



Gray is a Vibrant Color

Ideas for Being a Vibrant Older Adult Congregation

In American culture, we prize youth. People spend lots of money to keep from looking older—from wrinkle creams to plastic surgery. This prizing of youth over age has permeated the attitudes of many small congregations. Too often ruling elders and teaching elders look out at their graying congregations and lament the lack of youth, children, and young families. They look at their congregations and see imminent decline unless young families are brought in. Yet, what these leaders miss is that gray is a vibrant color. There is a vital and vibrant ministry to be had in an older adult congregation — ministry to and with a group of people who have served God their whole lives and long to serve God and to continue to grow in faith and grace.

What are some ideas for creating a vibrant older adult congregation?

- Embrace who you are. The first step to becoming a vital and vibrant older adult congregation is to embrace your call to be an older adult congregation. In embracing this call, the church is not letting go of its youth ministry, its children’s programming, or its outreach to young families. Instead, it is embracing a new type of outreach to a group in the community, and in the church, that is often overlooked and undervalued. Encourage the development of older adult ministries that meet the specific needs of the members. Some ideas include:
 - Sponsoring a grief support group for recent widows or widowers.
 - Creating a singles group that meets regularly for food, fellowship, and encouragement.
 - Developing a prayer ministry team that includes people who are unable to attend worship regularly because of health or other reasons.
 - Sponsoring caregiver support groups.
 - Providing space for a respite program to provide caregivers of those with dementia and dementia-related illnesses with time for self-care.
- Train teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons in how to provide care for those with dementia and dementia-related illnesses.
 - Equip elders, deacons, and others to visit those with dementia and dementia-related illnesses. Too often, ruling elders, deacons, and even teaching elders are reluctant to visit because they don’t know how to communicate with the person they are visiting. A short course on simple pastoral care skills could help give

people the confidence they need to visit members with dementia and dementia-related illnesses.

- Create a team of ruling elders, deacons, and other volunteers who are willing to visit with members and friends of the church with dementia and dementia-related illnesses.
- Help members to embrace the ministry of being a care receiver.
 - Teach the congregation about the ministry of receiving care as part of a class on aging or as a separate program. A great resource for this is an article for *Christian Century* magazine by Joyce Ann Mercer entitled, "What does Christian vocation look like for the elderly?" Find it [here](#).
- Become a Dementia Friend at <https://www.dementiafriendsusa.org/> and encourage the congregation to do so as well.
- Look for opportunities to support Older Adults volunteering in mission and outreach programs for your community, whether supporting a community garden, food pantry, or neighborhood school.
- Join the Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries Network. POAMN offers great ideas and resources free for download for ministry with older adults. Their website is <https://poamn.org/>.

Congregations made up of primarily older adults can be vital and vibrant congregations. They can be places where lives are changed, and hope is given. They can be places of growth and learning. If leaders and members look at our graying congregations as simply churches headed toward decline, then they are missing the wonderful opportunities that the last third of life has to offer individuals, the congregation, and the local community.

Other Resources to explore:

Books

- *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr
- *Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia Through a Spiritual Lens* by Kenneth Lee Carder
- *One Foot in Eden: A Celtic View of the Stages of Life* by Philip J. Newell
- *Start with Yes: A Unique Way to Communicate with Those with Dementia* by Cathy Braxton and Tami Neumann

Movies

- *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011)
- *Up* (2009)

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POAMN: www.poamn.org

Office of Christian Formation: www.pcusa.org/formation

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