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Bye Bye Rocking Chair

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Bye Bye Rocking Chair

Win Arn

Senior adults in most churches have more available time ... give more financially (one study indicated seven times more) than younger members ... have years of valuable experience working in the church ... don't go "church shopping," nor do they often move their residence ... their work quality is high, and church loyalty solid.

There's only one problem. Many seniors have given up on the idea of getting involved. And worse, many churches have given up on them, too.

OUT OF THE ROCKING CHAIR

So, how do we tap into this bountiful resource of human spirit? What can church leaders do to help senior adults out of their rocking chairs and back into active ministry? Here are some suggestions:

#1: Help senior adults re-capture a dream.

Sherwood Wirt, author of *I Don't Know What Old Is, But Old Is Older Than Me*, opens his book with the following comment: "The number one problem facing older people today is not aging itself. Nor is it a diminished income, or dependence on relatives or loneliness, or mental depression, or unhappy memories, or fear of death. The number one problem with us older people, as I see it, is a lack of vision."

How do senior adults re-capture a dream? The first step is to help them focus their attention *away* from themselves onto someone or something else. Dreams journey beyond oneself. Help seniors find a cause to support ... a person to mentor ... a mission to pursue. For "... unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone. But if it dies it brings forth

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much fruit" (in. 12:24).

Next, integrate the pursuit of the dream into a ministry of the church. If there are dreams in the hearts of some seniors for helping young children get a fair start in life, work with the seniors to begin a parent effectiveness training course and adopt a grandchild program. If some seniors dream of learning new skills, begin a series of stimulating courses open to members and non-members alike. If some dreams are for seeing friends reached for Christ, develop a friendship evangelism training strategy.

Solomon's words of wisdom apply particularly to senior adults: "Without a vision, the people perish."

#2: Help senior adults discover and use their spiritual gifts.

Senior adults who have found and are using their spiritual gifts have discovered that a) they are more productive in their Christian life, and b) they are happier and more fulfilled.

There are numerous books and discovery guides to help senior adults (and others) discover their gifts. The value of such a process is substantial:

- retirees find identity in their spiritual gifts, even though their occupational identity has been taken from them.
- those using their gifts are more effective and productive.
- unanimity among members and harmony in the church are by-products of people using their gift.
- more significant ministry can be accomplished in a church.
- more senior adults will be involved.

#3: Help senior adults do "kingdom work" rather than "busy work."

Kingdom work is activity that touches lives for Christ and the church. Busy work is activity for activity's sake. Seniors, more than most, know the value of time. And their time, more than most, is limited. Consequently, older adults want to use the time they have as productively as possible. Folding bulletins, arranging chairs, and stuffing envelopes may be important to the functioning of the church, but it is not a very effective way for senior adults to touch people's lives.

The Church of the Nazarene in Pasadena, CA has focused on deploying seniors in kingdom work. They have developed a "Helping Hands" ministry that is managed entirely by their retirees. Needy families in the Pasadena area come to receive food and clothing, and the members they come in contact with are the seniors. Another ministry of the church is "Heart to Heart,"

where members scheduled for open heart surgery receive a visit from a senior adults who has had heart surgery themselves, who serves as a reassuring counselor. A widow support group brings together people who have recently lost a spouse with those who have experienced this loss earlier. These are examples of “kingdom work” ... work that is significant and fulfilling.

#4: Involve senior adults in short-term tasks rather than long-term roles.

In our research, we have found that one common characteristic of older adult men and women is that they prefer short-term tasks over long term roles. A short-term task may be anytime from three weeks to six months. It might be serving on a task force to raise money for a missionary. It might be organizing a greeter training program. It could be organizing a small Bible study group for new retirees. But there is a singular goal with an identifiable completion date. In contrast, many churches have one, two, even three year terms on various boards or committees. And some positions (such as Sunday School teacher) often sound like life sentences. Senior adults value flexibility. They want the freedom to leave for weeks or months at a time. They don't know what health situations may change their mobility. And they want to participate in tasks they can see through to completion.

#5: Recognize achieving senior adults.

How do you reward and praise your senior adults who are willing to get out of their rocking chairs and back into the mainstream? Reinforcement is one of the most powerful motivators for continued behavior. Public affirmation. Private gratitude. Notes of thanks. Words of praise. Seniors know the value of their time. Do you? And do you thank them for it?

One side benefit in frequent public affirmations is that the more seniors are thanked for their involvement, the more those uninvolved members will see what their peers are doing. Anyone — of any age — is influenced by what his or her peers are doing. Through public affirmation you are trying to “get the ball rolling” and build momentum that will become self-perpetuating in senior adult involvement.