



Every Church Should Have a Seniors' Ministry



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INTRODUCTION

Most members would agree, Sis. B is an exceptional and wonderful member. Those who have been members of her church for some time, recall her serving admirably as one of the finest Sabbath School Superintendents as well as one of the first female elders. She is warm and affable.

She would be the first to admit that her eighty-six-year old body has slowed down in the last few years. Her hearing is not as good as it used to be. Her right hand swells with arthritis especially in the morning. She admits that she forgets things easily and doesn't have the energy she had but a few years ago.

Like so many other elderly persons, she likes to be independent. Since her husband's passing 10 years ago, she has lived alone in the same home. Caring members help her with grocery shopping. Her two children live in another province, where they attended university and met their spouses. They are now busy professionals with teenage children. Sis B. keeps in contact by phone. She knows how challenging it is for them to visit regularly.

Winters are difficult. She showed one of her swollen hands sharing the fact that her furnace is a wood burning one. "I have to pay someone to secure the wood for the furnace now. My husband did faithfully did it for 56 years, but he is gone now," she said, as tears filled her dimming eyes. "I have to be careful about just stepping outside during the winter, let alone secure wood for the fire" she groaned.

Sis B. lives on a small pension, from which she returns her faithful tithes and supports the local church budget with her regular offering. She has even made provisions in her will for the work of God to continue when she dies. It was interesting to watch her tenderly care for her beautiful potted plants. She smiled as she told me how she talks to her them.

She was excited with the idea of a Senior's Club at her church. This would allow for others to worship with her each week on the phone and visit from time to time. "that would be great for us older ones," she said. "I don't want to spend my final years as a bitter, complaining old woman. I want to be remembered as a woman who is sweet and nice to be around. Nobody wants to be around somebody who talks about aches and pains all the time." Sis. B was about to realize that a positive attitude fostered by a supportive caring environment will enhance her quality of life.



THE BIBLE AND OLD AGE

Old age, as we all are aware, is not something new. Aged people have always been around. In fact we are aging even as we read this handbook. The Bible tells us of the unusual Methuselah, who lived 969 years. However it is also a fact that many of the Old Testament patriarchs lived, well beyond 100 years.

Apparently, even in those times, older people faced frustration and even repudiation. While it was admitted that wisdom is increased with age, the psalmist still prayed,

“Forsake me not, O God, when I am old and gray.”

Even in past generations, older people were at risk of facing rejection.

In my reading, it seems that Ecclesiastes Chapter 12, is the clearest biblical description of the onset of old age. The Message paraphrase renders it in contemporary language, expressing it well.

“Honor and enjoy your Creator while you’re still young. Before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes, before your vision dims and the world blurs and winter years keep you close to the fire.

In old age, your body no longer serves you well. Muscles slacken, grip weakens, and joints stiffen. The shades are pulled down on the world. You can’t come and go at will. Things grind to a halt.

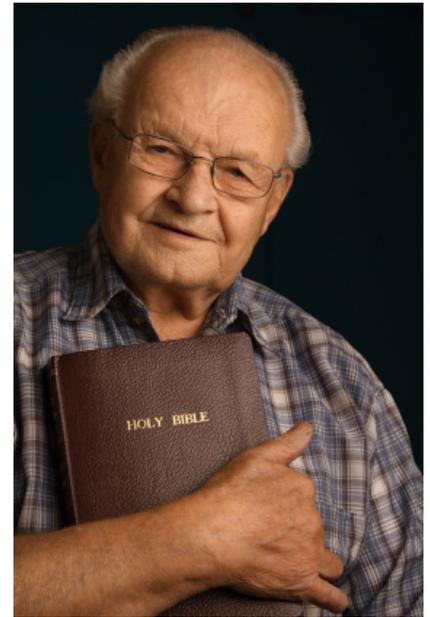
The hum of the household fades away. You are wakened now by bird-song. Hikes to the mountains are a thing of the past. Even a stroll down the road has its terrors. Your hair turns apple-blossom white, adorning a fragile and impotent body. Yes, you’re well on your way to eternal rest, while your friends make plans for your funeral.

Life, lovely while it lasts, is soon over. Life as we know it, precious and beautiful, ends. The body is put back in the same ground it came from. The spirit returns to God, who first breathed it.”

Psychologist G. Stanley Hall, referred to Eccl. 12 as the most pessimistic description of old age ever written. But I see it as realistic.

The fact however is, that despite the slow and increasing onset of old age, every person can find meaning and purpose in life. While the youth have the benefits of strength and energy, the elderly have the benefits of wisdom and experience.

The philosophy of our seniors ministry is that even in the later years one, if positively challenged, inspired, encouraged and supported, may be productive and fulfilled. Even in the secular environment there have been remarkable examples of older persons who made their senior years exciting and fulfilling.



Ronald Reagan, celebrated his seventieth birthday a few days after being inaugurated as President of the United States of America. This former radio announcer and Hollywood actor, was beginning a new career at seventy years old. This is the time when many would have retired.

We learn in our history lessons that Douglas McArthur became commander of the UN forces in Korea when he was seventy years old. He later went on to be a successful businessman. Winston Churchill continued to be a powerful influence even as he was an elderly statesman. Psychologist B.F. Skinner and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson each wrote books after turning Eighty years of age. These are amazing feats which cannot to be ignored.

Though it may be argued that these were exceptional persons, they also demonstrated that the later years of life need not be times of misery, worry and inactivity. It was Robert Browning the English poet and playwright who embraced the positive challenge and left an open invitation to the readers of his poems, "Grow old with me! The best is yet to be the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in his hands who saith, a whole I planned, youth shows but half; trust God: See all, nor be afraid!"

REAL CHALLENGES SENIORS FACE

Ecc 12 identifies many challenges which may accompany old age. It is of concern that ever so often folk seem insensitive to the adjustments seniors have to make as they experience particular changes. It is no wonder that it is estimated that one-fifth of the American population suffers from "gerontophobia" which is the fear of growing old. Let's consider a few of the challenges seniors face.

Physical Changes

As we age our bodies get weaker, and are at a greater susceptibility to illness. If one is not in a positive environment, where our seniors receive support, fellowship and fulfillment one may be inclined to worry and thereby engender stress. Stress has a negative impact on our health. In fact the World Health Organization indicates that some 75% of all medical complaints are stress related.

Cosmetic changes

As one gets older, graying and thinning hair are common features, wrinkling skin and bags under the eyes are also among the visible changes which accompany the later years.

In a world where youth and physical appearance are celebrated, these cosmetic changes can



influence ones' self-esteem and self-worth. This may be even more evident when older people stop taking care of their physical appearance. Thankfully there are cosmetic products which are readily available which slows the onset of these features quite effectively.

Sensory Changes

It is well known that many older people do not see or hear as well as they once did. Eccl. 12:2 in describing sensory changes says, "...the sight is impaired, and the sun and the light of the moon and the stars be darkened..." As one gets older he appreciates eyeglasses as a marvelous invention.

In addition to the above sensory changes, older persons may experience degeneration in their senses of taste, smell and even their memory. I visited an elderly friend who with excitement started introducing me to a new product he secured from a health food store which in his words was fantastic for enhancing memory. Understanding the benefits I could derive from such a product I eagerly asked its name. Suffice to say he could not recall. Some products may be more helpful than others.



Sexual Changes

While reproductive abilities diminish as one grows older, we are learning more and more that it is not true that sexual interest diminishes as well. Older persons still need closeness as well as physical contact. Jokes about old age describes the sexual progression from "tri-weekly, to try-weekly, to try-weekly". In many cases this is more humor than fact. Many older folk welcome new products which restore the "tri-weekly" experience.

Economic Changes

Retirement brings about a transition from full time employment. For many it also brings a lower income and a reduced standard of living. This reduced income in many instances fails to keep pace with the rate of inflation. Robert N. Butler, in his Pulitzer – prize winning book, 'Aging in America', describes the sad reality of millions who live in an affluent society but grow poor as they grow old. This is a real issue in our society and a real problem for our seniors. This situation creates problems such as finding an affordable place to live, affording a balanced diet, affording transportation costs as well as self-esteem problems that comes when one has declining resources and may have to apply for public welfare assistance.

Yet despite these real economic challenges senior members are sacrificially supporting the

cause of Christ, faithfully returning their tithes and giving their offering systematically. This sacrificial giving is highlighted in Mark 12, in which Jesus draws attention to a widow.

41 “and He sat down opposite the treasury and saw how the crowd was casting money into the treasury. Many rich (people) were throwing large sums.

42 and a widow who was poverty-stricken came and put in two copper mites (the smallest of coins), which together make half of a cent

43 and He called His disciples to (Him) and said to them, truly and surely I tell you, this widow, poverty-stricken, has put in more than all those contributing to the treasury.

44 For they all threw in out of their abundance, but she out of her deep poverty has put in everything that she had, (even) all she had on which to live.

Technological Changes

What is the effect of technology on older people? How do the advances in technology impact the elderly? Technological change may complicate life for some older people. In this age in which on-line banking is encouraged, automated message with its many instructions, challenge those with deteriorating hearing and slower responses. Every now and then I at the kiosk check in at the airport, I observe a look of relief as I volunteer to assist an elderly person to navigate the many instructions in the check in process. In an understanding environment such as the church’s Seniors Club meetings, basic computer courses, tips in cell phone use as well as other technology friendly courses will be very helpful to our seniors.



Important Facts about Aging in Canada

Each of us is aging and as a population, Canada is aging faster than ever before.

Today, people aged 65 and over make up approximately 13 percent of the Canadian population. It is predicted that by 2031, there will be approximately 9 million seniors, who will account for some 25 percent of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Older Canadians are living longer and with fewer disabilities than the generations before them.

At the same time, the majority of seniors have at least one chronic disease or condition.

The World Health Organization indicates that older adults can live longer, healthier lives by staying socially connected, increasing their levels of physical activity, eating in a healthy way, taking steps to minimize their risks for falls. Social connectedness has a positive effect on health. People who remain actively engaged in life and connected to those around them are generally happier, in better physical and mental health, and more empowered to cope effectively with change and life transitions. Distress, isolation and social exclusion increase substantially the risk of poor health and loneliness, and may even act as predictors of death

Ageism is discrimination based on age, especially prejudice against older people. Ageism occurs when people believe that enabling and promoting healthy living among seniors is unimportant or too late to make a difference. For example, it is widely recognized that promoting activity is important for children and youth. There are many initiatives designed to do just that. But there is a prevailing attitude that it is not as important to be physically active in later life. This prejudice reflects our minimized expectations of older adulthood and misconceptions about seniors' ongoing roles in society.

Social Support

Normally, social support is provided by family, friends, neighbors and members of local organizations such as church groups, to include our Seniors Clubs. This kind of support provides older adults with the vital support they need to feel as though they belong to a society that values and appreciates them. Social support enables seniors to improve their self-esteem and their overall quality of life.



The Canadian Community Health Survey revealed that seniors who reported a strong sense of community belonging were 62 percent more likely to be in good health compared to 49 percent of seniors who felt less connected.

Benefits of Physical Activity

A solid evidence base supports the positive relationship between regular physical activity and healthy aging. Exercise often called the “elixir” of healthy aging, adds vitality and quality to life. It improves ones capacity to function effectively, their mental health, fitness levels, and contributes to the prevention of chronic diseases, and overall well-being. According to Health Canada, “engaging in physical activity with others can help seniors make connections and build social networks that promote overall health.” (Health Canada, 1999)

Barriers to Participation

Some of the major barriers to participating in physical activity which have been mentioned at some of our seniors meetings include:

- a) fear of injury
- b) illness
- c) disability and pain
- d) lack of energy
- e) lack of motivation
- f) inadequate facilities
- g) expensive gym fees
- h) long cold winters and icy surfaces make it difficult for older people to walk and resume activity out-of-doors.



TIPS FOR YOUNGER SENIORS PREPARING FOR RETIREMENT

Here are a few important discussion questions to contemplate before retiring.

1. When will I retire?
2. What does God want me to do after retirement?
3. Where will I retire?
4. Where will I live in retirement?
5. How will I spend my time during retirement?
6. What will I do to keep my mind alert and active?
7. How much money and financial resources do I have?
8. What financial needs will I have in retirement?
9. Do I have enough insurance?
10. Is my will complete and up to date?
11. Have I included the Lord's work in my will provisions?
12. What can I do now to prepare for retirement?

SENIORS MINISTRY COORDINATORS SHOULD

1. Value the ministry opportunity provided by God to serve those who have served before.

2. Initiate seminars and other enrichment presentations that speak to the real needs of the elderly. Such sessions may include

- Dealing with feelings of insecurity
- Processing the loss of a significant other while still trusting God
- Dealing with regret over past failures
- How to deal with the fear of death
- How to cope with the problems of life, both real and perceived – Ellen White says



“some will think that they leaders own relatives and children want them to die in order to possess their wealth.”

3. Aim to stimulate social, and recreational contact with same age and younger persons.

4. With the help of the conference assist seniors in finding solutions to personal problems before they get worse.

5. Include in their outreach initiatives, meeting with residents in retirement and nursing homes.

6. Do everything to influence civic affairs and government programs for the elderly as well as informing the elderly through resource persons of the existing government provisions.

7. Encourage local building committee and church board to adapt the physical facilities so older persons do not experience undue hardship.

8. Create volunteer opportunities for older people to be involved in useful service, example

- a. Teaching
- b. Visiting
- c. Praying



An intentional program of the church's Seniors Club with ingredients such as these, shows everyone that the elderly are important. Our aging may avoid some of the difficulties common to this age group, if they can be encouraged to

- a. Use their minds
- b. Exercise their bodies
- c. To plan their diets
- d. Make good use of their leisure time
- e. And find creative ways of serving others

Over and above all the social provisions is the importance of stimulating spiritual growth. A growing relationship with Christ does not prevent life's problems, but the committed believer should be able to deal with stress more effectively having confidence in an omnipotent God. People of all ages need encouragement to pray, read the scriptures, worship regularly, fellowship with other believers and become involved, as far as is possible, in active service.

Scripture Verses and Ellen White's Quotes About Seniors

Isaiah 46:4 "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

Proverbs 16:31 "Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness."

Psalms 37:25 "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."

Of the aged, Ellen White said, "They often thought that their own children and relatives were wishing them to die in order to take their place and possess their wealth, and receive the homage which had been bestowed upon them."

"David remarked that although the lives of some while in the strength of manhood had been righteous, as old age came upon them they seemed to lose their minds, making them restless and dissatisfied."

"They (the elderly) should lay aside anxiety and burdens, and occupy their time as happily as they can ripening up for heaven,"

BASIC QUESTIONS EVERY MEMBER SHOULD CONTEMPLATE

9. What is your attitude toward the elderly?
10. Do you harbor some of the common stereotypes that see older people as incompetent, cranky and pre-occupied with physical aches and pains?
11. Do you resent older people and try to avoid them?
12. Are you impatient with them, making no time to listen to their stories?

CONCLUSION

Church seniors clubs are bringing many benefits to our aged members. Many indicate that their confidence and self-esteem are being restored as the clubs allow for a context in which they plan make decisions, do useful work, create new programs, get involved in new projects, accept responsibilities and go on retreats. This combats the surrounding ageism which exists in so many places. Ageism is a form of prejudice that discriminates against the elderly, and assumes that younger people are better. Just like racism, ageism creates problems for its victims and contributes further to the older person's decline in self-esteem.

The Bible clearly respects the aged, and the followers of Christ are expected to do the same. If church care compassionately for the aging and help members develop a positive attitude toward the elderly this would be blest of God.

References:

1. *Job 12:12 kjv*
2. *Ps 71:18 kjv*
3. *The message – Eccl 12:1-7*
4. *Conversations on growing older*
5. *Eccl 20:29 – message*
6. *Joseph H Bunzel “note on the motions of a concept – gerontophobia”*
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10. *Mark 12:41 – 4 amplified*
11. *3Bc 1148 – E G White’s Community on Psalm 71*

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