

Practical Ministry Skills: Ministry to Senior Adults



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training*. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of *Leadership Resources* and *Christianity Today International*, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This specific theme is designed to build up your ministry to senior adults. You may use it either for a training session or to give individually to key people who work on outreach and events for older adults. Simply print the handouts needed and use them as necessary.

For example, to reflect on the increasing importance of a vibrant adult ministry, see "Senior Adults: Ministry's New Cutting Edge" (p. 3). To better understand the transitions and anxieties that seniors face, see "What You Need to Know About Seniors" (p. 4). For some ideas to build your seniors ministry, see "Serving and Being Served" (p. 7). For some practical but inexpensive ways you can reach the needs of your senior adults, see "Ideas You Can Use Now" (p. 10).

We hope you benefit from this theme as you equip your church to build up the older adults in your congregation and reach out to the growing seniors population outside your doors.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Senior Adults: Ministry's New Cutting Edge

Why your church needs a strong older adults ministry—and fast.
Psalm 90:10

A group called LIFE (Living in Full Effectiveness) has a revolutionary and ambitious goal: the overthrow of the youth cult in the church and the world.

According to the church growth specialist Win Arn, “widespread ageism” exists in churches, with many offering no, or woefully inadequate, ministry to older adults. To put it bluntly, Arn says, “The future belongs to the aged, to the old people.”

Arn and son, Charles—who leads Church Growth Inc.—believe churches are missing out on both a huge potential volunteer force within their walls and a large mission field outside by ignoring senior adults. LIFE’s goal is to “sound a bugle to wake up the church to the opportunity that is available in adult ministry.”

The rising “age wave” is apparent by estimates that two-thirds of all people who have ever lived to 65 are alive today, and the over-65 age group in the United States is growing three times more rapidly than the population at large.

A Growing Demographic

The age wave began to break in the mid 1990s as the first of 76 million U.S. baby boomers turned 50. Charles Arn said churches must adopt a new paradigm in reaching older people beyond existing senior ministries that seldom are more than “happy time travel clubs and potlucks.”

He urges church leaders to recognize and tailor ministry to five distinct adult groupings within their congregations: emerging adults 18 to 30; young adults 30 to 50; middle adults 50 to 70; senior adults 70 to 80; and elderly adults 80 and over.

Seniors are a largely untapped resource for churches, says Jim Hughes, director of senior-adult ministries at Skillman Church of Christ in Dallas. “Most older adults have a yearning to do something significant with their lives before they die. They don’t want to be served, they want to serve.”

A New Mission Field

While conventional wisdom says older people are set in their ways, they actually could be more open to change than the young, Charles Arn said. Through life passages such as retirement, the loss of a spouse, and the “empty nest” syndrome, they face more of the major stress points at which people are typically open to personal change.

“How many churches do you know that are targeting older adults for evangelism?” asks Jim Hughes. “Older adults will receive the gospel and be responsive just as easily as any other age group if you are sensitive to who they are and where they are.”

— ANDY BUTCHER

Reflect

1. How is our church affected by the growth of the senior adults population?
2. Church growth specialist Charles Arn divided adults over 50 into three categories: middle (50–70), senior (70–80), and elderly (80+). How well is our church ministering to each of these groups?
3. What are the issues in the lives of people 70 and older that we could minister to?



What You Need to Know About Seniors

Three points for your ministry to keep in mind.

Joshua 14:11

Senior adults are a diverse group. In order to minister effectively to them, you need to understand the following points:

1. They are in a unique time of transition

People are more receptive to the gospel message at certain times in their life, particularly times of intense transition. When a person's traditional points of reference are changed, they tend to be open to other changes too—including a move toward Christian faith.

Events that bring about life transitions provide opportunities during which people seem to move from resistance (or indifference) to receptivity to the gospel. We understand these events as experiences the Holy Spirit uses to open people's eyes to spiritual needs.

One of the best ways to reach older adults is to plan a senior ministry around some of these transition events. One church set up a support group for people who had suffered a stroke. Another church launched a "Crisis Deployment Team" to help persons dealing with the loss of a spouse or loved one. Those involved in this ministry had personal experience and special training in this major transition event. And many have come to faith or become active in the church because of it.

2. They have a strong need and desire for relationships

Senior adults have a particularly strong need for meaningful relationships. Such relationships are known to be therapeutic and contribute to longevity. In contrast, one research physician calls loneliness the number one killer of seniors: "Some other illness goes on the death certificate, but the primary cause was loneliness."

As interactions with others decrease, many seniors find the quality of life decreasing too. Despite this, senior adults are more willing to express emotions than many other groups in the church. We asked church members the question "On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy is it to say 'I love you' and mean it?" and found positive responses clearly increase with age.

3. They are redefining their lives

After retirement, it is no longer appropriate to define ourselves as we do through most of life—by vocation. As a result, seniors often find themselves looking for meaningful activity and a sense of purpose.

Churches with growing senior-adult ministries are ones that take ministry seriously—and extend it to senior adults in particular. A mere cycle of games, trips, entertainment, and handicrafts wears thin. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that Christians retire from discipleship and ministry at age 65.

As Billy Graham said when asked about his plans for retirement, "I wasn't aware that Christians retire from ministry." As your seniors retire from their jobs, help them redefine their lives around ministry.

—WIN AND CHARLES ARN

Reflect

1. Who are some seniors you know who have successfully redefined themselves after they retired? What did that redefinition look like?
2. What are some life transitions that we could develop ministries around?
3. What are some ways that a church can encourage relationships with and among seniors?

DEFINING YOUR MINISTRY



Four Myths to Shatter

Senior adults want, need, and are capable of dynamic ministry.

Ecclesiastes 9:10

Grace Bible Church in Sun City, Arizona is essentially a single-generation church—over 65. In their ministry, they've observed the following myths about ministry to senior adults.

Myth 1: Retired means retiring from ministry

The truth is that retirees are motivated by the same thing as younger generations: the chance to invest themselves in meaningful ministry. Here are a few of the assets senior adults possess:

- **Productivity**—Retired adults have a reservoir of experience and, as a group, they have much more free time.
- **Self-confidence**—Retirees have no need to impress anyone, so they're not afraid to share their failures. They've done away with the pecking order based on what one does for a living. They understand they're all has-beens! That frees a lot of energy!
- **Motivation**—Some retirees made poor decisions in the first few decades of life. Church ministry offers these people—in a sense, a second chance to make their lives count.
- **Patience**—Not all people become more patient with age, but many do. The changes in our lives have come not in weeks but in decades. The ability to think long term allows us to overlook short-term discomforts.

Myth 2: Retirees need to be entertained

Most senior adults have discretionary time, but not “free” time. They're not looking for something to fill their calendars, and they don't need a sack lunch and a bus trip to the zoo to keep them happy. They want a reason for being that's bigger than golf or sightseeing.

In terms of ministries, our congregation supports missionaries with more than checks. The future of missions for us will be through older adults who can join short-term missions. We also run Bible classes on Sundays and Tuesdays to keep retirees growing intellectually.

Myth 3: Retirees want distance from the young

In our congregation, grandparents often have to travel great distances to spend time with their grandchildren, but most make the effort. Why? Because we believe in the biblical model of elders teaching the younger generation, and we want to influence our grandchildren for Christ.

Something important is lost when interaction between the older and younger is cut off. So we encourage grandparents to influence their grandchildren as much as possible.

Myth 4: People don't come to Christ in their old age

The sign above our exits reads, “As you pass through this door, you enter the mission field.” We're determined to win friendships, because in our stage of life, everyone is going to face a crisis sooner or later.

We've developed an evangelistic Bible study that we present to unchurched couples. Our philosophy is threefold: win friends, gain confidence, and earn the right to share your faith.

—ROBERT WARREN, JARED GERIG, AND JOHN COTTONE

Reflect

1. Which of these myths are at work in our congregation's perception of senior adults?
2. What would be the benefits of our church organizing mission trips for senior adults?
3. How do we currently support interaction between senior adults and children, especially grandchildren? What are some other ways we can do this?



Getting Better at Seniors Ministry

Five steps that will help you start or enhance a ministry to senior adults.

Psalm 92:12–15

The possibilities for an outreach-oriented, growth-producing senior adult program in most churches are tremendous. While there are many senior adults in the church today, there are millions outside the church. Senior adult ministry is a logical place for a church to proclaim the gospel and effectively carry out the Great Commission.

Here are five steps we've noticed in churches with effective senior ministries.

1. They begin by identifying those adults 55 years and above, both in the congregation and in the community. They develop a profile of both groups, listing needs, interests, family and marital status, mobility and physical conditions, skills, interests, and hobbies.
2. They organize a three-month trial program for seniors to assess interest, participation, and possibilities. The details of such a program vary from church to church, but help is available from many sources, including denominational offices.
3. They provide opportunities for growth and development in the following areas:
 - Ministry—the challenge and opportunity of giving time, insights, experience, and energy for the benefit of others
 - Spiritual growth—continuing to walk in the Christian life and faith
 - Evangelistic outreach—sharing one's faith with nonchurched friends, relatives, and associates
 - Friendship—building meaningful relationships with others in small groups
 - Education—continuing intellectual growth that raises self-esteem and contributes to mental health
 - Fellowship—providing recreational, social, and physical activities; visiting interesting places and doing interesting things
4. They raise congregational awareness about the opportunity for ministry and the church's specific response to those over 55. Some plan a "Celebration of Seniors Sunday" with special activities and events to challenge not only the seniors but also the rest of the congregation to maintain an attitude and lifestyle that will give them a rich, full life.
5. They consider the addition of a full- or part-time senior adult pastor. While many congregations have a youth director, few have even considered a senior adult director. Yet, in most churches there are twice as many adults over 55 as youth 13 to 20 years old.

This is a critical time for the church in America as more and more people enter the 55-plus population. These people have unique needs and hopes, and the church, equipped as it is with the Good News of Jesus Christ, has a wonderful opportunity to gather and direct its resources to minister to them.

—WIN AND CHARLES ARN

Reflect

1. How does evangelism to senior adults run against the logic of some church programs?
2. What are some ways we can determine the needs and interests of seniors in our church and community?
3. Look at step three. What are some opportunities can we focus on providing to our seniors that we are not currently offering?



Serving and Being Served

Two ideas for bringing seniors into the center of church ministry.

Colossians 1:29

Here are ways for churches that want to reignite ministry to and by seniors, but may not quite know how.

A Mission Trip for 70-Year-Olds

Are service expeditions only for the young? Not according to the senior adult fellowship at First Baptist Church in Gainesville, Florida.

These men and women, each between 70 and 75 years old, were a little tired of the same old activities. So the group wrote to their home mission board in Atlanta. The board responded by putting them in touch with the pastor of Temple Church, Moundsville, West Virginia, a fellowship needing help to finish its new building.

The senior adults took an inventory of what they felt they were good at and contacted the church. They purchased what they needed, loaded it into a U-Haul trailer, and headed north.

Sunday morning found them in church, and on Sunday night they were given charge of the entire service. They led singing and shared testimonies. Later, they enjoyed fellowship with members of the church. From Monday to Thursday, they worked hard, hanging windows, painting, and installing insulation.

As they were preparing to leave Moundsville, one of the participants admitted: “This has been the best week of my life. Coming up here, helping these people, and listening to their testimonies has made this event very special to me.”

A Harvest of Years

Harvest celebrations usually focus on pumpkins, corn, and other edibles. But one year’s annual Harvest Heritage Sunday at Oak Grove Mennonite Church in Smithville, Ohio, focused on a different kind of bounty—a “Harvest of Years,” honoring the 30 members of the church who were 80 years and older.

The worship service began with each person over 80 receiving a corsage. Children marched in with the flowers and presented them to 30 “affirmants” (a friend, neighbor, or relative who could introduce and affirm the older person). The affirmants pinned the corsages on the honored person.

After the church service (which included a sermon on the wisdom and counsel that older people have to offer) came a dinner and program of affirmation. Each affirmant told about the older person’s contribution to the church and his or her current interests.

The Harvest has had a lasting effect. “Since that Sunday,” observed their pastor, “I’ve noticed the older people, who always sat at the same place near the front, are now sitting with their affirmants. That Sunday helped us bridge the generational gap.”

—FROM *FRESH IDEAS FOR DISCIPLESHIP & NURTURE*

Reflect

1. How would our church be different if the older adults were actively engaged in ministry?
2. How can we honor the senior adults in our congregation? How can we specifically involve younger generations in this ministry?
3. Why are mission trips for seniors an especially good idea?



How to Teach Senior Adults

Break through stereotypes to introduce change and create an effective class.

Titus 2:1–2

Teachers of senior adults should see their work not as ministry of “maintenance” for persons in their “declining years” but as outreach to a growing demographic. Here are some facts about older-adult life that can strengthen your educational ministry.

Changing Lives

Older adults are often thought of as being reluctant, or even incapable of change. We must keep in mind that the later years of life subject most adults to many life-altering transitions. A spouse dies; the family home must be sold; one must move to another neighborhood or state; income diminishes; little by little independence disappears; support groups diminish; and societal pressures increase. The amazing fact is that most seniors *do* adjust to these significant alterations.

Decades of Experience

We often characterize senior adults as “set in their ways,” or “not open to change.” Rather than casting them in this stereotypical manner, we must understand that the “old dog” may not resist “new tricks” simply because they are new, but because he or she remains unconvinced that the new way provides something better than the old. Older persons pass new things through the filter of a whole lifetime of experiences, habits, and learning. In this way reluctance is not nearly the same as intolerance to change.

Growing Anxiety

The elderly also come into the learning situation with various anxieties or a lack of self-confidence. These feelings can come from a number of sources—a lack of formal education, failing eyesight, or hearing. Understanding these matters should encourage the teacher to create a relaxed, trusting, and informal climate.

Needing More Than a Lecture

We do a disservice to senior adults by permitting them to sit and merely listen to someone talk. We need to branch out our methods to include discussion, media presentations, storytelling, demonstrations, hands-on experiences, small group work, and role-play.

We ought also to bear in mind that learning and growth toward spiritual wholeness does not take place exclusively in classrooms. Field trips, luncheons, seminars, ministry activities (in the church building and in the community), and social occasions all provide opportunities to be involved in life and grow in discipleship.

Ready for Change (Done Right)

Most teachers approaching the task of teaching seniors will ask, “What methods or activities should I use to introduce change?” Here are a few suggestions:

1. Introduce new methods slowly. Let the personality of your group guide you.
2. Choose methods appropriate for the group, the lesson, and the location.
3. Choose methods that tap the experience and gifts of the group.
4. Choose methods that help fulfill goals. Never use an activity to fill time.

—ROBERT E. FILLINGER; Originally appeared in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Adult Education*, Kenneth Gangel and James Wilhoit, eds. © 1998 Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

Reflect

1. How can understanding the changes and anxieties older adults face help our teaching?
2. What are some ways to be innovative in ministry to seniors without bringing about too much change?
3. Why is it important to tap into the needs and experiences of a particular age group?



Overcoming the Age-Old Divide

These churches implemented ideas to integrate old and young in their congregations.

Psalm 145:4

Helping young and old serve together is one of the church's unique opportunities.

Redefine Family—Evergreen Baptist Church in Los Angeles, California

This church is deliberate about connecting across generations. They frequently, intentionally create some discomfort to foster connections. For example, the Sunday school program is a modular system designed to involve the entirety of the church. Every adult small group and ministry has responsibility for teaching the children; they rotate a turn each month.

A great deal of what creates a church ethos is the language we use, particularly from the pulpit. So Evergreen tries to inject concepts such as the joy of having friends of a variety of ages. For example, while preaching, the speaker will make a side comment about how the senior group invited the college group to breakfast. When a church is intentional about crossing generational interactions, it expands the concept of family beyond the nuclear family.

Let the Old Serve with the Young—The Worship Center in Lancaster, Pennsylvania

While watching the worship team one Christmas Eve, the pastor observed that every singer on stage was a grandmother. Most of the church leadership were people 45–55 years old. And the next generation did not have a big place at the table.

To connect with the next generation—and prepare to reach more people—this church took steps to bring younger people to the leadership table in all settings: on the board, the planning teams, and on the worship team. As generational values clashed, they were forced to have tough conversations about certain aspects of church culture. But the benefit runs both ways: the church benefits, and the younger generation benefits from the wisdom of the older. This is particularly visible in youth ministry, where a number of senior adult volunteers help in this high energy, loud, youth-oriented facility and program.

Parent the Unparented—Pentecostal Tabernacle in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Only 0.5 out of 10 African-American children will be raised in a home with both parents, compared with 4 out of 10 Caucasian children. Many in this predominately African-American church have never been properly parented. But since the Pentecostal Temple integrated the generations, these kids don't just have one mother, they have eight or ten.

The effort started by allowing younger generations to be involved in ministry. There is a dance group that performs a range of styles. Young people serve on the praise team, leading children's church, and on the ushering team. The church tries to plan services that will appeal to all generations, and combine hymns with more edgy songs that young people enjoy. The older generation enjoys seeing the young people energized about worship.

Nursery Discipleship—Boca Raton Community Church in Boca Raton, Florida

Children's ministry is the best place to start generational interaction. It is a system already in place that involves a variety of ages. But it's more than childcare. Those who benefit most are the adults who volunteer. It has a tremendous impact on their spiritual formation. It makes them better parents, grandparents, and helps them grow in their faith.

—SHARON KOH, DON NEFF, BRIAN GREENE, AND DARRELL FRALEY

Reflect

1. How successful is our church at encouraging young and old to serve alongside each other? How can we do this even better?
2. How can seniors be especially effective in ministry to young children and teens?
3. How can both older and younger Christians gain by serving together across generational gaps?



Ideas You Can Use Now

Eight ways you can help older adults without a change in the church budget.

Leviticus 19:32

These are low-cost, easy, and practical ways for you to minister to your church's senior adults.

1. *Add a care manager to your staff (at no cost).* There is an increasing need/desire for older adults to be able to remain within their own home. Identifying needs and resources to fill those needs are the tasks of a care manager, a person skilled in needs assessment and knowledgeable about community resources. Contact a local care manager (www.caremanager.org) and ask if they would be willing to be placed on the masthead of your Sunday bulletin. The care manager receives free advertising and referral, and the congregation receives a qualified person who can meet their needs.
2. *Pull bars in restrooms.* A simple thing like having pull bars in the restroom stalls can signal openness to older adults even if they never have the need to use them.
3. *Use 14-point font for bulletins.* People won't tell you directly, but many have difficulty reading bulletins because they are either too cluttered or use typeface that is too small. The time used to reformat Sunday bulletins would be well spent. It is another sign of welcome. If the congregation doesn't want to change their bulletin, consider printing a second issue that uses larger paper and font.
4. *Order devotional material in large-print format.* Devotional booklets are conveniently small and concise. But they are also hard to read as one gets older. Just about every devotional booklet service has large print alternatives.
5. *Use Autumn Wisdom by James Miller (Augsburg Fortress, 1995) for small group study.* This book provides a spiritual perspective on later life. The short chapters can be used for devotions in Sunday school or at other meetings and Bible studies where older adults are present.
6. *Remove some pews.* Many congregations have more seating in their worship centers than they have worshippers. The arrangement of this seating, often pews bolted to the floor, is spaced in such a way that persons in walkers or with canes have a difficult time sitting down. Removing some pews and providing extra space between them can create greater comfort and accessibility.
7. *Adjust the equalizer on your sound system.* It is a fact that as people get older they experience a loss in their high-pitch range of hearing. Since most speaker systems are set for persons without any hearing impairment, consider gathering some older adults to help you as you set the sound levels. A simple variation can make a vast difference in the ability of a person to understand what is being said.
8. *Hold special services in the morning and the evening.* Many older persons do not like to be out at night. Many congregations have found success in providing a time for worship in the daytime to accompany any service that might be held at night (such as Advent or Lenten services).

—DONALD KOEPKE; Originally appeared at www.spiritualityandaging.org.

Reflect

1. How can we make our facilities more accessible to people with physical limitations or disabilities?
2. Make a list of several books that could be particularly helpful for the senior adults in our church to study?
3. What are the benefits of trying to accommodate older adults even if they don't make use of all of our improvements?

MINISTRY TO SENIOR ADULTS



Further Exploration

Books and resources to equip your ministry to senior adults.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- “[Mentoring](#)” Assessment Pack
- “[Adult Education](#)” Practical Ministry Skills
- “[Ministry to Men](#)” Practical Ministry Skills
- “[Ministry to Women](#)” Practical Ministry Skills
- “[Mentoring](#)” Training Theme & PowerPoint

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

GoCasa.org. The website of the Christian Association of Senior Adult Ministries offers training and articles, as well as ways to become involved in their leadership training conferences.

SpiritualityandAging.org. A website that promotes education, spirituality, and care among the senior adult population.

Autumn Wisdom by *Richard Lyon Morgan*. A book of devotional readings and reflections on older adult life. (Upper Room Books, 1995; ISBN 0835807452)

Catch the Age Wave by *Win and Charles Arn*. A book that explains the new generation of older adults in America and how churches can and should respond. (Beacon Hill Press, 1999; ISBN 0834118009)

The Graying of the Flock by *James L. Knapp*. Provides a biblical and practical framework for ministering to senior adults. (Leafwood Publishing, 2003; ISBN 0971428980)

Ministering to Older Adults: The Building Blocks by *Donald Koepke*. Helps lay the groundwork for assessing the needs of seniors and then building a ministry for them. Draws off the specific needs and abilities of local congregations. (Haworth Pastoral Press, 2006; ISBN 0789030497)

One Church, Four Generations by *Gary McIntosh*. This book explains the different forces that have shaped the four generations that are present in churches today and seeks to provide ways to reach them. (Baker, 2002; ISBN 0801091373)

Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century by *David P. Gallagher*. A practical guide to beginning and growing a ministry that will actively involve and nurture seniors (Group, 2002; ISBN 0764424521)