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Designing an effective ministry for senior adults

by David Gallagher

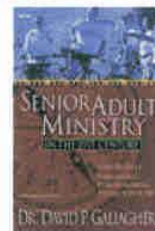
Programs designed to reach people over the age of 50 are springing up everywhere – except in churches. Universities, graduate schools, retail giants, developers – virtually every part of our society sees the age wave and is responding to it – but not churches. That's why I believe seniors are the next hot ministry field.

Over the years, I've served in family churches packed with children, youth, and young adults. I've never seen a church that was overflowing with seniors. So nine years ago, when I was asked to start a new church and design it specifically to reach seniors, I knew there was an opportunity to try something that had never been done. Without hesitation, I said yes. Every member and friend in the congregation would be over the age of 50. An exciting challenge awaited me. And I love a challenge!

That was nine years ago. Since then, we've watched the amazing blessing of God in our midst. There were 23 in the core fellowship and today we have more than 400 seniors attending every Sunday. We're picking up speed. Our congregation grew by 14 percent last year.

Three years after I came as pastor, we burned our mortgage on a \$2 million fellowship hall. On Thanksgiving Sunday, 2006, we break ground on a multi-million dollar worship center and fully anticipate being debt free at completion on Palm Sunday, 2007. Our ability to grow and build is based on our congregation's amazing generosity and the fact that the average tithes in our church far exceeds the national average – in fact, it far exceeds the typical tithes of 10 percent!

If you think you're ready to design an effective ministry for senior adults, here are five simple steps to help get you started:



“Specializing in seniors' ministry has allowed me the privilege of laughing like I've never laughed before, but I've also cried with more people than in any other previous ministry I've been in.”

David Gallagher, author of [Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century](#)

1. Read everything you can get your hands on (both secular and Christian) that relates to people over age 50. Books like *Half Time* by Bob Buford, *Understanding the Generations* and *The Graying of the Flock* by James Knapp, *Catch the Age Wave* and *The New Senior* by Charles Arn are good for starters. Go to every Web site that will help you understand seniors, like [Access America for Seniors](#), [Administration on Aging](#), [American Association of Retired Persons](#), [Social Security Online](#), [Third Age](#), [Christian Association of Senior Adult Ministries](#), and [Focus on the Family's Focus Over Fifty Web site](#).

2. Dump all your old stereotypes. Most of us have stereotypes of seniors just sitting back in their rocking chairs. That's a myth. Seniors are incredibly active people with tremendous experience and resources that we all too often don't utilize. Often that is because we have these old stereotypes of what aging is. I recently read about a pastor in one of America's largest churches who never talked about seniors until he turned 50. Then he began to realize the importance of this neglected ministry. It makes perfect sense. A pastor who has never been married may have a hard time understanding the gut-wrenching conflicts that some marriages face. A 30-year-old pastor may find it even uncomfortable to be with 70- or 80-year-olds. But dump the stereotypes and catch up; mix with and get to know some elderly folks. I was in a contemporary worship service a while back at a very rapidly growing church of several thousand and heard the pastor, who was middle-aged himself say, "We don't want any creepy old people coming to this new program." Everyone laughed, except the seniors, who noticeably felt uncomfortable. If you plan to design an effective ministry for senior adults, dump the stereotypes quickly.

3. Nurture a spirit of team ministry and volunteerism. Volunteerism is part of what seniors are about. After working for most of their life, they now have the time and resources to invest as volunteers in the local church. While transitioning from full-time work, seniors might want a change for a bit – but not for long. Soon seniors want to return to doing something meaningful. Most seniors have a real desire to serve, to volunteer, and to share their wisdom and experience. From the beginning, our church focused on volunteerism. Just a few years ago, 25 people gathered to pray about starting a new senior adult ministry. Today, there are more than 400 people in a vibrant and growing seniors group. Our seniors group has grown numerically and spiritually. The two key words in the process are outreach and volunteerism. As our fellowship grew, I realized that we needed more emphasis on seniors reaching other seniors. It really became evident to me that I would not last long in this ministry without scores of volunteers.

4. Cultivate caring small groups. Small groups are where people come together for healing and release, where God can work in their lives. Some seniors will come in brokenness, looking for healing. Others may come looking for simple encouragement and socialization. Small groups provide the opportunity to involve people and bring vitality and growth to your senior adult ministry and, ultimately, to the entire congregation. Be sure your groups emphasize involvement, fellowship, acceptance, and caring. An excellent resource that has some specific sections with tips for seniors' groups is *Small Group Ministry in the 21st Century*.

5. Get ready for a roller coaster ride. Ministering with seniors has its ups and downs and your emotions will be stretched to their limits. You will laugh and you will cry more than ever before. Pain, loss, and sorrow are a part of seniors' ministry. Specializing in seniors' ministry has allowed me the privilege of laughing like I've never laughed before, but I've also cried with more people than in any other previous ministry I've been in. Many whom I serve

have agonized over losing loved ones, including children and grandchildren. They've found themselves on a journey of grief and healing. In designing an effective senior's ministry, you will need to help people in the healing process and remind them of God's sovereign love and grace. You can help them find the strength and encouragement they need by pointing them to Holy Scripture, friends, and the God of hope and peace, who brings final victory. In designing an effective ministry for senior adults, you will need to laugh with those who laugh and truly cry with those who cry.

Recommended resources

- [The Purpose Driven Church Conference on DVD and VHS](#)
- [Sermon Title: *Honoring My Parents*](#)
- [Sermon Title: *Finishing Well With Your Parents*](#)

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