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Senior Adult Evangelism

David E. Moore

Introduction

In the restructuring of age-graded Bible study classes, one of the difficult classes to “promote” is the class with the most elderly age span. The reluctance of adults to attend this class is heard in their response not to be a part of the “next class to glory.” The writer of Psalm 90 captured this sentiment when he wrote:

We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. The length of our days is seventy years-or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrows, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Desperation and fear of death are heard in the voice of these words. Senior adults need to personally know God and His promise of eternal peace. Seniors in this state of hopelessness and fearfulness need to be given the opportunity to hear and then be invited to receive the hope and assurance of personal salvation with the promise of eternal peace and security. The lack of evangelism which targets today’s seniors is a growing crisis. The number of unsaved seniors will continue to expand unless today’s churches and believers intentionally evangelize these needful individuals that God loves and desires to be a part of His kingdom for eternity.

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Imperatives for Evangelizing the Senior

It is not uncommon to find churches focusing their evangelism efforts on children and youth. In 2004, the Barna research organization found that “nearly half (43%) of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before reaching the age of 13, and two out of three born again Christians (64%) believe Jesus as Savior before their 18th birthday.”¹ The rate of belief is reduced dramatically as the age increases. Only one out of eight people 18 to 21 years old come to faith.² However, one Veterans Hospital study found that 40% of the patients became believers after the age of 65.³ The Bergstroms contend that many of the studies used to support youth outreach efforts have neglected to include samples of people over the age of 65.⁴ Indeed, as churches focus on the young, the receptivity is evident. But, the receptivity of the senior may be even greater as one experiences the loss of significant loved ones, aspects of self, external objects, time, independence, and purpose. The church is no exception to the presence and practice of ageism. Arn and Arn argue there is an absence of effective senior adult ministries that focuses on the life experiences and spiritual needs of people over the age of 55, and even fewer opportunities for seniors to serve others.⁵ There are five compelling reasons to evangelize the senior—the command of Christ, the increasing number of unbelieving seniors, ageism in the church, the myth of automatic spiritual involvement as one ages, and the receptivity of the senior. The challenge to the church is addressing this critical need in the spiritual life of the senior adult.

The Command of Christ

The central mission of the church is evangelism. Christ himself said in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost.” As he approached his death on the cross, he further explained in John 20:21 that his mission is now the mission of all believers. He said, “As the Father has sent me, I also send you.” This mission of evangelism is found in Mathew 28:19-20, known as “The Great Commission” which main focus is to “make disciples.” In making disciples, a witness must be shared with non-believers who are then invited to believe. The second aspect of the command to make disciples is the nurturing and spiritual growth of the new convert. At the moment of Jesus’ transfiguration and ascension, Luke records in Acts 1:8, the repetition of the Great Commission as Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses...” The process of making disciples involves the tandems of believing and obedience, proclamation and practice,

telling and teaching, and witnessing and working.⁶ After spiritual birth comes the life-long journey of spiritual transformation of all believers.

The Demographic Situation

For decades, the “age” of the populace of America has been youthful. In 1900, the sixty-five and older population represented only four percent of the population of the U.S. However, by 2040, it is predicted that this age group will number almost twenty-five percent of the population.⁷ This translates into the church as one out of four attendees will be sixty-five or older. In addition, as life expectancy increases in years due to better health practices and medical improvements, these seniors will live longer and continue in years of fruitful and purposeful life. In matters of faith, only about fifty-one percent of present day seniors (Builders—born 1927-1945) and newly retiring adults (Boomers—born 1946-1964) report to be believers in Christ.⁸ When describing themselves, even less percentages of constituents of these two age groups confirm personal faith in Christ.⁹ In the 2001 and the 2002 Annual Church Profile of Southern Baptist Churches, only 4% of reported baptisms were in the 60 and older adult population.¹⁰ Only preschoolers (0-5 yrs of age) ranked lower. This demographic shift only magnifies as future generations age. McNeal summarizes in *The Present Future* a study by Rainer, which reports the increasingly bleaker outlook of future believers.¹¹ The percentage of Christians dramatically declines in succeeding generations. These facts compound the need to present Christ as Savior to all seniors. After a lifetime of rejecting the truth of the Gospel or never having it shared, seniors face an eternal destination of separation from God if believers do not present the claims of Christ.

Ageism within the Church

As churches minister to youth and children with the purpose of reaching them with the truth of salvation, it is unintentionally practicing ageism, the discrimination of adults based on age. They are rightly declaring God’s power to the next generation but are blind to the mission field of the non-believing senior whose future is waning. All of life is a gift and unexpected death comes at any time. But, seniors have less predictable time to hear and receive the truth of Christ. In analyzing ageism in the church, questions need to be asked: questions such as: “Is the emphasis put on older adult ministries proportionate to the emphasis put on youth?”; “Does the leadership of the church view older adults as liabilities rather than as valuable resources?” and

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"Are older adults active in every area and ministry of the church?" The answers to these questions will indicate the presence or absence of ageism.

Another indication of ageism in the church is the comments from seniors themselves. It is common to hear the excuse that "it is time for someone younger to lead, I am now retired." This is self-directed discrimination strictly because of age. Not only has the church indicated a lack of worth for the individual, but as a senior questions their own worth they contribute to their own ageism. The church is one institution where ageism should not exist as the dignity, value and honor of seniors is returned to the proper biblical perspective.

The Myth of Religious Involvement

As with any other stage and passage of life, senior adults need attention as it concerns spiritual growth and development. Bergen asserts that spiritual maturity is not a simple by product of aging.¹² In fact, she references several studies which "refute the myth that seniors become more religious as they grow older."¹³ For the most part, one's interests in the earlier years of life are continued in the latter years. Petty comments that most studies indicate the life-time stability model of involvement. The life-time stability model means that seniors do not become more involved, just maintain or continue their existing levels of participation.¹⁴ The only increase noted was non-organizational religious involvement such as viewing religious programming, praying at home and becoming a part of a "homebound" type of ministry. Dr. William Day commented in a telephone interview that the "longer seniors live it is less likely they will make a profession of faith unless intentional ministry is directed toward them."¹⁵ Arnell Motz reports only a small percentage of new members being added to church roles by conversion are 55 years or above—6.8% over the age of 50 and only 1.2% over the age of 60.¹⁶ In their *Age Wave Wake-up Call*, Arn and Arn commented the conversion growth of 67% of 1,000 member churches related to only one or no seniors.¹⁷

Receptivity of Senior Adults

A paradoxical truth to the small percentage of senior adult conversions is their overwhelming receptivity. With intentional evangelistic efforts towards senior adults, the rates of salvation experiences and baptisms have increased. In fact, with the growing population of senior adults, outreach to older adults represents the greatest potential for church growth. The Bergstroms reference Arn and Arn on this matter of receptivity who wrote in

Catch the Age Wave:

Donald McGavran, one of the founders of the modern church-growth movement, observed a remarkable phenomenon on the mission field of India over forty years ago. He noted that when Christianity flourished in a particular area or region, it was often because entire villages or groups of people came to faith in a short period of time. During these 'people movements,' as he later called them, entire castes and tribes would become Christians. Dr. McGavran also observed that although some tribes and castes of people were, at certain times, more receptive to the gospel, other groups tended to be resistant. His subsequent recommendation to missionaries who desired to see the Christian harvest in great numbers was to seek out receptive "people groups"—people whom God had prepared—and focus evangelistic strategy in that direction. This principle of 'receptivity' is just as relevant today as ever. And senior adults are a 'people group' particularly receptive to the Good News. There are three reasons: (1) Seniors are experiencing many changes in life; (2) Older adults have an increased desire for meaningful relationships with others; and (3) Senior adults want (and need) to make a meaningful contribution to society.¹⁸

Independently, Win Arn and L. Vogel both discovered that seniors are more open to the gospel truth due to the high number of life-transition events.¹⁹ With the reports of receptivity, the question arises as to the low percentage of senior conversions. For those who do convert, are there any factors that lead up to or influence this decision? Dr. William Day pursued these questions in his dissertation, *The Relationship of Selected Contextual and Institutional Factors to the Evangelism of Senior Adults in Churches of the Southern Baptist Convention*.²⁰ Charles Arn in his *White Unto Harvest* developed a seven step strategy to reach seniors as a result of a study he conducted.²¹

Considerations for Senior Adult Evangelism

Dr William Day conducted a study of two types of Southern Baptist churches—evangelistic (193 churches) and senior adult evangelistic (164 churches). An evangelistic church was defined as a church in the top 0.5 percent of churches (37 or more baptisms) for two out of three years with no senior adult baptism.²² A senior adult evangelistic church baptized four or more senior adults in two out of three years.²³ One key contextual variable

impacting the baptism results was the relative number of senior adults both inside and outside the church. Beyond this, Day discovered twenty-four institutional variables leading to the conversion of seniors sixty years of age and older. In order of importance, they were: evangelism training, targeting senior adults, seniors witnessing to lost friends, pastoral vision for evangelizing senior adults, evangelistic emphasis in church senior adult programs, evangelistic focus in church programs for the elderly, seniors inviting lost friends to church revivals, evangelism priority in senior adult programs, seniors focusing on the future, senior adult Sunday School classes involved in church evangelism ministry, open, warm greeting of guests by seniors, senior Sunday School leaders trained in evangelism, senior adult "greeters", seniors making friends with non-Christian seniors, evangelistic planning by senior adult Sunday School leaders, vision for church growth by seniors, senior adults starting new Sunday School classes, focusing on the Sunday School purpose of evangelism, worship style enjoyed by seniors, senior adult classes welcoming guests, preaching of evangelistic sermons, quick inclusion of seniors in the life of the church, setting of evangelism goals by seniors, and involving seniors in prayer ministries.²⁴ One of his baseline conclusions from his research was the need for senior adult evangelism to be an intentional strategy of the church.

Charles Arn believes that seniors need to be the targets of intentional evangelism with a defined strategy that brings focus to the effort. First, he believes churches need to clarify the goal of the outreach priority. This goal is "making disciples and responsible church members."²⁵ The second step of the strategy is to develop a potential disciple list of friends, relatives, and previous contacts which will then be used in the third step of building bridges toward these individuals through meeting needs or special activities.²⁶ In the fourth step, the focus on evangelism should be concentrated on the potential disciples that are the most receptive.²⁷ Senior adult leaders and members need to be trained to share their faith as well as how to be effective disciplinarians. Lifestyle evangelism marks the fifth and sixth step of the strategy.²⁸ Lastly, churches create a place for senior adult newcomers through various small groups.²⁹ The church is called to reach all ages with the truth of salvation, yet, there is immediacy with seniors. The fields are truly "white unto harvest."

Consideration for Builders and Boomers

The seniors in the church and community comprise adults of two generations—Builders and Boomers. As both of them have

their unique characteristics and trends, the church will do well to formulate ministry with both of these generations. The make-up of this ministry will be different and especially tailored for the spiritual needs of the Builder or the Boomer. The considerations presented in the previous discussion are the framework and intentional focus of the ministry. Builders and Boomers each have different needs and avenues of evangelism and ministry.

Evangelism to Builders

Being the oldest generation, Builders may begin to seriously concern themselves about spiritual matters. With the tendency to be private and not discuss such personal issues publicly, there will be a reluctance to openly reveal spiritual needs and thoughts. However, attending an event with a simple presentation of the gospel will appeal to the Builders as they consider the truth of salvation, death, forgiveness, and eternal existence. Builders will receive the information and be open to private, individual discussions. The presentation of these topics will need to be respectful with the offer of individual appointments given for follow-up.

According to McIntosh, the main avenue for reaching Builders is through care-giving ministries as the church meets real needs.³⁰ Many Builders do not have extended family or even children with the ability to provide care for their aging parent or relative.

As the family structure has changed, there is a need for care-givers with few available. Needs of Builders can be addressed with such ministries as a help hot line, support groups, traditional activities around the holidays, assistance with social security and income taxes, trips (with 50% non-Christians), various types of interest classes, counseling, a clearinghouse for transportation and medical attention, and respite care.³¹

Evangelism to Boomers

According to McIntosh, as Boomers have transitioned through the normal stages of life, they have now reached the conclusion there is no salvation in secular society.³² The search for meaning and purpose has risen to be the prevailing need. However, this search for meaning does not necessarily lead the Boomer to organized religion or the institutional church. Rather than a private matter, Boomers are choosing lifestyles closely aligned with religious beliefs. Re-evaluating personal goals and purpose is an over-riding concern for the Boomer. This generation can be reached with such ministries that highlight purpose and vision, use celebrative worship, stress quality, streamline

structure, offer multiple options, use small groups, restructures existing services, communicate visually, expand the role of women, focus on local ministry, and offer short-term mission involvement.³³ For the next 25 years, the Boomers will be entering the fifty plus age bracket. This adds to the already critical need of reaching seniors with the truth of salvation through Jesus Christ. A two-tracked strategy to reach both Builders and Boomers is needed by the local church.

Results of Interviews on Senior Evangelism

As a part of the preparation for this research of the need for senior adult evangelism, an informal survey of twenty-seven churches with senior adult ministers was conducted. The interview consisted of three basic questions: "Does your senior adult ministry include evangelism?"; "If so, is it direct or servant evangelism?" and "How many senior adult baptisms do you have in a year?" Eight churches interviewed are involved in direct evangelism. As senior adult prospects are discovered, teams of seniors are trained in evangelism and sent to visit the prospects with an evangelistic purpose. Prospect discovery occurs from guests to worship services or attendance at senior events. Fourteen churches replied with a servant evangelism focus and methodology. Servant evangelism activities range from nursing home visits to home repair for seniors in the community. Two senior adult ministers admitted there is no evangelism at this time. Three churches reported that all events for seniors are evangelistic. These events are community service, planned meetings and programs at the church and organized outreach and visitation. The churches with this intentional and all-inclusive focus of ministry conduct ten to thirty baptisms per year. The other twenty-four baptized less than five and even none. Dr. Day's conclusion of the need for intentional evangelism of senior adults was evidenced with these interviews.

Application to First Southern Baptist Church

Currently, First Southern Baptist Church of Dover, Delaware, does not have a senior adult ministry beyond three Bible study classes. These classes are structured to provide care ministry to class members, fellowship, and outreach to prospective members. Rather than working together in a common senior adult ministry, they are individually being responsible for their own grouping of adults. In the last three years, First Southern has only baptized 2 senior adults (age 60 +) per year. This has not been the result of an intentional ministry strategy. Recently, two senior adults have responded to an invitation by the minis-

ter of education to meet and discuss the potential of a senior adult ministry. Separately, both individuals commented they are not interested in a “meet, eat, burp” organization but one of intentional ministry to seniors both within and outside the church. First Southern has been unconsciously practicing ageism with its focus on young adults, younger families, children and youth. First Southern will continue this focus but will provide intentional activities and strategies to reach more seniors with the gospel message. Evangelism training continues to be offered each year. Both F.A.I.T.H.³⁴ and *Share Jesus Without Fear*³⁵ have been utilized in the past. This year, the *One-Day/One-Hour Witnessing Workshop* from NAMB or the *Story to Tell/Life to Live* material developed by the South Carolina Baptist Convention will be used for the training. Seniors will be specifically invited to the training to prepare them for personal evangelism wherever and with whomever God directs them. Another emphasis for this summer will be the continuation of an adult VBS class. The target group for this class will be senior adults in a daytime setting. An integrated approach that incorporates Bible study, recreation, fellowship, and learning activities will be staffed, planned and implemented. One other strategy currently maintained and accomplished by seniors is a prayer-walking ministry. Several times throughout the year, senior adult housing complexes have been the target of these prayer walks. Underlying these strategies will be the planning and implementation of a senior adult ministry. It will be one to compete with a vibrant, local senior center, but will discover the niche and purpose God has for it to minister to senior adults.

Conclusion

Through this research, it is evident that intentional evangelism to seniors is the key to answer the critical need of senior adult conversion to the truth of salvation through Jesus Christ. Through the research by both Day and Arn, churches are just as guilty of ageism as modern society and seniors themselves. It is beyond time for evangelistic churches to begin an intentional strategy to reach seniors with the gospel. It goes without saying younger generations need the gospel message, but time for the elderly to be invited and respond is shortening each moment. The low baptism and salvation statistics represented by the seniors is an indictment of the evangelism efforts, or lack thereof, on the part of the evangelical church. Even though the two types of evangelism (direct or servant), were utilized, it was the churches that were intentional throughout programming and ministry that were the most effective. Let it not be said of the 21st Century

church that it did not care about the salvation of senior and strictly focus on the younger generations.

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