

AMY HANSON

BABY
BOOMERS
and **BEYOND**

Tapping the Ministry Talents
and Passions of Adults over 50

A LEADERSHIP  NETWORK PUBLICATION



Baby Boomers and Beyond

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**Tapping the Ministry Talents and
Passions of Adults over Fifty**

Amy Hanson

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ABOUT LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Leadership Network, an initiative of OneHundredX, exists to honor God and serve others by investing in innovative church leaders who impact the Kingdom immeasurably.

Since 1984, Leadership Network has brought together exceptional leaders, who are focused on similar ministry initiatives, to accelerate their impact. The ensuing collaboration—often across denominational lines—provides a strong base from which individual leaders can better analyze and refine their individual strategies. Creating an environment for collaborative discovery, dialogue, and sharing encourages leaders to extend their own innovations and ideas. Leadership Network further enhances this process through the development and distribution of highly targeted ministry tools and resources—including video, podcasts, concept papers, special research reports, e-publications, and books like this one.

With Leadership Network's assistance, today's Christian leaders are energized, equipped, inspired—and better able to multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives.

In 1996 Leadership Network partnered with Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, to develop a series of creative books that would provide thought leadership to innovators in church ministry. Leadership Network Publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, practitioners, and pioneering churches. The series collectively draws from a wide range of disciplines, with individual titles providing perspective on one or more of five primary areas:

- Enabling effective leadership
- Encouraging life-changing service
- Building authentic community
- Creating Kingdom-centered impact
- Engaging cultural and demographic realities

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INTRODUCTION: REINVENTING MINISTRY WITH OLDER ADULTS

It was a hot and humid summer evening in rural Iowa. I had been asked to meet with the leaders of a particular church to help them set a direction for a brand-new senior adult ministry. The sixty-five-year-old senior pastor had led this church to grow from 150 to over 550 regular attenders in his thirty-four-year tenure, and he would soon be phasing out of this leadership role and taking on a part-time role as the minister of senior adults.

It was apparent to me from a previous visit to the church, a few conversations on the phone, and a casual dinner that these leaders had some assumptions as to what this ministry would be. Perhaps visiting the elderly. Planning dinners and parties for the senior members of the congregation. Hosting Bible studies in local retirement homes. Obviously some very good and traditional ideas.

But as I began the meeting, I told them the most important question to answer in the room that night was not which activities or programs to plan but rather who it was they really wanted to reach. What did this person look like? They could say it was a ministry for adults over sixty, but the numerical age alone was not descriptive enough. My task was to paint a few verbal pictures of different older adults so that they would be better equipped to define whom the ministry was intended to reach.

We all have ideas that come to mind when we think of the later years of life, and we all have a way that we define “age.” As you think about your current ideas with regard to older adult

ministry, consider these snapshots of three different categories of older adults.

One group of older adults is the frail elderly. We might say they are in the eighty-five-plus age range, though using chronological age as a defining mark is not always appropriate. This is a group of people whose health is a primary factor in their lives. In some cases, they can no longer drive, and they may be homebound and suffering from isolation. Ministry opportunities with this group abound. Visitation, driving them to appointments, cleaning their homes, and responding to their physical needs are just a few of the ways to serve this segment of the population. Ministry with the sick and frail is also a biblical mandate found in James 1:27 and Isaiah 1:17, where we are instructed to care for orphans and widows.

A second set of older adults can be identified as seniors. In assigning numerical ages, we might identify this group as being seventy (or even seventy-five) to eighty-four years old. There's a good chance these folks are retired, though still engaged in activities, and they may prefer to drive only in daylight. These adults may be experiencing multiple losses—the loss of a spouse, loss of their own health, and even the loss of friends and siblings. This has been the target group for a traditional senior adult ministry. Historically, these ministries have been characterized by trips and fellowship-centered programs. And yet there is a great opportunity to engage people in this age group in meaningful service opportunities as well as encouraging them to reach out to their unchurched peers. A number of churches throughout the country are doing innovative ministry with this segment of the population, and this is certainly a worthy age group in which to invest time and ministry efforts. But this particular group of older adults (often referred to as the “builder generation”) does not have the same characteristics or needs as the third set of older adults.

The third group describes who I am referring to in this book as the “new old.” I first heard this term used by my friend and colleague in older adult ministry, John Coulombe, to describe an

emerging group of older adults who approach aging differently than previous generations.

Taking a purely chronological look, this is the set of adults ranging in age from fifty to seventy. The majority of people in this age group are baby boomers; a small proportion are just slightly older. This is an enormous demographic, especially when you consider that the baby boomers alone consist of seventy-eight million Americans.

These adults are dealing with a number of issues, including concerns regarding retirement, grandparenting, caring for aging parents, and preparing for their own aging. For the most part, they are healthy, active, and quite capable of serving God in some remarkable ways. They have more discretionary time and may naturally be searching for what their purpose will be as they begin to phase out of their careers. They have a strong desire to not “get old” and are doing all they can to stay young.

This book will primarily focus on that third group of older adults. I will use a variety of different terms to describe this particular generation, including baby boomers, leading-edge boomers, older adults, adults over fifty, and the new old. It’s hard to put rigid numerical ages on the people we will be discussing because health and attitude play a tremendous role in how people age. There are ninety-year-olds who still drive a car and are active from dawn until dusk, and then there are sixty-year-olds who are confined to home or even a nursing home.

With that said, we will discover that generational differences can have an effect on how aging is perceived and what ministry with older adults looks like. So please hear me loud and clear: the ages we assign to people are merely numbers, and they don’t completely define the people themselves. We are talking about a philosophy of ministry in which older adults are engaged in meaningful service and Kingdom impact that have the ability to transcend age.

In Part One of the book, we’ll look at the urgency of this ministry and why our churches cannot afford to ignore this generation of people who are marching into the later years of life.

We'll also take a hard look at some of the negative stereotypes that have permeated our society, our people, our churches, and even our own attitudes.

In Part Two, we'll dive deep into three of the main issues on the minds of boomers: staying young, juggling multiple relationships, and redefining retirement. If we want to reach individuals both in the church and outside the church, we've got to understand who they are and their pressing concerns.

Finally, Part Three will be devoted to the implications of an aging population for the church. How do we do ministry? What should be the focus? Where do we put our energy? And most important, how do we harness the potential of this new generation? These are questions for all who want to be serious about ministering with aging boomers.

This is a book for senior pastors, leaders, and primary influencers in the church who desire to be equipped for the biggest demographic reality shaping our culture. As you read, you will discover connections between the dynamics of aging and the real-world experience of ministry in the local church. This book will not provide you with a step-by-step approach for starting a boomer ministry, although I have included numerous examples from churches across the country to suggest practical ways to put these principles in motion.

Primarily, my hope is that this book will serve as a wake-up call to one of the greatest realities facing the church today, both in America and around the world. The principles we will discuss are transferable and applicable for churches of all sizes, in all communities, all over the globe.

I warn you that portions of these chapters aren't easy to read because they force us to shine a light on our own attitudes regarding aging and perhaps even confront attitudes we need to change. But that's OK. That's the kind of work God does, and the work He wants to do in our churches often starts with the leaders. It's both exciting and scary because the potential for ministry is endless and a number of needs are just waiting to be addressed.

Let's go back to that summer night in Iowa. After presenting the three different groups of older adults and asking some reflective questions, I began to see light bulbs turn on in the minds of these leaders. I heard comments like "She's talking about us" and "This is a complete paradigm shift." And then one man had the courage to say, "I think we should focus our ministry efforts on the fifty-to-seventy age group. We have just a short window of time to catch these people as they are planning how they will spend their retirement years and how they will invest the rest of their lives." Others nodded in agreement, and one said, "These are the folks who can be the best servants, the best workers to do the ministry with the two older age groups." And then with excitement another voice said, "And we need those in their fifties and sixties to be mentoring young couples." And the enthusiasm began to grow. And leaders began to dream. And the old aging paradigms began to change. And the door flew wide open to the ministry possibilities waiting to be mined within this generation.

What happened among those leaders is what I hope happens on your journey through the pages of this book: that we will grasp a new vision of what older adult ministry could be. What older adult ministry could be if we let go of the negative stereotypes associated with aging. What it could be if we started recognizing the potential for Kingdom impact lying dormant among older adults. What it could be if we reshaped our churches to be more intergenerational, with a focus on reaching all age groups, equally. What it could be to see people in their fifties, sixties, and seventies finding their way to God and grabbing hold of the salvation only He offers. What it could be to call people out of a self-focused retirement lifestyle and into something much greater.

Let's dream about what could be—and then let's go make it a reality. Seventy-eight million boomers are waiting.

BLANK

1

A WAKE-UP CALL FOR THE CHURCH

A Reality We Can't Ignore

It was the mid-1950s, and millions of baby boomers were nearing adolescence. Never before had there been such an influx of young people who were drastically shaping the culture. And the church was unprepared. Youth ministry expert Mark Senter writes, “The post-war baby boom caught the church without a strategy for dealing with the sudden influx of people whom the media began to call ‘teenagers.’”¹

These young baby boomers represented a huge untapped resource for the church, and some people began to work nationally at convincing church leaders that youth ministry was vitally important. These entrepreneurs created a sense of urgency among churches to reach out to this young generation before it was too late.

This idea caught on, in part because of the bulging number of teenagers who were alive. Today, most churches have a youth minister as a part of their staff, and often it is the second or third position they add after the senior pastor. Youth ministry has become a popular degree of study in most Bible colleges and seminaries across the country. It is an expected element of our current church culture.

These baby boomers who revolutionized youth ministry are now entering their fifth and sixth decades of life. They are marching into their later years at an unprecedented rate. And the urgency of ministry with them is just as great as when they were young—perhaps even greater.

The stakes are high. There is much to be gained for Christ or much to be lost. And it starts with whether or not we choose to ignore or embrace this aging reality.

Longevity and the Growth of the Older Population

For nearly a century, there has been an upward trend in people living longer and the older population growing. In 1900, 4 percent of the population was over age sixty-five; in 2001, the figure was 12 percent; and the projection for 2030 is that the proportion of people over sixty-five will rise to 20 percent.²

Take a look at some other statistics. You may have seen these before or heard them discussed on a news program, but try to look with fresh eyes at these astronomical numbers and really let them soak in.

- Americans sixty-five and older are the fastest-growing segment of the population.
- In the past century, the number of Americans over age sixty-five has increased twelvefold (from 3.1 million to 37.9 million).³
- By the year 2030, there will be 72.1 million people in America over the age of sixty-five.⁴
- An American turns sixty every seven seconds.⁵

Life Expectancy

One of the primary reasons we have so many older adults is that life expectancy is increasing. This is known as the squaring of the pyramid. Take a look at Figures 1.1 and 1.2. In the early 1900s, the number of adults living into their later years was small. Today, people are living much longer.

Life expectancy is the *average* number of years of life remaining at birth or from some particular age in a given population. For instance, in the early 1900s, life expectancy in the United

States was forty-seven. This meant that when a baby was born, he could expect to live until the age of forty-seven. In the year 2009, life expectancy for a Caucasian baby was approximately seventy-eight years (and this number is projected to rise).

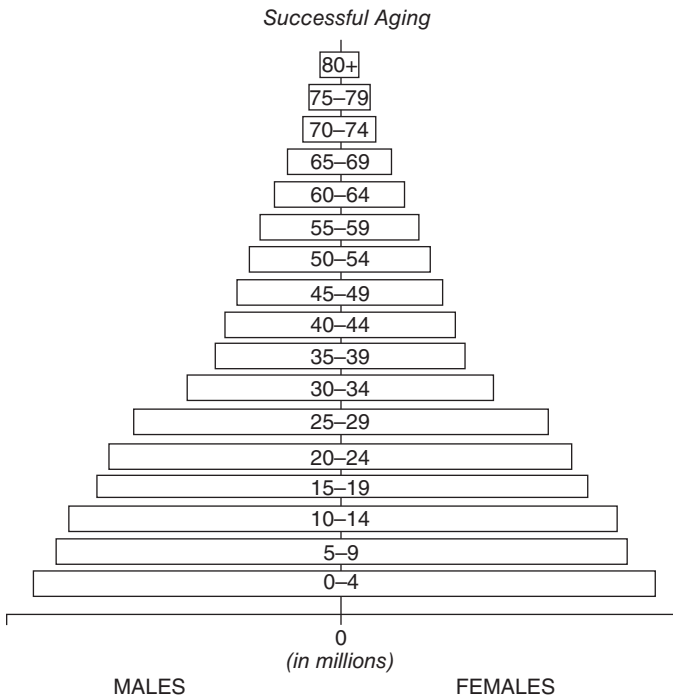
That life expectancy in 1900 was forty-seven did not mean that forty-six-year-olds began to fear they were soon going to die. Nor did a forty-year-old look like an old person, with white hair and wrinkles. There simply weren't all that many people who remained alive until old age. The difference today is that we are seeing the majority of people in industrialized nations living into the later years of life.

A reduction in infant deaths, immunizations for children, advances in medicine, and overall better health care have been some of the primary factors contributing to the growth in life expectancy. In addition, people are better educated about their health and are practicing better habits that lead to longer lives. Fewer employees are dying in work-related accidents, and work environments are generally cleaner and safer than in the past. All of these factors contribute to people living longer.

Birth Rate

A second reason we are experiencing such growth in the older population has to do with the birth rate. I've pointed out that the percentage of older people is on the rise. Percentages are determined by the composition of the entire population. So if a lot of babies are born, this will raise the percentage of young people and lower the percentage of older people. On the other hand, if the birth rate is low, this will result in a larger percentage of older adults.

The post-World War II baby boom initially drove the percentage of old people in America down because so many young people were suddenly part of the mix. The generation following the boomers was much smaller, fewer babies were born, and the result is now a higher percentage of older adults.

Figure 1.1 Age Profile of the U.S. Population, c. 1900

Global Aging

The growth of the aging population is not unique to the United States. It is being felt by many industrialized nations. Japan is recognized as the world's fastest-aging society; by the year 2015, fully 25 percent of its population will be over sixty-five. Other developed countries, including Italy, Germany, and Greece, have a high percentage of older adults. It's interesting to note that even in developing countries, the number of older adults is growing. Such countries as Columbia and India are experiencing a rapid increase in people over the age of sixty-five.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that across the world, by the year 2018 (if not sooner), people over the age of sixty-five will outnumber children under the age of five. For the first time

ways to boost the birth rate in order to help balance the population. Some government offices in Seoul plan to provide up to 30 million won, equivalent to about U.S. \$25,500, to families having three or more children.⁶

How Does Age Affect the Church?

We can talk forever about numbers and statistics and the causes for these trends. What does all of this really mean for those of us living in the twenty-first century who care about Christ and His church?

First, it is no accident that God has allowed such a large number of older people to be alive at this moment in time. In His great sovereignty and wisdom, He chose this time to raise up an army of older adults for His purposes. We must tap into God's plan for the members of this generation, to see them come to Christ, grow in Him, and be engaged in meaningful service.

Second, if we take these statistics seriously, we can see that we are not talking about creating some little subsidiary ministry for a few older people who live in our communities and go to our churches. Rather, we should plan and dream for this to be one of the strategic initiatives of the church. In the past, older adult ministry was not seen as crucial to the mission of the church. As we move into the future, this attitude must change. If we want to be churches and Christians who are in step with the demographic trends of our time, we must respond to this one. It's huge.

Third, this ministry is much bigger than the baby boom generation alone. There are hundreds of thousands of older adults in their late sixties, seventies, and even eighties who are looking at aging in a new way. They are seeking meaning and purpose and are capable of contributing their time and talents to Kingdom efforts.

Fourth, older adulthood is becoming a life stage of its own. With the majority of people born expecting to live into their later years, we have an entirely new season of life. Development

psychologists used to focus on the changes in childhood and adolescence and then lumped all of adulthood into one category. Now the older years are being perceived as a brand-new stage of life with its own opportunities and challenges—as well as great possibilities for ministry. If we choose to embrace this reality, we have the chance to help define what this new stage of life will be like.

Finally, this is not a ministry for just the United States. Nearly every country in every part of the world is being affected by aging, and opportunities to minister and encourage older adults to live for Christ abound.

The New Old

To minister effectively with the growing older population, we must understand some common characteristics regarding this new generation of adults.

The baby boom generation includes seventy-eight million people born between 1946 and 1964 and reflects the boom in the birth rate after World War II. This is the largest generation in U.S. history and is made up of two cohorts—leading-edge boomers, born between 1946 and 1955, and trailing-edge boomers, born between 1956 and 1964. Leading-edge boomers were influenced by many social movements, including civil rights, modern feminism, antiwar protests, the sexual revolution, and drugs. Today, the majority of leading-edge boomers are facing the empty nest, providing care for aging parents, and dealing with retirement.

Because of their large numbers, as the boomers have progressed through life, their needs and desires have taken center stage. Whether it be the need for more diapers, more schools, or more jobs, this generation has been a driving force behind many of the changes we have experienced in our culture.

As a whole, members of this group were willing to leave behind some of the values of their parents and do things

differently. In many ways, they have approached politics, fashion, child rearing, and religion differently than their parents.

It should therefore come as no surprise that they are approaching the later years of life in a different way than the generations before them.

A Different Perspective

Research sponsored by Merrill Lynch indicated that 70 to 80 percent of boomers want to keep *working* in some fashion after they retire. Interestingly, most of them would like to find different jobs in areas of personal interest where they can make a difference in society. They want work that will allow them the flexibility to travel, spend time with family, participate in leisure activities, and continue learning.

Boomers are also very interested in *staying young*. They plan to remain active and involved with life and don't want to participate in things that suggest they are aging. The idea of sitting in a rocking chair is not appealing to them. One way to see this more clearly is by looking at two general ways in which people age.

Disengagement theory was an early academic theory proposed to explain aging. It stated that the experience of aging involved a mutual withdrawal of the elderly person from society and society from the elder. In my mind, I see images of an old woman being put on a raft and pushed out to sea, never to return again. Disengagement theory isn't quite that drastic, but it does tend to view older people as detaching from this world as they prepare for death.

A second theory that emerged around the same time period as disengagement theory was activity theory. Activity theory stands in complete contrast to disengagement. Proponents of this theory believe that the best approach to aging is staying active. Even if someone's general routine changes—say, from working full time to working part time—the emphasis is still on being

involved. Most people today—especially baby boomers—are proponents of this particular theory of aging. Boomers want their later years of life to be very similar to their midlife.

Finally, as boomers approach their later years, they are *searching for purpose*. They may look for purpose through relationships, education, and even leisure pursuits. Others will seek to discover ways they can use their time and experience to serve the needs of those around them. They want their lives, as they get older, to be productive and meaningful—to really count for something. Rather than approaching these years as a time for slowing down, they view this period of life as a time of exciting possibilities.

Although baby boomers do have their own approach to aging, many of their ideas and lifestyle choices with regard to their later years are similar to those of the previous generation. Someone commented to me that even though he was a few years older than the leading-edge boomers, he agreed with many of the thoughts and impressions that boomers have regarding aging. He wants to stay healthy, plans to keep working, and wants to be involved serving and making a significant difference with these years of his life. So the way that boomers view aging will also resonate with people slightly older than those in the boomer age group.

A New Focus for the Church

Nearly every industry, from travel and leisure to health care, has invested countless hours researching the current demographic trends and the impact they will have on society. Businesses are studying how to develop products that will attract aging people. For example, Chico's is a woman's clothing store that appeals to boomers and older women because it offers stylish clothing that fits more loosely but doesn't look dated. Companies like Johnson & Johnson have begun to design bottles that are easier for arthritic hands to open. The auto industry is studying how to design cars better suited to the growing number of older drivers.

Some states are even redesigning roadway intersections to make them safer for older motorists.

So what about the church? Despite the greater attention being paid by industries to the growth of the older population and the new ways in which boomers are approaching aging, it appears that many churches are ignoring this reality. Why?

An Obsession with Youth I was only nine years old, but I still remember the sights and sounds of my dad's fortieth birthday party. Friends and family started showing up at our house wearing all black. Mom pulled a wheelchair out of the closet for Dad to sit in and draped an afghan over his shoulders. Everyone had joined together to mourn the death of my dear father's youth.

For quite some time, our society has not exactly celebrated getting older. Birthday cards lament being "over the hill" or "out to pasture." Adults (especially women) are often unwilling to even tell their age.

It hasn't always been this way. During colonial days, some researchers report, old age was preferred over youth. In meetings, the elderly sat in the positions of highest status. People even wanted to dress in such a way that they looked older. Men's clothing was cut to narrow the shoulders, broaden the waist and hips, and make the spine look bent. Women wore long dresses, and both genders wore white wigs.⁷

As the United States (and other countries) became more industrialized, the value attached to the elderly began to wane. Scientific knowledge grew, technology improved, and the need for older people to share their wisdom and experience became less important. Over time, being young has become the preferred status.

Today, we live in a culture that values youth, and we are constantly bombarded with the message that being young is what we should strive for. People use makeup, hair color, and other things to maintain a youthful appearance. I have even seen a surge in news articles focused on medical treatments to help

people stay young. One recent article spoke of hormone therapy in which women spend as much as \$500 per day to inject hormones into their body that will enable them to look and feel younger.⁸

And while most of us would say that this example is pretty drastic, there are ways in which our churches have bought into the same mind-set as society—that younger is somehow better. We proudly communicate that “ours is a church reaching out to young families.” And we believe that growing churches are those that are appealing to the younger generation. If there are too many old people in a church, the common thought is that the church must be dying.

Is it possible to be a vibrant, growing, active church that intentionally seeks to reach middle-aged and older adults? Absolutely. But far too many churches in too many communities are failing to take an honest look at their demographics and pay attention to whom God has put in their path. As already noted, the older adult population is growing, meaning that there will be a constant flow of people turning sixty, seventy, and eighty for many years to come. As long as we discover effective ways of reaching these adults, our churches will never have to die.

In 2002, Caloundra Church of Christ in Queensland, Australia, was concerned it would have to close its doors. The church had about sixty people at the time, and the leaders said, “We need a youth minister or we are going to die.” Richard Pearce began working with the church first as the interim minister and then later as the full-time minister. As Richard began his ministry, he realized that the church was located in a growing seaside community and therefore would never be forced to close as long as the congregation reached out to the people who were moving into the area.

The coastal community attracts large numbers of retirees each year, as well as young people who are looking for jobs. Within six years, the church had grown to an average of 250 people on a Sunday morning by attracting both the young and

the old. Richard explains that the church tries to have a variety of ministries that reach out to both age groups. A volunteer ministry team serves the young adults, and another team focuses on the older adults. There are play groups and socials for young moms in the area and a youth ministry and junior church program. There is an annual senior adult convention, as well as walking groups and other activities for older adults. In many activities, the church makes an effort not to segregate by age but to mix the generations.

Richard estimates that 70 percent of the people attending are over the age of fifty. The congregation has seen young people come to Christ as well as older adults. Richard says, “Many of the adults in their fifties and sixties may have gone to church in the past, but they never realized they could have a personal relationship with God.”

Ageism Not only is our society obsessed with youth, but we’ve also grown accustomed and, dare I say, even comfortable with the negative attitudes surrounding aging.

In 2009, the TV competition *Britain’s Got Talent* featured a forty-seven-year-old contestant named Susan Boyle. Susan got a lot of media attention because she didn’t fit the stereotype of an up-and-coming singing star. She looked middle-aged and dowdy without much fashion sense. When she came onto the stage before the three judges and the large audience, you could sense the skepticism and distaste. The camera even panned to one young woman who was rolling her eyes. You got the impression that people were saying, “Why would someone her age be doing this? What makes her think she stands a chance of being taken seriously?”

The term used to describe the negative attitudes hurled at Susan Boyle and many other people in our world is *ageism*. The term was coined in 1969 by Robert Butler, a leader in the field of gerontology, to describe negative perceptions and attitudes toward older people, aging, and old age in general. It’s

one of the reasons why the church may be ignoring the aging population.

At its worst, ageism, like racism or sexism, is a form of discrimination. It's devaluing someone because of age.

Maybe you are saying, "Hey, wait just a minute! We value everyone in our church." I believe we want to value everyone, but often one age group is emphasized more than another.

I know of a large and growing American church that puts a strong emphasis on missions. Just before the 2008 Summer Olympics were to be held in Beijing, this church's older adult ministry began to invite older adults to be a part of a team that would travel overseas and do ministry during the Olympics. Twenty-four willing and able fifty-plus age adults signed up for this endeavor. They were excited about working in an orphanage in China and providing other services to people in need of the love of Christ.

The missions team at the church, including the missions pastor, agreed to let the group go but was unwilling to list the team in the missions brochure or to include them in the formal introduction and prayer service for short-term missionaries. In short, the missions team said, "Sure, they can go, but we aren't going to back them with financial help, public prayer support, or recognition."

More conversations revealed that the committee was concerned that one of the older members might fall ill or that the older people wanted to go on the trip merely for sightseeing. So in other words, these committee members held some ageist attitudes—that older people are sickly and only interested in leisure activities and that mission trips of this sort should be left to the young.

Before you go shaking your head in judgment at this church, would you be willing to take a hard look at yourself? Have you ever given time in the Sunday service to a high school youth group who went to Mexico? Has the congregation listened to the participants' testimonies and applauded their efforts? Have you

given the same amount of platform time to a group of older adults who have gone on a mission trip or participated in a significant service project? Does your staff or even your budget reflect which age group you value most? Do you ever neglect to ask the input of older church members because you believe they will not have much to offer? Ageism has affected all of us. It's crept into our churches without our recognizing it.

Unfortunately, older adults themselves have bought into the negative images of aging. In fact, Linda Woolf of Webster University in Saint Louis, Missouri, said that the greatest limitation facing older adults is not mental or physical handicaps but the negative stereotypes that exist regarding aging. This is a main obstacle to older adults' continuing to grow in the Lord and serve Him to their fullest capacity. Many of them believe the lies that they no longer have something to offer or contribute.

Although ageism is most often associated with older adults, it is technically descriptive of any judging on the basis of age. Young people can experience ageism just as older adults can. In 1 Timothy 4:12, when Paul instructs Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he is young, Paul is telling Timothy not to let ageism affect the work God wants him to do. This is the same message the church needs to proclaim today regarding the later years of life. If Paul were to visit our churches, he might say, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are older. Do what God has called you to do!"

Just as we should strive to become churches that do not put limits on people because of their race or gender, we must work just as hard not to restrict the potential of adults because of their age.

The Time Is Now

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Mark Senter, who said that when boomers were advancing in record numbers into their teenage years, the church was caught off guard, without a strategy to reach this group. My fear is that unless the church wakes up to the aging population, we will once again fail to be ready for

what is about to hit in full force. We simply cannot afford to ignore this issue.

For one thing, this new generation of older adults represents a huge network of potential Kingdom laborers. Boomers have discretionary time, wisdom, and experience that are too valuable to ignore.

I was reminded of the great impact this generation can make when I talked to David, who works for Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry committed to serving the persecuted church. David was an insurance company vice president when he was laid off at the age of fifty-six. He wasn't planning to retire at the time and attempted to find work with some other company, but God had different plans for him. Even before losing his job, David had been exposed through a newsletter to Voice of the Martyrs and its work to help Christians around the world who were living out their faith and often persecuted for their beliefs. He began volunteering for the organization as a speaker and even traveled overseas to further the group's efforts. The ministry soon became a burning passion within his soul. Nearly four years after leaving his corporate job, while he was in China serving with Voice of the Martyrs, he received word that one of the ministry's key leaders had died in a car accident. The group immediately asked David to replace him.

When other sixty-year-olds might be settling into retirement or looking forward to more time with grandchildren, David and his wife uprooted themselves from the home and community where they had spent much of their lives. They left behind their adult children and grandchildren, aging parents, friends, and church. They moved several states away to a small community where Voice of the Martyrs has its headquarters. And there they started a new life and ministry.

David's business experience and organizational skills make him well suited for the managerial role in which he is now serving. He confessed that he makes about 25 percent of the income he made in his corporate job. But he was quick to tell me he would be happy to do the job for free. He is passionate

about the ministry and the work God is doing and is using his energy for the cause of Christ.

We could travel the country and find other stories like David's. People who in their middle and later years are choosing to do something significant that is advancing God's mission in this world. However, I know there could be many, many more adults unleashed into meaningful ministry if the church would begin to call people in their fifties, sixties, and seventies out of a leisure-focused life and into one of service. Imagine the impact to be made on our world. Imagine the yet-to-be-discovered ministries that would reach out to people who are hurting. We need to be leaders that raise the expectation of how older adults are to spend their later years.

A second implication to consider in ministry with this generation is the number of older adults who are lost, without hope, in need of a relationship with Jesus Christ. If we continue to focus all of our efforts on reaching a younger generation for Christ and ignore the older generation, millions of people will face an uncertain eternity.

To begin to love boomers, we must jump into their world. We have to understand their daily needs, interests, and burdens. As boomers search for meaning and purpose in their lives, we offer the only lasting purpose that exists. Recognizing their needs, issues, and desires will be the first steps in loving them and hopefully being used by God to point them to Christ.

Finally, the church has a moment in time, right now, to create a new paradigm for aging. A biblical, God-honoring view of aging. Yes, culture does focus on the young and ageist attitudes abound—but we can be a force that stands counter culture. We can show the world what it means to value people of all ages, rather than marginalizing certain segments of the population. We can communicate that God has a purpose and a specific role for everyone to play, regardless of age.

I think it's going to be an exciting, challenging, and rewarding ride. Won't you join me?