

# CHURCHES RESPONDING TO THE AGE WAVE

Top Innovations in Older Adult Ministry

*by Amy Hanson*

## **Article Summary**

America is aging and older adult ministry of today is not the same as it was 30 years ago. A one size fits all approach to ministry has been replaced with a variety of fresh ideas that recognize the multiple needs, interests, and abilities of older adults.

WHAT USED TO BE REFERRED TO AS THE "GRAYING OF AMERICA" IS NOW UNDERSTOOD TO BE A SOCIAL REVOLUTION.

Sometime after World War II a new and different wave of ministry began to emerge as millions of Americans entered adolescence. Visionary church leaders began to talk about this surge of young people and the great need for targeted ministries. From this a huge movement was born to reach the young people of America for Christ. Youth ministry became a popular degree of study in seminaries and Christian colleges and today in most churches across America the second or third hire on a church staff is the youth pastor.

Fast forward five decades and you will find a nation where Americans over 65 now outnumber teenagers by nearly two to one. What used to be referred to as the "graying of America" is now understood to be a

social revolution. In the past century, the number of people in the U.S. under the age of 65 has tripled; however, the number of people over age 65 has increased by more than a factor of 12.<sup>1</sup> Nearly every industry in society, from health care to entertainment, is scrambling to respond to this age wave that is crashing on our shores. Interestingly, very few churches in North America have targeted ministries for older adults.

There are, however some churches that are setting out on uncharted waters and leading the charge in ministry with adults 50-plus. Leona Bergstrom, director of Lifetime of ChurchHealth at **Northshore Baptist Church**, Bothell, WA (<http://www.nsb.org>) says, "I believe that in regards to 50-plus ministries, the Church is poised for an 'Esther moment' in history and that God has called His people, 'for such a time as this.'" (Esther 4:14).

Older adult ministry of today is vastly different than it was 30 years ago. People over 50 are living longer and want to make a difference with the second half of their lives. Some innovative churches across the country are developing new strategies and methods for reaching this ever-growing segment of the population.

These churches are learning a number of principles such as:

- *Creating diversity in ministry with older adults*
- *Integrating 50-plus adults into the entire life of the church body*
- *Giving traditional ministry models a new purpose.*
- *Doing ministry holistically, including the body, mind, and soul.*
- *Finding new ways to express the name "senior"*
- *Reaching older adults living inside 55+ living communities.*



The senior adults ministry at First Evangelical Free Church hosted "Moonlight Strings" in the church plaza, and had over 500 people in attendance.

The following pages will tell the stories of churches that have a heart for older adults and a passion to see them flourish in God's Kingdom. "Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." (John 4:35).

**Older adult ministries Show a great amount of diversity.**

Many churches who have fruitful 50-plus ministries are finding that a 'one-size-fits all' approach does not work. Gone are the days when

an afternoon of bingo will effectively reach all of the older adults. A variety of factors influence the shape and structure of an older adult ministry. The various ages represented by the ministry, the location of the church, and the resources available all play a part in the design of the ministry.

**Ministry with the Boomer**

“Our church is in a community where many of the people have retired from Microsoft and are searching for purpose and meaning in their lives. 90% of those that are a part of the 50-plus ministry are in the 50 to 70 age range, while only 10% are over age 70,” says Richard Bergstrom who is the pastor of 2nd Half Ministries at Northshore Baptist.

About two years ago, Richard and Leona Bergstrom formed a focus group of adults in the 50-70 age range and heard a common cry from them, “We are over-committed in ministry, over-committed in caring for our parents and grandchildren, and we never get to have any fun.” From this came the idea for the “Baby Boomer Bash” complete with Beatles music, decorations in orange and yellow, pizza, and dancing. Over 300 people attended the party. “The Boomer Bash was designed to celebrate the Baby Boomers turning 60 and affirm people who are at this stage in their life.”

Gerontologists (those who study aging) have long identified three separate age groups in order to define the older generation. The “young-old”

are those age 65-74; the “old-old” are those age 75-84, and the “oldest-old” are those age 85+. In addition, there is an even younger group of adults, age 50-64, who have unique needs and interests. While these numbers can be helpful, chronological age alone does not account

**THE HEALTH AND PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES OF AN INDIVIDUAL PLAY A TREMENDOUS PART IN THE ACTUAL “AGE” OF SOMEONE.**

for the diversity among the older adult population. The health and physical capabilities of an individual play a tremendous part in the actual “age” of someone.

**Ministry to the Frail Elderly**

**Johnson Ferry Church** in Atlanta, GA (<http://www.jfbc.org>) has a unique ministry that touches the needs of the frail elderly. For the past 6 years, Peggy Fulghum, director of the Life After Fifty Ministry, and her team of active older adults, have hosted the Magnolia Ball for over 300 nursing home and assisted living residents as well as the homebound members of their church.

The church’s gymnasium is transformed into a 1940s big band dance hall with hundreds of lights, finger foods, and a 40-piece jazz ensemble. “We want to help these elders remember that they are loved and cared about and that they have not been forgotten.”



Johnson Ferry hosts the Magnolia Ball each year for over 300 nursing home and assisted living residents.

One part of the evening consists of helping to fulfill the dream of an elder. In one case, three women missed singing in the church choir and dreamed of having this opportunity. During the band’s intermission, the 50-member church choir came marching into the room in their church robes, singing, “When the Saints Go Marching In.” The elderly women were then dressed in robes and sang “Amazing Grace” with the choir. Peggy says, “Many of the elderly are transported in the vans from their nursing homes and they arrive at the ball hunched over with their heads down, almost with the attitude of ‘what now?’ but by the time they leave they are laughing and smiling and waiting in anticipation for next year’s ball.”



The Magnolia Ball guests are each given a blanket to help them remember that they are being prayed for.

**Grace Presbyterian Church** in Houston, TX (<http://www.gpch.org>) is also ministering to a specific group—the caregivers and those suffering in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease. The Gathering is an adult day of care for those in the mild to moderate stages of Alzheimer’s disease. Hosted once a month at churches throughout the city, The Gathering gives caregivers a 3 hour break from the constant demands of caring for their loved ones. The individual with Alzheimer’s disease is ministered to by volunteers who share entertainment, read Scripture, tell jokes, lead in chair exercises, and serve a warm lunch.

Ann McIntire, an elder and volunteer director of The Gathering at Grace Presbyterian, says that her dream for hosting such a ministry began when she visited another church that was doing this program. The program originated with Interfaith Care Partners of Houston, (<http://www.interfaithcarepartners.org>) a non-denominational group that assists churches in developing ministries that serve their community. Over 30 churches in the Houston area host The Gathering. Caregivers can participate each month in as many as they like, with no charge. Michele Shultz, Director of the 50+ ministry at Grace says, “The Gathering is really a ministry to the community. We can step into peoples’ lives and offer encouragement and support during one of their most vulnerable times.”

It is not surprising that this ministry would have such an impact on peoples’ lives, as the Alzheimer’s Association (<http://www.alz.org>) estimates that approximately 4.5 million Americans suffer with the disease. More than 7 out of 10 people with Alzheimer’s disease live at home, where almost 75 percent of their care is provided by family and friends.<sup>2</sup> Caregivers find their task to be overwhelming and frustrating and they are at risk of suffering from depression and health problems.

**Chapelwood United Methodist Church**, also in Houston, TX, (<http://www.chapelwood.org>) hosts The Gathering once a month and simultaneously offers a support group for the caregivers. This gives the caregivers a chance to process care issues, share concerns and offer support with others who are in the same situation. Mopsy Andrews, Director of BOLDER Adult Ministry (Being Our Lord’s Delight) at Chapelwood, said

that The Gathering is the ministry she is most “proud” of in that she herself experienced Alzheimer’s disease in her own family. “The thing you often find most powerful in ministry is the thing that God has personally prepared you for in some way. In my case, my mother had Alzheimer’s disease and I know how beneficial it is to have people willing to help you.”

Ann also feels that she has been hand-picked by God to serve the elderly. “I was a nurse by trade and when I retired 10 years ago I sensed God calling me to this ministry. I believe He planned all of my previous preparation to help me in caring for people in this season of their life.”

### 50-plus ministries want to integrate with the entire church

Conventional wisdom used to be that people in church should be grouped according to age. The thinking was that teens should hang out with teens, young parents with other parents and senior adults with seniors. Even neighborhoods are set up in this fashion, with young people attending school, the middle-aged adults working and raising families and the older adults living out their years with others in retirement. While this system of grouping people may be educationally and economically sound, it does not take into account the powerful impact of human connection and the desire of older adults to make a difference with their lives.

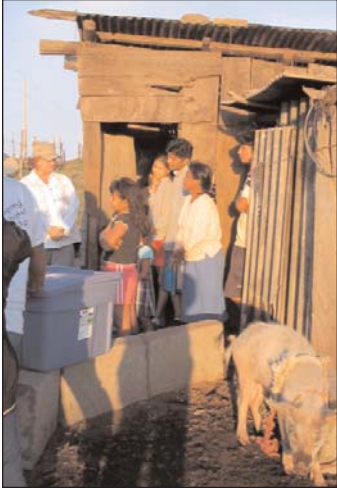


Some churches are tapping into the benefits of integrating adult ministry with other age groups.

### Serving outside of the 50-plus ministry

The BOLDER senior adult ministry at Chapelwood is considered a relationship ministry of the church. Older adults can participate in trips or quarterly luncheons and feel a sense of belonging with others that are in a similar season of life. However, Mopsy describes the ministries of the church as being a grid. The relationship ministries are organized laterally around interests and age groups and include men, young adults, single adults, and older adults. The purpose ministries

are designed to serve people regardless of age or gender and include worship, caring, praying, learning, and serving ministries. According to Mopsy, "The goal of this ministry structure is to create synergy and a collaborative atmosphere. All of the ministries overlap each other. The caring and serving ministries come to the 50-plus adults and invite them to be involved. Our job as the older adult ministry is to supply the people. In other words, our seniors' ministry becomes a channel of communication where the older adults hear of needs and opportunities." Each purpose ministry has a senior adult member as a part of their team. This ensures that each ministry in the church has the involvement of older adults. For



The serving ministry at Chapelwood has over 300 projects which older adults can be involved in.

example, the serving ministry has 300 different projects, including Habitat for Humanity, mission trips and elementary school mentors. Nearly 295 BOLDER adults are involved in these various projects.

Andy Parsons, a retiree, serves on the BOLDER adult ministry team and is passionate about serving young people. As a part of a middle school initiative, he speaks to eighth grade students in the Houston area about the importance of taking classes in high school that will prepare them for college. "There are things I wish I had learned when I was younger, and now I would like to help others by-pass the pitfalls that I experienced."

Mopsy does not measure the success of the ministry by how many people attend a BOLDER adult gathering, rather she feels like she is reaching her vision when older adults are involved in areas of ministry and service throughout the entire church and community.

Richard and Leona Bergstrom, from Northshore Baptist, share a similar vision in that they

describe their Boomers and Beyond ministry as being a ministry without walls. "We don't want the 50-plus age adult to come to our event or activity and 'stay' there, rather we want to nurture them, let them have fun and then send them back out to serve their world." The Bergstrom's have produced a short film entitled *Musical Chairs* (<http://www.musicalchairsthemovie.com>) which they use to stimulate discussion about purpose and meaning in the later years of life, in hopes that the 50-plus adult will seek out where God wants them to invest their time and resources during their retirement years.

### **Intergenerational Ministry**

One of the benefits of older adults being involved in the entire church is the intergenerational relationships that develop. In fact, 50-plus ministry appears to be most effective when it is done in an intergenerational context.

Rosalyn Encarnacion, Director of Senior Adult Programs at **First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, CA** (<http://www.evfreefullerton.com>) says, "We want to make sure that we take advantage of every possible opportunity we have to mix the generations." Over 15 years ago, Walt and Maxine Williams were mentor couples in the young-married class when they met a couple who went on to serve as missionaries in China. Recently, Walt and Maxine along with five other people went over to China in order to care for this couple's children while the parents attended a mission's conference. Rosalyn says, "I ask God to bring older adults into our ministry who will demonstrate how God is real in their lives and is with them until the very end." Walt and Maxine have just recently accepted the role of leading the Encore 50-plus ministry team. They hope to encourage other retirees to actively serve the younger generations.

WE WANT TO  
MAKE SURE  
THAT WE TAKE  
ADVANTAGE OF  
EVERY POSSIBLE  
OPPORTUNITY  
WE HAVE TO  
MIX THE  
GENERATIONS.



ROSALYN ENCARNACION

Some of the senior adults of First Evangelical Free also participate in a pen pal ministry with a third grade class in a local elementary school. The older adults are matched with the children for a year. Letter-writing, gift-giving, and field trips to baseball games or piano recitals are some of the activities that the seniors do to encourage each child in their school and family life.



Bob Williams poses with his pen pals at a local elementary school.

Intergenerational ministries help fulfill what the writer of Psalms expresses in Psalm 78:4, "We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done."

Still another way that older adults are being integrated into the entire church body is by inviting anyone, of any age to participate in their activities.

Plus, the name of the ministry with adults 50 and older at **Peninsula Covenant Church** in Redwood City, CA, (<http://www.peninsulacovenant.com>) is hosting a tour to Israel and is inviting all ages to participate. Rod Toews, the pastor of Plus, laughed when he said, "Most of the people registered are in their 40s, 50s, or 60s, but we have someone as young as 19 joining our group. Just think about it, people at 19 want to identify with our ministry!" Rod goes on to say, "Our older adults do not need to be served. When they see young people participating in the activities of the Plus ministry, they feel fulfilled." This attitude displays the words of Jesus in Matthew 20:28, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve."

### ***Calling older adults to Ministry***

It is a common theme among churches that are having success in their older adult ministries to view their ministries as being *with* and *through* older adults rather than *to* older adults. The leadership of 50+ adult ministries at **Beaverton Foursquare Church** in Beaverton, OR (<http://www.beavertonfoursquare.org>) believes that the secret to meeting many of the needs of the church body is through the older adults. Michael Kinsman, pastor to the group says, "We believe the most fruitful place to invest our effort is in the active, older adult. These are the people

that have the time, wisdom, and resources to provide needed assistance in ministry to both the older and younger people in the church."

In the past, senior adult ministries have been one separate arm in a church's various programs. It was acceptable to have a senior adult ministry, but it was not an important mission of the church. Leadership Network's Don Wilcox, the Encore Generation Leadership Community director, says, "Too many churches see older adult ministry as peripheral, perfunctory or even optional. The 50-plus ministries that are thriving are those that the church leadership views as central, strategic, and critical to the mission and vision of the church."

### **Traditional Fifty-Plus Ministries Can Take on a New Purpose**

While older adult ministries have a great amount of diversity, some churches are finding that by incorporating traditional senior activities into their ministry they are more effective in fulfilling their mission. In the past, the average senior adult ministry included potluck luncheons, travel opportunities, and social programs. Now, rather than destroying these models, churches are adding new purpose to the old forums. The ministries are taking on a new focus and becoming more outreach oriented, consequently senior adults that were previously unreached in the church and community are finding a comfortable place to grow and serve.

One Wednesday a month over 160 to 230 older adults attend the 50+ adult ministries luncheon at Beaverton Foursquare Church. Some participants are as young as their mid-forties; a couple of people are in their early 90's. Beaverton's Michael Kinsman says, "People are involved serving and sharing their gifts in every aspect of this ministry. We have volunteers who prepare the food, decorate the room, serve as greeters and help with clean-up. Hosts and hostesses are trained in how to respond and care for the people that attend. As many as fourteen senior adult volunteers may be involved in leading the actual program, from the moderator, the prayer and worship leader, the individual who gives the devotion, the person who recognizes those with birthdays, or the one who introduces the guest speaker." In all, probably 60% of those in attendance have some part in making the

luncheon ‘happen’. Though to an outsider, the luncheon may look like a fairly typical senior activity, the meeting is in fact very strategic and intentional. “We use our monthly lunches as a communication platform to mobilize people into ministry. There, people are encouraged, loved upon, unified in heart and spirit, and exposed to a wide variety of opportunities in which to serve. Usually four different ministry opportunities are brought to their attention and, naturally, people are warmly invited to get involved.”

Beaverton Foursquare is finding that the lunches provide a great first step for people to get exposed to the 50+ ministry. Michael continues, “More and more we are becoming aware of the almost untapped and seemingly ‘bottomless reservoir’ of support older adults are able to offer to our local church, community, and kingdom work. Now our eyes are wide open because lying there, still dormant, is an astounding gift just waiting to be found.”

Another traditional ministry with a new purpose is the birthday ministry at Chapelwood. Every month, the BOLDer ministry sends a birthday card to the older adults connected with the church that are 70 years or older. Mopsy, director of the 50-plus ministry explains, “In the card we write that we will be specifically praying for them on their birthday and if they have any prayer concerns that they would like to share to give me a call. I receive phone calls from older adults that say, ‘thank you so much for remembering my birthday. At my age people usually don’t remember.’ This is a way that we can stay connected with individuals and show that we care about them.”

## Older Adult Ministries are Becoming Holistic in Their Philosophy

Eating healthy, getting enough exercise, planning retirement housing, and choosing a Medicare plan are just a few of the concerns that affect many older adults. Some churches are discovering that by responding to the needs of the whole person (physical, emotional, and spiritual) they can more effectively reach older adults in their church and community.

### **Physical Exercise**

On any given Monday, Wednesday, or Friday

older adults can be found walking in the Johnson Ferry activity center or on the outdoor track in order to improve their health. This ministry, called “Trackers” began when Peggy decided to encourage the older adults to walk 10,000 steps a day. “We know of the importance of staying physically active as we age and so the church purchased pedometers and t-shirts for the seniors and told them that once they reached 10,000 steps the pedometer was their’s to keep.” The walking ministry has drawn people that Peggy called “pew sitters.” “When these adults first come they don’t know anyone, but many of them have made friends and are now involved in a Sunday school class or other senior adult group.”

The Trackers ministry also draws in people from the community. Many older adults are looking for ways to improve their health in a safe environment. As they walk, the senior members of the church reach out to them and invite them to upcoming trips and socials where they can get more connected to the ministry.

Peggy says it is also important for people to exercise their minds as well as their bodies and so as the seniors walk they are given Scripture verses on notecards that they can read and memorize.

### **Parish Nurse<sup>3</sup>**

Another ministry that has been growing throughout churches of all sizes and denominations is the parish nurse program. Also called health ministry, this modern movement originated in 1980 under the leadership of Granger E. Westerberg. Parish nurses are currently licensed registered nurses who obtain additional training to help them in developing health and caring ministries in churches. While the traditional parish nurse program serves all ages of the church body, many older adult ministries have found it to be an effective way of meeting needs among the seniors. Chronic illnesses and medical problems become more common as people



Monthly blood pressure clinics are a part of the Parish Nurse program offered by First Evangelical Free Church.

age and older adults often feel lost and unsure where to turn for help. Monthly blood pressure clinics, a workshop on nutrition, or a directory listing community resources for seniors are just a few of the ways that a parish nurse program can be a blessing to the older adult ministry.

There are 11 volunteer parish nurses under the direction of one full-time nurse who is a church staff member at First Evangelical Free Church in



A parish nurse in the First Evangelical Free program makes a home visit.

Fullerton. These nurses spend much of their time being advocates for older adults, especially those that do not have family to care for them. They help seniors sort through the maze of paperwork and ensure that they get the medical benefits that they are entitled to.

Rosalyn says, “It helps to have a parish nurse that knows the health lingo and can sit down with the social worker and say, ‘this individual qualifies.’ We had a woman who was hospitalized and needed to have a hospital bed set up at home. The parish nurse was able to check with the woman’s insurance company and make arrangements for the bed to be delivered to her house.”

The parish nurse program at First Evangelical Free serves the church and community by:

- *Assessing and coordinating care for the elderly and those with health challenges.*
- *Following up with those who have been hospitalized and need continued assistance.*
- *Giving support to the terminally ill, their families, and their caregivers.*
- *Providing referrals to other church and community programs*
- *Sharing information on health and wellness.*
- *Offering prayer and the gift of presence during times of need.*

### **Life After Fifty Fair**

Another way that churches are ministering to the various needs of senior adults is through educational endeavors. Peggy recalls what motivated her to host the first Life After Fifty Fair, “I would get calls constantly from people who would ask, ‘What should I do to help my mother?’ ‘How should I handle this situation with my father?’ They were overwhelmed and stressed by the demands of retirement and aging and could not make informed decisions. They needed to know the variety of options and services that were available.”

The Life After Fifty Ministry at Johnson Ferry decided to respond to this need with an educational fair, hosted at the church and open to the entire community. Providers and experts from various services were invited to come and set up a booth, give out literature, and inform the attendees of their options. Peggy wanted to ensure that the entire range of needs was addressed, and so the event was organized around the following categories:

- *Housing*
- *Legal & Financial*
- *Health & Medical*
- *Travel & Leisure*
- *Nutrition & Fitness*

The Life After Fifty Fair was marketed through radio, television, local magazines, newspapers, and word of mouth. Nearly 1,000 seniors and their families attended the first fair.

Macon Lowe, a retired CEO and Bible teacher at Johnson Ferry reflected, “It is amazing that people spend more time planning a vacation, then planning the various issues associated with retirement. The Life After Fifty Fair was a smorgasbord of information including advice about Medicare, counsel from attorneys, funeral preparation and cholesterol testing. There was something for everyone.”

### **Grief Support**

An emotional crisis that often affects older adults is the loss of their spouse. Tim Stafford, in his book *As Our Years Increase*, shares part of a memo he wrote to his mother: “Before now, I never thought much about it when I heard that an



older person had lost a spouse. A child dying of leukemia shakes me; but the end of forty or fifty years of loving, daily companionship I have treated as something ordinary. I have been powerfully affected by my conversations with widows. The impact of their loss is so plainly overwhelming. These conversations have made me think of you...It is hard to imagine what it would mean for you to be alone, without Dad...It will be as though, one old intertwined tree having fallen, the other's shape is seen clearly for the first time."<sup>4</sup>

The First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton has taken a proactive stand when it comes to grief support. John Coulombe, pastor to senior adults, says that the next venue for evangelistic crusades would be in memorial services. Rosalyn and John actively encourage their church members to prepare their plans for their memorial services, using standard forms they have developed. "We need to maximize every opportunity to draw others to the Lord. It would be such a waste if the testimonies of God's people are not declared during their memorial services," says John. In light of this, "Alongside" ministry was developed. This team coordinates memorial services with trained volunteers from the 50+ ministry to run alongside a grieving family through the whole planning process. These volunteers serve as liaisons between the church and the family, and direct them to grief support groups offered by the church.



From left: Rosalyn and Gerry Encarnacion and John and Jacque Coulombe.

**Community Christian Church** at Carillon (discussed in more detail on p. 12), is reaching out to those individuals coping with the loss of a loved one through a grief support group. The group, which meets twice a month, has had as many as twenty people in attendance. Earl Ferguson, pastor of Carillon says, "Some of the people who attended the grief group have now started attending a church service and have found their way back to God."

Adapting is certainly a life task that people of all ages have to confront. Getting married, coping with a job change, or adjusting to a new baby are a few of the ways that adults have to adapt as they travel through life. However, research has shown that as age increases the need to adapt to change becomes more prevalent. Older adults are confronted with major physical problems, forced retirement, death of a spouse and often a move to a retirement home. Sometimes all of these changes occur at the same time.

The widely used "Social Readjustment Scale", developed by Dr. Holmes and Dr. Rahe, has individuals indicate the life events they have encountered in the past year.<sup>5</sup> Each event is assigned a point value and the total number indicates the impact of these life changing events on a person's overall health and well-being. Those individuals with higher scores were often at risk of suffering from debilitating physical symptoms. Win and Charles Arn in their book, *Catch the Age Wave*, make the important point that nearly half of the events on the list typically occur in the lives of persons over age 50. Events such as: death of spouse, death of close family member, retirement, change in health of family member, death of close friend, change in living conditions, change in recreation and change in sleeping habits. They say, "The older people become the more frequently they experience life-changing events. These events provide windows of opportunity for the church in that people seem to move from resistance or indifference to the gospel to receptivity to its message of hope and salvation when a caring person offers help."<sup>6</sup>

Churches that create ministries in response to the whole person (physical, emotional, and spiritual) are providing tangible expressions of Christ's love and healing power, much like what James says in James 2:14-17, "What good is it, my brothers, if a

man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if

PEOPLE OVER 50  
PERCEIVE THE  
WORD *SENIOR*  
AS BEING  
DESCRIPTIVE OF  
SOMETHING THAT  
THEY ARE NOT.

it is not accompanied by action, is dead." At no time is this more important than when people, in this case older adults, are experiencing so many life-altering events.

**New expressions give new identity to the over 50 set**

People over 50 perceive the word *senior* as being descriptive of something that

they are not. Old, senior, elderly and retired are all words that have negative connotations attached to them. In this country, youth is often glorified while old age is something to be avoided. Just browsing through greeting cards at a store will shed light on the many negative themes that surround the context of aging.

These negative attitudes have crept into the church and the majority of older adult ministries face the challenge of what name to use to describe the audience that their ministries seek to reach. Northshore's Richard Bergstrom says, "It is a huge dilemma to try and have an identity and a name that won't repel people. People in their 50s and early 60s have a real push back to anything that smells of senioritis. This is one of our greatest challenges."

THE GREATEST  
LIMITATION FACING  
OLDER ADULTS IS NOT  
PHYSICAL OR MENTAL  
HANDICAPS, BUT  
RATHER THE NEGATIVE  
STEREOTYPES THAT EXIST  
REGARDING AGING.

Experience has shown that this is a tough battle to fight. Linda Woolf, of Webster University in St. Louis, MO said that the greatest limitation facing older adults is not physical or mental handicaps, but rather the negative stereotypes that exist regarding aging.<sup>7</sup>

However there is hope. By eliminating age descriptors and creating educational opportunities, many churches are discovering that they can still have effective older adult ministries, without using the word "senior."

**Eliminate the Age Connotation**

The 50-plus ministry at Peninsula Covenant uses the name Plus to identify their ministry. "We dropped the number 50 from 50-plus and retained the word plus to describe our ministry. The rationale behind this name is that we want to *add* something to peoples' lives," says Rod Toews, director of Plus ministries.

Every individual that is a part of the Plus ministry wears a name tag on Sunday mornings to identify themselves as well as to bring exposure to the ministry. Rod says, "We are focusing on a life stage of people rather than mentioning the numerical age." The Plus ministry lets the particular activity drive the age of the people that participate.

The ministry has hosted motorcycle rides and hiking trips that appeal to the baby boomer crowd, whereas a hymn sing reaches those that are 65-80 years old. Dot Toews, lay member of the Plus Ministry, says, "All of our activities are inclusive, but some things appeal to those that are younger and others appeal to the older."

**Consider Changing the Name of the Ministry**

Both First Evangelical Free and Johnson Ferry have found success in simply changing the name of the older adult ministry. First Evangelical has had a dynamic ministry with older adults for a number of years. The name of the ministry, Forever Young had been used for nearly 20 years and reflected the vision of the verse in Psalm 92:14; "They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green." Rosalyn recalls what prompted them to change their name, "We were having problems getting the "new-old" (those in their 50s and 60s) to participate in any of our activities. In their eyes, everything was related to the past senior group, which they identified as being old. So we had to take a fresh look at how to reorganize our ministry in order to attract the younger ones." It took three years to convince many of the older adults that identified with the Forever Young name to be willing to change the ministry name to Encore.<sup>8</sup> Rosalyn and the



With a name like Encore, several “new-olds” began to join the ministry at First Evangelical.

leadership team liked the name Encore because it means, “great job; do it again.” The next phase in the reorganization of their ministry is to simply provide opportunities for the “new-olds” to interact with those that have been participating for a long time.

## CHANGING THE NEGATIVE IMAGE OF AGING STARTS WITH CHANGING THE TERMINOLOGY.

Peggy, at Johnson Ferry had a similar experience with the name of the older adult ministry. The original name was PrimeTimers and Peggy changed the name to Life After Fifty. Peggy recalls, “People in their 60s and 70s resisted the PrimeTimers group and said, “Oh, that is not for us, we’re not that old.” Once the name changed to Life After Fifty, we began to see more involvement of people from this age group as well as some people in their 50s. People weren’t intimidated anymore.”

Peggy feels that the name of the ministry may have to be changed often because each new generation will not identify with the previous name.

In both of these examples, the actual title of the ministry is not the concern, but rather peoples’ perceptions. Interestingly, Don Simmons, expert on the topic of volunteerism, says, “You will never change the culture until you start to change the language.” Changing the negative image of aging starts with changing the terminology. Rather than seeing the later years as something to be avoided, older adults should view aging as it is written about in Proverbs 16:31, “Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life.”

### **Draw attention to those making a difference**

One of the best ways to change the negative

stereotypes attached to aging is by highlighting those that are making significant contributions in their later years. The Plus ministry publishes a full color, 8 page newsletter<sup>9</sup> every other month in which they feature on the front cover an individual or couple in the 50-plus age range from the church. The article relates a short biography of the person and emphasizes their service to the Lord and their spiritual life. The leadership strategically chooses different ages of older adults, highlighting people in their 50s, 60s and 70s. “This communication tool has been very effective in creating a positive view of our ministry. People really look forward to the newsletter and anticipate it coming,” says Larry Nunan, lay leader of Plus.

Rosalyn believes that it takes exposure and involvement to change the fears people have about aging. To attempt to involve the new-olds into the ministry, they are having the Sunday school classes that are comprised of 50 and 60 year olds host a monthly event for the ministry. “By hosting the event, they are involved in the planning and execution of the program. This should help to alleviate some of their fears about what it means to be older.”

### **Educate people regarding the truths of aging**

Another effective way of combating the negative views of aging is through education. First Evangelical Free has embraced the importance of this and has developed an aging sensitivity curriculum that they share with young people. The curriculum has been taught through the



A group of helpers pose at a monthly Sunday school event called Moonlight Strings.

children's ministry at the church to grades 1-4 for one-hour on Sundays over a 5 week period, as well as in the senior high school level as a 2-week curriculum.

Children learn through interactive games and activities some of the changes in vision, hearing and balance that occur with age and are trained in how to be more compassionate and respectful around those who are older. They also are taught a scriptural view of aging through verses like Psalms 92:14 and character studies, such as the life of Moses. Rosalyn, writer and teacher of the curriculum, shares "Part of the program is to bring in seniors who have had an active youth life, like those who have fought in the war and can show the kids their medals. Some of these children do not see their grandparents and therefore do not have the opportunity to interact with a different generation. All they know about aging is what they see through the media. We want to show them another viewpoint." An important part of the curriculum is to encourage young people to think about how God can use them now to minister to older adults. Towards the end of the lessons, the children visit elders in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. Rosalyn has taken



The aging sensitivity curriculum at First Evangelical allows children the opportunity to interact with a different generation.

the curriculum outside the church walls and partners with schools that want to expose the children to a positive view of aging. She says, "I do this because it is my passion. To look into the faces of the kids and see that their misconceptions about aging are rectified—this is a great joy for me."

### Reaching Certain People Groups that Only 50-Plus Adults Can Access

It is becoming quite popular for people to move into a 55+ adult community when they retire. Most large metropolitan areas, as well as smaller communities have recognized this trend and are

responding with unique living environments for the active retiree. Del Webb, the nation's leader in building active adult communities, found in a survey that 59% of baby boomers plan to relocate upon retirement with 7% of those considering a 55+ living community.<sup>10</sup>

These communities are marketed as resort style living with golf courses, recreational activities and fitness centers. But what about the spiritual lives of the thousands of adults who live in these communities? Some churches are taking a serious look at the importance of evangelizing and ministering to older adults where they live.

#### *A Church inside the community*

**Community Christian Church** (<http://www.communitychristian.org>), a multi-site campus based church in Naperville, IL, has one of its sites in Carillon, a 55+ living community in the Chicago suburbs. It began with the vision of one woman who lived in Carillon and wanted to have church services in the clubhouse. Getting approval for this was difficult but eventually they began having monthly worship services. Not long after, Community Christian learned of the need, embraced this ministry and started weekly services. In May of 2004, Earl Ferguson (pastor of Carillon) moved with this wife Pat into one of the homes inside Carillon. Earl recalls, "I had just finished a 38 year ministry and was searching for what God had next for me. My first response when asked to be the Carillon pastor, was 'No!' I was not interested and did not want to live in a community where everyone was 55+!"

God had other plans for Earl and Pat, who is the creative arts director for the campus. Since moving into the community and taking on the leadership role of the church campus, attendance at Sunday morning services has grown from 50 to 150.

One of the challenges that the church faces is that they can not invite people that live outside of Carillon to join them. The Carillon Adult Master Association insists that the clubhouse be only for those who live inside Carillon. The leaders of the church do not let this discourage them. Earl laughs and says, "We have a mission field of 3600 people, all living within Carillon."

Small groups are a foundational part of the ministry and this is often the entry point for a

person's involvement with the church. Earl says, "We have as many people in small groups as attend church services on Sunday morning." Currently there are 13 groups. Many of the people living in Carillon have come into a saving relationship with Christ or found their way back to church through the small group ministry. One of these men, Bob, had owned his own business and traveled all over the country before retiring and moving into Carillon. Earl shares, "We invited him initially to a small group and we could



EARL BAPTIZES BOB IN A NEARBY LAKE.

practically see his eyes begin to open to the message of the gospel. Bob was baptized when he was 80 years old and told his friends and family, 'All my life I've known something was missing and now I know what it is.'"

But the benefits go both ways. Carillon is a blessing to the original campus as well. They are able to provide numerous volunteers for projects, such as a partnership that Community Christian has with a local elementary school. The school has a heavy Hispanic influence and many of the families have very little. The church hosts a Christmas event where gifts are collected, sorted and then made available at the school for parents to purchase for a small amount of money. While the parents are shopping for these gifts, the kids are entertained with crafts and music in various classrooms. Last year alone the church collected 5,000 gifts and now the ministry has expanded to include another school in the area. Many of the members of the Carillon church campus give of their time to this outreach event.

Carillon is also a financial blessing to the church, in that many of the older adults have discretionary resources that they can give. Pat says, "Carillon is able to bring people to Christ very economically, in that we meet in the campus clubhouse and do not have to pay rent." Earl reflects, "It's great to have a high percentage of the money that is given go towards face to face ministry with people."

## THE RELATIONSHIPS FORMED THROUGH SMALL GROUPS MAKE A HUGE IMPACT ON PEOPLE IN THE LATER YEARS OF THEIR LIVES.

The relationships formed through small groups make a huge impact on people in the later years of their lives. In fact, Earl recalls someone saying, "I have more close friends now than I have had all my life." Sentiments like this one are a normal occurrence among the people in Carillon.

The Carillon church campus benefits greatly by being a part of the larger Community Christian Church. All leaders in any capacity from all the campuses attend a monthly gathering where they are trained and encouraged in their task as leaders. Each of the campus pastors, including Earl, meet weekly to plan and prepare upcoming sermons. Pat as the creative arts director also has a weekly meeting where she gathers ideas for music, drama, and video to enhance the Sunday service.

### ***Church members living in the community***

Not all churches have the opportunity or the ability to plant a church inside a 55+ living community. However, there are other ways to reach those living inside these neighborhoods. First Evangelical Free is very intentional about training their church members who live in these communities to be involved and visible. Rosalyn says, "We encourage our church members to be a part of the Home Owners Association or to be active in the crisis response teams in the communities. When they are in leadership, they notice the homes and the individuals who need help. At this point, the church's 'Family Fix-it Day' ministry can step in and serve the people." From this, the older adults are invited to a social activity at the church and begin to develop relationships with others who can tell them about Christ. "We also will help someone who is moving out of the community and into an assisted living facility or nursing home. This can be a very difficult time for people, especially for those who don't have family. We will often help them pack and even host a garage sale for them while one

of our church members takes them out to lunch or a movie.”

Older adults and church leaders are discovering the great importance of integrating into 55+ communities across the country. Much like missionaries who move and settle in a different country, churches that are willing to invest time and resources into these communities are seeing people come to Christ and grow in their relationship with Him.

### Bottom Line—It’s about an Attitude of Service

An overarching attitude that prevails through all of the mentioned innovations is that older adults are serving others—not looking for people to serve them. This debunks the myth that older adults are purely interested in a life of leisure just wanting to golf, play bridge or sit in a rocking chair. There is a generation of people today who are approaching their later years of life much like Caleb did in Joshua 14.

OLDER ADULTS ARE  
SERVING OTHERS—  
NOT LOOKING  
FOR PEOPLE TO  
SERVE THEM.

After years and years the Israelites were finally able to move into the land promised to them. Caleb stood on the fringes of Hebron, the place that God had promised to him 45 years earlier, and said these words in verses 10b and 11, “So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m

just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country the Lord promised me that day.” Here is a man that did not let age keep him from fulfilling God’s purpose for his life nor did he expect others to serve him. Instead he embraced his second half and depended on God to help him finish well.

The American church of the early 21st century finds itself on the brink of an age explosion. Innovative churches are recapturing the spirit of Caleb and creating strategic and purposeful older adult ministries. A 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. The potential impact of this army of 50-plus adults is incredible. Leona and Richard Bergstrom passionately say, “There is great power in age: power in wisdom, power in experience, power in time and financial resources! It is time to unleash that power within congregations and churches across the country!”<sup>11</sup>



AMY HANSON



DON WILCOX

*Amy Hanson is a freelance writer for Leadership Network, as well as an educator, speaker, and consultant in older adult ministry and gerontology. She was the active adult (50+) ministries director at Central Christian Church in Las Vegas, before moving to Nebraska to complete her Ph.D. in Human Sciences. She teaches several aging courses at the college-level and has conducted research on volunteerism among older adults in the church. Amy lives in Omaha, NE, is married to Jon and they have a three-year old daughter named Ella. You can find out more about Amy's ministry by visiting [www.amyhanson.net](http://www.amyhanson.net).*

Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is **Amy Hanson**. Editorial advisors were **Don Wilcox**, Director of Encore Generation Ministry Leadership Communities for Leadership Network and **Warren Bird**, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support for Leadership Network. Contact them via [Diana.Jones@leadnet.org](mailto:Diana.Jones@leadnet.org)

© 2007 Leadership Network (<http://www.leadnet.org>)

Want to find more resources like this one? For the most current listing of free and purchasable resources, some of which are distributed solely through Leadership Network, go to [http://www.leadnet.org/Resources\\_downloads.asp](http://www.leadnet.org/Resources_downloads.asp) (alternate: <http://www.leadnet.org>, then select "resources" then "downloads") or call toll-free 800-765-5323 or 214-969-5950 outside the U.S. and Canada.

Leadership Network's mission is to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact.

*\* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; (Cited in Hillier, S. & Barrow, G. (2007). *Aging, the Individual, and Society* (8th ed.) pg.15

<sup>2</sup> *Losing a Million Minds: Confronting the Tragedy of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*. U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987; p. 14. (As found on <http://www.alz.org>).

<sup>3</sup> To read more about Parish Nurses and innovative strategies in Healthcare please download *One Heart Many Models* by Pat Springle at the following link:  
[http://www.leadnet.org/resources\\_downloads.asp](http://www.leadnet.org/resources_downloads.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Stafford, T. (1989). *As Our Years Increase: Loving, Caring, Preparing: A Guide*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids MI. p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Holmes, T., & Rahe, R. (1967). The Social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of psychosomatic research*, 213-218.

<sup>6</sup> Arn W. & Arn, C. (1999). *Catch the Age Wave: A Handbook for effective Ministry with Senior Adults*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press. p.69.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Woolf - Aging Quiz website page. <http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/myth.html>

<sup>8</sup> The ministry name Encore is catching on as Leadership Network has adopted it as the title of the leadership community for innovative ministries for adults who are 50 and older; and the team at Beaverton Foursquare church (see p. 6) has also changed their ministry name to ENCORE!! to match the heart of the 50+ age set.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.peninsulacovenant.com/Ministries/PLUS-SpotLights.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Features/3-06-18delweb.htm>, June 18, 2003 Baby Boomers Worried About Money for Retirement

<sup>11</sup> Bergstrom, L. & R. (2000). *Amazing Grays: Unleashing the Power of Age in your Congregations*. Church Health: Bellingham, WA. (quote from back cover of book).