Baby Boomers in Ministry

A presentation to the Church Council of Peace Lutheran Church

Aging & the Family

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This education piece explores the reasons, benefits, and challenges for significantly involving the baby boomer generation in congregational ministry. It also provides practical ideas for discussion and consideration for implementing ministry to and with the baby boomers within our church. Baby boomers are the generation born between 1946 and 1964 and is called the “boomers” because the boom in birth rate after World War II. There are seventy-eight million people in this largest generation in American history (Hanson, 2010). This exploration of baby boomers in ministry is suggested as a resource for church councils, family ministry teams, and congregational leaders (both professional and lay) who are considering implementing steps to increase and utilize baby boomers in ministry.

**Expected Outcomes**

- Participants will be able to articulate the need for specific and intentional ministry to and with baby boomers in the church.
- Participants will gain knowledge of significant needs and concerns of the baby boomer generation.
- Participants will be able to utilize a resource list of books and websites to assist with developing ministries for baby boomers.
- Participants will be able to think critically about different ways to do intergenerational ministry.
- Participants will be able to understand the purpose of an aging generation developing and realizing their spiritual legacy.

**Content**

*Aging Well*
As the Baby Boomers age, they desire to “age well.” This can take on many forms such as healthy living and eating, exercise, and keeping their minds sharp. They do not desire to just sit around and get old like they are seeing with their aging parents. Our world has a focus on “staying young” and the boomers have more disposable income than their predecessors, and they want to use it to help with this.

Aging has always been a part of God’s plan since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden and mortality was realized. It is the way we move from life to death and then to the promise of eternity as questions. Throughout the Bible, God highlights aging as a blessed and special time in life, quite different than the culture in which we live where youth is lifted up and death and old age is feared.

While God lifts up old age, he also calls us to take care of our bodies; that they are a temple to him (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The goal of this age group is not that people are complimenting on youthfulness, but that wise decisions are being made in regards to an individual’s body so that they can continue to give God their best (Hanson, 2010). This is not only an area where congregations can minister to their own members, but as an outreach to the community as well. Churches can host health fairs to connect people with services such as hospice, Alzheimer’s associations, grief support groups, home health providers, and more. Costs are minimal because groups appreciate the opportunity to tell others about their services. Not only does this show care for a church’s own members, but also for the community as a whole. In a church like Peace, which strongly supports small groups, groups can form around different exercise interests such as hiking groups, walking clubs, and exercise classes. Once again, these are great ways not only to keep one’s body in good physical shape but for people to invite others into a Christian environment who might otherwise not step foot into a church. Bible studies can also be offered
on healthy living. While Peace already offers one weekly Bible study for women on this topic area, it could be expanded to include both men and women and teach on self-discipline and focusing on God above all else, as even exercise and healthy eating can become an idol (Hanson, 2010).

God already knows what is in store for all of our lives, and that includes whether or not we will experience some level of dementia. However, there are still ways churches can help in encouraging mental fitness. For example, they can have classes for retirees held during the week covering any number of topics from theological issues and apologetics to life journaling. This can be promoted in senior centers and other places, and once again, be a place where people from outside of the church are welcome. Organizing travel groups is a way to help keep the mind sharp as well. Not only can baby boomers learn more about the world, they can learn how different regions of the world have interacted with and influenced the Christian faith. My parents, both late baby boomers, went on a Holy Land cruise for twenty days last year with many people older than them and had the time of their lives.

*Relationships at An Older Age*

The relationships that baby boomers are experiencing have huge implications and opportunities for ministry. The relationships are wide and vary from person to person and can include grand-parenting (both traditional and those are raising their children’s children), grand-parenting in the midst of divorce, relationships with adult children (who may or may not be living with their parents), aging parents, and marriages.

Many baby boomers are grandparents or will become grandparents in the next few years. Hanson (2010) says that there are seventy to eighty million grandparents in the United States and
half of all adults become grandparents before they reach the age of sixty. Baby boomer grandparents are much different than grandparents of the past. They may still be working, and also spend their time exercising, traveling, volunteering, and more. Baby boomer grandparents care deeply for their grandchildren and would do almost anything for them. They often have close relationships and are much more involved in the lives of their grandchildren than grandparents were previously, attending school productions, concerts, and sporting events. What an opportunity these grandparents have to influence their grandchildren spiritually because of the closeness of these relationships.

Churches also should be cognizant of the challenges that many of their baby boomer members might have with grand-parenting. Many baby boomers are the primary caregivers of their grandchildren. They have to manage their own lives, and then often the lives of both their children and grandchildren. They could be struggling with their own health issues, feel guilt about how they raised their child, and resentful toward their child for having to raise a grandchild when they could be doing other activities such as traveling. Dealing with a child’s divorce when grandchildren are involved can be a struggle for grandparents as well (Hanson, 2010).

There are many ways that churches can minister to and with grandparents. They can offer grandparent – grandchild retreats or mission trips that highlight spiritual teaching that is applicable to both groups as well as activities and service that can be done together. Churches can offer grand-parenting conferences as well. They can include topics that grandparents are dealing with, as well as time for worship and prayer for their grandchildren and families. Teaching grandparents to leave a spiritual legacy to their grandchildren (and what that means) should be a high priority of every church.
Beyond grand-parenting, the boomers role with their adult children is also significant. One of the biggest issues boomer adults are having with their adult children (besides when they have to raise their grandchildren) is when their children move back home with them. This is often due to financial issues and it is important to define roles as to length of stay, household responsibility, and job status. Many boomers, however, have great relationships with their adult children and because of modern technology are able to be quite involved with one another’s lives and are able to communicate frequently.

Churches can help parents with adult children by addressing relationship issues in sermons and Bible studies. Even boomers can benefit from lesson on listening skills and sharing knowledge with their children without being demeaning. There are many groups for parents with young children as well as teenagers, and parents with adult children can benefit from opportunities to share joys and struggles with people in similar life situations.

Many baby boomers are also caregivers – caring for parents that are nearing the end of life. Their parents may live still live in their own homes, but also may live with their adult children or in a long-term care facility. Care-giving can be very demanding and all-consuming. Churches have many opportunities to reach out not only to caregivers but to their aging parents as well. Boomers are looking for churches that will care for and love their parents. Churches should consider providing services both for members and the community that give caregivers a break and give aging adults a change of scenery and routine. Churches can also offer support groups for caregivers from a biblical perspective, and advancing technology expands the potential and ease of this type of ministry. Churches can be a place where resources are offered for people who are seeking out community services. This is helpful for both regular members as well as adult children who may live in a different community (Hanson, 2010).
As boomers age and many of their relationships begin to change, marriages are not left untouched. When churches minister to boomers in regards to their relationships with their grandchildren, adult children, and aging parents, their marriage relationship will also benefit. Churches can plan events specifically for couples in this boomer age group, allowing for reconnection and growth time within the relationship.

Retirement

As baby boomers enter their mid to late 60s, many retire from their careers. Culture has a lot of say (and influence) when it comes to what one does and how they spend their money during retirement. Culture says that retirement is a time to take it easy and let others do the hard work; that one’s retirement is all about enjoying one’s self. While this is not entirely inaccurate, Scripture highlights many older leaders who spend their later years working actively and passionately for the Lord. For example, in a retirement living community, Christians can have powerful ministry and witness with their fellow retirees that is supported by their congregation.

In regards to retirement, churches must be willing to teach against the culture. While entertainment and leisure are important, they are not the only important thing in the lives of Christian retirees. Christian service must be modeled and taught to Christians of all ages. Retirees should also be encouraged to discover ways that their hobbies and interests can be used as ministry opportunities. There is nothing wrong with using interests to interact with others that lead to spiritual conversations. Churches must also recognize that retirement is a major life change – like getting married or having a baby. Churches should offer resources and seminars for individuals and couples that are nearing this stage. These can cover topics such as finances, relationships, and time management. If a church is not able to offer these conversations in a
class-type setting, pastoral staff should consider it a priority to have one-on-one conversations with people who are nearing this stage, similar to premarital counseling to discuss and create a “plan” of sorts on how God may use retirement to his glory. Churches can also highlight individuals who are using their retirement to honor God, providing a model for others to follow. God desire for everyone in this point in their life is not just to retire, but to have a purposeful retirement that can lead others to him and continue to strengthen the church (Hanson, 2010).

*Entire Church Ministry with Older Adults*

Amy Hanson (2010) argues in *Baby Boomers* that “they key is not to view older adults as a separate group but instead as an integral part of the church as a whole.” All ministries should be available to older adults – not just “senior’s ministry.” Certainly churches can offer age-specific classes and programs, but should not measure older adult ministry success only by the amount of people that are participating in this specific age-type programs but instead by how many older adults are involved in all aspects of a congregation. More specific ways of measuring success in ministry with older adults can be found under the “Evaluation” section.

Many boomers struggle with the thought of being “old” and spending time with people they see as the same age as their parents. Churches must be open to looking at senior ministry in fresh new ways. Certainly, there are many boomers who have a yearning for a place for spiritual growth, evangelism, and service with people in similar life stages. Events for this group do not have to merely just focus on the social aspect.

*Older Adults and Serving*
Midlife and older adults have much purpose left in the church and in the world. God is not done with them, and their churches, families, and communities still need what their talents and abilities have to offer. They should not give up these skills and gifts because they are retired.

Churches must not underestimate what older adults can contribute. Certainly folding the worship folder and stuffing envelopes is a beneficial task for the church, but it is not age that necessarily qualifies an adult for a certain task. These older adults have years of life experience and should be challenged to dream big where they can combine their passions and experience in making a difference for Christ in their communities. They do not always want to slow down and “let someone else do it” (Hanson, 2010).

Boomers must see service and volunteer positions are valuable and short term. They want to understand how their work contributes to God mission, and they want these service positions to use their gifts in a flexible manner. One way churches can help with this is asking boomers to serve on ministry teams that meet for a set amount of time or until a specific event or function is complete.

*Intergenerational Ministry*

A church that does intergenerational ministry well recognizes the benefits of becoming a church that embraces all ages – constantly exploring the question. How can we love and serve each other and together? It is more than just one activity, it’s an adjustment in the culture and philosophy of the congregation across the board.

One way different generations can connect is to encourage them to serve together on a worthy cause. In this, people see beyond their differences and are able to focus their attention on
something greater than themselves. Habitat for Humanity, Short-term mission trips, and work with community organizations all can involve the passion and service of people of all ages.

Church groups can also form around interests rather than age. People can find all sorts of people from different ages that have similar passions and interests as they do, and boomers do not want their age to dictate what they can and cannot do within the church. Most people, regardless of age, do not want to be labeled or categorized. These interests can be centered on service, physical activity, literature, hobbies and more.

The different generations should be encouraged to pray for one another. Prayer is powerful no matter what the age, and young people feel encouraged when older people with much more life experience than themselves specifically pray for them and what is going on in their lives, and vice versa. Prayer encourages care and concern for others, and makes us more like Christ. Churches can help in establishing prayer connections formally by supporting a prayer partner ministry and informally by suggesting in sermons and Bible studies that each generation find someone in their life in a different generation that they can be praying for. Using scripture to pray for others is a helpful tool that all generations can use as well.

Having older adults share their stories with younger people can be extremely impactful, especially when these stories involve God’s faithfulness and presence. This can happen in specific intergenerational events or in youth or children’s Sunday school classes or programming. Encouraging people to write their stories down is a great “jumping off” point for people to start thinking about stories they can share with younger generations.

These are only a few of many different ways that a variety of generations can interact with one another. When we encourage different generations to interact within the church, we are
showing people that God’s love transcends ages, life situations, and circumstances. All generations can learn from one another and develop an appreciation for the gifts that each has to offer.

Resources

Articles/Blogs

http://amyhanson.org/category/baby-boomer-ministry/

http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/article/entry/727/article-those-elusive-baby-boomers#axzz2XN9a7ohn

http://baptistmessenger.com/baby-boomers-are-not-your-typical-seniors/

Websites

Adult Lutherans Organized for Action https://aloaserves.org/

Caregivers Ministry Network http://www.caregiversministry.org/

Elder Source http://www.eldersourceinfo.org/

Books

**Good Faith Hunting: How Baby Boomers Help Recapture a Biblical View of Faith** By Henry Stewart

**Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century: Step-By-Step Strategies for Reaching People Over 50** by David P. Gallagher
A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors by James M. Houston and Michael Parker

Evaluation

Churches should consider measuring “success” by how many older adults are involved in serving both in and outside of the church. This can be done by surveys, individual conversations, and asking these adults to share their “serve stories.” This can be a great way to see how many different people are influenced and impacted by the older generation’s service in both the congregation and the community.

Churches should also focus older adults that are not connected to any ministry within the church, and potentially measure that numerically, rather than trying to get adults that are already involved in other ministry areas to come to a 55+ ministry event. Certainly the church should want everyone who is of that age to find value in their events, but true success is measured by people becoming involved who are not currently connecting in some way.

References