



BABY-BOOMERS
A ministry for Older Adults of
The Kentucky Conference

Boomers: Reframing Aging and Transforming Elderhood

In addition to COVID-19 and the uncertain future of The United Methodist Church, one of the greatest challenges facing church leaders in 2021 is the aging of our congregations. United Methodist churches are graying, our members are growing older.

Nearly 70 million Americans make up the Baby Boomer Generation – persons born between 1946-1964. Starting January 1, 2021, leading-edge Boomers started turning 75. The generation that never thought of itself as getting old and has lived in a state of denial about aging, is now on the cusp of old age.

While the pandemic has deeply affected the way people are living, it's impact is greatly felt by the Baby Boomer Generation. For many Boomers, COVID-19 has brought disappointment and changes – death and sickness of family and friends and canceled retirement travels and visits with grandchildren. Health and financial challenges add to the sense of loneliness and self-isolation during this crisis.

Many Boomers feel cheated as expectations for their retirement years are upended. This is the generation who trusted no one over 30 and believed they could make it in the world on their own.

Boomers may also see their anticipated next stage of life evaporate as the pandemic continues to have a grip on their lives. Because Boomers do not identify with labels such as older adult, senior citizen, or elderly, and because they have enjoyed the illusion of youthfulness for so long, it is difficult for them to realize that, during the pandemic, they have been placed in the *high risk group*.

As Boomers go through the stages of growing older, they bring with them a unique historical profile. They will continue to alter the meanings and values traditionally associated with growing older. They are the generation of the anti-Vietnam War protests, Civil Rights struggles, Women's Liberation, environmental awareness, and experimentation with new lifestyles.

Boomers have traditionally been a seeker generation, pursuing quests and experiences beyond the boundaries and values set by preceding older generations. Boomers are not interested in *acting their age*. They are not their parents and they are aging differently than their parents.

When Boomers' parents reached retirement age, they believed the world no longer belonged to them. This is not so for many Boomers. They believe that it is never too late to change their career, appearance, or the future, or reinvent oneself.

Considering the paradigm-busting history of the Boomer generation, why apply yesterdays thinking about aging, retirement, and old age to Boomers?

Boomers are aging differently than past generations; they are reframing what it means to be aging and therefore they are transforming elderhood in our society. Unfortunately,, a huge chasm often separates church ministry that strives to be creative, innovative, and competitive from church leaders' willingness to involve adults ages 65 and older.

Some church leaders intentionally overlook Boomers and naively believe that only a church with lots of young people will make a church vital, healthy, and relevant. Boomers can provide churches with leadership, financial assistance, experience, generativity, and faith – all of which ser the needs of growing, vital congregations.

Many Boomers view aging and older adulthood as a time of loss, decline, and diminished relevance. Your church can help Boomers understand that this stage of life offers new opportunities for growth, well-being, contribution, and self-expression. Begin by encouraging Boomers to spend less time lamenting aging and what is gone in life and more time supporting what is present and still possible.

While life may seem terrible during the pandemic, church leaders can help Boomers reframe their thinking about being in control. Boomers have adapted all of their lives – readily and steadily reinventing category after category, year after year. From education, lifestyles, autos, personal technology, travel, media/entertainment, and religion, there is hardly a category Boomers did not invent, popularize, or adopt. You can find their influence on toppling domestic car brands, standardizing athletic shoes as daily footwear, devaluing religious denominationalism, and transforming traditional worship.

Some of the challenges Boomers face as they age are finances, health, relationships, and purpose. Boomers want the same thing most everyone else wants: financial security, good health, happy relationships, and meaning and purpose in life. As they grow older, it may be harder for Boomers to receive these things. They tend to be more worried about money, less trustful of government and institutional authority, and gloomier about the future than other generations.

Because Boomers do not think of themselves as older adults – avoid using *senior* to describe Boomers – they have very little interest in the current design of most older adult ministries. Rather than asking Boomers to participate in an existing older adult ministry, church leaders should start new groups designed specifically for Boomers.

Congregations wanting to be intentional in ministry with Boomers should accept this generation for who they are:

- For many Boomers, regular participation does not mean weekly
- Because of active lifestyles and busy schedules, Boomers may have limited time for participating in church programs and activities
- Accept the fact that Boomers, wanting to be in control, will not necessarily attend an event out of obligation
- Many Boomers will work well beyond the “normal” retirement age and may not provide the same degree of volunteer service as previous generations of older adults.
- Provide a variety of opportunities related to Boomers’ careers and interests in which they can engage with others.
- Create opportunities for meaningful service and mission projects for Boomers and their families and friends.
- Recognize that intentional ministry must be person-centered, knowing that no two Boomers are exactly alike.

No single ministry meets the needs and circumstances of all Boomers. Person-centered ministry works best with Boomers because they do not fit every description, interest, habit, or activity attributed to them. While there is no script for successful aging, church leaders can help Boomers write their own scripts.

From the very beginning, Boomers have been a generation who would look at something and ask, if it wasn’t what they wanted it to be, “How can I make it better?” they continue to be a generation that reframes aging to their own liking and, as a result, transforms elderhood for future generations.

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