



Application to the church

We read about the approaching tsunami of baby boomers and the challenges of providing retirement income, health care and social services with limited resources. In her article, “Elderly and living alone in rural Mississippi,” Wanda Lott Collins presents us with both demographic statistics and a case example of one older adult with representative challenges.

The needs of a growing older adult population provide a powerful opportunity for the church to be the body of Christ to some of the most frail and marginalized of her people.

Dr. Collins helps us understand the isolation experienced by older adults, particularly those in rural communities. That isolation compounds the issues of declining health and finances. Older adults may need transportation to the physician, assistance with personal care in the home, financial assistance paying for medications, nutritious meals, and safety modifications for their homes. Many of these needs were met in previous generations by family members, largely adult children and grandchildren who lived nearby.

Families today, however, frequently are scattered geographically and even when living nearby, daughters who were historically caregivers are now often in the workforce and not as available. Dr. Collins’s case example of Mr. Miles is an illustration of adult children who are limited in care giving capability because they are working and living at a significant distance. Who will be family to the Mr. Miles and the many others who find themselves isolated and in need?

This is an opportunity for the church to truly be “the family of God.” For centuries, we have described ourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ; now, too, we can be family and care givers to our older members of the family. A starting place is for the church to be intentional about intergenerational worship, service, programs and activities.

Beyond that intentionality, church leaders have a wonderful opportunity to guide the church in how to be family to each other. A few suggestions include:

- Provide transportation for doctor and grocery store visits.
- Offer a two-hour window of service on Saturdays in which younger members can do yard work, heavier house cleaning, or help program new electronic devices.
- Churches with Wednesday evening meals can deliver to the older adults and provide homemade TV dinners to those who are shut in.
- Provide “recipe exchange days” and “cooking” days as a fellowship/service activity for the younger adults as they prepare meals for older adults.
- Look into a parish nurse program to offer blood pressure screenings and instruction about medications. Parish social work programs provide case management services, care planning organization in the congregation, and when needed, mental health counseling for older adults.
- Begin an “adopt a grandparent” program, pairing a younger person with an older member.

There is no one answer that meets all situations. The role of family throughout the scripture is to care for one another. In more urban areas, churches can provide goods to and make referrals to local agencies. In more rural areas, church members may find themselves providing the goods and services themselves. The opportunity to be intentional about ministry to older adults is before us as the family of God.

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