

NORTH PUGET SOUND LIFETIME SEMINAR
Northwest Baptist Church, Bellingham, Washington

**“Unleashing The Power Of Age
In Your Congregation”**

A Ministry Report

Purpose of the Seminar:

The purpose of the seminar was to convene pastors, church leaders, older adult ministry leaders, and persons interested in older adult ministries representing many churches to:

- Define the challenges and opportunities facing the church as a result of radical demographic changes in the next several decades,
- Discuss the issues,
- Determine resolutions and
- Derive strategies for effective ministry.

Summary:

The “Unleashing The Power of Age In Your Congregation” seminar was held at Northwest Baptist Church on Saturday, April 5, 2003, from 9 am to 4 pm.

Thirty-one persons attended, representing twelve churches from Bellingham, Mt. Vernon, Lynden and Camano Island. Most participants were leaders in Older Adult Ministries, while others were pastors, parish nurses, and pastoral staff. The seminar was convened by ChurchHealth and hosted by the Northwest Baptist Church.

A worship team led all participants in an opening worship session.

The keynote lecture, delivered by Dr. Richard Bergstrom, was entitled “Unleashing the Power of Age in Your Congregation.” The lecture discussed the radically changing demographics in our country and in

the world as the numbers of people living longer increases dramatically. These changes call for a defined response on the part of church leadership. We must conclude whether the vast amounts of older adults in our society and church will be viewed as an “obstacle or an opportunity.” As churches look at the coming age wave, it would behoove them to recognize the needs of older adults and acknowledge the contributions they can continue to make. Dr. Bergstrom challenged participants to discover four biblical principles in order to unleash the power of age in congregations. Taken from Mark 2, the story of the paralytic who was carried to Jesus by his friends, Dr. Bergstrom suggested the following characteristics required by a church to be effective in ministering to and with older adults:

- Compassionate fellowship
- Creative freedom
- Corporate faith
- Leading to complete forgiveness!

A second lecture, delivered by Richard and Leona Bergstrom, was entitled “The Times, They Are A-Changin’: How the Age Boom Will Transform the Church.” This lecture discussed some of the social implications of the “longevity revolution.”

The question was also asked, “How will the new re-defined attitudes toward retirement impact and transform the church?” The Bergstroms outlined 8 things that can be expected in the next few decades:

1. Increased longevity will drastically impact the composition of the church.
2. Today’s concept of “retirement” will be re-defined.
3. Expectations in retirement and old age will change.
4. Lives will be characterized as “cyclical” rather than “linear.”
5. The age boom will redefine “old age”
6. Ministry infrastructures that are sensitive to changing demographics will change.
7. There will be greater degree of diversity in values, lifestyle and population mix.
8. New retirees and baby boomers won’t fit into traditional categories.

What is the essential message to the church?

1. If we expect to reach the emerging generation of retirees and attract their interest in the church and kingdom ministries, then we must recognize the uniqueness of this new generation of retirees.
2. We have the opportunity to provide them with significant and meaningful involvements around purposeful relationships to replace those lost from career and family.
3. The involvements offered must be tailored to the goals and desires of this population group.
4. We need to be sensitive to the kind of language that we use in seeking to reach out to them and involve them:
 - a. Many of the traditional labels, with which a current generation of 70-100 year olds may in fact be comfortable, are not acceptable to the newly emerging generation of retirees;
 - b. By using words that build upon their potential or their contribution, we may open doors that would otherwise be closed.
5. We need to create a completely new infrastructure that will capture the imaginations of new retirees, motivate them to live lives of purpose and direction, and release them to meaningful and significant service.
6. We need to thoroughly understand and teach that God has a purpose for long life.

Small Workgroups:

Participants were divided into small workgroups to brainstorm and discuss the needs and issues facing three groups of aging adults: Midlife (ages 50-65), Retired life (ages 65-80) and Senior Life (ages 80+). The following are the lists of needs that were generated:

Mid-Life (Ages 50-65)

Physical Needs:

Exercise – (gym – Sports- Routines)
Beginning Health Issues
Friends begin having problems
Turn the clock back – regain youth
Financial Security
Legal Issues
Independence
Chronic diseases
Start to travel
Caregiving
Housing issues
Safety
Computer skills

Social/Emotional Needs:

Loneliness
No time
Busyness
Acceptance of aging
Finding significant purpose
Need for meaningful relationships
Desire to connect with children – grandchildren
Healing for broken relations
Healing of grief
Loss of spouse
Loss of parents
Slowing Process
Sleep less (patterns change)
Women: menopause
Diet restrictions begin
Less energy and stamina
Fear of financial uncertainty
Lack of future security
Pressures of two generations (sandwich)
Anxiety of our very fast changing world
Anxiety about paying for health insurance before medicare
Children back in the home
Early retirements
Smaller social circle
Empty nest
Travel
Identity crisis
Education/info (life change needs/concerns)

Wills – loose ends
Retirement decisions
Housing
Loss of spouse – divorce
Sense of humor
Hobby
Independence (keeping/losing)
Depression
Computer skill
Literacy materials available
Grief

Spiritual Needs:

How to be a better witness
Defining spirituality
Desire to participate in ministry
Spiritual challenge to be evangelized
Passing on values
Need for disciplines
Need for quiet time
Post-Modern
Seekers
Open to all religions
Not loyal to a denomination
Doubters/atheists
Sense of panic (only so many years left)
Feelings of mortality
International student ministry
Purpose
Travel (missions – short term)
Spiritual grandparent
Education- growth
Recognize that the youth are our future

Retired Life (65-80)

Physical Needs:

Accessibility
Large enough print
Speaking speed
Hearing – too low
 too high
Transportation
Exercise

Housing changes
Meds/help
Dental work
Live with limitations
Computer skills
Financial security
Sight and hearing assistance
End of life directives
Mobility
Body wearing out (hip, etc., replacement)
Memory loss
Keeping up with younger family members
Increased travel

Social/Emotional Needs:

Finding friends
Significant purpose
Affirmation
Loss of spouse
Unable to fulfill expectations
Family cares – children
 Grandchildren
 Parents
Need people – fellowship
Keeping up with the times
 Computer – technical – education
Entertainment – joy
Increasing isolation
Support adult children
Acceptance
Gracious receiver
Nurturing others
Encouragement
Supportive of others
Listening to others and to them
Recognition of talents
 accomplishments
 and history
Pass on family values, traditions, uniqueness

Perceptions of others
Self-perceptions
Sense of humor
Letting go
Hobby

Computer skills
Availability of literacy materials
Downsizing/relocation
Freedom to travel
Fear of financing medical costs
Loss of spouse
Singleness/some loss of identity
Anger and frustration over inability to do stuff
Anxiety over income lasting their lifetime
Great-grandparenting
Need to be a grandparent (and no family nearby)

Spiritual Needs:

How to share spiritual journey
Opportunities for sharing – fellowship
Need to contribute according to spiritual giftedness
Be valued by church
Teaching that helps them face life and death issues
Spiritual maturity
Active
Facing death
Wisdom
Prayer
Staff partnering
Pass on values, traditions
Self-perception
 In relation to God
One-to-one ministry
Passing on values
Funeral planning
Need for quiet time
Worship wars
May well need to “make peace with God”
May feel “it’s too late” (hopeless)
May go back to their roots (genealogy)
Cross –cultural experiences (mission trips)
Meaningful existence

Senior Life (80+)

Physical Needs:

Loss of mobility
Relying on others for transportation
Multiple doctor appointments

- Forced to leave their long-time home
- Dietary concerns
- Lack of nutritious meals
- Active as able
- Range of motion exercise
- Safety
- Ramps/Accessibility
- Hearing loss
- Eyesight loss
- Meds/help
- Computer skills
- Financial security
- Home and yard help
- Shopping help
- Encouragement to use necessary therapies
- Need to be touched

Social/Emotional Needs:

- Disconnect from children and grandchildren (distance of family)
- Anxiety over assisted living – cost as well as emotional readiness
- Companionship/fellowship
- Lack of community (alone)
- Sense of humor
- Letting go
- Put it in writing
- Hobby
- Acceptance of limitations
- Independence (keeping/losing)
- Legal needs
- Depression
- Computer skills
- Grief
- Downsizing/assisted living
- To be valued
- Opportunity to tell their stories and to be heard
- Socialize
- Visit
- Need to grow old gracefully

Spiritual Needs:

- Need for spiritual friends
- Enjoy prayer groups
- Loss of corporate worship (shut-ins)
- Spiritual life (it's getting "late")

Fun/laughter
Prayer warrior
Large print
Audio tapes
Church hearing aids
Doubt/assurance
One-to-one ministry
Guilt release
Evangelized
Bible study
Opportunities for ministry
Reconciliation
Need to be forgiving
Sense of the spiritual future

Top Priorities Identified:

Through a process of combining similar suggestions and multi-voting (each participant was allowed to vote for their three “top” needs per category), the following needs were identified as priorities:

Midlife (50-65)

Physical

1. Exercise
2. Beginning health issues
3. Less energy and stamina

Social/Emotional

1. Retirement decisions
2. Acceptance of aging
3. Fear of financial security

Spiritual

1. Passing on values
2. Desire to participate in ministry
3. Feelings of mortality

Retired Life (65-80)

Physical

1. Financial security
2. Memory loss
3. Housing changes

Social/Emotional

1. Family cares – children
 - grandchildren
 - parents
2. Downsizing - relocation
3. Anxiety over income lasting lifetime

Spiritual

1. Be valued by the church
2. How to share spiritual journey
3. Worship wars

Senior Life (80+)

Physical:

1. Loss of mobility
2. Meds/help
3. Financial security

Social/Emotional

1. Downsizing – assisted living
2. To be valued
3. Losing independence

Spiritual

1. Loss of corporate worship
(shut in)
2. Reconciliation
3. Need for spiritual friends

Designing Our Future

The final lecture/discussion was focused on how to develop powerful and effective ministries for middle and older adults. It was concluded that ministries must reflect the following:

- Middle and older adults represent a rich source of wisdom, service and giving. Ideas were shared on how an older adult ministry group can equip members to pass on a heritage of faith, be involved in service, and be encouraged to give.
- Middle and older adults need the opportunity to hear the gospel and respond to its life-changing message of forgiveness and renewal. Ideas were shared regarding evangelistic outreach targeting middle and older adults.
- Middle and older adults need communities of faith surrounding them as they face unprecedented transitions, changes and loss. Ideas were shared regarding activities, caring ministries, lifelong learning opportunities, and purposeful planning.

Many exciting and helpful ideas were shared by both the presenters and participant.

Helpful resources for ideas to develop powerful and effective ministries can be found! One suggestion is obtaining the Bergstroms' book, **Amazing Grays: Unleashing the Power of Age in Your Congregation**, available online at www.chonline.org or by calling 360-676-4824.

Let's Get Going

Participants were encouraged to begin to think strategically about purposeful and effective older adult ministries. In a session entitled "Let's Get Going" participants were challenged to discuss the following:

Define your purpose. Why does your ministry exist?

1. What is your church's purpose (mission statement)?
2. What is the purpose or mission of your senior adult ministry?

Determine your potential. Where do you want to be in 2-5 years?

1. What vision do you have for your Senior Adult ministry?
2. What are the major objectives for your ministry?

Develop your plan.

1. What goals do you have for your Senior Adult ministry?
2. What programs and ministries can you undertake to accomplish your vision?

Conclusion:

The seminar concluded with the reading of a set of "resolutions" defining our commitment to developing powerful and effective ministries by and with older adults in our congregations and in our communities.

Reflection and Evaluation:

Evaluations reflected a high degree of satisfaction with the presenters, facilities, and workgroups. Participants overwhelmingly appreciated the day and reported being challenged to think differently about aging and the potential of older people in congregations and community.

The following are some of the comments made when asked: ***“What did you like best about the seminar?”***

- The current resources that Richard and Leona brought to us: books, statistics, ideas.
- There was a great mix of lecture (experts) and processing/creative thinking (attendees). Great thoughts on needs.
- Practical, helpful insights about seeing three groups of older adults and the range of their needs, potential, and uniqueness. Some good suggestive “how to’s.”
- New awareness of needs of older adults and how large the age group is growing.
- Interactive. Informative.
- Effective partnering as facilitators.

The following are answers to the questions: ***“What is one thing that you will add or change in your ministry with older adults as a result of attending this seminar?”***

- To communicate with the church’s pastors and overseers about their priorities and mesh with them.
- To define this as a specific part of our ministry probably needing to identify a willing and able leader to co-ordinate it.
- To explore ways to include testimonies, life-wisdom stories of older adults into inter-generational settings—perhaps even in worship or as complements to the sermon.
- Try to get more seniors serving.
- Plan to begin some new approaches.
- Listen more to them.
- Ideas for Parish nurse program.
- Create a ministry for those 80+ that meets their specific needs.

- I haven't really been a part of an organized ministry, but this seminar has provided me with a foundation and ideas of where to begin.
- Work with the pastor to start a ministry.
- Give more attention to outreach.

Thank you.

We hope that the insights shared during this day will inspire the churches involved to continue to develop powerful and effective ministries to and by older adults in the future. If we can be of further assistance in helping you fulfill that mission, we would be honored to do so. May God richly bless you as you follow His leading.

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