

Understanding Boomers & Builders— Reaching the 55 & Up Crowd

by Dave Gallagher

Nearly everyone knows these statistics on the Boomer generation...

- The U.S. population aged 50 and older is exploding at three times the national growth rate.
- Approximately 58 percent of Americans age 50 and up have no religious affiliation.
- By the year 2025, Americans over 65 will outnumber teenagers by more than two to one.



I lead seminars around the country on reaching “Boomers and Builders,” those over the age of 55 who have entered retirement. I have a passion to help churches understand and reach this vital age group. The potential is staggering, when you consider the experience, wisdom, and *time* they have to offer the church! It’s important to value those in this life stage, and let them know they are vital members of your church. The simple question is: *How can the church prepare now to be ready for the growing older population in America?*

If you’re interested in designing an effective ministry to reach the 55+ crowd or if you want to strengthen an existing ministry to those over 55, here are five simple steps to help get you started:

Step 1. Read everything you can get your hands on (both secular and Christian) that relates to people over age 55. A must-read new book is *Baby Boomers and Beyond*, (Amy Hanson). Classic must reads are *One Church Four Generations*, (Gary L. McIntosh), *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century*, (David P. Gallagher, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2006, Originally by Group Publishing, 2002) and *Who Stole My Church?* (Gordon MacDonald).

There are some great websites that will help you understand Boomers and Builders, like:

- [Christian Association Serving Adults](#)
- [Access America for Seniors](#)

- [Administration on Aging](#)
- [AARP](#)
- [Social Security Online](#)

Step 2. Dump all your old stereotypes.

Most of us have stereotypes of older adults just sitting back in their rocking chairs.

That’s a myth. In the past, older adults were thought of as “care receivers,” but I’ve seen how people over 65 and 75 can actually be “care givers.” Believe it or not, even the 70-and-up crowd are incredibly active



people with tremendous experience and resources that we all too often don’t utilize. Frequently, that’s because we have outdated stereotypes of aging.

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 good starting point is to go to the LifeServe National Conference <http://lifeserve.group.com/September26-29,2011inLouisville,KY>. A “Half-Track” will be offered with three sessions: 1) *Energizing Seniors for Serving*, 2) *Involving the 50+ Generation in Ministry* and 3) *Prerequisites That Will Make or Break an Effective Adult Ministry*.

Another example comes from a worship service I attended at a rapidly growing church of several thousand. The pastor, who was middle-aged himself, joked, "We don't want any 'creepy old people' coming to this new program." Everyone laughed, except those over 55 or 60, who noticeably felt uncomfortable. If you plan to design an effective ministry for the 55+ crowd, dump the stereotypes quickly.

Step 3. Nurture a spirit of team ministry and volunteerism. A recent survey reports that 71 percent of older adults today believe the key to being retired is "keeping busy." After working for most of their lives, older adults now have the time and resources to invest as volunteers in the local church. While transitioning from full-time work, an older adult might want a change for a bit—but not for long. They soon want to be involved in something meaningful. Most older adults have a real desire to serve, to volunteer, and to share their wisdom and experience. Volunteerism is part of what the second half of life is all about.

God used my wife and me to help plant a church specifically designed to reach people over age 50. We watched God take a core fellowship of 23 adults over age 50 and grow it to more than 500 weekly. From the beginning, we focused on volunteerism. The two key words in the process were *outreach* and *volunteerism*.

An excellent resource book is *Second-Half Adventure* (Kay Marshall Strom).

Step 4. Cultivate caring small groups. Small groups are where people come together for healing and release, where God can work in their lives. Some people come in brokenness, looking for healing. Others may come looking for simple encouragement and socialization. Some come for serious Bible study.



An excellent resource that has some specific sections with tips for 55+ groups is *Small Group Ministry in the 21st Century* (Group Publishing, Loveland, CO, 2005).

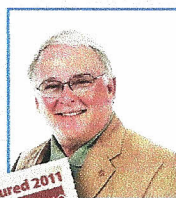
Small groups provide the opportunity to involve people and bring vitality and growth to your 55+ ministry and, ultimately, to the entire congregation. Be sure your groups emphasize involvement, fellowship, acceptance, and caring.

Step 5. Get ready for a roller-coaster ride.

Ministering with the 55 and older group 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 older adult ministry. 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.

An excellent resource for individual or group use is *Healing Takes Time*, (David P. Gallagher).

Is your ministry ready for the growing older population in America? Follow these five simple steps and you will discover the untapped potential and vitality these seasoned saints can add to your ministry! ■



Featured 2011
LifeServe
SPEAKER

Dave Gallagher (drdavog@gmail.com) is Program Director at Green Lake Conference Center (www.glcc.org) and Pastor Emeritus at Palm West Community Church (www.palmwestchurch.org). Dave is offering a "Half-Track" on this topic at the LifeServe national conference. His recent books include *Healing Takes Time* and *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century*. He and his wife Mary Ann reside in Phoenix, AZ and have two adult children and two granddaughters.