



CHANGING THE NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES OF AGING

by Amy Hanson, Ph.D.



How many times have you heard someone say “no” to being a part of an older adult ministry because they just don’t consider themselves a *senior*?

People over 50 perceive the word *senior* as being descriptive of something that they are not. Old, senior, elderly and retired are all words that have negative connotations attached to them. In this country, youth is often glorified while old age is something to be avoided. Just browsing through greeting cards at a store will shed light on the many negative themes that surround the context of aging.

These negative attitudes have crept into the church and the majority of older adult ministries face the challenge of what name to use to describe the audience that their ministries seek to reach. Richard Bergstrom, pastor of 2nd Half Ministries at **Northshore Baptist Church** of Bothell, WA says, “It is a huge dilemma to try to have an identity and a name that won’t repel people. People in their 50s and early 60s have a real push back to anything that smells of senioritis. This is one of our greatest challenges.”

Experience has shown that this is a tough battle to fight. Linda Woolf, of Webster University in St. Louis, MO said that the greatest limitation facing older adults is not physical or mental handicaps, but rather, the negative stereotypes that exist regarding aging.

However there is hope. By eliminating age descriptors and creating educational opportunities, many churches are discovering that they can still have effective older adult ministries, without using the word “senior.”

Eliminate the Age Connotation

The 50-plus ministry at **Peninsula Covenant Church** in Redwood City, CA, uses the name Plus to identify their ministry. “We dropped the number 50 from 50-plus and retained the word plus to describe our ministry. The rationale behind this name is that we want to add something to peoples’ lives,” says Rod Toews, director of Plus ministries.

Every individual who is a part of the Plus ministry wears a name tag on Sunday mornings to identify themselves as well as to bring exposure to the ministry. Rod says, “We are focusing on a life stage of

people rather than mentioning the numerical age.” The Plus ministry lets the particular activity drive the age of the people that participate.

The ministry has hosted motorcycle rides and hiking trips that appeal to the baby boomer crowd, whereas a hymn sing reaches those that are 65-80 years old. Dot Toews says, “All of our activities are inclusive, but some things appeal to those that are younger and others appeal to the older.”

Consider Changing the Name of the Ministry

Peggy, director of the Life After Fifty Ministry at **Johnson Ferry Church**, had a similar experience with the name of the older adult ministry. The original name was PrimeTimers and Peggy changed the name to Life After Fifty. Peggy recalls, “People in their 60s and 70s resisted the PrimeTimers group and said, “Oh, that is not for us, we’re not that old.” Once the name changed to Life After Fifty, we began to see more involvement of people from this age group as well as some people in their 50s. People weren’t intimidated anymore.” Peggy feels that the name of the ministry will have to be changed often because each new generation will not identify with the previous name.

In actuality the title of the ministry is not the concern, but rather peoples’ perceptions. Interestingly, Don Simmons, expert on the topic of volunteerism, says, “You will never change the culture until you start to change the language.” Changing the negative image of aging starts with changing the terminology. Rather than seeing the later years as something to be avoided, older adults should view aging as it is written about in Proverbs 16:31, “Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life.”

Draw attention to those making a difference

One of the best ways to change the negative stereotypes attached to aging is by highlighting those who are making significant contributions in their later years. The Plus ministry publishes a full color, 8 page newsletter every other month in which they feature on the front cover an individual or couple in the 50-plus age range from the church. The article relates a short biography of the person and emphasizes their service

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to the Lord and their spiritual life. The leadership strategically chooses different ages of older adults, highlighting people in their 50s, 60s and 70s. “This communication tool has been very effective in creating a positive view of our ministry. People really look forward to the newsletter and anticipate it coming,” says Larry Nunan, lay leader of Plus.

Educate people regarding the truths of aging

Another effective way of combating the negative views of aging is through education. First Evangelical Free has embraced the importance of this and has developed an aging sensitivity curriculum that they share with young people. The curriculum has been taught through the children’s ministry at the church to grades 1-4 for one-hour on Sundays over a 5 week period.

Children learn through interactive games and activities some of the changes in vision, hearing, and balance that occur with age and are trained in how to be more compassionate and respectful around those who are older. They also are taught a scriptural view of aging through verses like Psalms 92:14 and character studies, such as the life of Moses. Rosalyn, who wrote and teaches the curriculum, shares “Part of the program is to bring in seniors who have had an active youth life, like those who have fought in the war and can show the kids their medals. Some of these children do not see their grandparents and therefore do not have the opportunity to interact with a different generation. All they know about aging is what they

see through the media. We want to show them another viewpoint.” An important part of the curriculum is to encourage young people to think about how God can use them now to minister to older adults. Towards the end of the lessons, the children visit elders in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. Rosalyn has taken the curriculum outside the church walls and partners with schools that want to expose the children to a positive view of aging. She says, “I do this because it is my passion. To look into the faces of the kids and see that their misconceptions about aging are rectified-this is a great joy for me.”



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Linda Woolf -- Aging Quiz website page.

ⁱ <http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/myh.html>

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