

SENIOR MINISTRY: A LOOK AT THE GROWING NUMBER OF SENIOR
CITIZENS AND HOW TO EFFECTIVELY MINISTER TO THEM

BY

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ABSTRACT

The “Baby Boomer” generation is getting older. By the year 2030 they are estimated to number over seven million people! The question we need to ask ourselves as a church body is, “Are we ready?” Senior ministry is going to be on the rise and a large part of the pastor’s ministry in the coming years.

The purpose of this thesis is to raise awareness of this changing demographic in America and give information on how to minister to seniors. By gathering information about the upcoming demographic I will show the urgency needed in senior ministry. This urgency is motivated by a desire to share the life-saving Word of God with seniors. I will also give some information on inreach and outreach programs a church can use and adapt to their own congregations. The hope is that by raising awareness and giving aid to congregations, many more seniors may hear the Gospel, continue to feel included in their congregations, and be comforted with Christ’s love until he calls them home.

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Literature Review

A majority of the research for this paper was completed using written sources from both Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and non-WELS authors. There is also a substantial amount of statistical research that was done using sources found on the internet as well as in books. There were also several pastors from WELS churches with whom I spoke in order to get an idea on how ministry to seniors is being carried out in places that seem to have a special emphasis on it.

The sources of written material from non-WELS authors gave perspective that the need to reach the older generation of Americans is something that all churches must focus on. These sources came from books found in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library as well as articles found online. The online sources were generally written more recently and gave some help as far as keeping a more up to date view on things. The books, while generally older sources, were still helpful to use as strategy guides and for understanding the mindset, stereotypes, and importance of ministry to the elderly. The main difficulty with these sources was that many of these sources had a focus on institutionalized ministry and not senior ministry in general. The online sources seemed a bit more geared toward a wider variety of senior ministry.

A majority of the WELS sources used were found on the Seminary's essay file. These too were sometimes a bit dated. Yet, they still provided very good information, especially the two articles written by Robert Schlicht which helped me understand the needs of the elderly and the importance of ministry to them. Through email I was able to get in contact with several people who work for the WELS Special Ministries. They were able to point me to people whom I could contact for more information on ministry to seniors. I also used three congregations as examples of ministry programs that could be used for senior citizens. This is not to say they are the best in the entire synod, but it does give an example and starting point for those who desire to begin an active and lively senior ministry program in their congregations.

To show the sense of urgency needed in this particular field, I took research and statistics from several polls which were found online. The Administration on Aging's website is where the majority of this research came from. Their site is filled with all the latest census information and

really does a nice job of breaking down a lot of information about seniors. I really enjoyed the charts and graphs they used which helped to visualize what they were saying in their words and statistics. These statistics showed from a worldly perspective the importance of senior ministry.

Of course, our most important reasoning to reach out to those who are seniors is to share the Gospel with them. We want to not only genuinely befriend them, but to share God's Word with them. For this thesis my focus was not to get bogged down in things like health issues or anything else. I did give brief overviews on a few topics just to get a handle on this target of ministry. The research gathered focuses on the topic of how to better understand seniors in order to meet them where they are with saving Gospel message.

Introduction

The final recorded words of Christ in the book of Matthew state, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mt. 28:19,20)

This passage is commonly used among church members. It is used in mission statements and written on banners, walls, and worship folders. It is used to give proof to the fact that infants need to be baptized because they are part of "all nations." Yet, we don't want to forget the other end of life. Senior citizens are also included in "all nations." A congregation may work hard to bring in young families with young children, but we dare not forget older adults who need to hear the Gospel just as much as the younger adults and children.¹

When it comes time for a church to celebrate a mission festival we often use Matthew 28:19,20 to remind ourselves to take the Word to the four corners of the world and spread the Gospel to those who are far away and have not yet known the love their Savior has for them. Yet again, we dare not forget those who are close by as well. We do not have to go far off to search for and find someone who needs the comfort of the Gospel. People in our own cities and communities need to be told about Christ. With these mission opportunities and prospects so

¹ Seniors, senior citizens, elderly, older persons, aged, and other such terms will all be used to refer to those aged 65 and older unless otherwise specified.

near to us, it is important to understand the demographic of the people around us. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, it appears this demographic is getting increasingly older.

There are many congregations in which a pastor can look out at his congregation and have a sea of white-haired parishioners looking back at him. To some, this may be perceived as a negative. They have in their heads a picture of an old and dying congregation which is stuck in its old ways. They perceive there is nothing more this congregation can do except slowly fade out of existence. After all, where is the youth in the church? How can a congregation thrive with an elderly population?

However, instead of looking at this as a negative we hopefully will view this as an opportunity to share the Gospel with an ever aging America. A census done in 2000 found there were 34,991,753 people aged 65 and older living in the United States. The projected number of senior citizens by 2030 is 71,453,471.² In just 30 years, the senior citizen population will have more than doubled! In a few short years there will be about 7.5 million elderly souls in the United States alone that need to be fed God's Word.

Why such a change in number? The Baby Boomer generation. There was a large growth in the number of children born right after World War II. The generations are usually broken down into categories that look like this:

Generations: 1925-1945 – Silent/Builders
1946-1964 - Boomers
1965-1979 - Gen X
1980-2000 - Millennials or Gen Y
2001-Present - Gen Z³

This “Boomer” generation has thousands of people turning 65 each and every day! This is a big challenge that pastors will be facing. How are they going to be able to make sure they have a ministry that encompasses and includes this age group? How can they make sure to give

²Administration on aging. http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx#state accessed last 11/22/2014

³Hintz, Mike. “*Seeing ‘All’ the Possibilities.*” A paper given for the Mission Conference. Oct 29-30, 2012. This paper was emailed to me by the author. “Boomers” highlighted in bold for emphasis.

adequate time to senior ministry when their schedules are already jammed full? What tools, resources, and methods work best? Are we ready for this ministry?

This paper is focused on opening up our eyes to seeing the demographics concerning this rise in senior citizens. While we look at these demographics it is also a good idea to dispel many misconceptions that are common when people think about the elderly. Once we have established the visible need in our world, we will journey through what God's Word has to say about aging and geriatric ministry.

Next, I will lay out some specific ideas on working with our elderly members. This includes the worship life, visitation, activities, volunteering, and some examples of what several churches have done and found successful. Finally, we will transition to looking at the outreach opportunities we have. The focus will be on finding where are the prospects, the challenges involved in outreach to seniors, and finally some methods that can be used to reach these lambs.

Whether we are ready or not, the age wave is coming. Win Arn points out in his book, *Catch the Age Wave: A Handbook for Effective Ministry with Senior Adults* that some churches don't want to get wet and so they just sit back and remember the good old days. Others want to get on the wave, but are slow and miss it. They are not prepared and never really get anything going. Others actually do get up on the wave and they take it for the ride of their lives. They are reaching the older generation with God's love.⁴ It is of interest to note that Arn wrote this book in 1993. The mindset toward a need for senior ministry is not something that is a new concept.

My prayer and hope is that as you read this thesis you will be stirred and excited to "catch the wave," and not miss the chance we have to share God's Word with the older generations. This is an area of ministry that congregations *need* to have on their radar. Christ's love for us is what compels us to desire to partake of this ministry. We want to share the good news of a Savior to all nations, including those who are getting near the end of their earthly life.

⁴ Arn, Charles, and Win Arn. *Catch the Age Wave: A Handbook for Effective Ministry with Senior Adults*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993). 38.

An Aging Demographic

In order to fully understand how to do effective inreach and outreach to those 65 and older, it is important for pastors and members of the church to get a good grasp on this demographic. The better we can understand seniors' situations and what is going on in their lives during their later years, the better we are able to serve them. It is important for us to intentionalize getting to know the challenges and joys senior citizens face.

Keeping this in mind, the first part of this thesis will be directed at understanding the statistics of aging in America and what it means for us. We will also want to look at some of the health difficulties associated with this age group, and many of the misconceptions people have as well. Furthermore, we will grapple with the relationship of older adults and their churches using a few more statistics.

*Aging Statistics*⁵

In the introduction it was stated that by 2030 it is estimated there will be about 7.5 million elderly people living in the United States. This is due partially to the increase of the Baby Boomer generation, but another factor is that people are living longer.

“‘The ratio between young and old is changing, and soon the whole world will look like Florida,’ observed journalist Gavin du Venage last year. He's right. A drop in infant mortality, eradication of certain diseases, better medical care, and healthier diets all have helped boost longevity in the developed West to record levels.”⁶

Advances in science have improved the quality and longevity of our lives. People have better healthcare and medicines. Therefore many are able to stay active longer because of medicines, surgeries, and treatments. These advances have led to more and more people are living longer. This means their time of grace, the time they have to hear about Jesus, is also growing longer.

The Administration on Aging's research supports the fact that people are living longer. The last census taken in 2012 shows that in the past ten years people reaching the age of 65 have

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics will be taken from the Administration on aging. http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx#state accessed last 11/22/2014

⁶ Kennedy, John. "A senior moment: the elderly population is steadily growing and will be for years: how some ministries are embracing the challenge." Christianity Today. Dec. 1, 2011

an average life expectancy of an additional 19.2 years. Just think of all the different experiences and things people can do with almost an extra 20 years of life! There is a greater chance to travel, learn, see great-grandchildren, and maybe even great-great-grandchildren!

A child who was born in 2011 is projected to live about 78.7 years. This is 30 years longer than a child born in 1900. A huge reason for this is the decrease in infant and child death rates. However, since 1990-2007 there has also been a decrease in the rate of death among people ages 65-84. This reduced death rate is especially true of males – 41.6% reduced rate for men aged 65-74 and by 29.5% reduced rate for men aged 75-84. This trend has been growing for more than a century and seemingly will continue to grow. Life expectancy at age 65 increased by 2.5 years between 1900-1960. From 1960-2007 there was a bigger jump of 4.2 years on average. The biggest threat to these growing statistics is an increase of smoking and obesity, especially for women over the age of 50.

There is also a difference in life expectancy between males and females. If we break down the statistic that people as a whole average an extra 19.2 years of life, men are on the lower side of the statistic (an average of 17.8 years), while women are above the average (averaging 20.4 years). In 2012 the ratio of older women to older men was 24.3 million women and only 18.8 million men. Simplified it breaks down to 129 women for every 100 men aged 65+. However, if you just look at those over the age of 85 the number increases to 200 women for every 100. These statistics point out that women generally live longer than men.

With the increase in life expectancy comes the shift in the number of people who fit into the category of senior citizens. The number of Americans aged 45-64 who will reach age 65 in the next two decades has increased by 24% since 2002. This older population (65+) numbered 43.1 million at the last census in 2012. Since 2002, this is an increase of 7.6 million people (or 21%) who are considered senior citizens. This means over 750,000 people a year turned 65 in a ten year span!

This older demographic is now making up about 13.7% of the entire American population. About one in every seven people in the U.S. is 65 or older. This shift is even more incredible because the percentage has tripled from 1900 (4.1%). The following graph found on the Administration of Aging’s website shows the huge upswing of the older population. It is amazing to see the change that has already taken place as well as looking ahead to what is expected in the future.

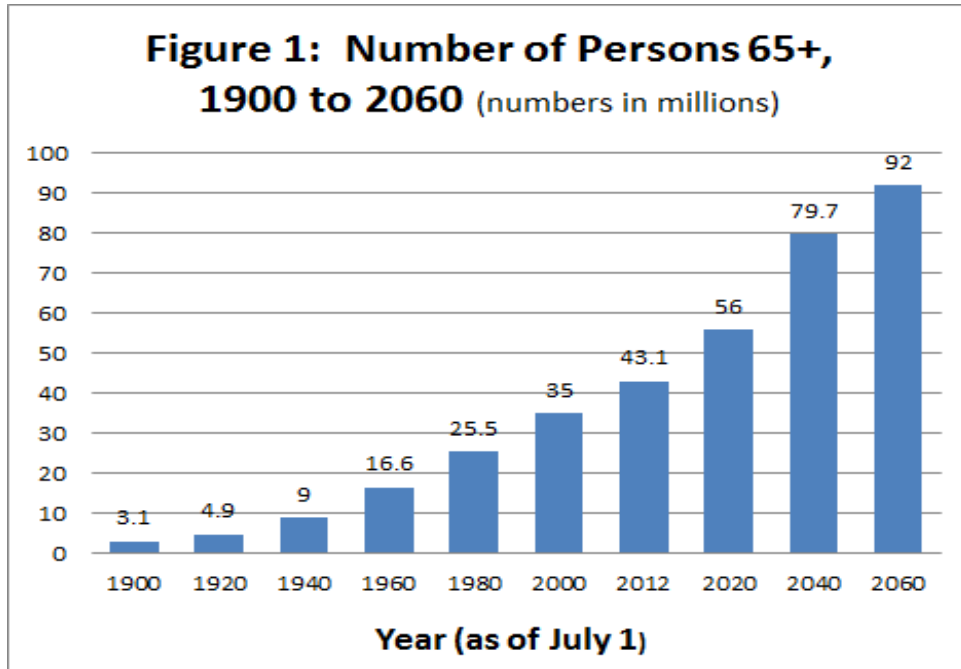


Chart taken from Administration on Aging Website.
http://www.aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/docs/2013_Profile.pdf

The older population itself is getting older. In 2012, the 65-74 age group (24 million) was more than 10 times larger than in 1900; the 75-84 group (13.3 million) was 17 times larger and the 85+ group (5.9 million) was 48 times larger. The projections for the 85+ population are expecting an increase from 5.9 million in 2012 to 14.1 million in 2040. Perhaps the most amazing statistic is the increase of the centenarian population. In 1980, 32,194 people had lived to see their 100th birthday. In 2012, there were 61,985 people over the age of 100. With a 93% increase, this number practically doubled!

Geographical Breakdown of the Senior Citizen Population

The proportion of older persons in the population varies considerably by state with some states experiencing a much greater growth in their older populations. In 2012, over half (59%) of persons 65+ lived in 12 states: California, Florida, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Virginia, and Georgia.⁷

As of 2012, people over the age of 65 make up 15% or more of the total population in 11 states:

- Florida (18.2%)
- Maine (17.0%)
- West Virginia (16.8%)
- Pennsylvania (16.0%)
- Montana (15.7%)
- Vermont (15.7%)
- Delaware (15.3%)
- Iowa (15.3%)
- Hawaii (15.1%)
- Rhode Island (15.1%)
- Arkansas (15.0%)

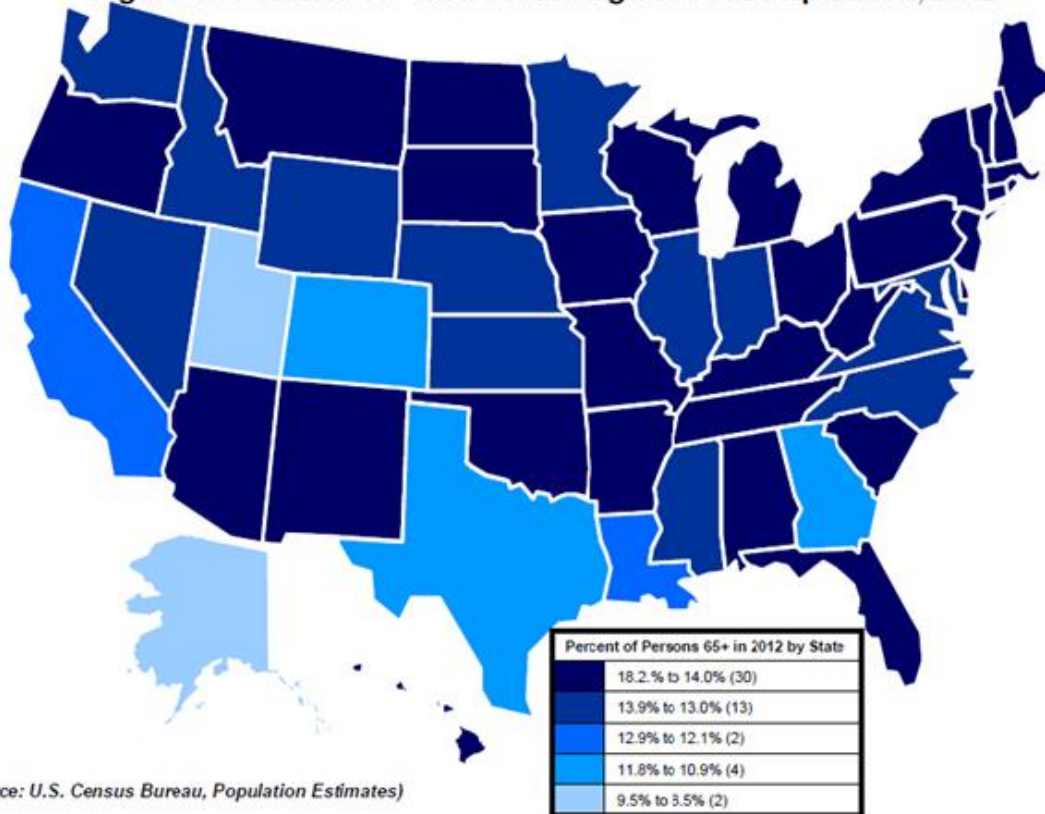
Also in 14 states, the 65 and older population increased by more than 30% from 2002 to 2012:

- Alaska (58.9%)
- Nevada (49.3%)
- Colorado (41.7%)
- Georgia (40.1%)
- Arizona (39.6%)
- Idaho (39.1%)
- South Carolina (39.1%)
- Utah (36.6%)
- North Carolina (34.6%)
- Washington (33.9%)
- New Mexico (33.6%)
- Delaware (33.6%)
- Texas (33.2%)
- Virginia (30.2%)

These statistics might be helpful when thinking about ministry done in your state. The following graphs help visualize the number of people 65+ living in each state and the percentage they make up. For a complete listing of all the states please see Appendix A.

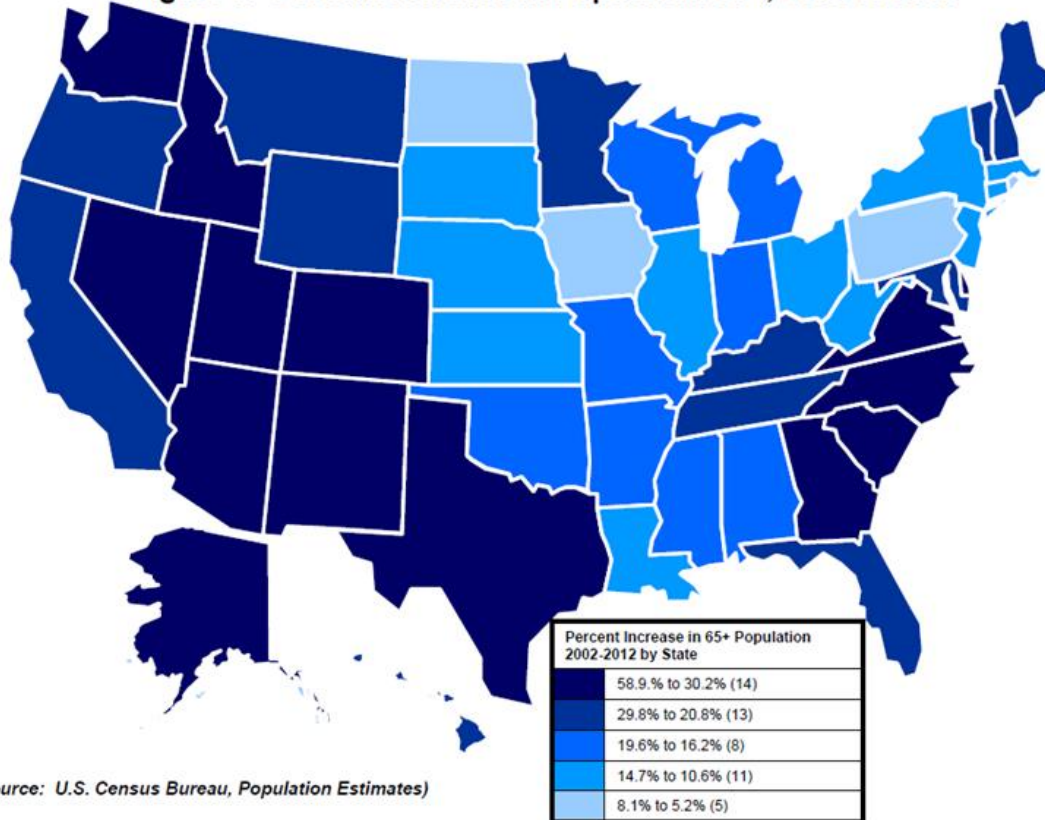
⁷ The percentage of senior citizens in these twelve states is as follows according to AOA.gov: California (4.6 million); Florida (3.5 million); Texas (2.8 million); New York (2.8 million); Pennsylvania (2.0 million). Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Virginia, and Georgia each had well over 1 million.

Figure 4: Persons 65+ as a Percentage of Total Population, 2012



(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates)

Figure 5: Percent Increase in Population 65+, 2002 to 2012



(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates)

Both graphs are taken from http://www.aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/docs/2013_Profile.pdf

It is also interesting to note that most senior citizens (81%) live in metropolitan areas. 66% live outside of principal cities⁸ while 34% lived inside the principal cities. The elderly are the least likely of any age group to relocate residence. Only 4% of older adults moved in 2012 to 2013. Of those who moved, 81% stayed within the same state.

Employment

When people think of senior citizens, perhaps they think of them as retired and no longer part of the working class. Yet, in 2013, 8.1 million (18.7%) of those 65+ were in the work force. There were 4.5 million men and 3.6 million women. While a greater number of men are contributing to this number, both genders are seeing a rise in members who are staying in the work place longer.

The increase in numbers is especially noticeable between the ages of 65-69. Why are senior citizens working longer? From the research I have done, it seems to me that there are several reasons seniors are putting off retirement. There may be a fear that they will not be able to live off of what they have earned previously in their lifetime. Medical costs are on the rise. More and more senior citizens seem to be finding themselves taking care of their children and grandchildren later in life and they need the finances to do so. Others may miss working and miss having something to do with themselves. They have a desire to feel as though they accomplished something and are still useful and are a productive member of society. These seniors tend to feel they are very capable and have the time to hold a full-time or part-time job.

Living Situations and Marital Status

When the topic of senior ministry is brought up, quite possibly thoughts and plans turn toward shut-in visits and going to assisted living facilities and nursing homes. However, only a small number of the senior citizen population lives in an institutionalized setting. Only 1.5 million people (3.5% of the demographic) were found to be in care facilities. As expected the

⁸“The largest city in each metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area is designated a ‘principal city.’ Additional cities qualify if specified requirements are met concerning population size and employment. The title of each metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area consists of the names of up to three of its principal cities and the name of each state into which the metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area extends. Titles of metropolitan divisions also typically are based on principal city names but in certain cases consist of county names.” Information about principal cities is taken from <http://www.census.gov/population/metro/about/>

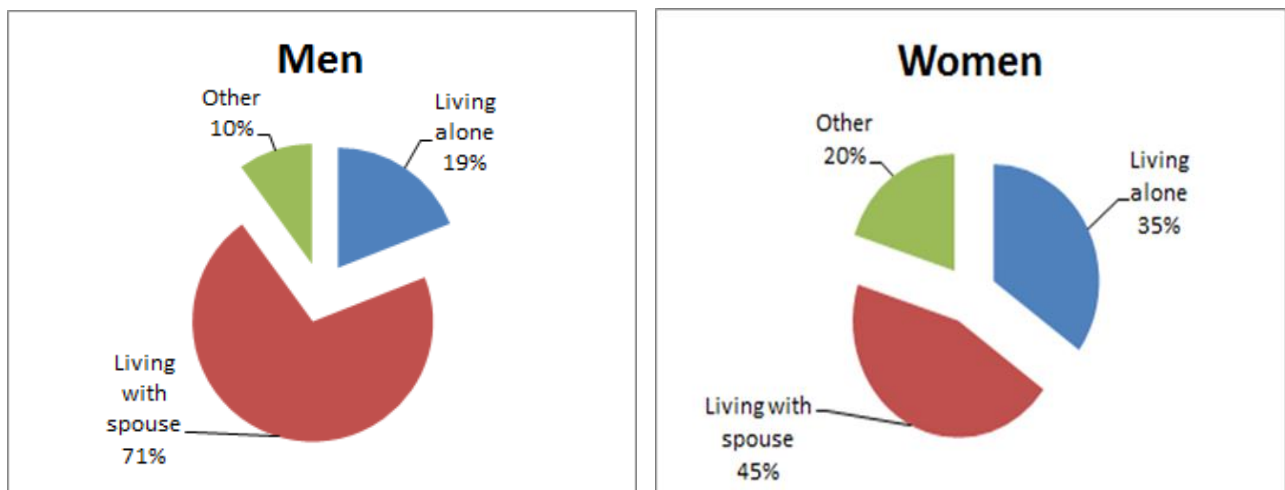
percentage increases dramatically with age, 1% for persons 65-74 years to 3% for persons 75-84 years and 10% for persons 85+. Also of note, in 2009, approximately 2.7% of the elderly lived in senior housing with at least one supportive service available to their residents.⁹

For those who are noninstitutionalized, over half (57%) of them live with a spouse. Since women tend to live longer than men, men have a higher percentage of living with their spouse. As age increases the number of those living with their spouse decreases, especially for women. This is due to some spouses needing to be institutionalized or others who have died.

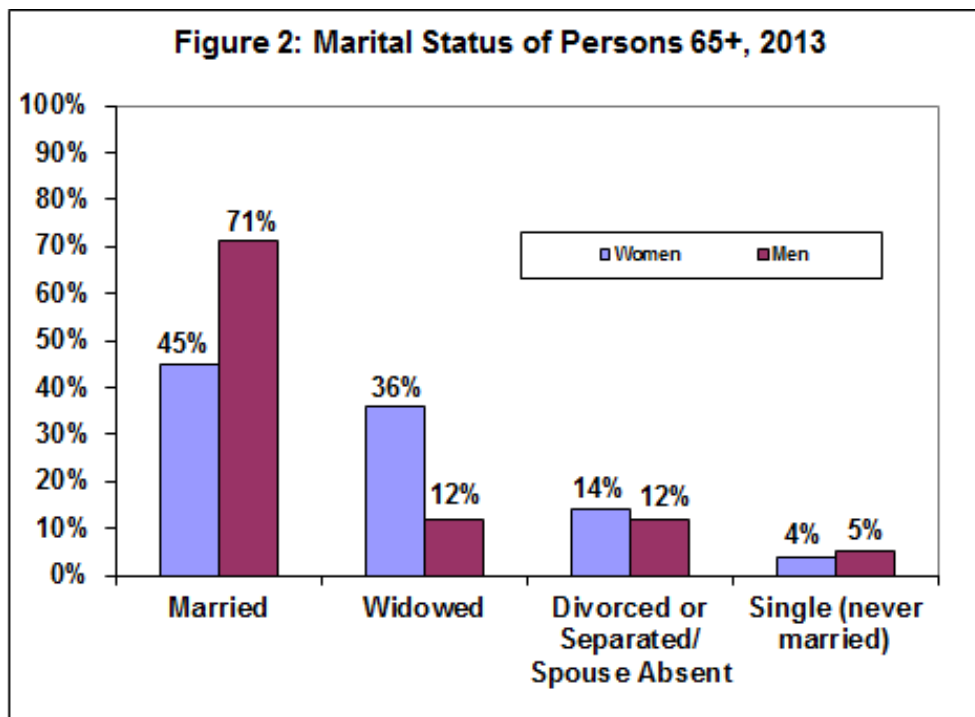
About 28% (12.1 million) of senior citizens lived alone in 2013. Here we see a dramatic difference between men and women, 8.4 million seniors living alone are women as opposed to only 3.7 million men. There is an increase of grandchildren who are living with their grandparents. In 2012, 2.1 million older people had a grandchild present in their home. About 518,000 of them had primary responsibility for those grandchildren. This is an added pressure for senior citizens to stay working and gives them an additional challenge of raising a child later in their lives.

The following graphs provide information on the marital status and living situations of senior citizens.

Living Situations of Men and Women



⁹ Supportive services consist of things such as transportation, legal help, personal care and chores, and even adult day care. For a more complete listing see http://www.aoa.acl.gov/AoA_Programs/HCLTC/supportive_services/index.aspx



Graphs are taken from http://www.aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/docs/2013_Profile.pdf

Health Difficulties

As the body begins to age, it starts to break down. Sadly, this is one of the effects of sin in our world. The body was not created to break down through the aging process and die. God clearly stated to Adam and Eve in Genesis that the day they ate of the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would surely die. Struggles with aging and death have been a part of our lives ever since they disobeyed God. Robert Schlicht, in his paper, *Ministry to the Elderly* records for us a description of what the aging body is going through:

Advancing years bring with them—for the elderly—fairly common changes in the skeletal system. The resultant stooped posture, stiffened joints and porous bone structure present not only a less attractive physical image, but also a limitation in mobility and in the independent activities of daily living, both at home and in the community. Skeletal changes can be observed in a slight reduction in height and in a loss of muscle power (especially to perform rapid voluntary movements) in addition to the joint and posture changes. These skeletal changes, because of the thinning of the muscle fibers, the calcification of the ligaments, the erosion of the cartilaginous joint surfaces and other factors (like ossification of the joint surfaces and the degenerative changes in the soft tissue which line the joint cavities), all contribute to an increased level of difficulty in the performance of the activities of daily living, to respiratory system impairment, to excretory function problems and

to a decrease in storage capacity for the reserve sugar supply from which power for emergency activity is derived.¹⁰

While the body is going through these difficulties it is important also to note that the nervous system changes as well. The speed at which an elderly person responds can diminish and the accuracy in which they understand what you have said to them also may be altered.¹¹ When you add this to the loss of sight and other physical abilities, activities like traveling or visiting with others may become much less fun. The self-esteem of the aged can be hurt, leading to feelings of worthlessness.

Most older persons, those aged 65+, reported that they have at least one chronic condition and many have several. In 2010-2012, the most frequently occurring conditions among older persons were: diagnosed arthritis (50%), all types of heart disease (30%), any cancer (24%), diagnosed diabetes (20% in 2007-2010), and hypertension (high blood pressure or taking antihypertensive medication, 72% from 2007-2010). As you can see by the percentages, many seniors struggle with more than one condition. For example a person might have high blood pressure which leads to a type of heart disease. The result would be that they fit under both the category of heart disease and hypertension. The breakdown of difficulties reported in 2012 is shown here on this graph.

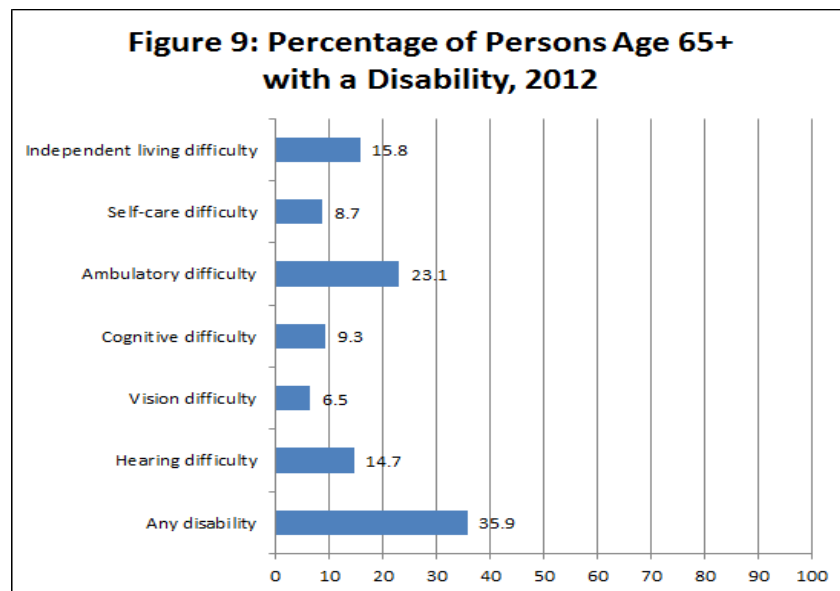


Chart is taken from http://www.aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/docs/2013_Profile.pdf

¹⁰ Schlicht, Robert. *Ministry to the Elderly*. <http://www.wlssays.net/files/SchlichtElderly.pdf>. pg. 2

¹¹ Ibid pg. 2

These health issues have also led to many senior citizens having difficulty performing daily living activities. Daily living activities include things like preparing meals, shopping, managing money, housework, taking medications, and the like. In 2010, 28% of older people reported having difficulty doing one daily living activity and 12% have difficulties with more than one activity.

These difficulties often lead to a family member who steps in to help care for their older relative. In a 2009 report, it was found that 43.5 million people are involved in caring for an older adult. Only 10% of the time is the son the main caregiver. It is more often a daughter, granddaughter, or niece. Caregivers are faced with a challenging task and often experience burnout. They are trying to help with errands, housecleaning, cooking, and whatever else needs to get done. They desire to help because they love their family and want to help the person in need. Yet, it can be hard, especially if the caregiver is also taking care of their own family or in the workforce fulltime.¹²

The increase of health issues also brings a rise in doctor and hospital visits. In 2009-2010, about 13.8 million people aged 65+ had short stays in the hospital. The average length of stay was 4.8 days. In many cases, the number of days in the hospital has decreased. In 1980 hospital stays averaged 5 days longer than in 2010. Perhaps several factors for this decrease of days in the hospital are the advances in healthcare or even changes in the amount of money insurance companies are willing to pay for a person's hospital stay.

Senior citizens will spend on average 12.7% of their income on health expenditures. This is almost twice as much as the rest of the population. The average out-of-pocket expenditures for those 65+ in 2012 was \$5,118. This is an increase of 43% since 2002. The amount breaks down to \$3,186 (62%) for insurance, \$935 (18%) for medical services, \$798 (16%) for drugs, and \$200 (4.0%) for medical supplies.

Misconceptions and Stereotypes

A big challenge to overcome concerning the topic of senior citizens is the misconceptions and stereotypes that go along with this age group. Our minds may tend to turn immediately to a

¹² Op. Cit. Kennedy.

frail and sickly person who needs help and is turning senile. This misconception isn't new. Shakespeare wrote about it in his play, *As You Like It*. Jaques (in his *All the World is a Stage* speech) says older people are all, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."¹³ Stereotypes create a barrier and it is a challenge to break them down.

In certain cultures and even in our history, older people were looked upon with a greater esteem and honor than today. Many looked to them for experience, knowledge, wisdom and insight. Today, the focus has shifted. We desire fashions, styles, cosmetics, and even surgery to keep us looking and feeling young. Youthful and fresh ideas are highly desired and sought after. We don't want to be, look, or feel "old."

Marguerite Kermis summarizes the ageist stereotypes that are widely believed in our culture:

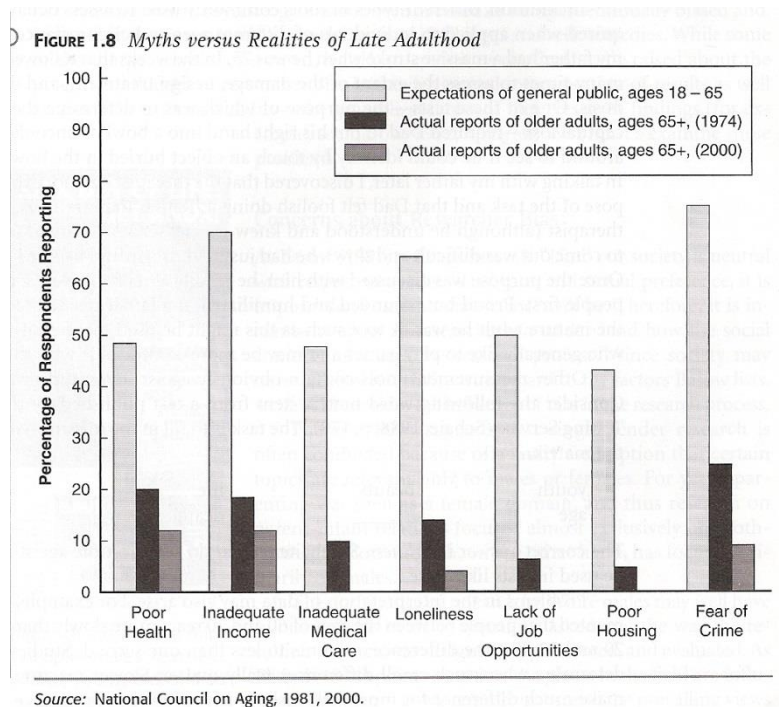
1. The elderly are all alike.
2. Old people are poor.
3. The elderly are all depressed.
4. The elderly are all sick.
5. The elderly are a drag on everyone else.
6. The elderly can't function in society.
7. All old people live alone.
8. Old people all die in institutions.
9. All old people become senile.¹⁴

With misconceptions such as these, it is not hard to see why people want to avoid being old. We don't want to be poor, depressed, sick and a burden on everyone else. We don't want to lose our independence and our feeling of importance.

However, there is a reason these are called misconceptions. Those who are not 65+ are the ones who come up with these ideas. In the graph below, the first bar shows some examples of what the stereotypes are and how they are perceived from those under the age of 65. Compare their thoughts to the second and third bars. Even those who are senior citizens are no longer holding to myths about their age group.

¹³ Shakespeare, William. *As You like It*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954). Act 2 Scene 7

¹⁴ Rains, "Ministry to the Aging." <http://www.wlssays.net/files/RainsAging.pdf>. Accessed Nov. 22, 2014. (2)



The chart is from: Lemme, Barbara Hansen. *Development in Adulthood*. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995). (29)

“Our behavior is greatly influenced by age norms – socially defined standards or expectations based on how old we are.”¹⁵ All of us have a “social age clock.” It tells us things like when we should graduate, when we should be married, and when we should have children. “Feeling old” is a product of this thinking as well. If our social norm is to say that senior citizens are all old and have all these stereotypes, then it is a contributing factor to a person thinking they are old. Also contributing to feeling old are social comparisons, physical health, status among others, and role involvements.¹⁶ When we put all senior citizens into the same category, we can contribute to their feeling aged and being looked at as a problem.

Turning 65 does not need to be something that makes people feel old or useless. In fact, it can be the start of some of the most enjoyable and enriching days of their lives. The growing number of elderly people adds a wide variety and experience to this age group. There is still so much they can do and teach us. “Elderly individuals rule nations, run marathons, create enduring works of art, patent inventions, make new friends, launch new careers, and entertain new ideas.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Lemme, pg. 63

¹⁶ Ibid pg. 114

¹⁷ Underwood, Ralph. *Pastoral Care with the Elderly*. Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty Ed.) 96, no. 3 (October 1, 1980). (19)

Not only should we keep these things in mind when working with seniors, but the Bible says that we should honor and respect our elders. Leviticus 19:32 states, “Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.” God commanded his people to show respect to the elders in their midst. If we keep this in mind and also remember that those over 65 are still able to do all sorts of things, we may be able to help shift our mindset away from the misconceptions and turn it back towards the learning and wisdom we can gain from older adults.

Really, when it comes down to how old someone is, it really depends on how old they feel. An 80 year old might still be able to go out for a jog or do physical labor. In the same breath, the body of a 65 year old may be more broken down and aged so that he is not able to do some of the same things that 80 year old could do. The term “senior” really can cover a wide range of people. There is not really a “one size fits all” when it comes to talking about senior citizens.

Pastor Robert Krueger, who is currently serving at Ascension Lutheran Church in Crossville, Tennessee, found in his observation there are three categories of seniors. He states that it really isn’t so much about the age of the person, but more of where they are in regard to their health and physical ability.

First, there are the active seniors. This isn’t an age thing. We have active seniors who are 65 and active seniors who are 85. They have been blessed with good health. They pursue hobbies. They travel. They have an active social life. They are the ones who are fond of saying: “Pastor, I am busier now than when I was working.”

Second, there are the seniors who are sick and shut-in. Again this isn’t an age thing. They are struggling with health issues. They are shut in or they are living in assisted living facilities or in nursing homes.

Third, there are the seniors who are transitioning from category one to category two. Again this isn’t an age thing. They are facing some challenges with their health. They are trying to stay as active as possible but have trouble doing

everything they want to do. They tend to say: “Pastor, I feel like I am really slowing down.”¹⁸

A pastor would be wise to keep these issues of health and physical ability in his mind when he is looking at ways to have effective ministry with seniors. He may want to look at who fits into which category for activities and events he plans on conducting.

As we look at these three categories of seniors which Pastor Krueger lays before us, we notice there may be challenges for us as we try to work with each group. It is possible the very active seniors may already have a lot on their plates and trying to find time to do something could become a challenge. Those who are shut-in or institutionalized may or may not be able to participate in every event. Perhaps a challenge for those who are in transition between these two groups could even be feeling down and feeling old which may become a barrier to their desire to participate. When planning events, we will want to make sure to talk with the seniors so that we can understand where they are in regard to these categories and what would be the best way for them to participate. Just because there might be challenges does not mean we want to ignore this demographic. It just means we may have to work harder, listen to their needs, and not be afraid to try out many different ways to have an effective ministry with older persons.

We need to consider and evaluate our own personal beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices about the elderly. These attitudes will influence all our interactions with this age group. If we consider them to be a nuisance and a burden to us, that is how we treat them. If we look on them with respect, love, compassion, and with a desire to refresh them and edify them with God’s Word, then senior ministry will become a joy.

Statistics on Senior Citizens and Church Attendance

When looking at polls done on the elderly and religion, you will find that most people 65 and older consider themselves religious. In his essay *Working with Older People* Robert Schlicht says that 97% of elderly interviewed said they were religious. Yet, only 78% said they are members of a religious affiliation. From that 78% only two-fifths say they attend worship at least

¹⁸ Krueger, Robert. Interview. I really like his view on how to categorize the elderly. It shows the variety of seniors and how you can’t just make assumptions based on the age of person. You really have to get to know them and understand where they are at in their lives. The more we begin to understand where they are the better we will know how to apply God’s Word to them.

once a week. One-fifth says they attend less often, but still frequently. The remaining two-fifths say they do not attend a worship service.¹⁹ There is a huge difference in the number of those who say they are religious, those who are members of a religious group, and those who actually attend a worship service.

These are stunning numbers to think about, especially when one adds in another survey done by Pew Forum in 2008. The survey found out that in mainline Protestant churches 51% of the members are above the age of 50.²⁰ This statistic may not be true of your particular congregation. However, it does open our eyes to see who is sitting in the pews of many churches on Sunday morning. With the rise in age expectancy, it is possible that a church may have an increase in the elderly members. Our ministry would then want to strive to bring the Word to them in a meaningful way.

Our society has been learning more and more about the myths and realities of aging, but the church has not always been quick to respond. We may do a few things like shut-in visits, nursing home services, a Bible class, or a few other things. Yet, “There have been very few models that reflect the vitality and rich diversity of human life which needs to be nurtured and encouraged in later years.”²¹ We need to ask ourselves, “Is there more we can do? Is there something else out there that would help bring this group closer together and closer to their Lord?” As we contemplate these questions, it will be good for us to keep in mind the statistics, demographics, and biases of this ever growing age group.

A Biblical Perspective on Aging

Knowing the facts concerning aging demographic gives us motivation to minister to seniors. Yet, this isn't our only motivation. The driving factor behind our reason to share the light of the Gospel with seniors is the motivation and reasoning our God gives us in Scripture. The Bible certainly is not silent when it comes to the topic of aging.

¹⁹ Schlicht, Robert, *Working with Older People*. May 3, 1985. <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/SchlichtOlder.pdf>. (20)

²⁰ "Chapter 3: Religious Affiliation and Demographic Groups." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. <http://www.pewforum.org/2008/02/01/chapter-3-religious-affiliation-and-demographic-groups/>

²¹ Clement, William M., ed. *Ministry with the Aging*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). (253)

In fact, the Bible says that the mere fact that a person has aged is a blessing from God. Ephesians 6:2,3 states, “‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise— ‘so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’”²² The promise given is that you will *enjoy* a long life. God suggests that long life is a blessing from him. The writer of Psalm 128 makes the same point when he wishes this blessing in verse 6, “May you live to see your children’s children.” He looks at living to see future generations as a good thing. Growing old is not to be looked at as a burden, but a chance to reflect back on the mercies and grace God has bestowed on a person. Robert Garmatz puts it this way, “Growing old is a significant accomplishment, a living witness to God’s love and faithfulness.”²³

What a blessing it is for an older person to be a living testimony! They are proof of a loving God and they are able to serve him no matter what their age is or even how society views them. They can be an example to the younger generations (Titus 2:2-5) and serve in whatever capacity and situation they are living in (1 Cor. 7:17-22). It truly is a blessing for a congregation to have elderly people who are strong in their faith.

The Psalms do a wonderful job of pointing out what a blessing it is to be rooted in the Lord, even in old age. “Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.” (Ps. 71:17,18) “They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green.” (Ps. 92:14) Seniors do not stop serving God just because they are older. No, by remaining rooted in Christ, they still produce fruits of faith, good works that are a pleasing aroma to their Heavenly Father. Psalm 146 says it best in its opening two verses, “Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.” There is not a time when we quit praising the Lord. There is never an age where we stop thanking him for his continued blessing. There is not a day that we don’t strive to live our faith. Instead, we praise him with our lives, *all* our lives!

The Bible does not give any misconceptions that the aging process is easy. Our bodies had not been created to break down and have the effects of aging. When Adam and Eve fell into

²² All Passages are taken from NIV 2011

²³ Garmatz, Robert W. *Never Too Old: How to Involve Older Adults in Your Church*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992). (18)

sin, mankind was cursed with death. In Genesis 3:16-19, God shows that the result of sin is pain, toil, suffering, hard labor, and all these would continue until we return to dust.

Scripture is not shy about how old age affects the body. Abraham was shocked to hear that he would have a child because he was old and his wife being well past the age of childbearing (Gen. 17:17). The body should not have been able to provide offspring at that age. Isaac had lost much of his sight and he relied on sound and touch to tell which son he was blessing. Jacob used this disability for his own advantage, fooling his father (Gen. 27:1-29). The first verse in 1 Kings says that King David, in his old age, was not able to keep warm no matter how many blankets he had on him. Just as the Bible shows the sins and faults of even the heroes of faith, so also it points out the weaknesses that have come into their lives because of old age.

Even though aging does bring difficulties with it, the apostle Paul points us to a place where we can find our strength. He reminds us where to keep our eyes fixed.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Co. 4:16-18)

The troubles and difficulties that come with aging are only momentary compared to the riches and glories Christ has prepared for us in heaven. We keep our eyes focused on the prize and the promise of salvation.

God's promise to be with us and sustain us isn't solely focused on the world to come. He has promised to be with us to the very end of the age (Mt. 28:20). God has not forgotten those who are struggling with the difficulties of an aging body. He still watches over these precious lambs and he knows their needs. He hears their concerns. Isaiah states, "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." (Is. 46:4). God concerns himself with his creation, especially the crown of his creation, humans. Nothing, including old age, disabilities, struggles, hardships, stereotypes, or anything else will be able to separate us from the love of God (Ro. 8:38-39).

God still has great love and concern for older adults. It is the same love that he has graciously given each one of us. It is this love of God that stirs our hearts with the desire to show love for others, including senior citizens. In Luke 14 we are encouraged to invite to our banquet those who are facing health issues and those who are not able to pay us back or do things in return for us. It pleases God when we visit those who are sick or aid those who need help. We hear Jesus say in Matthew 25:40, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” We can once again turn back to God’s command in Leviticus to respect those who have aged, “Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.” (Lev. 19:32). This all goes back to the point that being old is really a blessing from God.

When God created Adam, he breathed into him the breath of life. Man became a living being; he had a body and a soul. Even though the body will decay, the soul will go on into eternity. This makes the soul so much more valuable than the body. “Behind the wrinkles, there is still always a soul. The soul needs to be nurtured on the Word of God. It needs to hear the message of salvation. A well-favored soul—though it be housed in a lean body—always bodes well for the individual.”²⁴

Churches exist as a place to gather together around God’s Word. They are to be a place where Christians care for the soul. Caring for these elderly souls in their time of need has been a task given to the Christian Church since Biblical times. James encourages Christians to, “look after orphans and widows in their distress.” (Jam. 1:27). As stated in the introduction, seniors are included in the “all nations” of Matthew 28. These souls are precious and need to be renewed and refreshed with the Gospel. They need to be cared for and comforted. God has provided doctors, nurses, and medical technology to care for the physical health, but for spiritual guidance and health, God has given pastors and churches.

In 1993, the WELS Committee on Services to the Elderly (a sub-committee of the Commission on Special Ministries) produced a handbook for WELS parishes to use in their ministries. It lays out the goals of a church when it comes to ministry with and for seniors:

²⁴ Op Cit. Schlicht, Robert. *Ministry to the Elderly* (2)

1. Carry the burdens of one another's moral [sic?]²⁵ weaknesses – Galatians 6:1-2
2. Comfort one another with the comfort he has given to us – 2 Corinthians. 1:3,4
3. Share with the saints who are in need – Romans 12:13
4. Practice Hospitality – Romans 12:13
5. Encourage one another for mutual edification – 1 Thessalonians 5:11²⁶

As we look to carry out the Great Commission, and these goals for sharing the ministry, we get to serve our Lord by serving others.

The need for a focus on senior ministry has never been greater. Looking at the statistics concerning the number of people who will be 65+ gives us urgency. Looking at what Scripture says gives us motivation and a desire to serve these souls. We know it is God-pleasing to serve this age group, but the question that jumps out at us now is, “*How? What can our church do to make this a successful part of who we are?*”

Inreach with Senior Citizens

In this next portion of the thesis, we will explore some ways to conduct effective senior inreach. The difficulty with working on this topic is it will not be the same at every church. Every geographical and demographical location will be different. Each congregation is blessed with different gifts and people. Each church is blessed with different pastors who have different gifts. Yet, even though this is true, it is still of some help to look at the topic of inreach to seniors. By keeping in mind some of these ideas and examples, a congregation may be able to get its wheels turning about things they can do, and how they can accomplish the task of having a vibrant senior ministry within their own area.

Worship as Inreach

Worship life is very important in the role of inreach to seniors. For some seniors, it may be the only time a pastor sees them in a week unless they are involved in other activities in the

²⁵ I feel as though this is a typo in the handbook. I prefer the reading “mortal weaknesses.” Mortal weaknesses seem like something we can help bear and help a person struggle though. A moral weakness of someone else is not something we can bear. We can help and encourage someone who is struggling against a sin, but we cannot bear it for/with them. The Galatians passage listed with this point could be understood with either moral or mortal. Again, my preference is to read it as “mortal.”

²⁶ *Ministry with and for Seniors: A Handbook for WELS Parishes.* (Milwaukee: Commission on Special Ministries, 1993.) (1)

church. It is also a time when the seniors can be together at the same time. We may tend to think, “Most seniors don’t have jobs or other responsibilities that would keep them from coming to services every Sunday morning.” Yet, these tendencies might not be as true as we think. Douglas Fountain speaks on the assumptions made by churches concerning the elderly in his article *How to Assimilate the Elderly into Your Parish: The Effects of Alienation on Church Attendance*, “Two assumptions made by leaders of the church are (1) if a person is ‘religious,’ he/she will worship and (2) as people get older they tend to increase their church attendance, barring illness.”²⁷

Fountain wants us to realize that even someone who considers themselves “religious,” will tend to stay away from attending worship services if they feel alienated and alone. If a person feels like they are not wanted or they feel as though they do not fit into the social system their attendance may decrease or stop altogether. Think of an older couple who has been faithfully attending worship for 20-30 years. They are now retired and moving to a new area. They come to worship, but as they worship they do not feel as though they are welcomed. They do not feel like the congregation has room in their ministry for a couple of “older people.” A congregation may not mean to do this, but it might have barriers and not realize it.

What do these “barriers” look like? First, there can be physical barriers. An elderly person may have more difficulty walking. They might have a walker or a wheelchair. Also, something as simple as stairs could be a difficulty. It could be a hindrance if the restrooms are located such that the elderly feel like they’re disrupting worship when they make use of those facilities. Some seniors may be dealing with hearing or sight loss. A church will want to ask themselves if they have a good quality sounds system or quality headsets to alleviate a hearing difficulty. They may also want to look at their worship materials and make sure they are easy to follow along and that they can be easily read for someone having difficulties with sight. Making large print copies of the worship folders may be one way to help in this area. It might even be helpful to have a copy of the sermon printed out for them to follow along with as well.

To go along with physical barriers, there may also be emotional barriers. A church may encounter many changes through the years. Some seniors may enjoy the changes and embrace

²⁷ Hendrickson, Michael, ed. *The Role of the Church in Aging Vol. II: Implications for Practice and Service*. (New York: Hawthorne Press, 1986). (45)

them wholeheartedly. Others, may still long for the “old ways.” They may prefer the way things were done before. It is important for a pastor and congregation to make sure those who are struggling with the changes are remembered in the church.

A pastor will also want to make sure his sermons and Bible classes have relevancy to the lives of seniors. If they don't see it as important for them or they feel excluded, they may feel as if they are the forgotten sheep of the church. Obviously there are many groups in the church, and many age groups. One cannot just pick an age group and apply God's Word to only that one group every week. Yet, it is possible to include examples of life situations a senior (or any other age group) might face. Using the experiences of those 65+ can enhance the application of Biblical truths to others. In sermons a pastor may speak about things such as worrying, the joys of old age, keeping focused on the prize of heaven, reminding people they are precious to their Savior, and other such topics which can help the sermon to have an immediate impact on the senior's life.

Other emotional changes could include a change of pastor. They may have been comfortable with the old pastor and he may have helped them through some difficult times in their lives. Now, they have to adjust to a new pastor and the new ideas and skills he brings with him. It may take time for them to build a strong relationship together.

Another change that may come up is a change of church building or location. It is a good thing to be in need of updating or building a new facility because of growth. Yet, people have had a history in their current building. They may have been baptized, confirmed, and married there. They may have recited Christmas parts and their children and grandchildren may have said those same recitations in that same building. It has a lot of history for them and it may be hard to let it go. If they have had to say goodbye to a spouse, family member, or close friend during a funeral in that building, those sad and painful memories might be on their hearts as they sit and look toward the front of church.

Seniors may also feel like they don't belong because they may not be able to contribute in ways they previously have in the past. Maybe they were ushers, organists, soloists, or had other responsibilities that they no longer can do. They feel as though they have lost their usefulness. Others may not be able to give offerings as they once had. They can't contribute financially and

can feel embarrassed about it. They could also feel embarrassed if they are not able to get dressed in their “Sunday best.” Either they don’t have clothes that fit this description or it takes them too long in the morning to be able to put those clothes on. These seniors may have at one time been happy to serve and “wash the feet” of others.²⁸ Now, they may have a tough time letting others “wash their feet.” If they are having these struggles they could get a feeling of alienation and isolation from the rest of the church.

As a pastor gets ready to worship on Sunday, if he keeps in mind these factors, he may be able to eliminate some of these physical and emotional barriers. Seniors can be such a great blessing to the worship service. They can sing their favorite hymns at the top of their lungs. They can give the approving smile when they hear God’s Word applied to them. They can teach the younger generations how to serve in the church. We don’t want to lose these valuable tools and souls God has blessed our congregations with. This is why it is ever important for a pastor to keep his ears attentive to what the older adults are saying in church. Maybe he can pick up something that is causing difficulty among older members. By alleviating this barrier he can enrich the worship of one of his dear members. “Pastors listen in order to know them better, appreciate them, and be of assistance to them. Pastors listen in order to learn from the elderly.”²⁹

We want worship time to be edifying to all our members, and with a growing number of seniors, we must not forget them. This is a time for them to come together to hear God’s Word. It is a time for them to be fed spiritually. It is the time they receive the Lord’s Supper. It is also a time for fellowship. Seniors do not just come to worship for one reason, but many. A great number of seniors enjoy talking and seeing others. They get enjoyment from learning and socializing, so many also come to Bible classes and after church fellowship opportunities. Here is another wonderful chance to visit with them, to minister to them, and to show them how important they are to us and our congregation. Listening to them, learning about them, and gearing ministry to not forget them will provide huge benefits for the senior, yourself, and your congregation’s health.

²⁸ John 13:1-17

²⁹Op. Cit. Underwood. (20)

Activities for Seniors

When it comes to finding activities for seniors to do, a pastor may have a hard time trying to decide what a useful and fun activity is for the seniors of his church. The truth is, if they have a senior member who is capable of leading this group, the pastor may not have to take the reins in this project. Older adults are able to lead and run their own groups. As one author put it:

Clergy need to see themselves as enablers and interpreters, giving support and encouragement to this new lay workforce. Older adults are quite capable of providing their own leadership. After all, who knows more about what is needed and how to go about achieving the desired goals of older adults than older adults themselves?³⁰

A pastor doesn't completely disengage from these groups, but he does not need the leadership of these groups to fall on his plate as well. Again, who knows and understands seniors better than seniors themselves?

To start something like a "Golden Age" group it may or may not be of some help to sit down and organize a plan of attack. You will need to let your group dictate how they want their group to run. Maybe they want something very informal that just has a "get together" feel to it. Others may want to identify leaders of the group and have their organization be much more formal in planning.

Author Win Arn is in favor of having an organized group. It is important to note, that he is coming from the "church-growth movement." Their tendency is to focus on their own mission statement and purpose rather than being grounded in and driven by God's Word. Again, whether or not your group wants to be very organized, not so organized, or somewhere in between your group of seniors should be the ones driving the direction of the group.

If you are thinking you would like a more organized group, it may be helpful to look at the suggestions that Arn gives. Remember, as Christians, we are driven by God's Word. Take Arn's suggestions with a grain of salt and do not feel like you need to follow his steps precisely. Arn suggests that right away your group will need to identify who the leaders will be and get together with them. A purpose statement will need to be put together in order to give the group

³⁰ Op. Cit. Clement pg. 255

direction and meaning.³¹ Once the purpose statement is drawn up, then you are able to use it in things like newsletters, activity advertisements, Bible studies, or whatever else you do. Arn suggests the purpose statement should accomplish the following goals:

- Unify the members of the group
- Provide motivation for involvement and a basis for accountability
- Give assurance the group is doing God's work and not just keeping busy
- Give the group an overall direction
- Define what the group will and will not do
- Give a basis for measuring the accomplishments of the group.³²

After leaders have been established as well as a purpose statement, then it is time to start figuring out what kind of activities can be done. The method suggested by most of the research is to hand out surveys to the seniors of the congregation and find out what they like to do, what interests them, and what they are capable of doing. Raising awareness of this survey and its importance is something that the leaders as well as the pastor can do. A sample of this kind of survey can be found in Appendix B. (Also, included with this survey is a planning guide, an aid for helping with organization, and also an evaluation form to reflect on how the activity went.)

When starting a new program like a Golden Age group it is important to not give up right away if things don't pick up immediately. Plan a three to six month trial period to assess interest, participation, and opportunities for ministry.³³ Also, it is good for this group to interact with other groups. We do not want them feeling like this is the only group they can be a part of as if they are their own isolated group within the church.

When planning activities it is again important to have conditions that are suited to make the people comfortable. Transportation and mobility could pose a challenge. Again, you may want to keep in mind issues of things like hearing, sight, and time frame depending on the participants of the group.³⁴

³¹ Win Arn points out in page 71 of *Catch the Age Wave*, "Unless such a purpose is established from the beginning, the senior-adult group will soon degenerate into a self-serving, ingrown, closed-off, and visionless collection of individuals at cross-purposes. Attendance will tend to plateau or decline. Visitors will drop off, and the group will either die or remain small and impotent."

³² *Ibid.* pg. 72-73

³³ *Ibid.* pg. 90

³⁴ *Op. Cit.* Schlicht, *Ministry to the Elderly* pg. 7

These programs also need to be meaningful for the seniors to do. They should not just be made in order to fill their time. “Instead of merely developing programs to keep the elderly occupied (off the street?), churches... need to utilize the experience and wisdom of these leaders in realistic ways.”³⁵ For example, if they are going to have an educational forum on a topic, make it something that is important to their lives (social security, Medicare, living wills, health, retirement, finances, housing, government, Alzheimer’s disease, etc.). We don’t want to just limit the educational opportunities to things seniors already know about and enjoy. Just because these people are older in life does not mean they still do not appreciate the chance to broaden their horizons and grow in their education. “The notion that ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,’ may apply to dogs, but it definitely does not apply to people.”³⁶

As you learn about the seniors, you will be able to customize your ministry and center activities around what they enjoy doing. Examples of what several WELS churches have done can be found in the upcoming section entitled, *Examples of Senior Ministry*.

Volunteering Among Seniors

Whether it is volunteering to help with your special “Golden Age” groups, at your elementary school, or whatever opportunities are unique to your setting, seniors can be a huge blessing. Retirement or advancing in age is not the end of usefulness for these people. In fact, it can be the start of an amazing journey of service to others and to God. Seniors who volunteer can have a real influence on the others they are serving. They have stories to tell, lessons to share, and wisdom to impart.

Christ said in Matthew chapter 20, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mat. 20:28) Jesus did not come to earth to rule over an earthly kingdom, but he came to serve us poor, lowly sinners. He served us by giving his life for us on the cross to forgive us our sins and make us children of God. Seniors, and all Christians, in their lives of sanctification desire to imitate Christ and reflect his love to others. Volunteering and helping others can be a great way to show their servant’s heart.

³⁵ Harris, Gordon J. *Biblical Perspectives on Aging: God and the Elderly*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). (110)

³⁶ Gray, Robert M and David Moberg. *The Church and the Older Person*. (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962). (123)

The voluntary service role is actually quite appealing to many older adults. Research done by the Corporation for National and Community Service, reports that in 2013 there were 20 million seniors volunteering nearly 3 billion hours.³⁷ This research points out that about 1 in every 3 seniors *wants* to be involved. They desire to help out and be active. These numbers only reflect organized volunteer efforts. The report also estimates that 3 out of 4 seniors volunteer, just not within an organization. With such a high rate of volunteering their time, seniors are proving that retirement doesn't mean sitting at home all day. They are out and active in the community. They are using their talents to help others and be involved!

Why are seniors so willing to get involved in helping out with volunteer projects? For some, they are looking for interaction with other people. For other seniors they are afraid to lose their self-worth after retiring from their jobs. Some may be looking forward to being able to help out and give their time to an organization that has always been close to their heart, but they have not had the time to really help as much as they have wanted until now.

Spiritual needs are closely tied to the need of elderly for a sense of wholeness and interaction and to their need for reinforcement against societal pressures that urge them to conform to stereotypes of activities and behavior. The elderly need to feel a sense of self-worth in Kingdom work and they want to be active in meaningful service so that their time—of which they commonly have plenty—can bring to them the satisfaction felt by any productive citizen.³⁸

This interest to volunteer is increased in older adults who are still very active seniors. Their parental or work roles may be tapering off or completed. With these roles shrinking, they still want to feel like they are useful and making a difference. They may be looking for a challenging volunteering opportunity which will bring them personal satisfaction. They may gain a great sense of satisfaction knowing they can still do these types of things and they are having a positive impact on the ministry of the church.

Yet, while we may start getting excited about finding our volunteers, we need to take a second to think about where they are in their lives before we rush out and have them involved in every organization the church has to offer! While generally seniors enjoy and are happy to be

³⁷ "Senior Volunteering at a 10-Year High." Corporation for National and Community Service. May 6, 2013. Accessed November 22, 2014. <http://www.nationalservice.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2013/senior-volunteering-10-year-high>.

³⁸ Op. Cit. Schlicht, *Ministry to the Elderly* pg. 5

involved we need to shy away from the tendency to think seniors have a lot of time to do things around the church. Active seniors may not appreciate the assumption they are always available to run or help out with activities. Seniors who are less active may not be able to get involved with some projects because of their own limitations. These are things we must consider when looking to get our seniors into volunteering.

It is of great importance that the activities and groups seniors are asked to volunteer in are meaningful opportunities. These things must not exist “just to fill their time.” These opportunities need to be edifying to those who are involved. It is good to look for a specific cause that many are interested in. It is also of benefit to have something with tangible results. Whatever it is, it must be something that seniors see as valuable or they may lose interest and be less likely to be involved in upcoming opportunities.

“Neither life nor leadership ends at the age of sixty-five. Rather, a respectful attitude and responsive transition structures may enhance both.”³⁹ Seniors can be like a well, filled with opportunities to enhance the ministry of a congregation. Also with volunteer opportunities, seniors may enhance their own self-image and worth. By taking advantage of the blessings they can be to a congregation, Lord willing, you will see a wonderful senior ministry blossom into a very fruitful endeavor.

Ministry to Institutionalized Seniors

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor.15:55-57). Many seniors live in this hope at a different level than a younger Christian. They may spend more time reflecting on what it will be like to die, they see the weaknesses of their bodies, and they are able to rejoice in the Easter message as a reality.

Yet, even though they live in this hope, there are still many fears and worries that plague those who are 65 and older. “The cumulative threat of, or actual decrements of energy, functional capacity, status, roles, financial resources, mobility, beauty, opportunities, and control disrupt the

³⁹ Op. Cit. Harris, pg. 111

older person's well-being."⁴⁰ Senior may be dealing with losing a lot of things all at once. It may be physical abilities, mental abilities, losing friends and relatives, and decreasing responsibilities. Often, when dealing with an older adult, it is not just one loss they are dealing with. One loss starts to bring others and it has a "snowball effect," accumulating huge losses rather quickly.

Take the case of an elderly woman who is recently widowed. She is diabetic and has issues with her sight. Her arthritis also makes it hard for her to move around easily. She relied heavily on her beloved husband to take care of her emotionally and physically. He was the one who took her to the doctor, got her prescriptions, brought her groceries, and took care of the bills. Shortly after the death of her husband, her daughter was able to come help out but couldn't continue doing this because of her own job and family. Soon, the widow had to sell her house and enter into a care facility where someone could look after her.

With cases like this we see a lady who lost her husband and is dealing with grief. She also lost her strongest form of support, love, and care. She had already been losing some of her physical capabilities, and now that she does not have her husband around they are increasingly difficult for her to deal with. On top of all of that, she has to leave her home which she may have lived in for decades and made so many memories there. Loss upon loss, hurt upon hurt piles up, and she is in serious need of love and comfort from others and from God.

Transitioning into a nursing home can be emotionally jarring. All of one's possessions must fit in a single bedroom or, more likely, half of one. Residents are in an institutional atmosphere where they know no one, and mealtimes and dining companions are regimented by strangers. In a diminished physical and mental capacity, residents frequently believe they have outlived their usefulness and are a burden to their children. On the other hand, many elderly, whose health seems out of control, enjoy the structure and activities of the nursing home schedule.⁴¹

To make matters even more difficult for seniors is the fact that two out of every three residents have no regular visitors.⁴² A big reason for this is many people are afraid to go into nursing homes. Some institutions may have a certain bad smelling odor to them. People may be afraid to hear the elderly crying for help or they see frozen faces staring at them. We can't help

⁴⁰ Op. Cit Rains, pg. 3

⁴¹ Op. Cit. Kennedy, pg. 47

⁴² Owens, Virginia Stem. "The Visit: an almost clichéd form of Christian service to the elderly remains one of the most vital." Christianity Today 48, no. 9 (September 1, 2004). (60)

but wonder, “Will that be me? Will I end up in a place like this?” A life in an institution without visitors fills us with sadness and fear. On the other hand, it could serve as a strong encouragement to take the time to visit those who are in institutions.

Institutionalized seniors need visitors. A survey conducted among institutionalized adults found that the biggest problem in their lives was depression, loneliness, and loss of self-worth.⁴³ These people are hurting. They are longing for someone to show them they care. As a church, we do care about these people, these souls. These people not only have physical and emotional, but they have spiritual needs as well. A church may be able to help with all of these needs by making sure they maintain a high priority in their ministry. In this way we are showing that we are giving them the love and respect which God wants us to have for them (Lev. 19:32).

One of the best ways to make sure a person knows how much their church cares are visits. Face to face, heart to heart, hand in hand contact is essential. “Visits help to ease loneliness, maintain contact with the church family, cement bonds of friendship, and keep the church familiar with individual needs.”⁴⁴ Visiting implies a deep commitment to demonstrate your love for that person as well as Christ’s love for them.

The best way to have effective visits is to learn how to listen. You want to convey a “tell me more” attitude and then also be ready for whatever they have to say. If they disclose feelings, fears, or anything else be ready to talk about it and not shy away from what is really going on in their hearts and minds. If the person visiting finds these visits to be “boring and repetitious,” he might not look forward to visiting again. Yet, even if they seem boring and repetitious, they are still very significant. Showing love, care, concern, being willing to listen, and sharing God’s Word is important. Some guidelines for visiting are given in Tom and Penny McCormick’s book *Nursing Home Ministry*:

- Be prepared (keep your personal relationship with God in good shape!)
- Be sympathetic (listen, hear what the needs are – not what you think they are, act in humility – not like you are superior)
- Be honest (give the hope you know, not false hope)

⁴³ Uhlman, Jerry, and Paul D. Steinke. "Pastoral care for the institutionalized elderly: determining and responding to their need." *Journal Of Pastoral Care* 39, no. 1 (March 1, 1985) (24)

⁴⁴ Op. Cit. Hendricson pg. 69

- Be attentive (fix your attention on what is being said and who is saying it, respond to them as best you can)
- Be open (share about yourself, be friendly and outgoing)
- Be sensitive (understand their current situation, ask about things they are interested in)
- Be consistent (commit to faithful visiting, continue in the face of boredom, discouragement, and even at times rejection, visit at appropriate times)⁴⁵

Sometimes the difficulty we face when ministering to those who are institutionalized is the thought that we don't know what to say, we don't know what to talk about. This is especially true if it is your first visit and you have no former relationship with this person. How do you start? Where do you start? The McCormick's also give suggestions to help get things rolling in your conversation. You can start conversations about:

- The room – cards on display, pictures on the walls, view from the window, television programs, roommate, arts and crafts
- The home – food, nurses, visitors, friends, noise level
- Family history – where they grew up, number in family, family pastimes, travel, school, where they have lived, jobs of parents, their jobs, married? how long? children's names, grandchildren's names
- General questions – weather, current events, how their week has been, upcoming events
- Spiritual topics - churches they have been members of, favorite hymns, Christmas programs, favorite Bible stories, Jesus, heaven, what they pray about⁴⁶

As the number of seniors will be on the rise, it will be helpful to a pastor if he is able to have lay members to help make visits more frequently. If a pastor has shut-ins, he cannot give up making these visits altogether, but if the congregation is involved it may alleviate some of the pressure on the pastor's schedule. It could also be another way for members to get involved and serve within the congregation. They may find that they enjoy taking the time to sit down and chat with others who enjoy their company.

While being an effective listener is one of the more important qualifications for visiting, it is certainly not the only one. Visitors will also need to understand feelings, have communication skills, be able to use Christian resources, and have an understanding of grief, loss, depression, death, and dying. It may be helpful for a pastor to have a course with volunteers

⁴⁵ McCormick, Tom, and Penny McCormick. *Nursing Home Ministry: A Manual*. (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1987). (58)

⁴⁶ Ibid. pg. 61-62

on these topics in order to train them on these things. This will help maximize the effectiveness and enjoyment of these visits.

Although it certainly is a blessing and a wonderful thing to have lay persons involved in helping with senior ministry and visitation, it is still vitally important for the pastor to visit. Someone can hear “take two aspirin” from a friend or family member, but for most people it means something different coming from a doctor. In the same way hearing the promises of God and the comfort of his Word is always good to hear, but especially when their pastor brings it to them. There may be times when another congregation member or friend may be able to connect better with the senior. Yet, many times it is the pastor who gets the privilege to focus on the spiritual health of a senior. The aging population is in need of qualified, caring people to assist in this final stage of life. Older people are more likely to contact their pastor than a professional therapist about emotional issues.⁴⁷ Pastors may get to spend a good deal of time with an elderly person and will get to share with them the comfort Christ gives us in Bible.

In the earlier mentioned survey in which many of those institutionalized said they were lonely or depressed, seniors also expressed the love of having a minister come and visit them. One of those interviewed said, “It's important knowing he cares enough to come. You feel your pastor cares for you when he visits—that he's close in time of need and stress.” Another mentioned, “Most of us are lonely and we feel we lost our importance, so we need visits to be uplifted and to feel we're still alive.”⁴⁸ These people expect to receive love and care from their pastors. Pastors, in return, desire to guide these seniors on their paths to heaven. They want to share the comforts and joys God expresses in his Word. They hold before the seniors the promises God has made to them and the sure inheritance of eternal life. This primary goal of sharing the Gospel many times will also result in feelings of being uplifted, cared for, and loved.

Pastors desire to give these members time, energy, and attention. Sadly, 54% of residents report they receive no pastoral visitation.⁴⁹ On top of that, 35% of those who say they did receive

⁴⁷ Op. Cit. Rains. pg. 6

⁴⁸ Op. cit. Uhlman pg. 30

⁴⁹ This statistic is for the overall general population. It has been my personal experience with many congregations and pastors in the WELS synod that visiting our shut-in members is highly stressed. I would venture to say almost 100% of WELS shut-ins do get visited regularly.

a visit said it lasted 15 minutes or less.⁵⁰ These are heartbreaking statistics. At times, a pastor's schedule may only allow him to have a shorter visit. However, it is still important to have these visits and not neglect to do them. Pastors keep these people close to their hearts and on their minds. Visiting them shows the senior that they are still important and loved. As Pastor David Rosenau puts it, "Sit back. Put your hands on your lap like you have all the time in the world."⁵¹ This is sound advice. We don't want to make them feel like we are in a rush to leave and they are a waste of our time. We don't want them to feel like they are just part of the job, something to check off the to-do list. These are souls, sheep from Jesus' flock. Visit with them, pray with them, and enjoy your time with them!

What do institutionalized seniors want most from their pastors? The survey mentioned in the previous paragraph also asked those surveyed "What is the most pleasurable elements of visitation?" About 35% said their favorite part was interaction and communication with the pastor. Prayer followed that with about 16%. Scripture reading and the sacraments came in tied for third with 4.2% each.⁵² This shows that first and foremost they just want to talk and visit. However, when you look at this report, most of those surveyed were not Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. While the visiting and spending time together is nice, it is not our main focus. Most likely it will not be the main focus of the senior either. A pastor's focus is on sharing God's Word and administering the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the senior. The pastor has a desire to bring the means of grace to that person. In the survey this was only the number one goal for 4.2% of people. Yet, our theology places a very high regard on the importance of the Word and sacraments. Again this is our driving force for our visits as well as the focus of the visits themselves.

Another great aspect of visiting those who are not able to get to church is also to keep them connected to the church. Maybe it is possible to have some of the shut-ins picked up by other members and brought to church. However, if this is not possible, visits can help keep Christian fellowship alive for the institutionalized. Since they cannot come to church the only way they can enjoy Christian fellowship is if it comes to them.

⁵⁰ Op. Cit. Uhlman pg. 26

⁵¹ Rosenau, David. Interview

⁵² Op. cit. Uhlman pg. 27

Connecting these seniors to their church is a blessing to them. When a pastor visits he can tell them any news happening at church. He can share the joys and possibly even some of the hardships of members. He can encourage them to keep praying for him and the church because God listens and answers their prayers. Prayer is an effective way they still can contribute to the ministry of their church.

Another opportunity to make them feel they are part of the congregation even if they cannot physically be at worship is to use the periscope to have devotions with them. Go through parts of the liturgy, sing or read hymns. Bring any bulletin or messenger that you put out so they are receiving whatever any other member would get on a Sunday morning. You can even leave devotional materials like *Meditations* or the latest edition of *Forward in Christ*. One of the strongest ways to keep them connected is by bringing communion to the member. Not only does communion give forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, but it also expresses a horizontal relationship with other Christians. It builds upon the unity that we as Christians have in the one loaf and one cup. (1 Cor. 10:16-17) As we are united to God, we are also united to our fellow believers and we rejoice to build each other up until the day the Lord calls us home.

Something that may become even more possible in the upcoming years is sharing your worship services on the internet. Here members can listen or watch the service. They can see the sermon from Sunday. They can hear the hymns and announcements. They can watch and enjoy the children's Christmas Eve service. Being able to physically see the sights of the church and hear the sounds from the church is another way to connect those who cannot make it to services.⁵³ As we grow in technology this may be a place to keep an eye on as a way to connect members to their churches.

Outreach to Seniors

Outreach to those 65+ is not usually what is on our minds when we think of outreach. We usually think of things like family events. We have Vacation Bible School, Christmas for Kids, Easter for Kids, and we may have a family get-together to celebrate at the end of these events.

⁵³ During my vicar year in Beverly Hills, Florida, I was visiting a shut-in member and I was showing him how to access our services on the internet. When he found them and was watching them, he could pick out one of the member's voices who was singing. You could tell that he enjoyed hearing his good friend's voice. It led to more conversation about their friendship and church topics.

There are various trips and outings, but again, the focus isn't specifically on seniors. Of course, we should not abandon these things, nor should we only run outreach events to attract seniors, yet this area of ministry is not as common as others. When we think of ministry to the elderly our thoughts tend to focus on shut-in calls and visits to those who are already members. Pastor Curt Seefeldt from WELS Special Ministries has noticed this as well. "I think our biggest challenge is to get our mindset away from thinking only about 'our own' shut-ins, and visiting seniors as unchurched prospects."⁵⁴

This is a different demographic for outreach that comes with its own joys and challenges. First, we need to know, "Where are these prospects?" Then we will look at some of the challenges we are faced with and end with methods that can be used for outreach.

Where are Senior Prospects?

As people get older, they may spend their time thinking about moral, religious, and spiritual things more than they did previously. Aging expert Vern Bengtson expects the Baby Boomer generation will start turning towards religion in their older years. He calls it part of "life's course," because they begin to think about their own life and death, experience the serious illnesses, and may lose a loved one for the first time. Also, the religious education of the grandchildren may become a concern for them. They could feel guilt over not educating their own children, but as they turn towards religion and discover the wonderful truths it holds, they will want to have their grandchildren receive a Christian education. Through grandparents it may be possible to bring in more than just the older person into membership, but also their family as well.⁵⁵

Yet, this may not be true of all older people. In fact, another study done finds that while some turn back to religion in their older years, it is not a large-scale turn towards religion. "Most of them continue the religious habits of their middle years, although it is customary for them to drop out of leadership positions in the churches gradually after they reach the age of sixty."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Seefeldt, Curt. Email.

⁵⁵ Lloyd, Janice. "Aging Expert Vern Bengtson: Boomers Will Return to Church." Religion News Service. November 22, 2013. <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/11/22/aging-expert-vern-bengtson-boomers-will-return-church/>

⁵⁶ Op. Cit. Gray, pg. 41

Even though it may be a challenge, we want to be able to speak to older adults about life after death, and the Savior who has come to rescue them. It is especially a good topic to talk about while it is on their minds more often than it may have been previously in their lives. This may be the first time these people have really had the chance to hear the clear Gospel message!

So where are these prospects that need to hear the Gospel? Where can we find them so we can start evangelizing? They are all around us! They are in our neighborhoods, apartment complexes, supermarkets, restaurants, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and pretty much anywhere else you can imagine. This really gives a wonderful opportunity for evangelism to everyone in your congregation. Almost everyone will come into contact with older adults, especially as this group rises in number. The opportunities are there if we look for them and act on them as Pastor Seefeldt puts it:

It's not hard to find an infinite number of prospects who are in their own apartments just waiting for someone to visit with them.⁵⁷ Volunteers from the congregation, with a little training, could visit, invite to Bible classes, worship services and activities, leave devotional material and open the door to devotional visits and witnessing. Think of all the active Christians who either become immobile and belong to churches who have abandoned them because no one makes calls, or have moved to a strange community to be closer to services or their children but just don't have the energy to get out to visit a new church. This is a huge mission field!

When I printed a list of senior housing, assisted living, rent subsidized senior housing, congregate living units in Manitowoc County, it was pages upon pages. This was in addition to three large nursing homes. A church could conceivably offer a weekly Bible class/worship service in each one.⁵⁸

When we look at working with institutionalized elderly people, usually it is good to get in touch with the activities director. They usually appreciate a group that wants to come in and do something for seniors. They desire to keep everyone under their care engaged and as long as you respect the rules of the establishment and show respect for the elderly, you should be able to start a ministry in the facility.

⁵⁷ While some might be waiting for a visit, remember that many seniors are still very active. You will be able to run into them not only in an apartment complex, but most likely wherever you go during your day to day life.

⁵⁸ Op. Cit. Seefeldt email

Mike Hintz, the director of the WELS Commission on Evangelism (COE), gave a presentation in 2012 to the Missions Conference in order to talk about strategies for outreach. His presentation was not specifically geared toward one demographic of people, but to be used and modified for each demographic. Even though the target is not specifically aimed at seniors, we certainly can take away some fantastic strategies and thoughts as we prepare for senior ministry.

He suggests, “Identify churches in your area and learn about their outreach programs.” What are the churches in your area doing, or not doing that would help your approach to reaching the unchurched. This also helps you look to see what groups of people in your neighborhoods and communities are not being reached or are underserved. Hintz also suggests that we need to “See the people: Who they are, what they do, what their needs are, what opinions they have.”

Based on questions like these, we can develop strategies to build connections with people (pre-evangelism), and connect people with the Gospel ministry of our church (evangelism). The whole point of these efforts is to, “*INVEST* in relationships,” and to, “*INVITE* to events/services/classes.”⁵⁹ This can be done with “Come Events” (special worship services, seminars, etc.), and “Go Events” (neighborhood interviews, new resident outreach, community service projects, fair booths, etc.).

By gathering information on the area, its people, and its churches a congregation can decide on which way would be best to begin its plan of outreach. Then it needs to be intentionally and actively doing something. It needs to foster relationships with others. It needs to be doing things to connect with people so they can connect to God’s Word. If one idea does not go as well as hoped for, try something else. Or, you may even try to do the same event and change the advertising strategy or the date on which the event was scheduled. Continue to do what seems to be working and always be looking for new ways in which to serve the community and to reach out to seniors.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Op. Cit. Hintz

⁶⁰ Op. Cit. Hintz

Challenges to Outreach

As with any outreach program there are going to be challenges along the way. One of the unique and most difficult challenges involved with senior outreach is that in most cases you are dealing with, “seasoned consumers.” One of the hardest places to do evangelism may be in a retirement community. Many may have heard religious “pitches” before. They may have been burned by a previous church or pastor. They may have misconceptions of what a church is, and what the Word of God is. There may be many hurdles to jump right away as you begin this ministry.

Even beginning to have a focus on senior ministry may be difficult to do because in many places there is not something already established. “When one looks for an aggressive outreach program for older adults, it is very difficult to find in the structure of most denominations today.”⁶¹ Even if a congregation does have a senior ministry program, is it aggressive? Is it alive and active? It is the senior program focused on outreach or just taking care of “our own?” Inreach to seniors is a good thing, but only if it is part of your ministry. Outreach cannot be forgotten as a vital part of the ministry. More challenges to starting a senior ministry can be found in lack of volunteers, or inadequate facilities, or not having events that attract seniors.

Often what can deter from senior ministry is that outreach has been focused a lot on younger adults. The idea is, “The hope of our church is in the youth. If anyone wants to come in we won’t turn them away, but we really need to get the young people in the door to bring life to this congregation!” We have Sunday School, youth groups, moms groups, and other such groups, but we may overlook a group for seniors.

Could a challenge in senior outreach ministry be a lack of seminary training in that area? Again, the worry here is that the focus shifts more towards attracting the younger adults and their families. This is why knowledge of the upcoming change in the age of America is needed. It is why pastors will need to take time to get to know their community and if they find they have many older adults they will need to ponder and then put into action a plan to minister effectively to these groups. Our own synod has begun to realize these upcoming challenges and that is why the Martin Luther Elder Care Ministries (MLECM) is developing an elective course that will be

⁶¹ Op. cit. Arn pg. 60

available via the web focusing on the topic of ministry to the aging, and especially on institutional ministries (more will be discussed upcoming in this thesis).

Once a pastor gets out into the field, there is the temptation to think that senior ministry is not all that glamorous. There generally is no real financial gain, and it may not even build membership in the church if he is working with someone in an institution. When a pastor sits down to make his report these people may never be added to “new members.” They may never increase the attendance or offering money and they may add extra work and take time out of his schedule. “But the fact that this people group does not have the ability to fill pews, give funds, or serve in a ministry does not disqualify them from the body of Christ.”⁶² When we remember that our goal is not numbers of members or amounts of funds coming into the church – when we consider the importance of a soul’s eternal destination and compare it to our schedule, then we remember what is most important. We remember it is our commission to spread the Word to “all nations.”

Methods for Outreach

The big question for outreach to seniors is, “How?” The challenge is, each area is different. Each congregation, pastor, and parishioners are different. Each senior you are trying to reach is different. There really isn’t a “cookie cutter” way to do things.

Perhaps, a good place to actively start looking is in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. If you have volunteers, they can go in and talk with the activities director. They can ask to visit those who may not be able to get out for activities or who may be feeling lonely. These visits will let others know that there are people who care about them.

Going out and trying to find seniors in need of the Gospel is not a bad method, but it seems the most effective way to do outreach is to have good inreach. When a pastor shows a lot of concern and love to his own members, they enjoy it and they tell their friends. They encourage their friends to come over and meet their pastor. Friendship evangelism seems to work best because seniors know other seniors. They know who they are, what they are going through, and what they need. These friendships can even grow stronger when they are in the same church

⁶² Op. Cit. Kennedy pg. 48

hearing the same message and conversing with the same people. Pastor Rosenau really puts a lot of time into this kind of ministry in his church in Leesburg, FL. He pours time and love on his older members and it has been a very rewarding experience and one that works well for outreach as he states:

The visits have built a confidence and buzz that their pastor loves them and cares for them and will be there when they need him.⁶³ This joy spreads to others and they are glad to tell about the visits they receive, and leads to a successful outreach as they offer the services of their pastor to friends and neighbors in their time of need.⁶⁴

The truth is 79% of people come to church as a result of a friend or relative. The second highest reason a person came to a certain church was because of the pastor, though this is only 6% of the time.⁶⁵ 79% compared to 6% is a huge difference! It is crucial for members to be reaching out to those they know because, humanly speaking, they have the highest chance to bring them to church.

Whenever there is an opportunity, a pastor needs to encourage members to invite their friends. If they are having a Friendship Sunday, a picnic, a ladies'/men's activity, or whatever else may be going on – invite a friend! Whenever there is a special service like Christmas or Easter, they really have an opportunity to invite others to come see what their church is all about. Having a friend invite someone is really a benefit because it helps eliminate the hurdle that the visitor doesn't know anyone he is worshipping with. They will have a familiar face to greet them and if they have come to events they can start building relationships. Having a friend also is nice in worship because then the visitor has someone who can guide them through the service until they are comfortable and understand how the service runs.

Win Arn lays out several reasons why friendship ministry seems to work best. I may not fully agree with the ordering in which he lists these things (nor sometimes the way in which he states things), but he does give some good reasons why this is a beneficial form of outreach.

⁶³ There is still the challenge mentioned earlier in the paper with a pastor's busy schedule. It may become a challenge for him depending on the other ministry items going on in the congregation. What Rosenau seems to be stressing here is that this time together is valuable and of a high quality to those you visit (and for yourself!). These visits can serve as the basis for outreach opportunities.

⁶⁴ Op. Cit. Rosenau interview.

⁶⁵ Op. cit. Arn, pg. 96

1. It is the *natural* way senior-adult groups grow
2. It is the most *cost-effective* way to reach new people.
3. It is the most *fruitful* way to win new people.
4. It provides a constantly enlarging *source of contacts*.
5. It brings the greatest *satisfaction* to members.
6. It results in the most effective *assimilation* of new members.
7. It tends to win *entire families*.
8. It uses existing *relationships*.⁶⁶

Another fantastic benefit to friendship ministry is that once a new member joins a church, they may have a network of family and friends that now can become prospects as well. This new member is now the best witness to use his/her relations to bring others to church as well. If they do bring others, then you have that new person's network of friend and family. This pattern can continue on and on and on, and it all started because one person was willing to invite a friend to "Come and see" (John 1:46).

Examples of Senior Ministry

What does senior ministry look like in action? Again, it will be different for each congregation. For the benefit of seeing what others have done and how you might be able to apply their ideas in your own congregation, I have included this section which gives a few examples of churches that have an active senior ministry. I am sure there are many others who have a wonderful and thriving ministry to seniors as well, but for our purposes these three will suffice.

Ascension in Crossville, TN

After doing some research about the demographics of the area, Pastor Robert Krueger found that 42% of the residents in Crossville are 65+. Lake Tansi (6 miles away) is 75% seniors and Fairfield Glade (also 6 miles away) is 95% seniors. Ascension Lutheran Church's membership reflects this demographic. This influences many of their decisions on how things are run in their congregation.

⁶⁶ Ibid Pg. 96

Their services are more traditional and the entire service is printed in large-print bulletins. Large print copies of the hymns are also available. There are also no meetings or church services scheduled in the evening to make sure no one has to drive in the dark. The weekly newsletter is not only emailed out, but it is also printed for those who don't have a computer or would rather have a hard copy.

The congregation was fortunate enough to buy an existing building for worship. When they made improvements on the building for their own use, their decisions reflected care for seniors to be comfortable and confident in worship. The first improvement was focused on giving the church a better sound system. Then they installed a "drop-off area" close to the front door. Volunteers help people out of their cars and even park the car if necessary. Additional handicap parking spaces were also installed. A new sidewalk was put in to get rid of any potholes or unevenness that could be a risk of tripping someone. All of these things were really appreciated by the seniors and what a joy it is for them to know they have a congregation that is thinking about them!

The church tried to encourage the seniors to come to "Game Days," and "Movie Days," but these did not seem to be as successful. Active seniors weren't looking for things to do, and other seniors weren't really interested either. There are three senior centers in Crossville which were already holding activities so having fellowship activities like these were not the most beneficial thing Ascension could offer.

Ascension focused on other types of activities. They annually have a "mitten tree" in which the seniors help grade school children with winter clothing. They help out with a school supply drive for an organization that benefits abused women and children. These projects are beneficial to the community and give the seniors a chance to play "grandpa and grandma" to children and families that are in need of help. With a large number of veterans in the congregation, the church also makes a big deal out of Memorial Day and the 4th of July. They attend these events in the community and serve water and snacks to those who are attending.

All of these are great ways to begin friendship evangelism. When they have special Sundays, they invite friends. When they have events like a church picnic or the ladies gathering together for tea, they invite friends. Here again we see the principle of the importance of seniors

inviting seniors and a church that keeps the needs of its members and the need to share the Gospel in the forefront of the decisions it makes.⁶⁷

St. Paul's in Beverly Hills, FL

Located in Citrus County, Florida, St. Paul's has a unique ministry for serving the seniors. Citrus County has over 140,000 people living in it, and about one-third of them are senior citizens. The question for them became, "What are we going to do to proactively reach out to this community?" St. Paul's decided that they were going to try and reach out and serve seniors by building a senior-living facility right on their campus.

These 24 villas make up what is known as "Kingsway." The villas are 1 or 2 bedroom apartments and several of these are made for those who are in wheel chairs. One of the villas is used as a ministry center where activities can be held and where Pastor Mark Gabb is able to meet with anyone who wants to speak with a pastor. Those who are living in the facilities do not have to belong to the church. In fact, there is a mixture of members and non-members. This gives the opportunity for inreach and outreach in these villas. It also gives a chance for the residents to develop friendships in which friendship evangelism can take place.

The members of Kingsway are able to gather together for presentations, Bible studies, playing cards, parties, and potlucks. They are also invited to volunteer and help at the growing school which is also on campus. This gives the seniors a chance to interact with children and another opportunity for St. Paul's to connect names to faces as well as getting them involved in ministry. The goal for the future of Kingsway is to build a separate building to be used as the ministry/community center and they also would like to build an assisted living facility on their campus.

The seniors from Kingsway are invited to join the seniors from the congregation for different activities they are having. Different presenters have come in to present on topics such as healthcare, hearing issues, and Alzheimer's disease. People from the community are also invited to these events because many of these issues are affecting loved ones of those living in this area. Seniors also go on their own outings to things like concerts and presentations in the area.

⁶⁷ All information taken from email by Pastor Robert Krueger

In 2014, an assisted living facility called “Always There”, which is located near St. Paul’s, invited them to come and conduct worship services every other Wednesday with their residents. Those who are attending the services have really enjoyed the pastor, vicar, and members who come and talk, sing, and share God’s Word with them.

The plan of St. Paul’s is to build bridges, to build relationships with others. When a friendship and trust is gained, this opens the door to reaching out with the Word. How do you do this? Pastor Gabb’s response shows the intensity and mindset that is needed, “Just do a lot. Don’t just do one thing, but keep firing away!” There is not one thing that is going to work for everyone. If a congregation looks at the unique gifts they have and look for ways to use these gifts to the best of their God-given ability, the Lord will bless their work.⁶⁸

Open Bible in The Villages, FL

In 2014, *Forbes* magazine labeled The Villages as the number one fastest-growing small city in the United States.⁶⁹ What makes that statistic even more amazing is the fact that The Villages is an age-restricted community. It is a place where many retired people go to live and where Open Bible Lutheran Church and its pastor, Mark Schulz, can be found.

The Mission Board was afraid to start a church in The Villages because there is no youth. However, once things started rolling for Open Bible, the momentum really picked up. Today they are growing at an average of 20 – 25% a year! They are able to grow so much because they have really become each other’s family. People who move to The Villages usually are moving away from family and friends and are looking for new connections. The members have been trained to talk to others and inviting their friends to come to events and to worship with them. Through their efforts the Lord has blessed their congregation immensely.

Once more it seems their best form of outreach is inreach. Open Bible has sixteen “small groups” for activities. The group SPLASH (Single People Loving And Serving Him) does Bible studies and activities. This group is especially focused and good for those who are widows. The

⁶⁸ Information comes from a phone conversation with Pastor Mark Gabb as well as St. Paul’s was my vicar congregation For more information of Kingsway <http://community.tlha.org/kingswayofbeverlyhills>

⁶⁹ Kotkin, Joel. "America's Fastest-Growing Small Cities." *Forbes*. September 3, 2014. Accessed November 22, 2014. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2014/09/03/americas-fastest-growing-small-cities/>

men's group meets for breakfast at a restaurant once a month to study the Bible. There are three women's groups. One focuses on a normal Bible Study. The Quilting group donates what they make to those in need at hospitals. Their Women of Riches group is actually made up of more nonmembers than members! They advertise in the community and among their congregation about their Grief Care Group which is led by a lay member and serves those who have lost someone. The most unique group they have is called the Defenders. Retired military seniors gather together to go to a gun range and then to eat and pray for their country! All these groups add to their usual Sunday and Wednesday Bible studies. Also, two times a month Bible studies are led by lay members in their own homes. This is a good way for those who live nearby to gather together around God's Word.

Other considerations are made to accommodate seniors. Since they are usually up early in the morning, Open Bible has a computer program that sends devotions, emails, and pastor's updates at 4 AM so they are ready for the people to read in the morning. They have done an excellent job of upkeep on the building. They made sure the church logo is attractive and memorable. They have been using their logo on everything from coffee mugs to license plates. They want everyone to know who their church is and where they are located. If you visit a church service, within 36 hours Pastor Schulz follows-up with a visit and brings them a gift basket filled with fresh bread, jam made by one of the members, golf tees, a business card, meditations, the *Come Follow Me* DVD, and a brochure with information on The Villages. This is intentionally going after their prospects and doing the best they can to connect them with Open Bible in order to share the Word with them.

Open Bible is also able to have short services at a nearby independent living facility. When a person died from that facility, Pastor Schulz presided at the funeral and the funeral actually served as outreach for the deceased's sister and husband. By finding ways to serve the needs of the community and its members, Open Bible church has become a growing, thriving example of senior ministry.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Information is gathered from an interview with Pastor Mark Schulz.

Martin Luther Elder Care Ministries

Martin Luther Elder Care Ministries (MLECM) was an organization formed by Martin Luther Memorial Homes in Michigan. This group no longer has their own senior care facility. Instead, they have shifted their focus to the training of pastors and, in the near future, lay members for service to the elderly who are institutionalized. At this moment there are 15 pastors serving 29 different elder care facilities in Michigan with weekly worship services. There are somewhere between 300-350 souls being served by these pastors. It begins with serving our members, but is also a wonderful tool to share the Word with everyone in the facility. The hope for the MLECM is they can provide some training and funding for pastors to visit care facilities.

To assist with this training and to begin the lay member involvement in this program, the MLECM is going to begin holding an online course through Martin Luther College starting in the fall of 2015. This three credit course will be taught by Pastor Daniel Krause who has been serving Parkview Heath Care in Winnebago, Wisconsin, every Sunday morning. This course will focus on identifying the need for senior ministry, help give an understanding of facilities, and help understand the needs of those who are in care facilities. The class also will have a focus on developing the skills of the participants so that they will be able to better serve those who are institutionalized. By educating people on how to use their gifts to serve in this way, it will increase the work a congregation does in this field and how many seniors are being served. It will also help take pressure off the pastor and give this responsibility to others who are capable of effectively running this ministry. This may be a class that could be taken by many members of a congregation together in order to start thinking about where to begin with this type of service to God.⁷¹

Conclusion

The month before he died, C.S. Lewis wrote to a friend saying, “Autumn is really the best of the seasons and I’m not sure that old age isn’t the best part of life.”⁷² Seeing the inflation of seniors opens our eyes to the upcoming mission field that is ready to be harvested. By keeping in

⁷¹ Information gathered from interview with Daniel Krause and more information can be found at <http://www.mlecm.org/>

⁷² Armand Nicholi, *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Free Press, 2002), (232)

mind ideas that help us be actively ready for this ministry, we will be ready to “catch the age wave.”

The church is in ministry *for, by, and with* older adults. The church can bring peace in time of anxiety, comfort in the time of sorrow, strength in the time of temptation, praise in the time of thanksgiving, and rest in the time of weariness.

Faithfulness in ministry is required for this undertaking. Visits with seniors may take more time, and become more frequent as they near death. Making efforts in activities and services to make them senior-friendly may be a challenge. Getting others motivated to do friendship evangelism will take time and effort. “Ministry to the elderly will make an old man out of you!”⁷³ Yet, we can eagerly look forward to this opportunity we have been given to share the Gospel, and rejoice in the blessing senior citizens are to the body of believers.

When, in a congregation of believers, this God-given resource begins effectively to assist in the care of the soul, then a ministry to the elderly has come into being here on earth that will not only put more meaning into temporal life but will boast overtones of joy that are timeless—overtones that will reach joyfully on into eternity in our Father’s home above. There, where aging itself ends, all who believe will inherit the gift of eternal life. Higher motivation than the prospect of sharing that bliss could not be given for any phase of ministry and especially not for a ministry addressed to those chronologically closer to their final call into eternal life. Ministering to the elderly is one of the highest privileges accorded by God to mortal man!⁷⁴

⁷³ Op. Cit. Rosenau

⁷⁴ Op. Cit. Schlicht *Ministry to the Elderly*. Pg. 13

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APPENDIX A

Source: Administration on Aging Website

http://www.aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/docs/2013_Profile.pdf (pg. 8)

State	Number of Persons 65 and Older	Percent of All Ages	Percent Increase from 2002 to 2012	Percent Below Poverty 2012
US Total (50 States + DC)	43,145,356	13.70%	21.46	9.10%
Alabama	699,380	14.50%	19.59	11.10%
Alaska	62,497	8.50%	58.89	4.40%
Arizona	971,533	14.80%	39.55	8.30%
Arkansas	442,590	15.00%	18.19	10.90%
California	4,600,085	12.10%	24.58	10.40%
Colorado	613,241	11.80%	41.65	7.80%
Connecticut	532,712	14.80%	12.92	6.90%
Delaware	140,474	15.30%	33.59	7.40%
District of Columbia	71,889	11.40%	5.75	11.90%
Florida	3,509,715	18.20%	22.80	10.20%
Georgia	1,139,699	11.50%	40.12	11.20%
Hawaii	210,801	15.10%	26.96	6.90%
Idaho	212,578	13.30%	39.08	9.70%
Illinois	1,694,437	13.20%	12.94	8.80%
Indiana	889,148	13.60%	17.14	7.20%
Iowa	470,305	15.30%	8.05	7.80%
Kansas	394,269	13.70%	11.23	6.70%
Kentucky	614,653	14.00%	20.97	12.30%
Louisiana	595,205	12.90%	14.65	12.60%
Maine	226,376	17.00%	21.15	8.20%
Maryland	763,019	13.00%	24.14	7.60%
Massachusetts	958,494	14.40%	12.19	9.30%
Michigan	1,442,714	14.60%	17.25	8.30%
Minnesota	729,767	13.60%	20.80	7.90%
Mississippi	404,075	13.50%	17.26	15.10%
Missouri	883,181	14.70%	16.35	9.00%
Montana	158,289	15.70%	27.75	8.60%
Nebraska	257,354	13.90%	10.55	7.40%
Nevada	360,914	13.10%	49.32	8.10%
New Hampshire	193,803	14.70%	28.33	6.60%
New Jersey	1,250,555	14.10%	12.12	7.90%
New Mexico	294,833	14.10%	33.62	11.90%
New York	2,757,572	14.10%	11.59	11.40%
North Carolina	1,347,869	13.80%	34.60	10.00%
North Dakota	100,666	14.40%	6.75	10.60%
Ohio	1,705,122	14.80%	12.76	8.00%
Oklahoma	534,247	14.00%	16.93	9.90%

Oregon	581,619	14.90%	29.82	7.50%
Pennsylvania	2,042,861	16.00%	7.50	8.30%
Rhode Island	158,629	15.10%	5.17	9.70%
South Carolina	695,459	14.70%	39.07	10.10%
South Dakota	122,183	14.70%	13.10	10.00%
Tennessee	918,507	14.20%	28.08	10.00%
Texas	2,839,295	10.90%	33.17	11.60%
Utah	271,419	9.50%	36.61	6.80%
Vermont	98,444	15.70%	24.39	7.50%
Virginia	1,062,505	13.00%	30.23	7.90%
Washington	908,417	13.20%	33.85	7.80%
West Virginia	311,949	16.80%	12.59	8.80%
Wisconsin	824,500	14.40%	16.15	7.50%
Wyoming	75,508	13.10%	27.33	4.80%
Puerto Rico	584,273	15.80%	29.38	39.70%

APPENDIX B

Source: *Never Too Old* (Robert Garmatz) pg.43-49

Older Adult Survey

Name _____

Address _____

Phone Day _____ Night _____ Age _____ Birth Date _____

Baptismal Birthday _____ Married _____ Wedding Date _____

Single _____ Widow _____ Widower _____ Divorced _____

Living Arrangements: With Spouse _____ With Children _____ With Other Relatives _____

Alone _____ Nearest Relative _____ Phone Number of Nearest

Relative _____ Live in Home _____ Apartment _____ One Room _____

Group Facility _____ Heath Condition _____

Drive an Auto Yes _____ No _____ Retired Yes _____ No _____

Before retirement I _____

My special interests are _____

What I like about my church is _____

What I like about my community is _____

I wish my church would _____

I wish my community would _____

Church activities _____

Community activities _____

I have traveled to _____

By car _____ bus _____ train _____ plane _____ ship _____

The last time I traveled was (date) _____ to _____

I would like to learn about _____

I have experience as _____

I would be willing to _____ at my church.

I would be willing to _____ in the community.

I need help with _____

Date _____

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Planning Guide

Our goal is _____

Date on which the project will begin: _____

What needs to be done to start the project and keep it going?

Facility Needs

People and Talent Needs

Communication Needs

Money Needs

What will we need to buy?

What will be given to us?

What are the obstacles?

What helps do we have?

How will we publicize this project?

What checkpoints should we establish?

How will the project end and when will it end?

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Organization

Specific Tasks

Persons Responsible

Deadline

Develop job descriptions for leaders.

Select leader.

Select committee members.

Gather data.

Determine goals for ministry.

Publicize goals.

Develop a plan to accomplish goals.

Determine tasks.

Write job description.

Select volunteers.

Publicize needs, programs, and projects.

Evaluate progress toward goals.

Other

Date _____

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Evaluation Form

The project or program goal was _____

Successes _____

Problems _____

People who benefitted _____

We would make these changes if done again _____

Did we accomplish our goal? _____

Project cost was _____ and the cost was met by _____

Project workers _____

Other comments _____

Date _____

Leader's sign-off signature and address _____

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