

## **WHY AN OLDER ADULT MINISTRY WHEN MOST OF OUR MINISTRY INCLUDES OLDER ADULTS!**

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Why take the time to develop an intentional and focused older adult ministry when most of the ministry within 'mainline' congregations these days involve many older adults? This is a valid question since in many churches it is the older adult who serves on the church council, deals with property issues, worships in the pew, and attends and-or leads the Bible studies. Why a 'specialized ministry' when many congregations would not exist today except for the older adults within them.

I would have the same question when it comes to youth ministry. Why have an intentional and focused youth ministry. Isn't the 'normal' ministry of the congregation sufficient? As many congregations have found, youth ministry often takes a specialized hand to lead. The questions youth may have are often different than those questions of older members of the congregation. At the same time, youth like to meet together since they share in the same issues of growing up within a very complicated culture. Youth need to be convinced that the congregation is concerned about them, listens to them and values them. Often pastors do not have the necessary skills or the experience to address the needs of youth. My son, who is area director for Intervarsity Christian Fellowship in the Montana region, laments that at age 36 his ability to directly engage college-aged people is becoming increasingly limited.

But can not the same be said about older adults. Like youth, many older adults are marginalized within our culture. At the very time when they have the most experience in living and thus the most to say, many people don't want to listen to them, considering their opinions as being 'quaint' and 'old fashioned.' Even though they might not say as much, many older adults do not see the church relating to their issues and their problems. Everything is about affirming families with children.

- When was the last time that a sermon contained an illustration about the experience of an older person (except to poke fun at them)?
- When has the challenge of those with dementia been addressed in Bible study?
- When have the insights gleaned by the confrontation with one's essential humanity that is aging been lifted up as a model of spiritual living and struggle?
- The church, like culture, is wrapped up in doing, creating, managing. Where is the talk about the value of being, the power of integrity in relationships, the insights gained by length of years that reveal the truth that "God's power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12)

Our churches have many older adults. Sometimes I wonder whether they are present because they are 'being fed' by the Word or because they are only committed to the institution called church. I wonder if they hear words that make sense to them and this time of their lives, or are they hearing words that seem to be for someone else and they are merely spectators.

Older adults have much to offer people of all ages. Their experience can give light to the paths of people of any age. They have struggled through many of the big questions in life and come out on the other side. What did they learn? What insights to life have they gained?

More often than do younger people, older adults understand that they are not the center of the universe (try to convince a young person of that) and that they are not 'God' and will not live forever. What insights-for-life arise out of such a perspective? I believe that this perspective is helpful to all people, even to the 35 year-old mother of three who has a career, a family and a house to care for in addition to their own soul-care?

Is the church helping older adults reflect on the meaning that their many years have given them? Is the church encouraging people of any age, but specifically the old, to trust in God rather than their own powers and abilities?

I have spoken with many older adults in my years as a chaplain and many of them are literally bored with their church, feeling as though it has nothing to say to them because nothing is being said to them in a language that touches their hearts.

Why have an intentional older adult ministry with the 'normal' ministries of our church are filled with older adults?

- Because maybe they are experiencing a time of life that cries for the support and the insight that comes from the Gospel.
- Because maybe their experience at the 'end of life' is a model for people of all ages.
- Because maybe, like younger people, they just need it.