

How to Begin a Senior Adult Ministry

If you are reading this you are likely considering starting a Senior Adult ministry. You have a concern for senior adults and want to lead your church to minister to this ever-growing group. This information will help you clarify what you want to accomplish, and then how to go about doing it.

You may already have a senior adult ministry!

You may already have a senior adult ministry and not realize it. Look at your Sunday School. Are there adult classes for folks over the age of 55? If so, you have a seniors' ministry already in place. If these classes are functioning properly, then you need do nothing else but help them be the best Sunday School classes possible. Your goal should be to enhance the quality of those classes and their leadership. Help these classes, whatever the age of their members, to organize around the five functions of the church: worship, discipleship, ministry, missions/evangelism, and fellowship. The class, with its teacher (discipleship) as the leader, would elect other leaders who would encourage the class in devotional and personal spiritual growth (worship), in care or shepherding groups and contacts (ministry), in special missions projects or regular outreach to prospects, visitors and new members (missions/evangelism), and in regular attendance, parties and other fun activities throughout the year (fellowship). If the adult Sunday School classes in your church were even half-way effective you would have the beginnings of a very good senior adult ministry.

You may want senior adult activities and events in addition to or complementary to Sunday School!

Understand What Kind of Senior Adults You Have

Ask the question: "Who are my senior adults and what do they like, need, and are able to do?" Seniors cannot be stereotyped or put neatly into a box.

There are **four broad factors** which shape the "over-55" adult and influence the organization, and activities in which they will want to be involved.

The age or "generation" factor is basic. Since society has decided anyone 55 (or 50) and older is a senior adult, we are looking at a 40 year (+/-) period. Such a time span allows for multiple generations of the same family to be classified as senior adults. Sociologists have identified four generations of senior adults. The G. I. Generation (Government Issue) includes folks born before 1925. The Silent Generation consists of those

Basic Resources

For good overviews of the **generations** see *Vision, Variety and Vitality: Teaching Today's Adult Generations* by Louis B. Hanks, (Convention Press [Life Way], 1996). Check your church media library for this resource it is out of print. Another good overview of **adult ministry in general with good emphasis on Senior Adults** is *Understanding Today's Adults: 25 Years and Older* by Jim Walter. This book is available as a free download online at www.lifeway.com. Click on "ministry downloads" in the left column and then scroll down to the "Understanding Series" section and click on *Understanding Today's Adults*. You will need Adobe Reader to access this file.

There are two "must have" **books** for beginning and continuing a senior adult Ministry: *Forward Together: A New Vision for Senior Adult Ministry* by John G. (Jay) Johnston, (LifeWay Press, 1998), and *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century: Step-by-Step Strategies for Reaching People Over 50* by David P. Gallagher, (Group, 2002).

There are two **magazines** that leaders of senior adult ministries must read. The first is *Mature Living* from LifeWay. This is the premier leisure reading magazine for seniors. It is an excellent outreach tool. Leaders benefit from the *Mature Living Leadership Edition*. These maga-

born between 1926 and 1945. Members of the Baby Boomer Generation were born between 1946 and 1963. Each generation has its own unique values and interests, developed because of historical events or societal trends of their formative years. These values and interests will, in turn, influence what seniors will like to do. Learn all you can about these generations.

Health is a second important factor. People are living longer and are in better health today than ever before. Someone has suggested that “sixty is the new forty.” This means that sixty year olds are acting more like their forty year old counterparts. They are rejecting the normal stereotype of what a sixty year old should be and do. Because people are healthier longer, there is more opportunity for organized social, ministry and study activities. There is a negative side to the health issue, also. Even the healthy must deal with the normal issues deteriorating health. It seems the older one becomes, the more pills one takes. Now, people just take the pills longer. Health concerns become a major focus for older seniors. Senior adult ministries can provide educational and ministry opportunities that will enrich seniors’ lives.

Money is always an issue for senior adults. Many seniors live on barely adequate fixed incomes. They often spend a larger percentage of that income for medicines. As Baby Boomers become senior adults they will have a significant disposable income. Take care to provide programs and ministries that are appropriate to the budgets and incomes of the seniors in your group. However, NEVER, presume to determine what your senior adult can or cannot afford. Let your senior adults, as a group and as individuals, determine what events or activities they will participate in.

Participant attitude will shape the ministry. Some seniors have a “can do” attitude. These folks have busy schedules and yet, are willing to be involved in almost anything of interest to them that health, money, and/or their schedules allow. Others are more selective in what they do. Some will want to focus outward in ministry, while others will only want to focus inward in fellowship. Leaders need to read the attitudes of their group members and realize that a ministry will indeed be shaped by the attitudes of its participants.

Discover needs and desires

Having discovered what kind of seniors are in your church, discover if they actually want or need additional activities. Survey them to see if they would be involved in such events, and, if so, what kinds of things would they like. There is no sense throwing parties no one attends!

zines can be ordered on the regular LifeWay Literature order form.

The second is *AARP: The Magazine*. If you are serious about ministering to senior adults you will read or skim this magazine regularly. You may not agree with everything in it, but it is important to know what is going on with and by senior adults in America!

Websites

Since senior adults are becoming more computer literate, surfing the world-wide web and keeping track of their families via e-mail, it is appropriate to be aware of websites of importance to them. While you can google over a million senior adult websites, here are four to start with:

www.lifeway.com This site will direct you to all the resources for adult and senior adult ministries offered by LifeWay Christian Resources. LifeWay has a topical index for [senior adult ministry](#) articles and [homebound adult](#) article on line.

Other Senior Adult Links

The following links to other Web sites are provided as a service. Inclusion on this page does not imply endorsement of the content of any sites.

<http://sam.ag.org> This is the senior adult ministry website for the Assemblies of God denomination and is full of good basic ideas and resources.

Find leaders and organizers

Gather an individual or group of folks who will plan, pray and work to make the ministry happen. Encourage one or more of this planning group/team or "Senior Adult Council" to become the "Senior Adult Champion(s)". This person or group would learn as much as they can about other senior adult ministries, senior adult needs, possible activities and social programs. They should read everything they can find to learn about senior adults (see the book list in the right-hand column) and attend any senior adult ministry training events they can find.

Make your plans and implement them!

Gather your leaders, survey your participants, plan and publicize your events, and your senior adult ministry is up and running! Just do it!

Special concerns for senior adult ministries

The Baby Boomers are coming! Boomers and older senior adults mix like oil and water. It is not that they dislike or disrespect each other. It is that they have different interests, needs and energy levels. Do not be disappointed if your younger seniors do not respond to the same thing as older ones. Younger seniors are doers and goers. They will respond to short-term trips or mission projects with meaning and purpose, more than having a weekly luncheon just for the joy of it. Anything that aims to involve this group must be done on their terms and schedules.

Be sure your facilities are senior adult friendly. Older seniors need easily accessible, comfortable, well-lit meeting space with good temperature control. These rooms should be close to the church worship center as well as large, accessible restrooms. Ramps, railings and bright lights are assets. Provide close-in, reserved parking places for seniors near their meeting rooms and the church auditorium. Be sure parking lots and walkways are well lit. During inclement weather provide assistance for seniors who need help in navigating stairs and slippery walkways.

A gentle reminder: When we minister to and with senior adults, we do so with the express purpose of sharing the love of Jesus with them. We must love and respect them, and honor them for their years of service and ministry. We must remember that they still have power and ability. They are still capable of serving others and of sharing the Gospel. Many of them are faithful prayer warriors. Our goal in senior adult ministry is to empower seniors in their own contexts to continue to serve the God they love so much!

www.qocasa.org This is the website The Christian Association of Senior Adults, an organization your church or leaders could join. The site provides immediate access to a bookstore with some good resources to purchase. Other resources are available to members only. CASA holds annual senior adult ministry conferences in California.

www.refdesk/seniors.html

This website is a gateway to other websites and downloads of material on topics of interest to senior adults, mainly of a secular nature.

Books

[*Designing an Older Adult Ministry*](#)

Richard Gentzler
Discipleship Resources, 1999

[*Catch the Age Wave*](#)

Win Arn and Charles Arn
Beacon Hill Press, 1999

[*Forward Together: A New Vision for Senior Adult Ministry*](#)

John G. Johnston
LifeWay Press, 1998

[*Understanding the Senior Adult: A Tool for Wholistic Ministry*](#)

Lois D. Knutson
Alban Institute, 1999

[*Engaging in Ministry with Older Adults*](#)

Dosia Carlson
Alban Institute, 1997

[*The Bible Answers Senior Adult Questions*](#)

Elmer L. Gray
Broadman Press, 1991

Examples of senior adult activities

- Regular attendance, as health permits, in church and Bible study, and regular and systematic giving to the ministry of the Church at home and around the world,
- Regularly scheduled daytime meals, Bible studies and game times (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.),
- Senior Adult music groups: choirs, small groups, hand bells, tambourine choirs, etc.
- Low-impact exercise programs such as “walking the mall,”
- Senior Handymen - senior men using their handyman skills to assist seniors and others in need of home or car repair,
- Regular prayer and Bible study groups, men and women meeting separately to pray,
- Organized trips to points of interest for fun and education, Senior Adult retreats and Conferences both in-and-out of state,
- Men’s and Women’s special ministry and mission projects (everything from working in Disaster Relief, accompanying youth mission trips, and constructions projects on churches or with groups like Habitat for Humanity to involvement in more sedate projects like Migrant Ministries or Samaritan’s Purse – Christmas Boxes,
- Encouraging seniors to have personal ministries such as adopting a college student, working as a tutor in a local elementary school.
- Senior women’s groups, who quilt, sew, knit or crochet for a particular project or needy group.

Acknowledgements:

This article was prepared by Dr. Dale “Geno” Robinson. Geno, until recently, served the California Southern Baptist Convention as Director of Adult Leadership and Senior Adult Ministries. He has led conferences on Senior Adult Ministries at the Glorieta West, Equipped for Excellence Sunday School Leadership Events and at various associational training events. He has written adult curriculum and a host of articles for LifeWay Christian Resources.

[*Caring For Your Aging Parents: When Love is Not Enough*](#)

Barbara Deane
NavPress, 1989

[*Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century: Step-by-step Strategies for Reaching People Over 50*](#)

Dr. David P. Gallagher
2002