

## Older Adult Ministry More than a Bible Study and a Pot Luck

By Donald Koepke

“What we need around here is more young people.” This statement is often heard in almost every Lutheran congregation. It doesn’t take much to see that, except for a few congregations, we as a church are getting gray as well as having fewer members. For many, that change is alarming since everyone knows that youth are the church of tomorrow. And yet, I believe that we have a wonderful resource in our elderly, just as we have a wonderful resource in our youth. They are just different resources.

Gone are the days when to be old means to be frail and in need of being served rather than being able to serve. No matter what their physical capabilities and limitations, older adults have much to offer a congregation. The offering might be different than yesteryear. Lack of energy or coordination might not allow for climbing the roof. A person who has served faithfully as a Sunday school teacher for 25 years might be ready to try another form of ministry. But elders still have skills that have been shaped through years of experience. They have perspectives that have been honed by the ups and downs of living.

But before we can take advantage of these gifts and encourage elders within our congregations, we need to change our own view of aging. Our culture views aging as a decline, as something to avoid and deny (remember all those cosmetic surgery or anti-aging cream commercials?). Instead, we need to view aging from the Biblical perspective that views aging (as in all of life) as a spiritual journey through which elders can deepen in a way that might be different but is no less valuable than the growth in the Lord experienced in younger years.

*Aging is a spiritual journey.* The losses that we don’t like, but which are a part of every life, can drive a person to despair or into the arms of a loving God. A decrease of energy can cause a person to complain that life is unfair or it can encourage (even require) one to slow down and ‘smell the roses.’ The journey called aging draws us within, asking questions about the meaning of our past and future rather than seeking to manage what is already done and what is yet to come. What a gift our elders have to give when they realize that while all of the things that they have done in the past have been fun, even important, they have not defined who they really are. God and God’s relationship with us is what defines us. What a gift our elders have to give when they come to experience that there is life beyond suffering, joy in the midst of sorrow, and that there is indeed life after death (because many elders have experienced them all and found the promises of God to be true).

But such wisdom does not come merely by living long enough. Age does not automatically result in wisdom. Age (length of years and experience) plus *reflection* brings wisdom. And thus the role of the church: to be a place where such reflection as to meanings and purposes are not only encouraged but enabled. Older Adult Ministry

needs to be more than visiting shut-ins and those in the hospital. Older Adult Ministry must use the opportunities for spiritual growth that naturally arise when persons are confronted with their humanity, something that continually happens to older persons who are either experiencing or anticipating the physical decline of age.

I have some suggestions for developing a ministry that encourages spiritual growth among the elderly. Congregations could offer guided autobiography groups that help participants identify how God has worked in their lives. Prayer groups can be started where persons of deep faith but limited physical resources can provide an essential ministry as they pray for the needs of others. Support groups can be developed where elders can process the losses that often invade life. A book study about the spiritual side of aging can help people discover the presence of God in daily life. A good book is [A Deepening Love Affair: God's Gift in Later Years](#) by Jane Thibault (1993, Upper Room Press).

Older adult ministry. It is more than a Bible study and a pot luck. It is a place to encourage meaning-making and wisdom gathering. It is an opportunity to deepen lives at a time when they are open to such depth.