



Job Description

for a Senior Adult Ministries Leader

By Amy Hanson

When I share with people that I work in senior adult ministry, I usually get one of three responses.

Some say, "You are so lucky; you get to take all those bus trips to Branson!"

Others say, "I used to go visiting in the nursing home."

And I often hear, "We try to have a quarterly potluck for the seniors in our church."

It is amusing to me what senior adult ministry means to different people. Many people wonder, "What is the job of a senior adult pastor or lay leader?" Is it a pastoral care role, where one visits the sick and comforts the grieving? Is it an activity director, who plans trips and special events? Is it someone who teaches the seniors' Sunday school class?

While every senior adult ministry will be different, four characteristics are important to look for when choosing a senior adult leader.

An Unquenchable Passion

Passion is by far the most important quality; it will make the difference between a mediocre and a dynamic ministry to older adults. Webster's dictionary defines *passion* as a strong fondness, enthusiasm, or a desire for something. Bruce Bugbee says that *passion* is the God-given desire that compels us to make a difference in a particular ministry.

When I began to feel God nudging me to work in this area of ministry, I was 18 years old and in Bible college. I began to write papers on senior adult ministry for my classes and look for summer internships in this area. People thought it was strange. My parents were concerned, and my college suggested I work with young people. But I could not let go of this passion God had put on my heart. I was compelled to work in this ministry no matter how hard it might be. That passion has enabled me to serve seniors and lead ministry to seniors since that time.

Four Myths

About Senior Adults

Getting older often gets a bad rap in our culture. We color our hair, hide our wrinkles, and lie about our age because in America there is a notion that aging is a bad thing. In contrast, aging is not something that just magically happens to us once we get the letter to join AARP or we start drawing Social Security. Rather, the moment we are born we begin to age.

How much do you really know about the later years of life? There are many stereotypes that prevail about aging. These attitudes have subtly crept into our churches, and they affect our ministries. Be honest with yourself and see if you have bought into any of these myths.

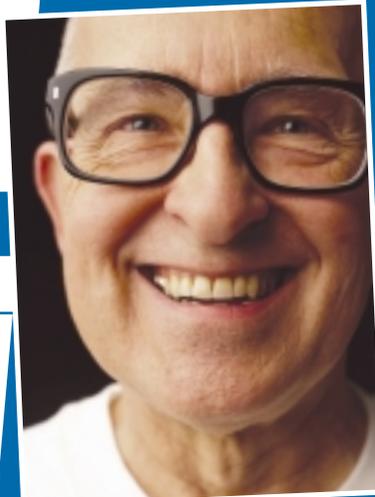
Memory loss is a normal part of the aging process

People are always telling jokes and stories about how they have forgotten something and it is a sign of their age. I sometimes hear people say this is a "senior moment." The truth is we don't automatically lose our memory as we get older. In fact, only 2 or 3 percent of older adults in their 70s and 5 to 10 percent in their 80s suffer from memory loss.



One-third of the elderly need nursing home care

When people find out that I work in senior adult ministry they immediately assume that I minister in a nursing home setting or work with the frail elderly. Often the word "old" triggers images of women sitting in wheelchairs with their white hair in buns. But only 5 percent of people 65 and older live in a nursing home. That means many older adults live in their own homes, care for themselves, and are involved in their church and community.



Sometimes when churches decide they want to have a seniors ministry, they look for a retired pastor who maybe wants to slow down and work part-time. At times I worry about this decision, because for a ministry to be effective, the leader must be completely sold-out and passionate about senior adults.

Passion enhances an older adult ministry for three reasons.

First, passion keeps the leader focused. It is the thing that drives people through the challenging times of ministry and keeps them on course.

Second, a passionate leader serves as a model to the seniors he or she serves. If the goal is for older adults to have a vibrant relationship with Christ and discover a ministry that they can pour themselves into, then the

leader needs to set the example.

Finally, passion helps the leader be the best advocate for senior adults. When I used to sit in church staff meetings and a new program was being discussed, I would always suggest how we could involve the older adults or what we could do to reach out to them. Senior adults deserve such an advocate.

A Teachable Spirit

Because older adult ministry is such a new field, it is important that a leader have a desire to learn. There are a number of avenues in which to gather information.

First, it is helpful to have some formal training. Perhaps the community college offers an introduction to gerontology course, or better yet, maybe they have a certificate in studies in aging.

Second, it is important to attend conferences and talk to others in the senior adult field. Christian Association of Senior Adult Ministries is a national organization that holds a yearly leadership conference, as well as sending out audiotapes and newsletters on senior adult ministry. You can find out more at their Web site, www.gocasa.org. Other organizations, such as Christian Association of PrimeTimers and Christian Seniors Fellowship, provide helpful resources. In addition, there are numerous books on aging and senior

Continued on next page

Older adults are incapable of learning new information

As we get older it takes a little longer to learn new things, but learning does occur. It is becoming more common for retired adults to go back to college, enroll in computer classes, and take up new hobbies.

I remember a woman in her 70s who took a nine-month intensive overview of the Bible at our church, and when I asked her about the class, she said, "Amy, I'm learning so much. There is so much in this Book that I never knew!"



Older adults can't adapt to change

I found an anonymous essay that begins, "For all those born before 1945. We were born before television, before penicillin, before polio shots, frozen foods, Xerox, plastic, contact lenses, Frisbees, and the Pill."

Sometimes in our churches we think that it is the older people who never want to do anything differently. I hear comments like, "She is so stuck in her ways." The truth is that older adults have had to do the most changing simply because they've lived the longest. More important, God is in the business of changing people and changing people's lives. When we allow ourselves to buy into the myth that once you reach a certain age you are not capable of changing, then we put a limit on what God can do.

It is easy to let society's myths influence what we believe, but the church needs to raise the flag and say, we are going to view aging as a blessing, a unique season of life that God has designed in which to accomplish His plans and purposes.

Let's do all that we can to help make the later years of life the very best years of life.

—Amy Hanson



The foundation of an older adult ministry must be built on evangelism.

adult ministry. Leaders are readers, and it is important to seek out books and articles on this subject.

Finally, perhaps the most important method of learning is to talk to the seniors themselves. Perhaps it would be beneficial to conduct a survey of the senior adults in your community or establish focus groups to find out the main issues in their lives.

A Heartbeat for Lost People

Too often older adult ministries are built on a social model where the goal is simply to pacify the seniors and keep them happy. The foundation of an older adult ministry must be built on evangelism, and the only way this will happen is if the leader sees it as a top priority. It is easy for a long list of activities on pastoral work to fill up a schedule, leaving no time for strategic and targeted evangelism efforts.

Older adults often are very open to the gospel. They are experiencing many life changes such as dealing with health issues, relating to adult children, losing friends and family members, and being forced into retirement. In such stressful situations, people often are receptive to spiritual matters.

Older adults also are prime targets for evangelism because they are looking for purpose. When I am leading a workshop on aging, I often ask the audience, “What is your greatest fear about aging?” A person most often fears he will not matter any more and that his life will not have any purpose. As Christians, we have the answer to this because we know that true purpose only comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

An Ability to Equip Leaders

As a senior adult minister, this might be my most difficult responsibility, but also the most rewarding. It is easy to fall into the trap of visiting the homebound, planning the funeral dinner, teaching the Bible study, organizing the trip, leading the grief support group, and writing the newsletter. There are so many things that can be a part of an older adult ministry, but it is impossible for one leader

to do all those things and do them effectively. Remember Jethro’s advice to Moses in Exodus 18:18 and 21, “What you are doing is not good. . . . The work is too heavy for you, you cannot handle it alone . . . select capable men from all the people . . . and appoint them as officials.”

Because senior adults are such a diverse group, it is important when creating ministries to cast many different hooks in the water in order to catch lots of different fish. Assuming that a potluck or a trip will reach all the senior adults is faulty thinking. The only way to have a variety of programs is to recruit a variety of people to lead these various ministries. The senior adult leader should focus on casting vision and involving others in ministry.

Coming up with a mission statement is one of the best ways to cast the vision. A mission statement will help the leader know when to say yes and when to say no. I adapted the mission statement for our church to fit the older adult ministry: “To connect the unconnected 50-plus adult to Christ and together grow in full devotion to Him.”

The leader needs to help senior adults discover their own spiritual gifts and passions and then help them find places to serve and succeed in ministry. If someone really enjoys travel, then consider placing her in charge of planning and leading one of the senior adult trips. If someone has mercy gifts, then encourage him to visit the homebound.

I often tell people that when I get to Heaven I don’t want God to say, “Well, Amy, you planned some great trips and parties, but what did you really do to bring older adults to Christ and help them grow?” Older adult ministry is the most exciting ministry to be involved in at this time in history. The aging population is on the cusp of exploding, and I believe God has huge plans for this age group. So as you begin to develop ministries and establish leaders, don’t settle for status quo. Reach for the sky and see what God will do!

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