipping older adults to be engaged in outreach opportunities should not be ignored and older adults should not be underutilized in this great endeavor. In addition, the church must be engaged in outreach to all persons, regardless of age or stage in life. Older adults can be the purveyors of Good News, but they should also be the recipients. All too often, our view of church growth involves reaching out just to young adults, rather than to persons of all age.

Recreation – Older adults can literally think themselves into the grave by feeling bad about getting old. Attitude is an important index in prolonging life expectancy. The ability to recreate



gives persons the chance to re-create themselves, at this stage of their lives. Laughter, fun, humor, and play are all vital ingredients for the well-being of older persons.

Fellowship meals, game days, and travel events are a few ways congregations can involve older adults in recreation. Holding golf or fishing outings, arts and crafts, quilting circles, and senior theatre are additional ways to energize older adults for fun and play.

Service – Helping to meet the needs of others can provide an ongoing sense of purpose for older adults. Involving them in service opportunities helps older adults gain or maintain a sense of self-worth and allows them to feel useful and needed.

There are countless opportunities available for older adults to be in service. They can serve others in their role as caregivers or by preparing meals, providing transportation, engaging in active listening, monitoring medication, teaching in Sunday school, or singing on the choir. Congregations must be encouraging of older adults to be in service to the needs of others and congregations must be willing to equip, train, and support older adults in these endeavors.

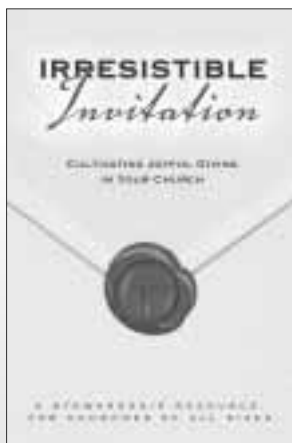
Older adults are the fastest growing demographic in many of our congregations, and we have a choice. We can be “light-years” behind the curve and ignore a vital resource for church vitality and growth. Or, we can be enlightened to the special gifts that older adults offer to Christ and the church. God has given us the gift of longer life. How will your congregation respond to this need? □



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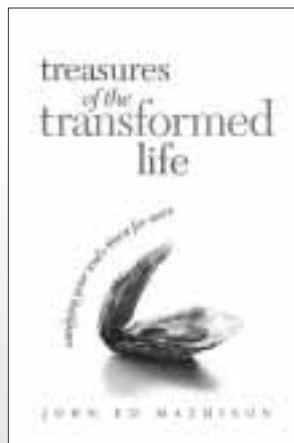
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