



WORDS OF WISDOM

A Ministry for Older Adults of The Kentucky Conference

Congregational Vitality and Older Adult Ministry

“Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days.”

Job 12:12

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just something for church leaders to endure until the vaccine becomes widely available and brings closure to the crisis. Rather, the pandemic is a lifetime change that is likely to affect our lives and our congregations for years. For older adults, the extended social isolation caused by the pandemic has created serious health implications for many – from heart disease and dementia to depression and death.

Major catastrophes like the COVID-19 pandemic, 9/11, and hurricanes can serve as a wakeup call to older adults, church leaders, and congregations about the necessity of being prepared and engaging in intentional older adult ministry. The creative potential for hope and vision for church leaders is unparalleled right now.

Many Americans are adjusting to a new normal as a result of COVID-19 – one that balances the critical need to prevent the spread of coronavirus with other factors affecting health and well-being. The COVID-19 situation is fast moving and what people need to know is fast changing.

The pandemic has brought about positive and negative long-term changes to churches that will outlast the virus. Some churches will not survive the pandemic. They will have to close. Other church leaders are looking to stabilize the health of their overall ministry, especially their financial situation. They are wanting to get back to “normal” and resume programs and services. They are hoping to have enthusiastic staff and engaged volunteers and congregants.

Prior to the pandemic many congregations with large numbers of older persons experienced intentional congregational vitality. Church leaders in vital congregations knew that people of all ages are called to be faithful witnesses of God’s love. Older adults are equipped and empowered for ministry no less than persons of other ages. Healthy congregations find creative ways of inviting older adults to remain a vital part of the church by making significant contributions to its ministry.

Since the pandemic, church leaders and congregations have faced unforeseen challenges. In-person worship services have been cancelled and, in their place, virtual worship services are being held. People attending worship services generally received a sense of comfort, God's presence, and community. During the pandemic, the rug has been pulled out from underneath Christians and there are few places where they can feel hope. Virtual worship services, Bible Study groups, and Sunday school classes are an attempt to maintain some sense of normalcy.

With the advent of a vaccine, it is everyone's hope that congregations will once again begin to assemble in person in 2021. Ministry can once again begin – even if in new ways and with new challenges.

As such, church leaders will need to reimagine and rethink ministry. In an effort to be pro-active during the coming months, here are suggestions for helping your church experience congregational vitality.

Build on your strengths, not your weaknesses. If you don't have a congregation filled with children, youth, or young adults, assess who you do have. If your church is situated in an area with more retired people than young people, your strength for ministry rests with midlife and older adults. Don't feel guilty for not having children or youth. Plan ministry that intentionally engages older adults in faith development and in mission and service. Stay open to ways of reaching children, youth, and young adults, but don't lose sight of your strengths for ministry: older adults.

Form a team. Identify others who have a passion and a calling for older adult ministries and form a team. Begin to identify the needs and talents of older adults in your church and community. Survey the older adults in your congregation and community. Identify their needs and talents and, with your team, develop a shared vision that engages, equips, and empowers older adults for ministry.

Follow your mission statement. The mission of the church and with older adult ministries (as with children's, youth, and adult ministries) is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Guild your older adult ministries with the mission of your church firmly implanted in your vision.

Empower lay leadership teams. Older adult ministry is not something that is done by a pastor to senior adults or by a volunteer leader for older adults. Rather, it is a ministry by, with, and for older adults. Such a ministry seeks to equip and empower all older adults for ministry. Vital congregations empower lay leadership teams with older adults who provide caregiving ministries, mission and service opportunities, and small group leadership. Invite lay leadership teams to visit and to take Holy Communion to all homebound and nursing home residents. Lay leadership teams can help hold one another accountable in growing as Christians and can model spiritual maturity for other older persons.

Use lifestyles, not age, as the determining factor for ministry. Chronological age is not important in ministry with persons at midlife and beyond. Rather, lifestyle issues are more important. For example, grandparenting concerns are not just for people who are retired. Grandparents are as young as people in their 30s and early 40s. The question becomes: What are the common concerns that all grandparents, whatever their age, may experience? Create small groups around common interests, concerns, or care.

Develop various ministry options. Realize that one ministry type does not meet all the needs of older adults. Some older adults will welcome returning to the church building for worship services and study groups, while other older adults will be more inclined to worship virtually, as they have been doing for months. Some older adults will enjoy meeting together for a weekly or monthly noon luncheon program, while other older adults would rather be part of a mission team or take part in a community service project. Some older adults will be available during the day; others will be working and only available at night or on weekends. Some older adults will need caregiving services, while others can be care providers. Some older adults will enjoy singing old familiar hymns while others enjoy singing praise songs. Remember: no two older adults are exactly alike; therefore, no single ministry will reach everyone.

Foster intergenerational ministry and lifelong learning. Create opportunities for intentional intergenerational ministry with young people and older adults. Help older adults become active listeners and faith sharers for young people in your congregation and community. Also, find ways that older adults can continue to learn and grow in faith and life. People who age well often have growing relationships with younger people and are involved in learning and growth opportunities. Invite older adults to invest in the lives of young people as well as investing financially in missions.

Make your church facilities inviting and accessible. Keep in mind the changing needs of people as they age. Restrooms should be accessible, lighting needs to be bright enough and font sizes large enough for people to be able to read, and acoustics and sound systems should allow all persons to be able to hear clearly. Plan Bible study groups to be held during daylight hours, especially in winter months. Create an atmosphere of radical hospitality that is warm, friendly, and inviting for all midlife and older adults.

Since many of us will live longer and healthier lives than previous generations, we have the opportunity to create a second half of life that is fundamentally different from what our parents and grandparents experienced. However, we will also face new challenges and struggles. In reality, we are pioneers – forging new paths and definitions about what it means to be older adults.

What our congregations urgently need now is a cadre of empowered elders, wise mentors, and spiritual sages who are discerning, embracing, and navigating change. We need them to be spiritual activists – spiritual warriors – to impart their wisdom, experience, and knowledge to

those who are younger to help heal our societal dysfunctions and our planetary environmental crisis.

Vital congregations will find creative ways of engaging, equipping, and empowering a growing older population. Ministry with older adults should be more than a maintenance ministry or a chapel ministry. Faced with the reality of an aging society, growing congregations will not get bogged down by negative attitudes about aging. Instead, vital congregations will equip older adults to grow as mature Christians and empower them for Christian mission and service.

The aging church is not an accident. It is God who has granted longer life for God's purposes. Intentional, vital congregations believe that older adults hold the keys to solving many, if not most, of society's problems.

Having a vaccine to combat the coronavirus is not an end-all to the problems many churches are experiencing. The cost of coronavirus has been enormous for many churches. The path forward in dealing with the harm, hurt, and death brought about as a result of the pandemic will require faith-filled and Spirit-lead church leadership that exhibits creativity, intelligence, authenticity, honesty, humility, and wisdom

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