

Reaching the 70+ Generation by Dr. David Gallagher

Over the years, I served in family churches packed with children, youth, and young adults. I had never seen a church that was overflowing with adults over age fifty and packing the facility out with the 70+ crowd seemed unthinkable. So ten years ago, when I was asked to start a new church and design it specifically to reach the 50+ crowd, I knew there was an opportunity to try something exciting. 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!

During the ten years I served as their pastor, we saw amazing blessings from God. There were 23 in the core fellowship. When I left a few months ago there were more than 400 attending every Sunday. We began picking up speed. The congregation was growing by 16 percent the year I concluded my ministry.

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

If you think you're ready to design an effective second half ministry, with a particular focus on the 70+ crowd, here are five simple steps to help get you started:

- **Read everything you can get your hands on (both secular and Christian) that relates to people over age 50.** A good starting point is to go to the CASA and BuildingAdultMinistries on line bookstores. At the end of this article is a resource listing for The MASTER's Group 70+ ministry. Go to every Web site that will help you understand Boomers and Builders, like Access America for Seniors, Administration on Aging, American Association of Retired Persons and Social Security Online. Your starting point of course, is Christianity Today, BuildingAdultMinistries and CASA.
- **Dump all your old stereotypes.** Most of us have stereotypes of older adults just sitting back in their rocking chairs. That's a myth. The MASTER's Group, the 70+ crowd, 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 people over 50 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 uncomfortable to be with 70- or 80-year-olds. But dump the stereotypes and catch up; mix with and really get to know those who are 70+. 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 those over 70, who noticeably felt uncomfortable. If you plan to design an effective ministry for senior adults, dump the stereotypes quickly.

- **Nurture a spirit of team ministry and volunteerism.** Volunteerism is part of what the 70+ crowd is all 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, the 70+ adult might want a change for a bit – but not for long. Soon those in The MASTER's Group want to return to doing something meaningful. Most older adults have a real desire to serve, to volunteer, and to share their wisdom and experience. From the beginning, our church focused on volunteerism. Our second half ministry grew 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 the laity reaching other laypersons. It really became evident to me that I would not last long in ministry without scores of volunteers.

- **Cultivate caring small groups.** Small groups are where people come together for healing and release, where God can work in their lives. Some seniors 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 70+ 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 70+ groups is Small Group Ministry in the 21st Century.

- **Get ready for a roller coaster ride.** Ministering with the 70+ 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 The MASTER' Group ministry. Specializing in second half 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 second half 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 The MASTER's Group, you will need to laugh with those who laugh and truly cry with those who cry. Resources for The MASTER's Group 70+ ministry (In addition to what is on the CASA webpage):

Carlson, Eric M. and Hsiao, Katharine, Bau. Baby Boomer's Guide to Nursing Home Care. Lanham, Maryland, Taylor Trade Publishing, 2006

Evangelism Explosion International, (A new ministry for Seniors) P.O. Box 23820, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33307, Main Line: (954) 491-6100, Fax: (954) 771-2256

Fay, Bill. "How Can I Share My Faith Without an Argument?" Grand Rapids, MI: RBC Ministries, 1991

Gentzler, Richard H. Designing an Older Adult Ministry. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000

Gallagher, David P. Healing Takes Time. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005

Gallagher, David P. Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006

GriefShare, www.griefshare.org

Haugk, Kenneth. Christian Caregiving a Way of Life. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984

Koenig, Harold G. and Weaver, Andrew J. Pastoral Care of Older Adults. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998

Kirkwood, Neville. Pastoral Care in Hospitals. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1995

Marriage Ministry in the 21st Century, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2007, "Ideas for Later-in-Life Marriage, Coping with Health Issues and Keeping Long Term Marriages Alive" (David Gallagher)

Outreach Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2006 Ideas to get small groups outreach-minded, service ideas for older adults and five ideas for caring for seniors (David Gallagher)

Pastoral Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing 2007 Tips for Hospital Visits and Reminders for Dealing With Deaths and Funerals (David Gallagher)

Shaw, Eva. What to do When a Loved One Dies. Irving, CA: Dickens Press, 1994

• Simpson, Carol. At the Heart of Alzheimer's. Gaithersburg, MD: Manor Healthcare Corp., 1996

Small Group Ministry in the 21st Century, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2005, "20 Tips for seniors' Groups" (David Gallagher)

Stallings, Earl & Ruth. Seniors Reaching Seniors. Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1990

Stephen Ministries, 2045 Innerbelt Business Center Dr. St. Louis, Missouri 63114-5765, Phone: (314) 428-2600, Fax: (314) 428-7888

Sullender, R. Scott. Losses in Later Life. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 1999

Sweeting, George. The Joys of Successful Aging. Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2002

Wiersbe, Warren and David. Ministering to the Mourning. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2006