

Whatever happened to ... senior adult ministry?

This is first in a series which will discuss how churches are taking a fresh look at old programs to meet today's needs.

It is dangerous to paint a generation with a broad brush, but AARP does note trends it sees in the senior generations, such as *gray* is in, the phrase *anti-aging beauty product* is out; and *immediate gratification* is in, *bucket lists* are out.

How does the church change with the times? I interviewed four persons who work with older adults: Leah Brown, Minister with Senior Adults at First, Asheville; George Fuller, founder of Life Compass Living; Andrew Garnett, Minister for Serving Christ at Forest Hills, Raleigh; and Carol Layton, Director of Communications and Administration for the North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry.

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How has senior adult ministry changed in recent years?

Carol: The old paradigm put seniors on a shelf and said, "Thanks for your service, now enjoy yourself at a monthly luncheon." Today's seniors want to be involved. The church is now challenged with providing intergenerational ministry opportunities to 4-5 generations.

Andrew: My congregation has definitely seen a shift toward senior adults not wanting to be considered senior adults. While the average age of my congregation has increased, the number of people on our homebound member list has decreased. People are increasingly reluctant to think of themselves as homebound and do not want to be placed on the homebound list like they once did. Another big change is the increasing reliance on lay people to minister to senior adults. While a minister has some general oversight, almost all of the logistics and planning is done by lay people.

Leah: Ten years ago, we had a strong group of people in their 80s-90s who were very actively engaged in programming. Today's younger seniors, those just retired and into their 70s and even into their 80s, don't want to identify as senior adults and don't expect the church to fulfill social needs. They find that on their own. Many still volunteer and do mission opportunities and we still have a very active senior adult group, but numbers have dropped from 180 to 75. Those who remember how the programming used to be wonder why the new seniors don't participate.

George: Baby boomers are strapped with emotional and financial burdens they have not been prepared for. When I was a pastor, I did not understand this. How many pastors understand Medicaid versus Medicare, the four stages and who pays for them, and the yearly changes to Affordable Care? These all have a huge impact on our people. The church has always rallied around persons in a time of grief but we do not have strategies to help as they live longer and spend all their savings. How can the church be a community for these persons?

How is your ministry addressing these changes?

Andrew: We now keep in touch with homebound senior adults primarily through lay members. We call our homebound members the "In Crowd." They are assigned at least one lay member who will visit or call them and one lay member who will send cards. These two people contact the In Crowd member regularly, and record all their interactions in our database. That multiplies our connections with homebound members and, by checking the database, our ministers can instantly know how much contact from the church each homebound member is receiving.

Carol: NCBAM offers volunteer and mission opportunities for well-aging seniors to minister to frail-aging seniors. We do that by connecting our Call Center clients with church volunteers in their communities. The NCBAM Call Center receives hundreds of calls each month from seniors in need from all over the state. Typical needs include friendly visits, transportation assistance, and wheelchair ramp construction.

Leah: The younger, pre-senior adults have many financial questions, so we have conversations about healthcare power of attorney, a living will, and how to managing finances for 30 more years of life. We are working to make stronger bonds between seniors and younger generations. We help seniors become mentors. Sunday School classes visit nursing home residents for Bible study together. We want them to know that they are not forgotten, so they do not feel isolated, alone, and depressed. We work to overcome whatever keeps them separated from us, such as transportation. We have learned to base our ministry on what that person wants, not on what we as the church want for them. We cannot assume we know what is best, so we have a conversation that starts, "Would it be helpful if we...?" We stay informed about what other agencies offer in our community. For example, every county has a Council on Aging with great resources.

George: Here are some crazy dreams I have: What if the church prepared younger adults for their senior adult years? What if churches transformed their missionary homes to become licensed care homes, say, for three widows – none of whom can keep up their own place? What if churches created "mutuality groups" of 15-20 persons who were committed to help one another financially, to offer respite for caregivers, to become surrogate grandparents, to receive hospice training? What if the church taught us how to be elders – wise leaders who live to support and to bless others rather than to build bigger barns? What if we used technology to connect our homebound with a virtual caregiver who could check in with them every day? What if we used technology to connect the homebound with one another?