

THE AGE LENS: HOW BELIEFS ABOUT OLDER PEOPLE IN THE WISCONSIN
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD AFFECT OUR MINISTRY TO BOTH YOUNG AND
OLD

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ABSTRACT

According to the 2024 WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) Statistical Summary & Analysis, young adult members are becoming less common in WELS congregations.¹ This trend has been made known to the Synod and its congregations since at least 2003.² How has knowledge of this trend affected the way people in the WELS think of older people and ministry to them? Do people in the WELS have an accurate conception of their older fellow believers and their spiritual needs? This paper seeks to identify beliefs among people in the WELS about older people, evaluate them, and explore how WELS churches can navigate them while effectively ministering to both younger and older people. This paper will consider the opinions of WELS ministers, WELS members, statistical analyses, and published authors who have written about these issues.

27. 1. Jonathan R. Hein, *2024 WELS Statistical Summary & Analysis* (WELS Congregational Services, 2024),

2. Joel Nelson, "Responding to Why Youth Leave WELS," *Lutheran Educ.* 47.2 (2006): 51.

INTRODUCTION

I have a heart for youth ministry. I have long been most comfortable ministering to those who are my own age or younger. In years past, when I would imagine idealistic images of the church that I would serve one day, that church always had a wealth of young people and families. My vicar year challenged me to broaden that vision.

In the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), men training to become pastors spend their second-to-last year of training at a WELS church, where they experience and learn the practical duties of pastoral ministry under the guidance of a seasoned supervising pastor. For my vicar year, I was sent to St. Mark Lutheran Church in Leesburg, Florida—a town that is part of the largest conglomerate of retirement communities in the world.³ Most of the members and prospects at St. Mark were of retirement age or older.

There I was forced to forfeit the notion that ministry to older people would be easy or instinctive, and I had to confront the fact that I was predisposed to ministry to younger people. There I came to notice that many of my beliefs about older people were very short-sighted and naive. These things needed to be realized and reacted to for the sake of my future ministry. I left my vicar year with a new sensitivity to those problematic assumptions and conclusions, and as I considered where they could have stemmed from, one specific matter came to mind.

3. “World’s Biggest Retirement Community: World Record in The Villages, Florida,” 30 October 2022, <http://www.worldrecordacademy.org/2022/10/worlds-biggest-retirement-community-world-record-in-the-villages-florida-422410>.

In the July edition of *Forward in Christ* magazine, Rev. Jonathan Hein, the coordinator of WELS Congregational Services, wrote an article which commented on the WELS 2024 Statistical Report. In his article, Pastor Hein wrote “Backdoor losses, particularly among 25- to 34-year-olds, are the largest strategic issue in WELS.”⁴ This comment reflected a disturbing trend found not only in the WELS, but also in American Christianity as a whole. Younger Americans are much less likely to be Christians than older Americans.⁵

Undoubtedly, this trend has led many pastors, congregations, and synod leaders within the WELS to consider how we view youth ministry. Perhaps they reevaluated their assumptions about what the best way to do youth ministry is. Maybe they reconsidered what their role in reaching young people with the gospel should look like. They may have shifted their mindset and reallocated limited resources to ensure the faith is passed on to the next generation. These are not bad things; they are prudent adaptations to today’s ministry climate.

Nevertheless, I wondered how the shortage of younger people in the WELS might also influence the way people in our Synod view older people and ministry to them. What beliefs are held by those in the WELS today regarding older people, and are those beliefs well-attested? How might those beliefs about older people change the way WELS churches do ministry today, and are those changes a wise approach? As many churches in the WELS apply themselves to

4. Jonathan R. Hein, “A Year of Challenges and Grace,” *FORWARD IN CHRIST*, 31 July 2025, <https://forwardinchrist.net/year-of-challenges-and-grace/>.

5. “2023 PRRI Census of American Religion” (PRRI, December 2024), 8, https://prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PRRI_Dec_2024_Religion_final-1.pdf; “2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database,” *Pew Research Center*, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/?post_type=rls.

serving such a multitude of unchurched young people with the gospel, how can that be done in a way that still meets the needs of older people and even utilizes them?

On the vast spectrum of opinions among church leaders and lay people in the WELS, there are some contentious beliefs about older people. These beliefs risk causing divisions between age groups in WELS congregations or ageist prejudices in the minds of members. They improperly overshadow some crucial commonalities between older and younger people which provide valuable inroads for ministry to both age groups. The beliefs about older people among some in the WELS have a profound impact on ministry to both older and younger people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are various helpful statistical reports on demographic trends in the United States and American churches published by Pew Research and the Public Religion Research Institute. They detail the trend of younger people leaving the church as well as behavioral trends among older people. In addition to this, WELS Congregational Services collects its own demographic data and publishes its findings on demographic trends in the Synod in an annual statistical report. This report shows how the WELS overall is trending older, matching the nationwide trend. Various evangelical authors have written books about the challenges faced by older people, the stereotypes about them, and effective ways for churches to integrate ministry to the aging alongside ministry to younger people. They provide a wealth of practical and theological considerations about this ministry. There is also an abundance of secular journal articles available online which identify generational trends that are apropos to the focus of this paper. They are especially insightful in showing behavioral patterns among different generations as well as how different generations interact with one another. There are a few resources in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file that address ministry to older people, but their endeavors are mostly ancillary to the focus of this paper. In addition to these resources, this paper will discuss the findings from interviews and a survey conducted by the author in the following pages.

PART I: COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS ABOUT OLDER PEOPLE IN THE WELS

Chapter I: The Belief That the Aging Should Not Be Our Priority Right Now

As aforementioned, the degree to which the WELS and its churches engage in ministry to the aging and dedicate resources to that ministry is closely connected to the decreasing number of younger people in our church body. The commonsense response to this trend is for many WELS Lutherans to conclude ministry to younger people should be our priority today. 59.7 percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement “Our church body is in trouble if we can't bring in more young people,” while only 10.1 percent disagreed (the rest remained neutral).⁶ Anonymous survey responders said, “Our Synod does not do enough self-reflection as to why younger people are leaving the church,” and “Outreach to the young is the future of our synod and church.”⁷ John Paulsen, the former executive director of the Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS), said we as a Synod need to put emphasis on those going through the “critical late teenage years into early adulthood.”⁸ It is hard to argue with the logic behind this position. Younger people will be needed to take up the duties of churches when the older people can no longer do them or pass away.⁹

6. See Appendix C

7. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging* (Hunter Smith, 13 October 2025), https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdTeVl4_ZOU1PtVx_gwIHIUDMiJxYpbk_AOf1q6aoKAYA253g/viewform?usp=header.

8. John Paulsen, Interview by Author, Phone Call, 22 October 2025.

9. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

Potential Effects on Ministry and Souls

This sentiment will affect how ministry is carried out across the Synod. Churches and the Synod might allocate far more resources to ministries intended for younger people. Pastors and other congregational leaders could opt to spend less of their time ministering to the aging and more time working on keeping younger people in the church. These reactions are not inherently negative so long as they make sense in a particular context. Yet this feeling of a need to prioritize younger people can be taken to negative extremes. Churches could spin their wheels trying to be the “church for young people” when it would be ingenuine or would not fit the context of their ministry.¹⁰ They could neglect the gifts of older members by sequestering them from involvement in worship, fearing that “age on the stage” would drive younger worshipers away.¹¹ They could throw themselves at ministries to younger people which they do not have the time, manpower, or money for out of conviction that doing so should be their highest priority.

If churches prioritize ministries to younger people—even appropriately, there is always the risk of some negative reactions among members as well. Older people could become bitter over the “youth-chasing” efforts in their church regardless of how justified those efforts are. Older people could disengage with a church to which they no longer feel important, even if they are not actually being ignored. Both the old and young who witness their church change too drastically or haphazardly could take away the message that metrics like membership numbers are more important than the core principles of worship, ministry, or the faith. The people of a

10. For example, a church might be located, as my vicar congregation of St. Mark was, in an area mostly filled with older people.

11. Craig L. Blomberg and Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry: Biblical and Practical Insights for Transforming Church Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 68.

congregation can have their faith in God's power and wisdom shaken if their efforts to bring in younger people are fruitless.

Analyzing This Belief

Is it proper to insist that young people should be the WELS' priority today? This sentiment is sound regarding the allocation of resources. Practically speaking, our church body and its congregations need to decide where to allocate their funds, for example, and how to organize ministry in a prudent way. In our Synod, far more funds are spent on educating younger people than are spent on ministry to older people across the board.¹² Interviewees and survey takers largely concurred that this is as it should be. This disparity reflects our Synod's emphasis on Christian education, which is costly, and Pastor Jon Enter explains that the cost of ministry to older people is small in comparison to that of youth ministry—especially because older people typically have a higher ability to pay for things themselves.¹³ Regarding non-financial resources, churches could also deem it appropriate to allocate their pastor's time and their congregation's manpower more heavily toward ministry to younger people. This could very well be the most sensible stewardship of the resources God has blessed our WELS churches with.

Yet this sentiment is problematic if it fails to view people of all ages as equal priorities in the overall mission of God's Kingdom. Our Lord does not show favoritism (Rom 2:11) but desires *all people* to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) and therefore calls us to make disciples of *all nations*

12. Rev. Jonathan Hein, Interview by Author, Video Call, 15 October 2025.

13. Rev. Jonathan Enter, Interview by Author, Video Call, 8 October 2025.

(Matt 28:19). Nevertheless, favoritism flows naturally out of sinful human hearts, just as it did for Jacob, who favored Joseph over the rest of his sons (Gen 37:3). In carrying out God's mission to bring the gospel to all people, congregations and their leaders are wise to contemplate how they might fall into favoritism, which God commands us not to do (Jas 2:1). Pastors might find themselves being more enthusiastic about teaching and interacting with younger people than older ones.¹⁴ Church members may recognize that they grow more excited over the welcoming of a younger new member than an older one. Adoring one group to the exclusion of the other becomes idolizing, which is wrongful and harmful for the church.¹⁵ As survey takers and interviewees often identified, the WELS and its churches must avoid age-based discrimination in serving all demographics with the Word.¹⁶

A Good Approach

It is best to avoid the pitfalls of this assumption by not making ministry into an “either-or” regarding the young and the aging. If only the younger people or only the older people of a congregation see and feel ministry done for them, then one group is likely being underemphasized.¹⁷ This does not mean that both age groups ought to be sought and ministered

14. William M. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 169.

15. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 68; Hein, “Interview by Author.”

16. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*; Hein, Interview by Author; Enter, Interview by Author; Rev. Joel Gaertner, Interview by Author, In-person Interview, 7 October 2025; Thomas Metzger, Interview by Author, Phone Call, 11 October 2025.

17. Arthur P. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 22.

to in exactly the same way—failing to take the distinctions among generations into account would be yet another pitfall.¹⁸ It means that at bare minimum, both age groups are facilitated. Younger people and their children, for example, will probably be in need of Christian schooling, which will likely require the lion’s share of financial resources.¹⁹ Aged members, on the other hand, might need their church to be equipped to help them see, hear, and move around easily.²⁰ Both groups need to be pursued and reached with the gospel, the power of God which saves them (Rom 1:16). Perhaps congregations will evaluate themselves and find that they are not pursuing both. Let them make the appropriate corrections. But if we view this pursuit less like a set of programs targeting specific demographics and more like the indiscriminate mission it is, the demographic controversy involved will fall away.²¹

Chapter II: The Belief That Older People in Our Synod Are Catered-to

Many who believe that reprioritization in favor of younger people is long overdue also believe that our Synod is conformed to the needs and wants of older people much more than to those of any other group. One anonymous survey responder said ministry is "already structured around [older adults] ... Youth, on the other hand, have largely been shut out of our churches, and we are

18. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, xviii.

19. Michael Thom, Interview by Author, Phone Call, 22 October 2025.

20. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 247.

21. Hein, Interview by Author.”

trying to find ways to keep them in.”²² Another said, “Our Synod leadership caters to the older generation and their views of ministry, but it's not effective ministry for younger generations, clearly.”²³ Survey responders with this view seldom gave examples of how this imbalance manifests itself in our churches, though “elder-centric” worship and social groups were both mentioned as issues.²⁴ Rather than being a criticism of older people specifically, this conclusion mainly finds the WELS and its congregations guilty of inflexibility regarding younger people.

Potential Effects on Ministry and Souls

In its best possible form, this conclusion calls for introspection. It encourages the WELS and its churches to drop all preconceptions and consider whether our practices and organization show favoritism to older people—even unintentionally. It leads churches to ask themselves whether they have unintentionally become specialized for ministry to an older generation. This introspection could lead churches to realize that they might be an uncomfortable or unwelcoming environment for younger people and make changes accordingly. It may lead pastors to hone their efforts so that they do not leave younger people behind in their preaching and teaching by not being relatable to them, speaking past their reality, or offending them. Surely it cannot hurt for pastors and churches in the WELS to weigh this conclusion.

22. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

23. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

24. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

Yet concluding that our churches cater to older people can also lead down problematic paths. It could presume, for example, that our churches have achieved excellence in ministering to older people, which cannot be concluded solely based on there being more of them in our fellowship. If that presumption is made, congregations could end up ministering to a stereotype of older people—forgetful, traditional, and dependent, for example—rather than the true versions of the people in their pews.²⁵ Additionally, if our Synod is broadly labeled as “catered-to” older people, fundamental aspects of the WELS can be miscategorized as symptoms of this problem and disposed of, such as its confessionalism and orderliness. On an individual level, this conclusion could either lead the older people in our membership to feel unfairly blamed or resented, or it could encourage them into a mindset of “age politics” in which they must defend their “influence” on their congregations.

Analyzing This Belief

There is legitimacy to the notion that older people are catered-to in a general sense. The “Baby Boomer” generation (born between 1946 and 1964), for example, have long been a major influence on American society, and today they carry on that influence as the majority of our leaders both in secular government and in the church.²⁶ Even outside of leadership roles, their sizable generation has been the most significant portion of church membership for multiple

25. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 169.

26. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 253–254.

decades.²⁷ It is no wonder that such a numerous generation would also influence the churches in our nation according to their inclinations. Baby Boomers appear to be the first generation that regularized seeking out a church which fits their preferences for worship, education, and preaching.²⁸ Baby Boomers are also generally characterized with a feeling of entitlement to authority and power within an organization, which can extend to churches.²⁹ While these factors do not prove that the WELS specifically is conformed to the preferences of the Baby Boomers, such a conformity would match a general trend in both American Christianity and American society.

We cannot, however, be objectively confident that the WELS is being dominated by older people—even if it may feel that way for some at the congregational level. In fact, survey responders were split evenly concerning the statement, “Our church body places more emphasis on ministry to youth than on ministry to older adults.” 34% of responders agreed with the statement, 33.2% disagreed, and 32.8% remained neutral.³⁰ Likely, older people are being catered-to in some congregations and are not being catered-to in others (possibly, the youth is being catered-to in some), so individual congregations will have to determine for themselves which category they fall into and adapt accordingly. They will have to evaluate whether their practices elevate older people and their preferences above others in the church, which would

27. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 25.

28. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 43.

29. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 14.

30. See Appendix C

violate the principle of equality in Christ (Gal 3:28), or whether some practices instead show an honor to older people which has a precedent in Scripture (Lev 19:32; 1 Tim 5:1–2).

A Good Approach

Pastors and other congregational leaders who are concerned about their own church catering to older people are not defenseless against this danger. Even churches with very few younger people can guard against it by intentionally seeking input from those younger people. A pastor, for example, might ensure his sermons speak to all demographics by regularly holding sermon “think-tanks” in which he asks people of many different ages and backgrounds for their reactions to the section of Scripture he will preach on.³¹ A church might consider bringing a qualified younger man onto the church council. Certainly, there may be pushback by older members of the congregation against “youthful input,” but so long as they cannot deny they are still heard, the pastor or leader who has earned their ire is on solid ground to tactfully assure them of the evangelical aspiration behind it. If older Christians accustomed to their church conforming to them are not chided for that situation but are patiently urged to see how changes can bring about wins for the church (with them included in the effort), the likelihood of buy-in could be far greater.³²

31. Enter, Interview by Author.

32. Enter, Interview by Author.

Chapter III: The Belief That Older People in Our Synod Have a Consumer Mindset

Very closely connected to the belief that our Synod caters to older people is the belief that many older people in the WELS are not willing to give their time or efforts to their church, but only to be served by their church. One survey responder said the people over 50 in his congregation seemed to feel that they had “done it all,” and were now “ready to take it easy and only consume.”³³ Another responder said, “What I find among our older members is not a lack of opportunities to get involved, but an unwillingness to.”³⁴ Rev. Joel Gaertner, the Director of WELS Special Ministries, said, “There are certainly those who [think] *I’ve put in my time*, so to speak.”³⁵ This belief attributes two flawed thoughts to older people: first, that they have reached some ambiguous “quota” of efforts given to their church, and second, that they are justified in not using their faculties to aid the work of the church. This belief certainly would not criticize those who are physically or otherwise unable to help in certain ways, such as the homebound. It would be completely wrong to denounce someone for their inability to be of use to the church in a more visible role.³⁶ This belief instead has in mind those whose age or life circumstances have not yet rendered them incapable of supporting the mission of the church.

33. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

34. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

35. Gaertner, Interview by Author.

36. John W. Kennedy, “A Senior Moment: The Elderly Population Is Steadily Growing and Will Be for Years: How Some Ministries Are Embracing the Challenge,” *Christianity Today* 55.12 (2011): 49.

Potential Effects on Ministry and Souls

If older people in a congregation do have a consumer mindset, it will be to the detriment of many in the church, including themselves. They are needed just as much as anyone else to be encouragers, evangelists, prayer-sayers, handymen, organizers, etc., according to their gifts. Naturally, the fewer people there are to do these things at a church, the heavier the load becomes that is placed on the few who do volunteer—or on the pastor. This can lead to resentment and can also rob a congregation of the blessings of intergenerational collaboration. If older people are not getting involved in their church, their unique capabilities are squandered, their potential as mentors is neglected, and they set a bad example of discipleship for all others in the church.

All these are not to mention the negative effects on the older people themselves who are uninvolved in the congregation. Older people already usually find themselves filling fewer roles than ever as their children become independent and they retire from their jobs. In the retirement communities and facilities of today, there are often many activities to try to fill this void by keeping older people busy, and increasingly more retirees are working part-time jobs after retirement.³⁷ But whatever sense of purpose can be found in those things is inevitably lesser than their pre-retirement roles. If they lose their role at church in addition to their other major roles, even by their own choosing, they will be taking on an unnatural role of passivity.³⁸ Even if they will not readily admit it or if they actively strive to step back from life, older people

37. Megan Wilkins, “Golden Years: Older Americans at Work and Play,” *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, May 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-14/golden-years-older-americans-at-work-and-play.htm>.

38. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 27.

generally do not want to be made into observers of life rather than participants.³⁹ If the people in their lives make life too easy for them, it will contribute to feelings of uselessness as they are shut out from the activity of life.⁴⁰

Analyzing This Belief

Generally, older people do tend to adopt a “consumer mindset” and increasingly shrink away from the challenging parts of life as they age.⁴¹ This naturally could carry over into their involvement in the church. The Baby Boomer generation is especially characterized by the feeling that the church does not need them.⁴² This is only exacerbated by others in the church not viewing them like they are needed anymore.⁴³ For older people, this is typically indicative of a greater and deeper struggle to determine what their identity and role will be in their retirement years.⁴⁴ This tendency becomes just as much a disadvantage for the older people in society as it is a problem for those around them. Despite this general trend, however, the survey surprisingly suggests that older people in WELS are getting involved in many of the congregations of those

39. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 28.

40. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 41.

41. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 33.

42. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 71.

43. Hein, Interview by Author.

44. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 64.

surveyed. A significant 75.8% of those surveyed agreed that older people are often among the most active volunteers in a congregation (15.3% remained neutral).⁴⁵

As for those who refuse to involve themselves despite ability, any “consumer mindset” older people (or anyone, for that matter) might take up would not be consistent with the guidance found in Scripture. The Christian life is not primarily one of consumption and self-satisfaction, but of servitude and consideration of others’ needs (Mark 10:45; Phil 2:3–4). The Holy Spirit distributes gifts to older people just as he does to younger people for the common good (1 Cor 12:7), and the Bible takes fruits of faith as given even in old age (Ps 92:14). Paul, in his letter to Titus, speaks of older Christians in a way that presumes their involvement in the congregation. He tells Titus, “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good” (Titus 2:2–3 NIV). We find good and loving reasons in Scripture to encourage older people not toward a mindset of consumption, but toward a lifestyle of participation in the mission of the church—a “good fight” of faith that has eternal blessings in mind (1 Tim 6:12).

A Good Approach

If older Christians in a congregation have adopted a consumer mindset, changing that sentiment starts at the personal level. Congregations first need to view older members not just as recipients

45. See Appendix C

of ministry, but as partners in ministry.⁴⁶ They will then need to be invited and encouraged toward opportunities to aid the mission of the church—including opportunities they might not have thought of.⁴⁷ Certainly, they can be encouraged to take up the more obvious duties in a church such as ushering, lay assisting, and serving on the altar guild. Yet they surely possess a great enough variety of gifts and experience that they should not be relegated to these tasks alone. Their wisdom will be invaluable for leadership roles. Their former professions will have left them with long-augmented competencies. They will be suited to be evangelists and Christian examples to groups of people whom the younger people in their churches would not be as suited to reach. Even older people who have few abilities remaining can be incredibly helpful to the church by offering their prayers for its people and for its mission (Jas 5:16).⁴⁸ Older people will need to be encouraged toward these things persistently because the secular world will continually encourage them toward the unbiblical and unhelpful temptation to pamper themselves after a lifetime of work.⁴⁹

Chapter IV: The Belief That Older People in Our Synod Are Resistant to Change

46. Hein, Interview by Author.

47. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 51, 143; Robert M. Gray and David O. Moberg, *The Church and the Older Person* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 143.

48. Rev. Jon Hein told a story of an older woman who lamented not being able to do things in her church due to health problems. He came to discover, however, that she spent hours each day praying for the people in the membership directories of her current and former churches. “She was doing as much ministry as a lot of people in those churches even though she never set foot in them,” Rev. Hein remarked.

49. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 62.

While lack of involvement among older people is a pain-point for some congregations, stubbornness among involved older people is an issue for many others. Survey responders frequently reflected this view. They said that older people desire what is comfortable to them, that they are not very receptive to newer ideas, and that they hold staunchly to their preferences, even as they are adiaphora.⁵⁰ 57.4% of survey responders agreed that older people tend to resist change in a congregation, while only 11.5% disagreed (31.1% remained neutral).⁵¹ Mike Thom, the current executive director of OWLS, said of himself and other older people, “One of our weaknesses is to want to have things the way they always were.”⁵² Former OWLS Director John Paulsen, himself an 85-year-old, said, “Frequently it's the older people that are stuck in their ways and don't want to make changes.”⁵³

Potential Effects on Ministry and Souls

This change-resistance, whether it is present in a congregation or in older people in society, can have a significant influence on the functions of the church. In the realm of worship, for example, congregations have difficulty including new hymns, new arrangements of the liturgy, and new Sunday traditions as older people push back against those things.⁵⁴ In the realm of outreach,

50. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

51. See Appendix C

52. Thom, Interview by Author.

53. Paulsen, Interview by Author.

54. Paulsen, Interview by Author.

Christians can find themselves up against decades of long-formed opinions or time-cemented misconceptions as they share the Word with older people, and pastors may struggle to gain older Christians' participation in unfamiliar practices like personal evangelism. When ministry conditions lead two or more congregations in the WELS to consider merging together, the older people will usually put up the biggest fight against consolidating.⁵⁵

This resistance to change is likely an unavoidable “landmine” of offense against one party or the other. If the resistance of older people is overcome by a majority vote or by strong-willed opposition, the older people might feel that their experience has not been taken seriously enough. They might deduce that their emotional ties to things of the past are unimportant to others. They could conclude, even irrationally, that they personally are of low value to others in their church. But if their resistance holds, the younger people might become apathetic, losing their desire to participate in the church, and good ideas could be rejected solely because they are new. Either way, a rift is likely to be formed or enlarged between the older and younger people of a congregation.

Analyzing This Belief

Change-resistance is a prevalent characteristic among older people—but not without reason. Generally, older people find themselves being dragged through increasingly more changes in life. As their roles, their circumstances, and relationships change so drastically from what they

55. Hein, Interview by Author.

once were, they tend to value the constancy of whatever can stay the same.⁵⁶ Additionally, they have grown to rely on certain concepts or thought patterns over many years lived, so they will instinctively resist the change that comes with digesting and adopting new ones.⁵⁷ This is further complicated when older people enter a period of “life review” wherein they evaluate their past and make conclusions about their lifetime based upon it.⁵⁸ If they perceive a change as a departure from something of their past which implies that thing is inappropriate or irrelevant in today’s world, they may feel personally attacked or invalidated. Some older people may not reflect this pattern and may be surprisingly open to changes, but older people generally do fall into stubborn patterns of living for these reasons.⁵⁹

Yet not all change-resistance is detrimental or unwise; it can sometimes be an important safeguard for churches. The church needs people who are cautious about innovation to guard against (sometimes unintentional) departures from the “ancient paths” of the faith (Jer 6:16) lest the history of unchecked innovations in Christianity hurting the church be repeated.⁶⁰ Some changes or new ideas may also be poorly thought-through. Older people who are more hesitant to adopt them might force the hasty people of a congregation to develop their ideas more thoroughly and to have a stronger, more persuasive plan (Prov 19:2). The commitment behind

56. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 55.

57. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 240.

58. Michael C. Hendrickson, *The Role of the Church in Aging, Volume II: Implications for Practice and Service* (New York: Haworth Press, 1986), 2.

59. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 38.

60. Consider Arianism, Montanism, or Gnosticism, for example.

some change-resistance will also often mean that older people stand firmly behind their church and support their pastor vehemently.⁶¹ Nevertheless, change-resistance could negatively be the manifestation of stubbornness or ignorance. It could be the result of pride, selfishness, or an unloving pessimism which disregards fellow believers. Sometimes, it is wise and loving to deny oneself and trust others to do what they determine is best for the good of God's people. The Bible certainly presents delegation of labor and decision-making as a positive thing (Exod 18:13–23; Acts 6:1–6).

A Good Approach

A ministry that anticipates and counterbalances older people's tendency to be change-resistant requires work from all parties involved. Older people will need to forfeit any assumptions that methods and practices from their younger years will always be the best ones.⁶² Not only will they need to be willing to "pass the torch" of decision-making to others, but they will want to promptly loop others into that planning so that the stories and explanations behind the most vital aspects of a church will be thoroughly passed down, rather than being forgotten.⁶³ From the younger people or proponents of a change, much patience will be required with those who are slow to try something new.⁶⁴ They will require humility, gentleness, and a willingness to bear

61. Paulsen, Interview by Author; Hein, Interview by Author.

62. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 255.

63. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 154.

64. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 72.

with their headstrong siblings in Christ (Eph 4:2). For both sides, communication and a willingness to understand one another are key. The older people will be helped by knowing how important it is to younger generations for everyone involved in a decision to be heard.⁶⁵ The younger people will be helped by realizing the anxiety that change can bring to an older person.⁶⁶

Chapter V: The Belief That Older Christians Are More Solid in Their Faith

In connection with the conception of older people as static and unchanging, some may believe that older people are likely to be more steadfast in their faith than younger ones. Some survey responders said outright that older people “tend to have a stronger faith,” or that they are “firmer in their faith, usually.”⁶⁷ Societally, older people are stereotyped as religious or faithful.⁶⁸ Interviewees identified this conviction as well. Thomas Metzger, the Executive Director of Martin Luther Elder Care Ministries, suspects that many think older people are spiritually “fine,” especially if they have been in church their whole lives.⁶⁹ Rev. Joel Gaertner admitted that it is instinctive to believe older people who have been Christians their whole lives would be “rock

65. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 182.

66. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 38.

67. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

68. Klaus Rothermund and M. Clara P. De Paula Couto, “Age Stereotypes: Dimensions, Origins, and Consequences,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 55 (2024): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101747>.

69. Metzger, Interview by Author.

solid” in their faith.⁷⁰ Behind this assumption lies the idea that faith long-held and long-strengthened will be deeply rooted in a person.

Potential Effects on Ministry and Souls

If the older people in a church are seen as more spiritually “stable,” the pastor and people in the church are likely to treat them differently in a variety of ways. Most obviously, the church will probably devote more ministry efforts toward younger people, who would be perceived as weaker or more fluctuating in their faith. The older people might receive less oversight and attention from the pastor, along with less focus in sermons, bible studies, and church programs. The older people might be unduly preferred for church positions that they may not be spiritually equipped for when a more spiritually mature younger person would have been a better fit.

The greater danger with this view is what might happen if churches assume it in error. An older person whose church does not proactively check in on them spiritually might go unseen if they do waver in their faith—especially if they are not the type of person to seek help. If their church has presented struggles of faith as something typical of younger people, they might feel like a failure in their wavering rather than seeing it as a normal experience of Christian life. An older person who is not regularly being shown how the gospel pertains to them at their stage in life lies susceptible to the devil’s lie that it does not, and the isolation of their church not checking in on them could exacerbate fear and despair for someone with death looming closer. If

70. Gaertner, Interview by Author.

there is the possibility or even a high likelihood that an older person's faith will grow weak at their stage in life, dismissing that possibility or failing to anticipate it could risk harm to their faith at a time when it needs strengthening.

Analyzing This Belief

Two of God's promises support the notion that an older person with many years of faith and being fed with the Word would benefit in their faith from being so seasoned. First, faith comes from hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17), and that Word builds up its hearers or readers (Acts 20:32). It would follow that many aggregate years of hearing the Word would be fruitful in building up one's faith in the gospel and in other promises of God. Practically speaking, more years of learning the Bible would likely also result in Christians who more readily recall its message. Second, the trials which test faith refine it and produce perseverance, character, and hope (Rom 5:3–5; Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 1:6–7). Older people have probably had more trials over their many years than younger people have, which would suggest that their faith would be thoroughly refined. Perhaps there are older people in churches who reflect this conclusion.

That older Christians would be more solid in their faith is not a foregone conclusion, however; it is often proven untrue. Older people are no more secure and no freer from sin in this life than Christians of other ages (Eccl 7:20).⁷¹ Out of those surveyed, a whopping 79.2% of people disagreed with the statement, "Older people need less pastoral care than younger

71. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 84.

families” (16.2% remained neutral), and 57% agreed with the statement, “Older Christians generally face fewer doubts in their faith than younger ones do” (24.3% remained neutral).⁷² Many years of sinful life mean many years of not putting God first, not keeping their word, failing as parents or spouses, and making poor choices of every kind.⁷³ Aging tends to bring one to confront the guilt of all these things—“crack him open”—and force him to evaluate a lifetime full of these things, even if he knows they are forgiven.⁷⁴ On top of this, older people are often experiencing terrible hardships very late in life which might make them doubt God’s love and faithfulness. Their bodies and minds are failing.⁷⁵ Many suffer incredible loneliness from going through the deaths of their spouse, relatives, or friends, or from being isolated from families who might forget them or hold grudges against them.⁷⁶ They are often barraged with medical costs or scams, leading to financial hardships.⁷⁷ Because of these things, even the oldest, most spiritually-mature Christian can have doubts about God’s promises and can fear death—in fact, doubts seem to be characteristic of the latest stage in life.⁷⁸ Older people find themselves in their last days of

72. See Appendix C

73. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 255.

74. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 121–122.

75. Paulsen, Interview by Author.

76. Hein, Interview by Author; Metzger, Interview by Author.

77. Cynthia Cox et al., *Health Care Costs and Affordability* (KFF, 8 October 2025), <https://www.kff.org/health-costs/health-policy-101-health-care-costs-and-affordability/>; “FTC Data Show a More Than Four-Fold Increase in Reports of Impersonation Scammers Stealing Tens and Even Hundreds of Thousands from Older Adults,” *Federal Trade Commission*, 7 August 2025, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2025/08/ftc-data-show-more-four-fold-increase-reports-impersonation-scammers-stealing-tens-even-hundreds>.

78. Hein, Interview by Author; Metzger, Interview by Author; Gaertner, Interview by Author.

being prone to the devil's attacks, and it makes perfect sense that he would do everything he can to knock their faith away before they are safe from him in heaven.

Accounts from the Bible corroborate this. King Solomon was faithful to the Lord early in life (cf. 1 Kgs 8) but turned away to false gods when he was old (1 Kgs 11:4–6).⁷⁹ King Asa, who had once been a major proponent for worship of the one true God (cf. 2 Chr 14–15), also stopped relying on the Lord later in life (cf. 2 Chr 16). Sarah's old age itself was a cause of her doubt of God's promise to her and to Abraham (Gen 18:11–12).

A Good Approach

Ultimately, since churches cannot assume that their older members are more solid in their faith (and, in fact, they should expect the opposite), they should endeavor even more to drown their older members' doubts with God's promises. Pastors and other ministers have good reason to put great efforts into reminding older Christians of the gospel and all of God's promises repeatedly.⁸⁰ They ought to lean into the use of the Lord's Supper with those older people who cannot often take advantage of opportunities to take it otherwise—shut-ins, the hospitalized, and the like—to grant people its amazing, individual assurance of salvation.⁸¹ When they discover that an older Christian is caught up in an intense struggle of faith, it should not be cause for surprise, but an

79. Frank Stagg, *The Bible Speaks on Aging* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 61.

80. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 255.

81. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 84–85.

expected opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with its power to quench unbelief (Rom 1:16).

This matter might also lead us to see a great opportunity for evangelism. Aging in and of itself does not necessarily make someone more open to the gospel, yet the hardships that often accompany it can.⁸² In addition to this, the loneliness that older people often face can make them very receptive to ministers who are willing to visit them. This leads to nursing homes, for example, having massive potential for evangelism.⁸³ A minister might find comparable potential in the hospital room or rehabilitation room of a member's friend or relative. Perhaps most obviously, the proximity of death will also make older people more open to hearing the gospel.⁸⁴ Older unbelievers will likely be considering their eternal destiny more than ever, and only God's Word can offer them the certain promise of eternal life (John 6:68).⁸⁵

82. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 60.

83. Metzger, Interview by Author.

84. Thom, Interview by Author.

85. Gaertner, Interview by Author.

PART II: WHERE OLDER AND YOUNGER PEOPLE FIND SIMILARITIES TO ONE ANOTHER

Moving on from assumptions many in the Church make about older people, it is worthwhile to consider that there are some ways in which older people and younger people, especially those going through the transitional years from the teen years into early adulthood, are quite similar. Survey responders identified the need to hear law and gospel, the need for identity, and the need for meaning as notable similarities between the two groups, for example.⁸⁶ If Christians and people in the WELS can see and keep these similarities in mind, it can contribute to a greater unity in our churches and help our churches understand how best to minister to all people, young and old, well. The three most prominent similarities between these two age groups are the adjustments they must endure in their stages of life, the loneliness they face, and the capability of aiding the church's mission with their unique gifts.

Chapter VI: A Time of Changes for Both Age Groups

86. Anonymous, *Survey on Ministry to the Aging*.

The Hardships of Change

Much has already been said on how the major changes that older people tend to encounter greatly impact them. Retirement takes away the one activity that older people had probably spent most of their time engaged in, and it could introduce a new uncertainty about one's financial well-being.⁸⁷ Simultaneously, the number of people in an older person's life who are lost or gone only increases as their years pass.⁸⁸ This is usually accompanied by ever-decreasing physical abilities and waning ability to remember things.⁸⁹

Ironically, though children and younger people entering adulthood are experiencing the opposites of some of these very things, they have in common the struggles of transition. Rather than facing retirement, the responsibilities of younger people increase, whether the duties of independence, career, marriage, or parenthood. With this increase in responsibilities come many opportunities for sin, new things to worry over, new crosses to bear, and new distractions from what is important (cf. Deut 8:10–14). While older people lose so many people in their lives, younger people become linked to many new people in their schooling, at their job, or elsewhere. Those new people could be bad influences or drains on their mental health. Older people lose the faculties they once had and often become relegated to the “small world” of a care facility or their home. Younger people experience the new freedoms and abilities of driving, drinking alcohol, living away from home, and making their own money, and they will struggle to use their new freedoms in a God-pleasing way. Just as the changes in the life of an older person

87. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 17.

88. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 18.

89. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 13, 18.

leave them prone to particular sins and struggles, those in the lives of these younger people do as well.

One significant aspect of this time of change common to both age groups is the question of their purpose and the occupation of their days.⁹⁰ As a young person progresses through high school, college, or their early jobs, they are constantly being pushed to decide what they should do with their life. When an older person reaches the point when they have “done” that thing with their life thus far, yet they still have an unknown number of years ahead of them, they often return to the same question.⁹¹ A young person who is transitioning from youth into adulthood is leaving behind the simplicity of youth along with its reliance on others and ample free time, while an older person who is transitioning into their final years is typically reintegrating into a similar simplicity of life.⁹² Both are at a crossroads of how they will fill their time, be productive, and maintain their relationships. Just as the devil will work to make the younger person fumble these responsibilities, he’ll work to make the older person give up on any or all of the three.⁹³

90. Hendrickson, *The Role of the Church in Aging, Volume II*, 15.

91. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 109–110.

92. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 115.

93. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 18.

Ministry Considering This Commonality

Both groups will require encouragement as they approach their respective new stages in life, and the older group will benefit from spiritual guidance in their wrestling with these changes just as much as the younger people would.⁹⁴ Even young and inexperienced pastors or other ministers who otherwise would not have much guidance to offer can be confident the truths of God's Word that they share are timeless, perfect counsel upon which both young and old rely (Ps 71:17–18). While the specific needs and circumstances of each age group do often warrant different forms of ministry for each, both groups share common human experiences which are spoken to by the same gospel and the same Lord who loves them (Eph 4:4–6).⁹⁵ With this in mind, inexperience in ministering to one group or the other does not need to be cause for panic. Ministers of both groups can expect that as they get glimpses into younger or older people, they will find the same root cause behind their tumult and need: sin. A minister's task is to learn the particular way that sin hurts each person individually as they go through the vicissitudes of life—which may defy the trends of their demographic—and to show them an unchanging Savior who comes to them individually with his forgiveness in every stage of life.

The periods of change common to both age groups also present an opportunity for the two groups to be connected for mutual benefit, which is an increasingly rare occurrence in our age-segregated society today.⁹⁶ The younger people of today are typically slower and later in

94. Rismiller, *Older Members in the Congregation*, 18.

95. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 175.

96. Lisbeth Drury, Paul Hutchison, and Dominic Abrams, "Direct and Extended Intergenerational Contact and Young People's Attitudes towards Older Adults," *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 55.3 (2016): 523, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12146>.

their transition from youth to adulthood than prior generations, bereft of properly developed knowledge and skills to make the transition successfully.⁹⁷ Older people, who have made this transition for themselves, are in a position to advise and aid those younger people from a Christian worldview.⁹⁸ This may not be a new idea, but it is worth reemphasizing how valuable it could be. Young people spending time with older adults is shown to make them more amicable toward older people in general.⁹⁹ Younger people who spend time with the aged tend to be alleviated of their own concerns about getting older.¹⁰⁰ It is also worth remembering that increasingly older young people need the guidance of such a mentorship—not just the young people who are in high school or college who at least have the guidance structure of their school.¹⁰¹ Perhaps the underemphasized aspect of mentorship in churches is the value it offers for the older person, who is given an opportunity to be utilized, heard, and affirmed at a time when they need those things greatly.¹⁰² It may even make sense not to present an effort to connect these two groups as mentorship, but to communicate to younger people that it is just as important of a

97. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 190; Paul Hemez and Jonathan Vespa, “Significant Drop in Share of Young Adults Achieving Four Milestones: Moving Out of Parental Home, Marriage, Work and Having Kids,” *Census.Gov*, 5 August 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2025/08/milestones-to-adulthood.html>.

98. K. Brynolf Lyon and Don S. Browning, *Toward a Practical Theology of Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 48.

99. Drury, Hutchison, and Abrams, “Direct and Extended Intergenerational Contact and Young People’s Attitudes towards Older Adults,” 523.

100. Drury, Hutchison, and Abrams, “Direct and Extended Intergenerational Contact and Young People’s Attitudes towards Older Adults,” 525–526.

101. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 246.

102. Hendrickson, *The Role of the Church in Aging, Volume II*, 4.

role for them to take on as it would be for the older person. Showing a younger person how much of a blessing they can be to their older brothers or sisters in Christ could convey the importance of connecting to them in a non-patronizing way.

Chapter VII: The Loneliness of Both Groups

The Impact of Loneliness

Pastor Jon Enter said of both younger people and older people, “They’re both lonely—they really are. They’re looking for acceptance. They’re looking for their group. The elderly are lonely if they’ve lost a spouse; young people are looking for community. They’re looking for their sense of belonging.”¹⁰³ Loneliness is considered an epidemic among Americans in general.¹⁰⁴ For younger people, social media and other forms of digital communication have often been pointed to as inhibitors to making authentic connections with others.¹⁰⁵ Yet older people are increasingly just as likely to become engrossed in technology and isolated from the real world as younger people are.¹⁰⁶ In an era of home delivery of nearly any item and access to lifetimes worth of

103. Enter, Interview by Author.

104. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 246.

105. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 187; Hein, “Interview by Author.”

106. Michelle Faverio, “Share of Those 65 and Older Who Are Tech Users Has Grown in the Past Decade,” *Pew Research Center*, 13 January 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/01/13/share-of-those-65-and-older-who-are-tech-users-has-grown-in-the-past-decade/>; Hein, “Interview by Author.”

entertainment, it is no wonder that people of all ages are not seeing and engaging with each other like they once did. Family groups especially are not as connected or close to each other as they have been in other cultures and in the past.¹⁰⁷

Congregations inevitably contend with the loneliness epidemic among members and non-members, young and old, even if there is no way for them to see the true magnitude of its effects on them. With the internet granting access to a variety of excellent preachers and world-class worship music, many people are “attending” worship in isolation rather than coming to a church physically.¹⁰⁸ Older people who have lost their spouse may have lost the person holding them accountable to attending church, and younger people failing to make friends in the church likely lose their tie to attendance as well. Critically, a pattern of solitude is completely antithetical to the way in which God made people and set up his church (cf. Gen 2:18; Heb 10:24–25). God uses believers to be one another’s comforters and burden-bearers (2 Cor 1:3–4; Gal 6:2). If they are not around one another to enjoy these blessings, their isolation is a fuel for their sinful nature and a danger to their faith (Prov 18:1; Eccl 4:9–12). Furthermore, if churches cease to be holdouts of community and connection, they lose a critical factor that makes them appealing to those outside of the church (cf. John 17:20–23). Of all the problems churches may identify among young or old people, their shared struggle with loneliness may be one of the most pressing issues at hand.

107. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 65.

108. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 71.

Ministry Considering This Commonality

Fortunately, countering loneliness among all ages is simply a matter of Christians connecting with one another and with those who do not yet know Jesus. Unfortunately, the best way to make this happen effectively is not obvious. In the realm of ministry to older people, pastoral or lay visitation is already a commonplace practice for the benefit of hospitalized or shut-in older members.¹⁰⁹ This visitation might be considered as a loneliness-combatting ministry more broadly across all ages in our current landscape, though it is widely known to be a considerable time commitment.¹¹⁰ Church groups are often seen as a strong solution to loneliness in a church—and they can be—yet they have their own pitfalls. Groups can become a barrier to connection in a church if they become homogenous to the point of being exclusive, whether intentionally or unintentionally.¹¹¹ Group settings may also limit communication, cooperation, and meaningful relationships—especially between younger and older people.¹¹² Churches may attempt to make unchurched visitors feel befriended by greeting them warmly and taking interest in them, which is an important consideration. But done poorly, this can make visitors feel overly focused-on and accidentally cordon them off from everyone else as a non-member.

109. Lea Pardue, “Models for Ministry: The Spiritual Needs of the Frail Elderly Living in Long-Term Care Facilities,” *Journal of Religious Gerontology*. 8.1 (1991): 19–20.

110. Gaertner, Interview by Author; Hein, Interview by Author.

111. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 68.

112. Miriam Verhage, Belia Schuurman, and Jolanda Lindenberg, “How Young Adults View Older People: Exploring the Pathways of Constructing a Group Image after Participation in an Intergenerational Programme,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 56 (2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100912>.

There may not be a one-size-fits-all solution to loneliness among younger or older people, but one major, biblical emphasis that may simultaneously combat loneliness and connect the age groups is that of the church as a family.¹¹³ We as believers are all children of God our Father and members of his household (Rom 8:14; Eph 2:19). We are called into a relationship of love for one another like that of family members (1 Thess 4:9–10), and both old and young Christians are encouraged to become family members to one another (1 Tim 5:1–2). These family members are to depend on one another (1 Cor 12:21–23), be hospitable to each other (1 Pet 4:9), teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16), encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11) and forgive each other (Matt 18:18). If Christians in a church are strongly, regularly, and specifically encouraged to take this concept of the church being a family seriously, just as the Apostle Paul often encouraged believers, they will become a mighty weapon against the loneliness of the young and the old.

Many churches in the WELS already lean into some of the ways this can be emphasized, such as using the language of family (i.e. “brothers and sisters in Christ”) and teaching people about the biblical examples of this principle (e.g. Ruth 1:16–17; 1 Sam 18:1; 2 Kgs 2:12; 1 Tim 1:2). In addition to these, churches can be intentional about groups having a familial aspect to them. This might mean forgoing age-segregated groups and instead trying to include Christians of different ages in each group, just as an actual family includes people of varying ages. Churches could also make a point of celebrating milestones like birthdays, anniversaries, and graduations much like families do (cf. Rom 12:15). Just as biological families are environments

113. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 176.

in which people can typically be vulnerable with one another, encouraging vulnerability between members of a church could catalyze special relationships with one another (cf. Jas 5:16). Just as biological families have clear roles of service to one another (e.g. a father knowing he is expected to provide for his family or a child knowing they are to obey), pointing out specific ways in which members can serve one another can also induce relationships with a familial character to them.

A congregation that operates like a family is not only a broad counter to the epidemic of loneliness, but also a more precise blessing for those whose loneliness can be attributed to a broken or missing biological family. It can be a wonderful boon for those young people who have a strained relationship with their parents or who missed out on a parental figure entirely, whether by being abandoned or losing a parent to a tragedy. A church family can fill this same hole for older people who continually lose the people in their lives to death or whose children or grandchildren have cut ties with them. Certainly, the spiritual family may not fit these holes the same way the biological family does—such is a symptom of our sin-broken world. But the alternative would certainly be emptiness and loneliness in both areas. Even imperfect interdependence, encouragement, love, etc. in the church family would clearly be a blessing to such people, and these blessings could also draw lonely unbelievers to the church who are unable to find such a family elsewhere.

Nevertheless, even as churches are wise to consider how they might connect lonely people, perhaps they are equally wise to equip people for the inevitable loneliness of life. In the practical matters of time, volunteerism, and other resources, churches are limited in their capacity to connect people as often as they may be lonely. Yet if ministers highlight how God

blesses people even in loneliness, it can thwart some struggles when people have no option but to be lonely.¹¹⁴ They can repeatedly remind God's people of his presence (Ps 34:18; Jer 23:23–24). They can encourage Christians to stay connected to God's Word and to pray frequently (Ps 119:105; Phil 4:6). They can share the biblical accounts of other believers steeped in loneliness never being forgotten or abandoned by the Lord (1 Sam 21; 1 Kgs 19:10). If churches work both to equip lonely people in this way and to connect them to one another, they will be addressing the impacts of loneliness among all ages in an appropriately well-rounded manner.

Chapter VIII: Both Groups Uniquely Equipped for the Church's Mission

One final commonality between the young and the old is actually a matter of diversity: their special capacities to contribute within the church. Despite the cynical views that different age groups can hold of one another, both groups have important capabilities that are more or less unique to their generations, their ages, and their positions in life and society. Younger people, for example, are technologically competent to a degree that their older counterparts usually are not.¹¹⁵ They tend to have more energy, vision, and flexibility.¹¹⁶ They tend to be more efficient and purpose oriented.¹¹⁷ Older people, on the other hand, are typically experienced, encouraging

114. Pardue, "Models for Ministry," 20.

115. Paulsen, Interview by Author.

116. Hein, Interview by Author.

117. Yunita Zahra, Seger Handoyo, and Fajrianthi Fajrianthi, "A Comprehensive Overview of Generation Z in the Workplace: Insights from a Scoping Review," *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 51.0 (2025): 2, 8.

toward called workers, and good at recognizing the complex nature of things.¹¹⁸ Their lifetimes of professional experience often equip them to be excellent handymen, businessmen, and clerical workers at churches.¹¹⁹ They also tend to be more generous than younger people—and not just because they have more money.¹²⁰

When young and old are put together, the body of Christ is as it should be: “growing and building itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16). A mutualism occurs which further cultivates members’ gifts and maximizes the impact of a congregation.¹²¹ If churches do not discount one group or the other as a barrier to ministry but instead strive to have each group complement the abilities of the other, it is likely to bring about a more vigorous church.¹²² The pessimism of the sinful mind may want to fixate on how each age group’s *shortcomings* hamstringing a congregation and strive to “cleanse” the church of such things, but perhaps less time is wasted if congregational leaders work to synergize the *strengths* of the people they have, young or old, to reach more souls for Christ. After all, it is God who has distributed particular gifts, secular or spiritual, to the believers in each congregation (1 Cor 12:4), has called those specific believers to faith (Rom 8:30), and has called specific workers to lead and equip those believers (Eph 4:11). Christians can be confident that as they employ the gifts among their ranks, God will use them, young or old, to reach more souls, young or old.

118. Clements, *Ministry With the Aging*, 117; Hein, Interview by Author; Gaertner, Interview by Author.

119. Gray and Moberg, *The Church and the Older Person*, 139–142.

120. Hein, Interview by Author.

121. Blomberg and Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 260.

122. Gray and Moberg, *The Church and the Older Person*, 143.

CONCLUSION

As is the case in the rest of American society, there are some divisive views among people in the WELS which are not only affected by the age demographics of the WELS but also affect the way in which churches in the WELS minister to people of all ages. Because these beliefs impact ministry so profoundly, churches in the WELS ought to be aware of them and how they might affect the ministry in their congregation. At the same time, careful listening, contemplation, and time spent in Scripture can give leaders in WELS congregations a solid understanding of how true these beliefs may be in their individual context as well as an idea of how they might adapt their ministry to best serve both younger and older people well. Regardless of how congregations decide to adapt their ministries in light of these things, they clearly have much to gain from striving to keep their ministry intergenerational and taking advantage of the similarities between younger and older people.

Discord between people of different ages appears to be the most common prejudice in our society today, and we have no reason to expect the WELS to be an exception to this.¹²³ Yet the Christian church has promises of God's guidance and involvement that the world outside of the church does not have. Even as people of different ages talking past each other or disliking one another will cause fractures, Christ himself will build up the church, and it will not be overcome (Matt 16:18). Even as such things impede the mission of the church, its mission will continue until he returns on the last day (Matt 24:14). Even as we sometimes fail to see people of all ages

123. Drury, Hutchison, and Abrams, "Direct and Extended Intergenerational Contact and Young People's Attitudes towards Older Adults," 535.

as they truly are, God's Word will not fail to give them what they truly need. (Isa 55:10–11)

Because of these amazing promises, people in the WELS and all Christians have reason to move forward in ministry to every generation guided by faith. The Lord is guiding our efforts to bring what is best for his church. The Lord will reach all his elect with the message of his forgiveness. While we cannot see God's precise plan for how he will accomplish these things, he has shown us what the result will be: a great, innumerable multitude worshiping their Savior who has rescued them from sin and sustained them whether in youth, old age, or any time in-between (Isa 46:3–4; Rev 7:9).

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Overlooking Ministry to the Aging
Researcher: Hunter Smith, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Contact: hunter.smith@wls.edu
(414)-391-8047

Purpose of the Interview

You are being invited to participate in an interview for research connected to my senior thesis. The goal of this research is to determine what assumptions or conclusions pastors or parishioners in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod make about ministry to the aging, and whether those assumptions or conclusions lead pastors or parishioners to overlook ministry to the aging in favor of ministry to younger people.

Your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time.

Confidentiality

- All information you share will be treated with respect and handled in line with academic ethical standards.
- Audio recordings, transcripts, or notes will be stored securely and accessible only to the researcher.
- No raw recordings will be shared publicly. Only material necessary for the thesis or related presentations may be used.

Record and Use of Information

Please indicate your preferences by checking the boxes below:

Attribution *

- ☐ I consent to being identified by my full name and role/affiliation.
- ☐ I consent to being identified by my role only (e.g. “one pastor said” or “one synod worker said”).
- ☐ I prefer to remain anonymous (no identifying information will appear in the thesis—you will be referred to as an “interviewee”).

Recording *

- ☐ I consent to an audio recording of the full interview (used only for accuracy in transcription; recordings will be stored securely and not shared publicly).
- ☐ I consent to a partial audio recording (specific portions of the interview may be recorded with my awareness).
- ☐ I consent to written notes only (the researcher may take notes during the interview, but no audio will be recorded).
- ☐ I do not consent to any recording or note-taking (the interview is entirely off the record).

Quotations*

- ☐ My words may be quoted directly in the thesis.
- ☐ My words may be paraphrased (summarized in the researcher's own words).
- ☐ My words may be used only for background (to inform the researcher but not included in the written thesis).

Future Use*

- ☐ I consent to my interview materials being used for related academic presentations, articles, or future research by the researcher.
- ☐ I consent to use for this thesis project only.

Rights of the Interviewee

- You may request to review direct quotations attributed to you before publication.
- You may withdraw your consent up until 12/8/2025.
- You may contact the researcher at any time with questions or concerns.

Interviewee Electronic Signature*

Please type your name into the text box below.

Electronic Signature Date*

Please select the signature date below.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEWEE QUESTIONNAIRE

Introductory

What experience have you had with ministry to children, youth, or young adults? What experience have you had with ministry to older people?

The Aging and The Youth

In your view, how do the spiritual needs of older people compare with those of younger people?

Are there any ways you think older people might be helpful to a congregation where younger people might not be as helpful?

Are there any ways you think older members might pose difficulties to a congregation where younger members might not be as difficult?

What value do you see people in our church body place on ministry to younger people compared to ministry to older people? If there's a difference there, why do you think it exists?

Some might say that youth ministry deserves more of our synod's resources than ministry to older people. How would you respond to that perspective?

Perspectives on the Aging

What assumptions or stereotypes about older people do you think are common in our church body, if any?

What challenges do you see as unique to ministering among older people?

What blessings or opportunities do you see as unique to ministering among older people?

Our Church Body's Approach

Do you believe our church body has room to grow in ministering to older people? If so, what do you think that growth should look like?

The WELS has an aging membership overall. How do you think that shapes our approach to ministry? Do you think that response is appropriate?

Helpful Counsel

If you could shift the mindset of our synod in one key way regarding older adults, what would you emphasize?

APPENDIX C. SURVEY RESULTS AMONG WELS MEMBERS

Research Project: Overlooking Ministry to the Aging
Researcher: Hunter Smith, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Contact: hunter.smith@wls.edu

Purpose of the Survey

I humbly ask if you would be willing to fill out this short survey for research connected to my senior thesis. The survey should take under 5 minutes. The goal of this research is to determine what assumptions or conclusions people in our church body make about ministry to the aging, and whether those assumptions or conclusions lead people to overlook ministry to the aging in favor of ministry to younger people. My prayer is that the findings of this research can inform and encourage the people of our church body in all areas of ministry—but especially in reaching those who are later in their years with the love and comfort of Jesus.

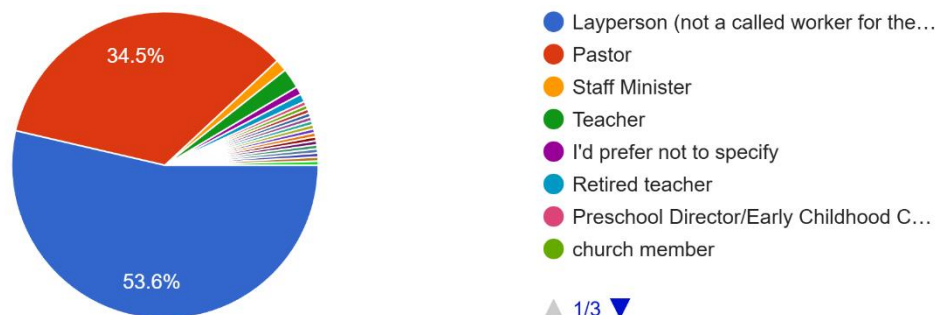
Confidentiality

All responses will remain anonymous and confidential. No identifying information (such as your name, congregation, or contact details) will be collected or connected to your answers. Only your status as a called worker or layperson will be asked for in the first question below, which is also optional. The results of this survey will be reported only in summary form as part of the final written thesis or subsequent presentations.

Individual responses will not be shared with anyone outside of the research process, and **no one—including the researcher—will be able to link your answers to you, your email, your congregation, or anything else.**

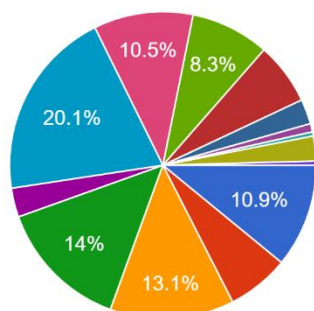
Demographic Info

I am a:
235 responses



I am in the _____ district of our church body.

229 responses

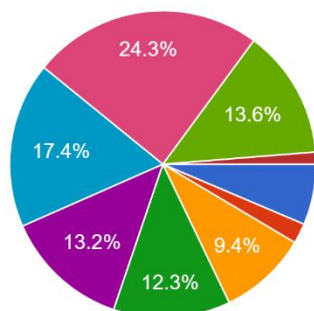


- North Atlantic
- South Atlantic
- Michigan
- Southeast Wisconsin
- Northern Wisconsin
- Western Wisconsin
- Minnesota
- South Central

▲ 1/2 ▼

My age is:

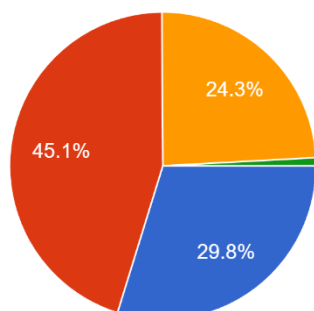
235 responses



- 0-17
- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 66-75
- 76+
- I'd prefer not to specify

My congregation is located in a community that is primarily:

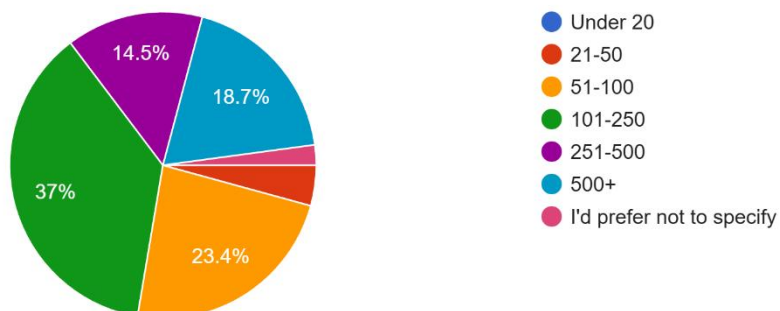
235 responses



- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- I'd prefer not to specify

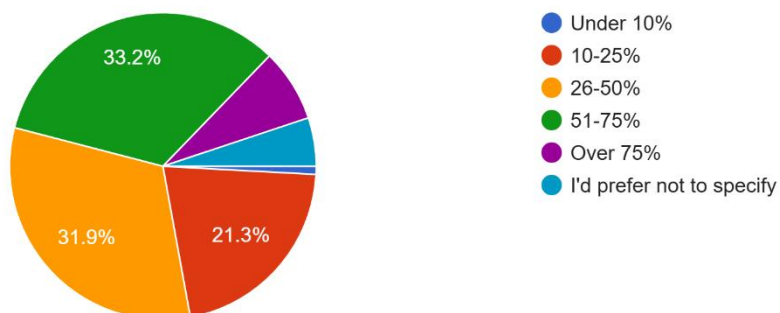
The approximate size of my congregation is:

235 responses



My congregation's approximate percentage of members over the age of 60 is:

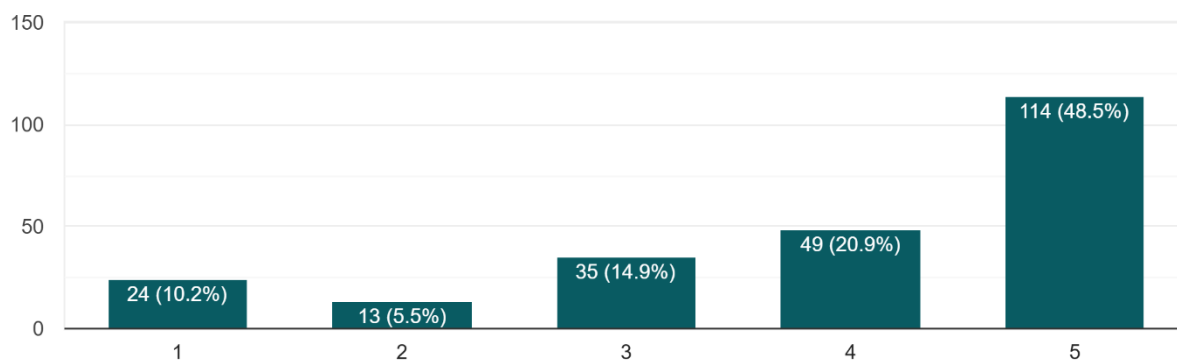
235 responses



Experience and Exposure

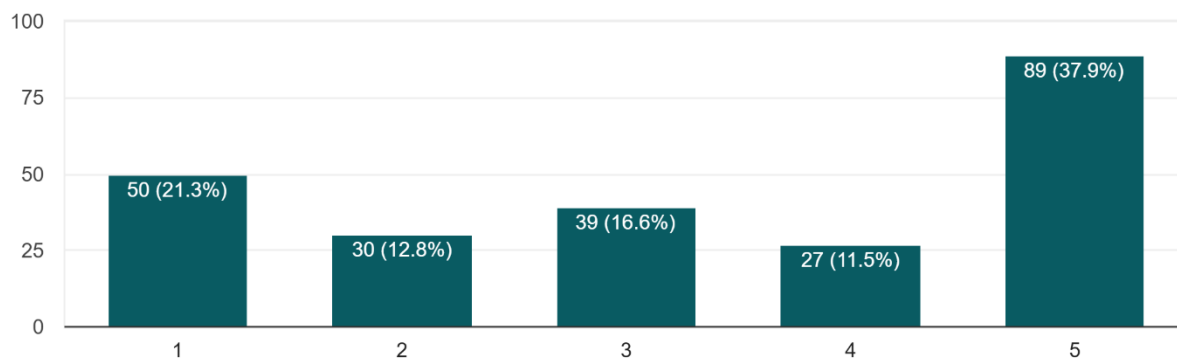
I have experience with ministry to children, youth, or young adults.

235 responses



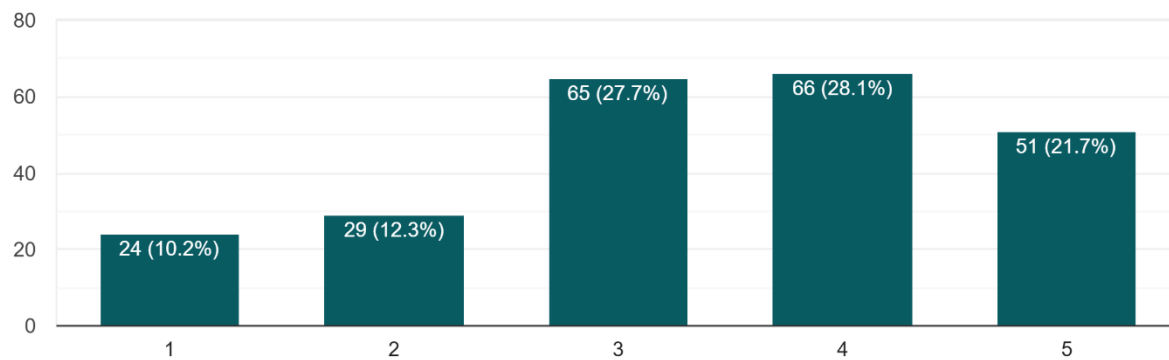
I have experience with ministry to older adults (60+).

235 responses



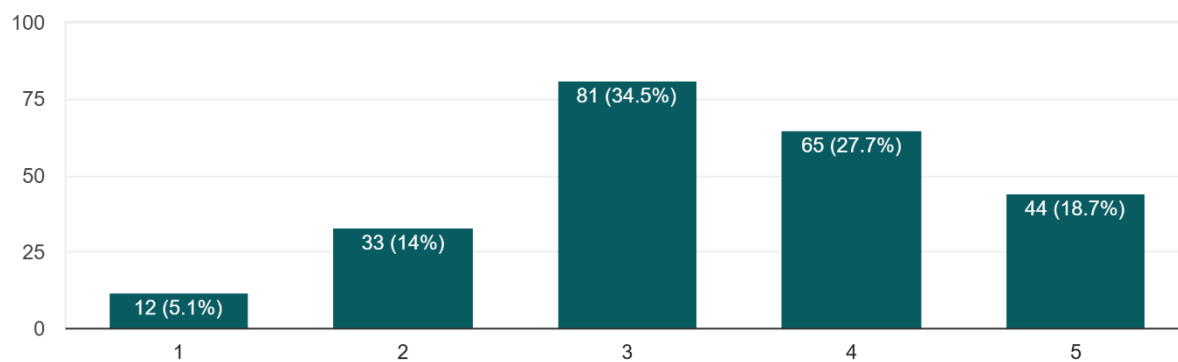
In my congregation, organized ministry to youth is a clear priority.

235 responses



In my congregation, organized ministry to older adults is a clear priority.

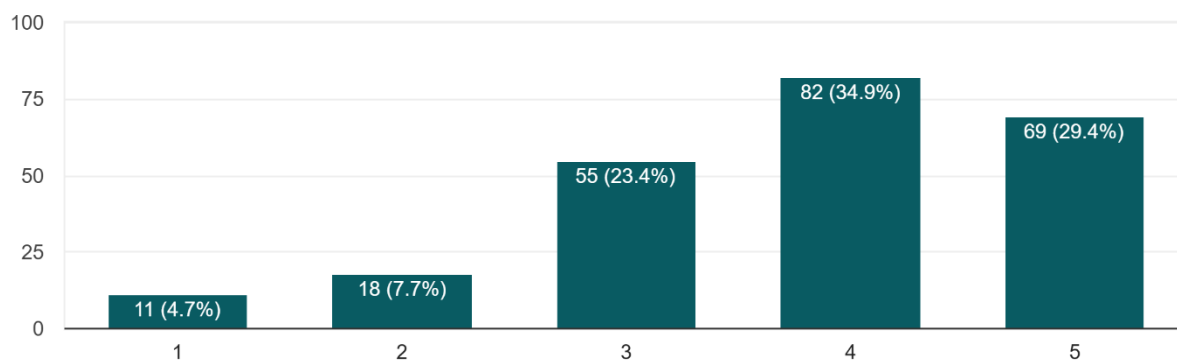
235 responses



The Youth and the Aging

The spiritual needs of older adults are generally different from those of younger people.

235 responses

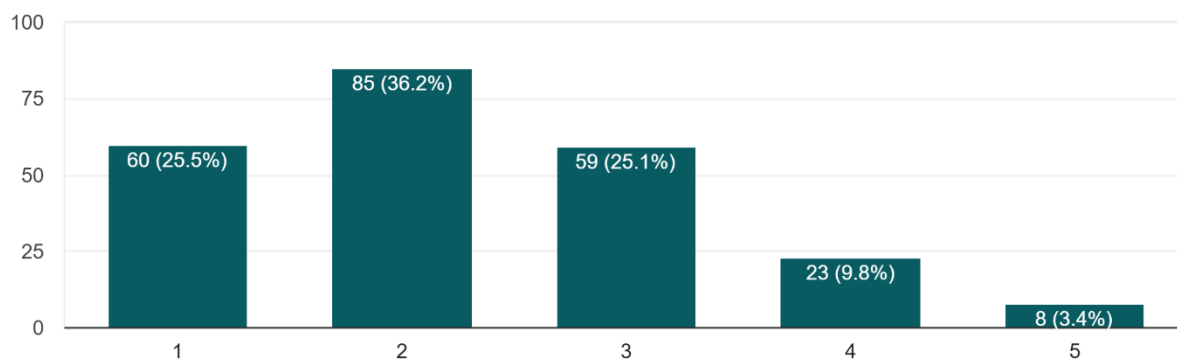


Optionally, you may explain your answer to the previous question.

107 responses were written.

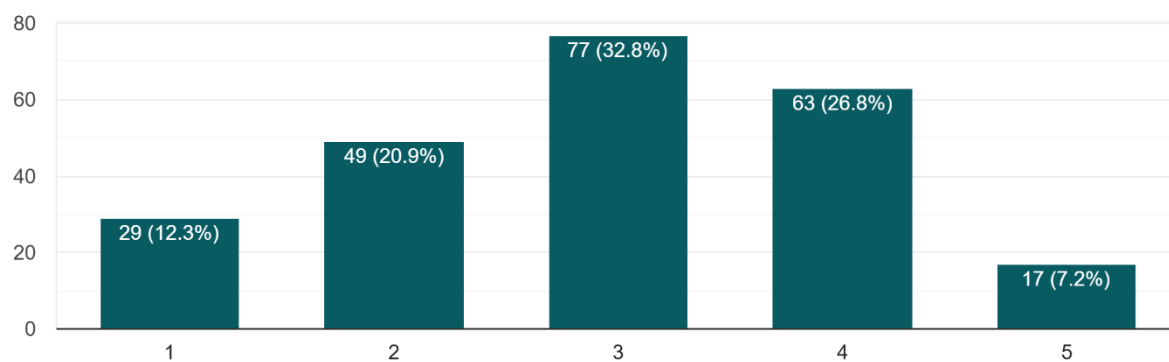
Older adults often have fewer opportunities in the church for spiritual growth than younger people.

235 responses



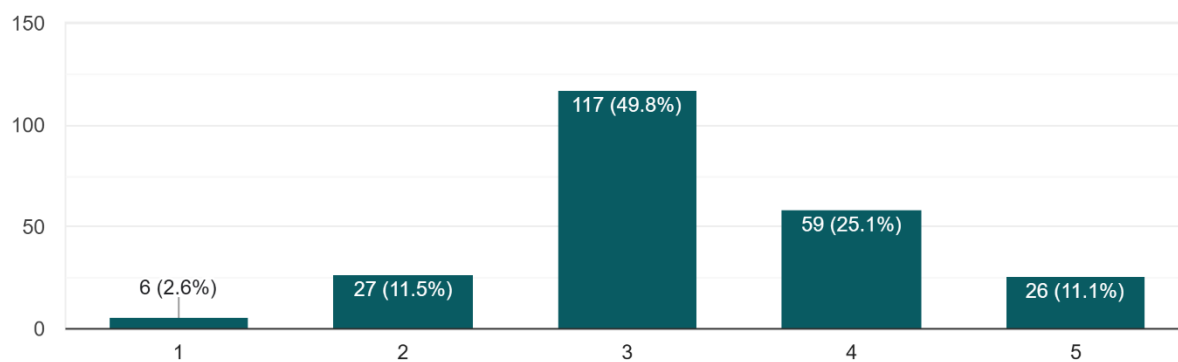
In my observation, our church body places more emphasis on ministry to youth than on ministry to older adults.

235 responses



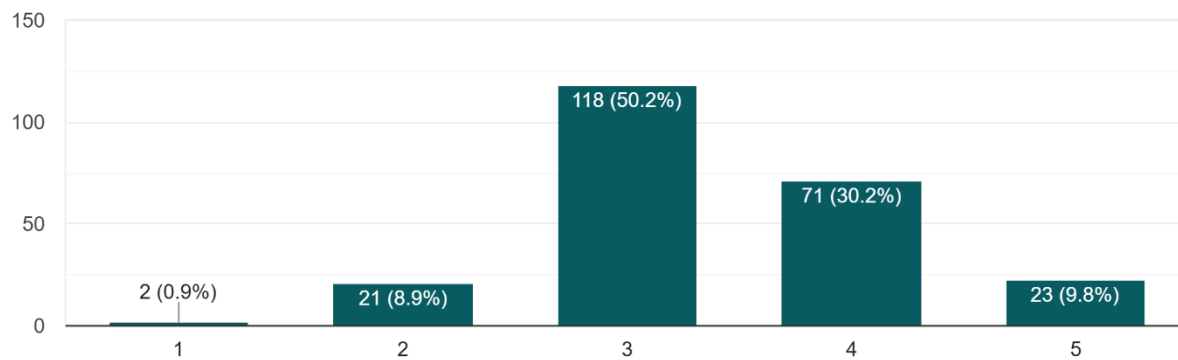
The church should invest more resources in ministry to youth.

235 responses



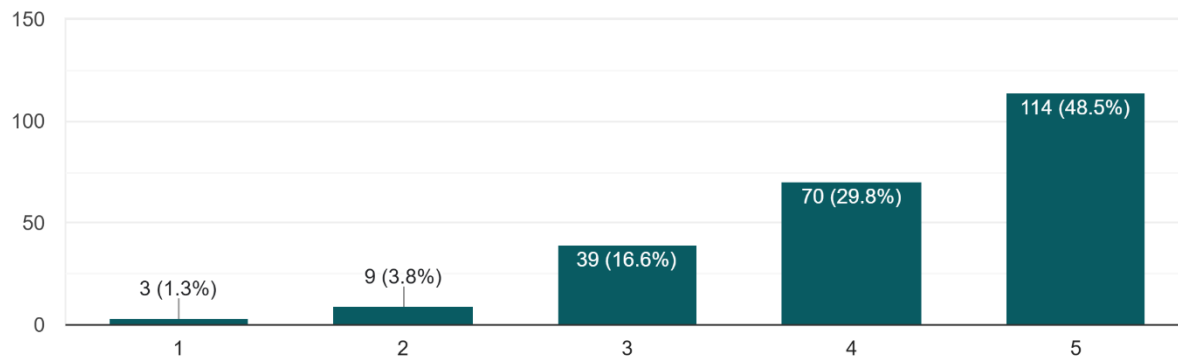
The church should invest more resources in ministry to older adults.

235 responses



Ministry to older adults is just as important to the future of a congregation as ministry to younger people.

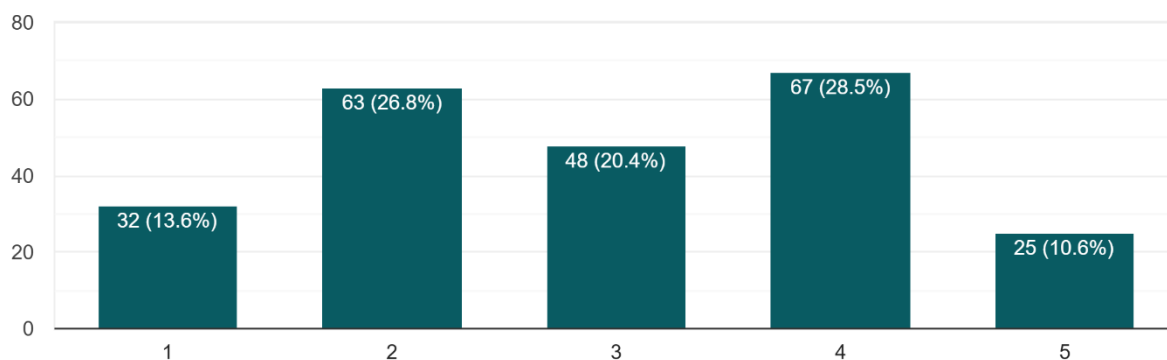
235 responses



Attitudes and Assumptions

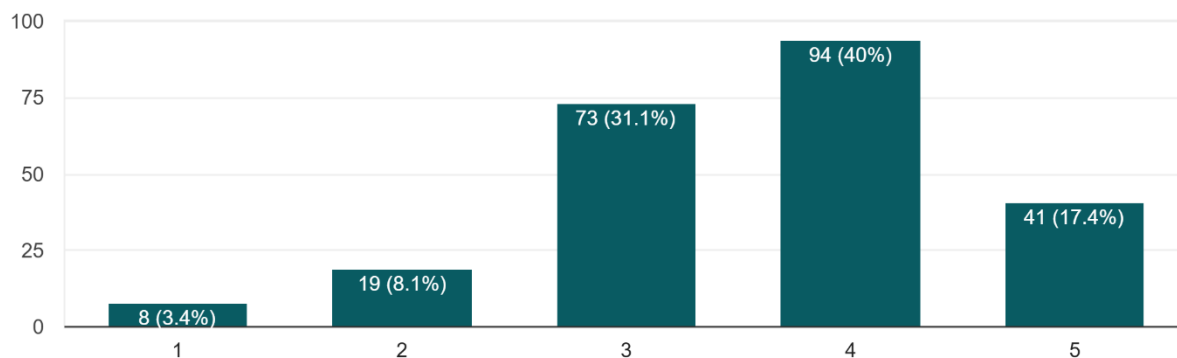
In my experience, older people are often underestimated in their ability to serve the church.

235 responses



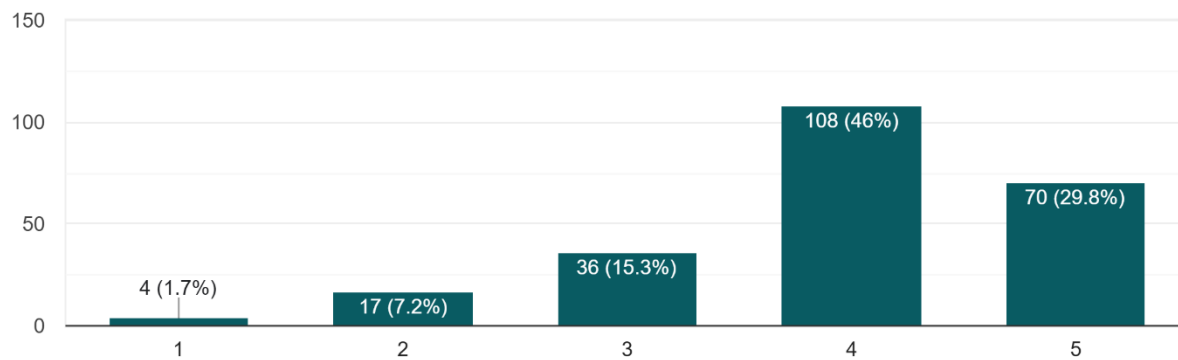
Older people tend to resist change in the congregation.

235 responses



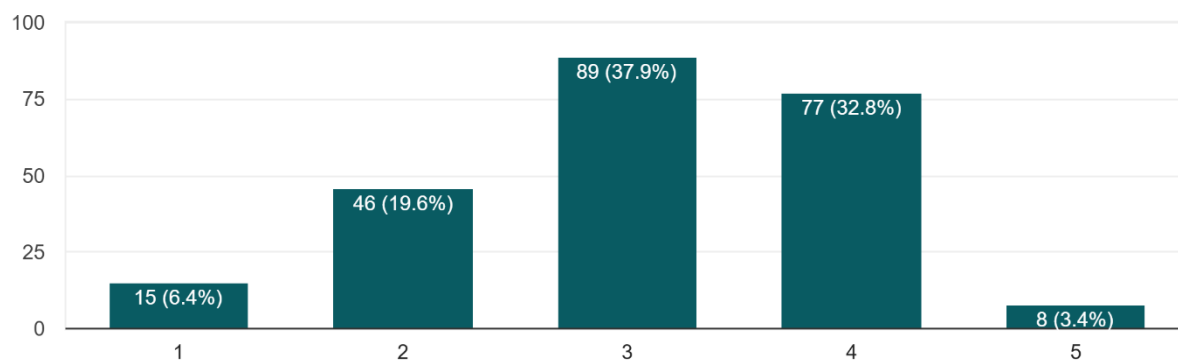
Older people are often among the most active volunteers in the congregation.

235 responses



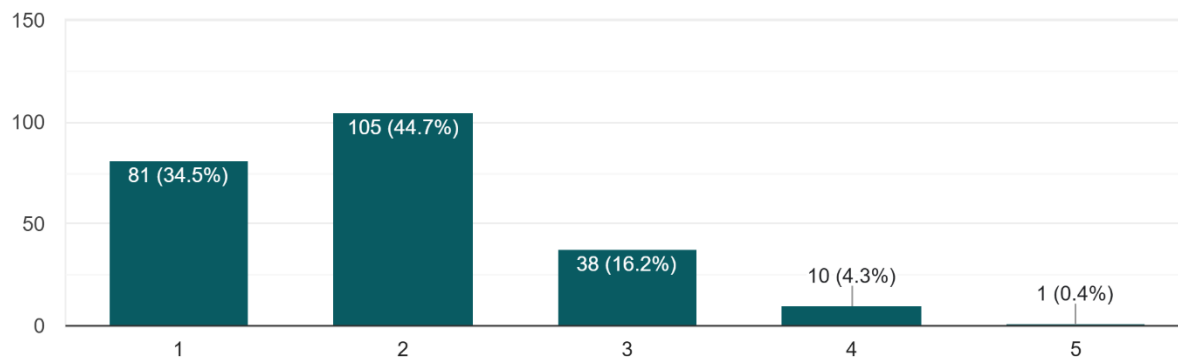
Younger people bring more creativity to ministry than older people do.

235 responses



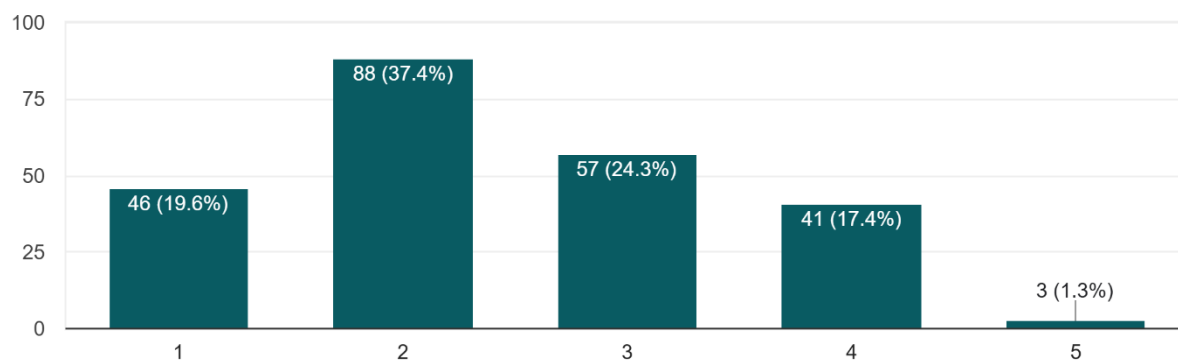
Older people need less pastoral care than younger families.

235 responses



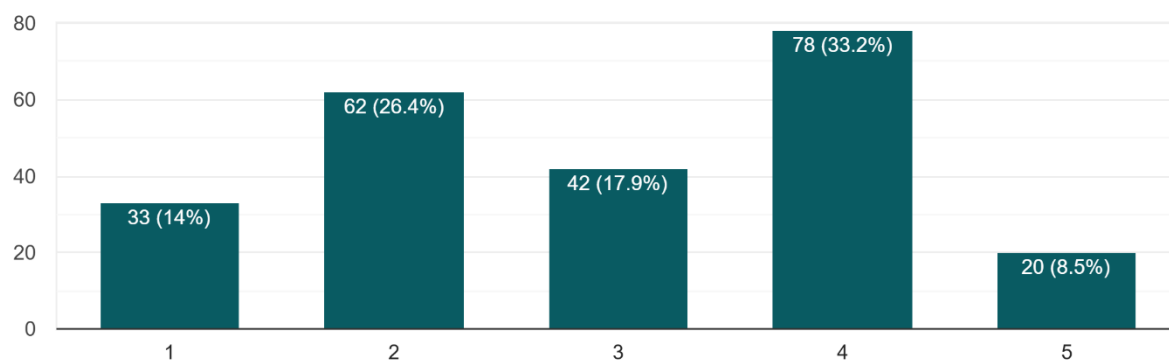
Older Christians generally face fewer doubts in their faith than younger ones do.

235 responses



Older Christians are generally less likely to be influenced by sinful peer pressure and societal pressure than younger Christians.

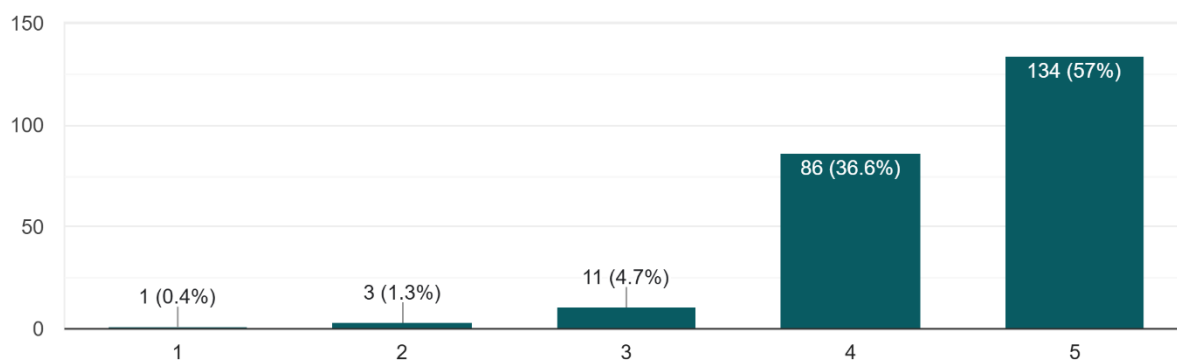
235 responses



Opportunities and Challenges

Older adults have unique gifts, resources, or wisdom to offer congregations.

235 responses

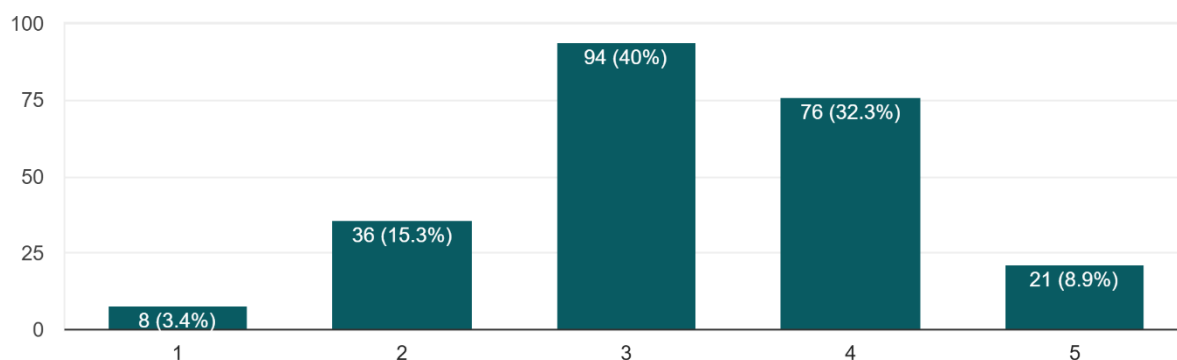


Optionally, you may explain your answer to the previous question.

64 responses were written.

In some ways, ministry to older adults can be more challenging than ministry to younger people.

235 responses

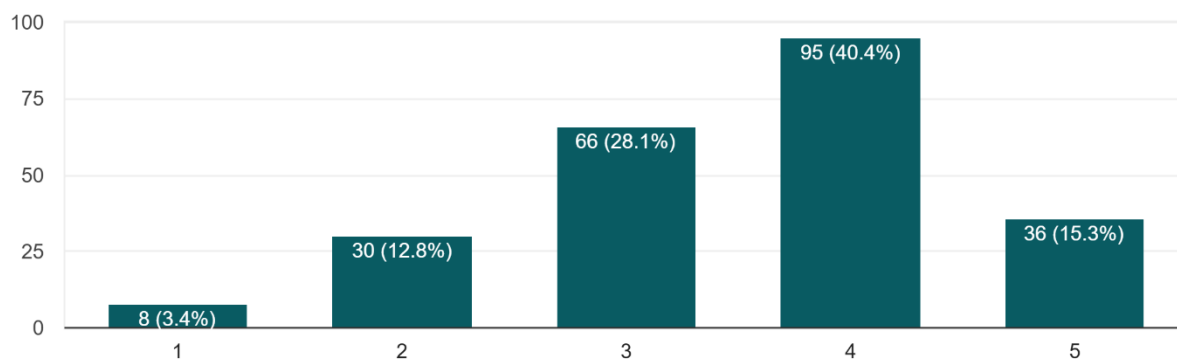


Optionally, you may explain your answer to the previous question.

65 responses were written.

Congregations with many older members are often less appealing to young families.

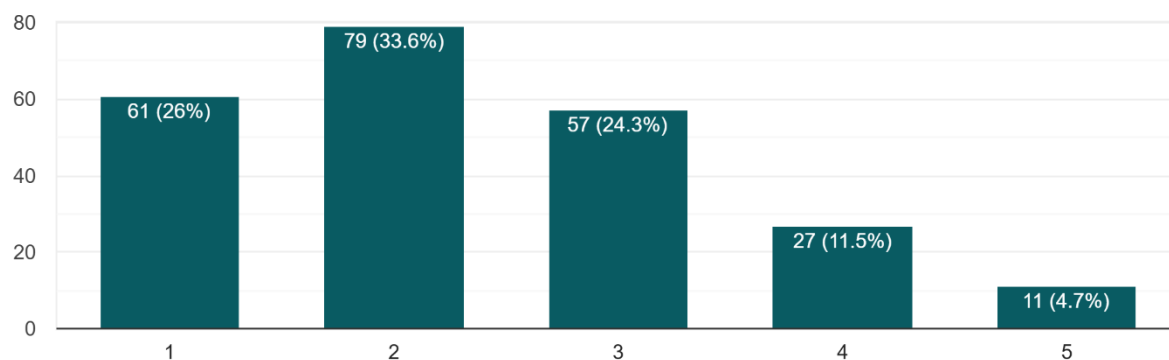
235 responses



Our Church Body

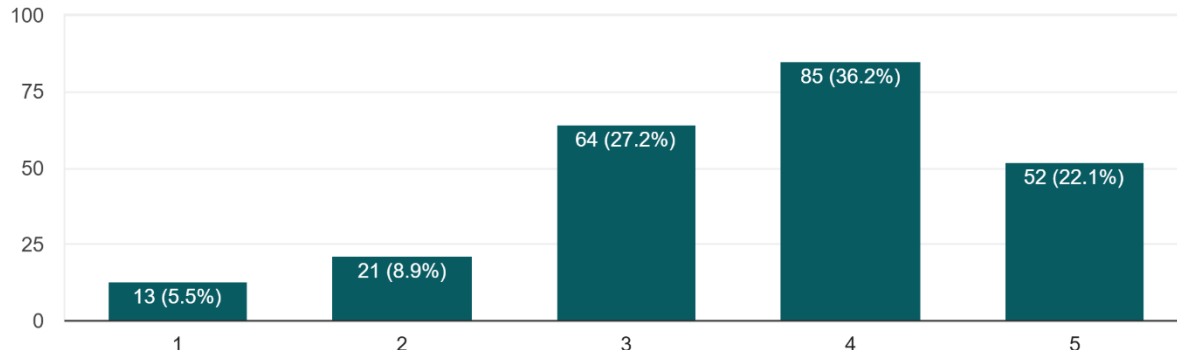
The aging of our church body should be viewed more as a problem than as an opportunity.

235 responses



Our church body is in trouble if we can't bring in more young people.

235 responses



Optionally, you may share any additional thoughts you have about ministry to younger or older people.

74 responses were written.

Consent Clause

By completing and submitting this survey, you are indicating your voluntary consent to participate in this study. Your participation is entirely anonymous, and no identifying information will be collected. Your responses may be used, analyzed, and referenced in my senior thesis and related academic presentations or publications.