

New Infusion of Enthusiasm for Midlife and Beyond Ministry  
by Bob Chism,CAM

### **Finishing Well**

Once on Sunday TV, I watched a church in Atlanta honoring one of its senior pastors who had been retired many years. He was 92 at that time and I wondered why the church had asked the older adult gentleman to preach at his age. After a warm welcome, introduction of the elderly senior pastor, and as the applause quieted down, he rose from his high back chair and walked slowly, with great effort and a sliding gait to the podium. Without a note or written paper of any kind, he placed both hands on the pulpit to steady himself and then quietly and slowly he began. "When I was asked to come here today and talk to you, your pastor asked me to tell you what was the greatest lesson ever learned in my 50-odd years of preaching. I thought about it for a few days and boiled it down to just one thing that made the most difference in my life and sustained me through all my trials. The one thing that I could always rely on when tears and heartbreak and pain and fear and sorrow paralyzed me... the only thing that would comfort was this verse "Jesus loves me this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, we are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so." When he finished, the church was quiet. You actually could hear his foot steps as he shuffled back to his chair. I don't believe I will ever forget it.

**"God's plan is ageless and unbiased"** is an expressive tagline of Forerunner of Faith, a second half intergenerational ministry at Village Church of Gurnee, Illinois. Society along with the Church is obsessed with youth, even with societal aging. It is generally accepted that age is an empty variable. It does not consider gender, race, disability, health, fitness, education, longevity, or the choices one has made concerning nutrition, smoking, drinking alcohol, exercise, and religious conviction which impacts one's health, vitality, well being, and ultimate mortality. Fortunately, greater awareness, understanding, sensitivity, positive attitudes between the generations, and share of mind is evolving through cutting edge research, education, conferences and publications by the Institute for American Church Growth, MacArthur Foundation Study of Aging, CASA Academy, CASA Network, and Dr Amy Hanson.

The Boomers are fast becoming "older adults", though they shun and detest the label. Yet "older adult" is considered to be the politically correct designation for them, since it now includes three categories: Middle Adults (50-69); Seniors (70-79); and Elderly (80+).

Based on a new type of older adult, one that are active, healthy, and capable of making significant contributions, as well as a bold new strategy that values each generation, there is great potential for new approaches to intergenerational ministry and to enlist the talents and passions of those in the second half of life.

Research confirms the benefit of older adult members:

**Giving:** contribute 70% of the average church budget

**Stability:** change their address 50% as often as the national average

**Volunteer:** spend 2 to 3 times as many available hours than any other group  
**Kingdom Building:** is the fastest growing population segment through 2040

Dr. Herb Shore of the Jewish Retirement Center in Dallas, Texas developed categories to differentiate appropriate leadership focus for each group by the church:

**Go-Go:** They need to be “challenged” to pursue Kingdom goals.

**Slow-Go:** They require ministry “adjustments” to allow participation.

**Can’t-Go:** “Planning” will enable them to make contributions.

**Won’t Go:** “Focus groups, training, and relationship building” can evangelize this group.

This speaks volumes for the need to redesign programs or create new positions.

Based on the uncertainties of today's society, older adult population explosion over the next 30 years, and given that over half (58%) in this group have no religious affiliation or won't go, the need for older adult evangelize (in and outreach) program redesign or new position creation is apparent.

During the 20th century, longevity has increased by 30 years. How or even if, an individual benefits from these added years depend on the result of personal lifestyle choices. Inactivity, nutrition, smoking, drinking alcohol, religious conviction, impacts one's health, well being, and ultimate mortality. The need for new older adult wellness ministry creation seems obvious.

Older adults have more personal inherited wealth than any other group. Since approximately 88 percent of their wealth is tied up in non-cash assets, the need for stewardship redesign or new position creation of generosity and benevolence development should be clear.

Older adult research reveals a bottom up leadership preference, upfront full disclosure, disdain for menial roles or ageist attitudes, and an impatience tendency. Church leaders may need to be more open, receptive to new ideas, willing to let go more, share responsibility, and involve members more in the decision making. Areas of redesign may include:

Demographic research and planning

Older adult evangelism

Generational connectivity

Older adult and youth ministry staff budget parity

Annual goal development, measurement, and reporting

Accountability of both membership and church leadership

Annual business meeting marketing and

Digital communication.

Some churches have developed older adult ministry positions that are serving senior and elder adults well, but are not attractive to middle adults. New positions need to be designed to foster wellness, evangelize adults in midlife; and cultivate generosity/benevolence in this group. Whether your church is small or large, the

question is not is a second half ministry position affordable; it is rather, can senior pastors afford not to consider multiple new ministry positions given societal aging, healthy longevity, and middle adult faith formation?

In *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rich Warren, states, "Once you gather a crowd of attendees you begin the important task of forming them into a congregation of members. Assimilation is moving people from awareness of your church, to attendance at your church to active membership in your church. If you will concentrate on building people, God will build the Church."

In conclusion, what can you exemplify for the Lord?

Life Course Ministry  
Ageless Evangelism  
Successful-Biblical Aging  
Positive Longevity Attitude  
Intergenerational Sensitivity  
Generosity and Benevolent Life Style

**CN Building Adult Ministries Resource Center (Posted January 28th, 2010)**