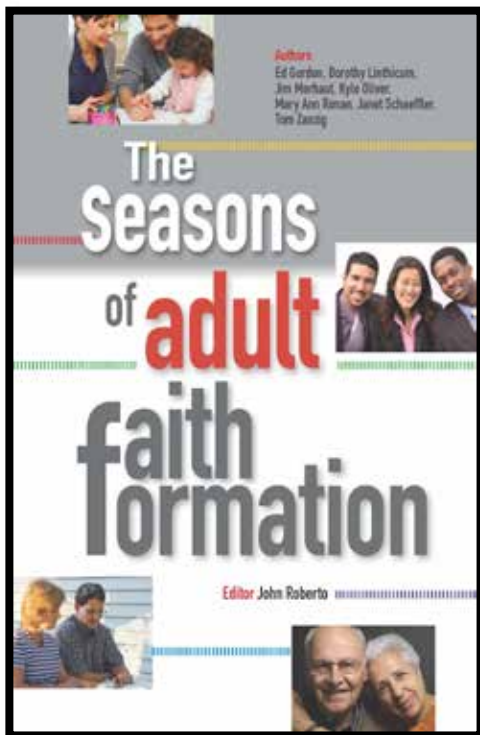# Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Practices & Approaches for The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation

Special Issue: Fall 2015

John Roberto, Editor

This **Special Issue** of the *Lifelong Faith* Journal extends the content in *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation* book by providing four practice-centered articles for each season of adulthood. Each of the authors wrote a chapter in the book exploring a contemporary understanding of young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults. In these new articles they explore effective practices for each stage of adulthood.

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Faith Formation with Young Adults

Kyle Oliver

When I began my work as a dedicated faith formation resource person with a specialization in digital media, I assumed campus and young adult ministers would make up a sizeable portion of the folks I served. I had been part of a small protestant campus ministry for six years while in undergrad and graduate school. I had pursued theoretical and practical projects about campus ministries while in seminary. And young adults seemed, after all, to be the people most reachable via digital media outreach and most amenable to digitally mediated ministry models.

But I quickly noticed a divide between the expressed needs of young adult ministers and of the other age-based or lifelong faith formation professionals and volunteers who seek out our center's guidance. The vast majority of requests we receive from this latter group look like this: "I'm looking for a resource for teaching. . ." or "Can you help me think through a new program that will. . . ?" or

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Kyle Matthew Oliver is the digital missioner and learning lab coordinator in the Center for the Ministry of Teaching at Virginia Theological Seminary. He was ordained to the Episcopal priesthood in 2012. He blogs at Digital Mission and Contraria Sunt Complementa and tweets at @VTS_CMT and @kmoliver.

simply "Tell me what curriculum to buy!" Young adult ministers were asking very different sorts of questions, questions well beyond the scope of our center's core expertise:

- How can we find new ways of funding our outreach to young adults?
- What is the relationship of campus ministry to young adult ministry? Of both these things to parish- and judicatory-based ministry?
- What kind of church are we becoming?

I don't mean to portray young adult ministers as especially strategic or visionary. I believe roughly the same proportion are naturally inclined to ask such big-picture questions as are other kinds of ministers. The difference is that young adult and campus ministers are always working at the margins of the church, especially in the "oldline" churches (my boss's playful term for Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics considered together). When you live at the margins, you *need* to ask questions about how you relate to the center. When you live at the margins, the dominant conversations at the center feel like a luxury. Or like deck-chair rearranging.

I want to begin this article by framing some issues in young adult ministry according to this schema. It is a blessing and a curse to live on the margins, but challenges will become opportunities in proportion to our ability to recognize and respond to the realities we face. After briefly discussing these issues, I will offer several emerging types of ministries that respond to them, including some concrete profiles.

Challenges and Opportunities in Young Adult Ministry

Demographic Margins: The Critical Mass Issue

To say that young adults are at the demographic margins is, in one sense, absurd. Millennials are the largest generational cohort in American history (or the second largest cohort depending on how you determine the years of the Baby Boom Generation). So much of our cultural attention is given over to studying them, reaching them, influencing them. We basically worship young adulthood. In fashion, in music, in television and movies, and in advertising, young adults are everywhere.

The exception, of course, is in church. And this is the sense of the demographic margins that I'm getting at. Pew Research reports the following percentages of each generational cohort who say they attend religious services "nearly every week" or more as of the late '00s:

- Greatests: 56%
- Silents: 44%
- Boomers: 32%
- Xers: 27%
- Millennials: 18%
  (Pond, Smith & Clement)

We have seen speculation that the uptick in religiosity over time may be both a generational *and* a developmental effect. Religion may well become more important to the Millennials as they age. Indeed, the attendance rate for Gen Xers has gone up six percentage points (that is, increased by almost a third) in the past decade. I don't think it's a coincidence that this uptick corresponds to their main parenting years.

But slight upward trends over the lifespan do not change the experience of church for the

young adults who *are* currently attending. Especially in churches with a focus on age-based faith formation and socialization, the young adult experience can be one of isolation and alienation. It is often difficult to form a "critical mass" for young adult fellowship or programs, especially given the divergent needs of young parents at the older end of the spectrum and of college-age emergent adults at the other.

Cultural Margins: The Millennials' Place in the Boomers' Church

The critical mass issue is often compounded by a sort of double disengagement. We have seen that Millennials as a cohort are detached from institutions. But it is often the case that even those wishing to be involved are significantly, if mostly unintentionally, disenfranchised. My job regularly brings me to young adult leadership conferences, and one question that always comes up is, basically, "How do we get the rest of the church to care about young adults?" Or maybe it's better to say, "How do we get the rest of the church to care about *what young adults care about*?" At a recent gathering, a colleague in campus ministry tweeted the following:

> To choose to minister w/ young adults is to choose the tension between institution and creative forms of ministry.
> (@JonathanMelton paraphrasing evangelism expert @tombrackett)

There is a theory—probably more true than false—that churches led primarily by Baby Boomers are not responding well to the expressed needs and values of the younger generations, especially Millennials.

At the same time, it's sometimes unclear precisely what young adults are looking for. I recently attended a churchwide meeting in my denomination on the subject of national leadership restructuring. Two young adult participants asked nearly the same question about young adult participation in the planning process, the second seemingly because he did not like the answer received by the first. In fact, the committee was well-represented by young people, and the feedback process was open to all and had quite a high profile on social media. Some of us were not sure there was much more the committee could do.

One got the impression of two groups talking past each other, one asking "Why aren't you listening to us?" and the other asking "How else can we reach out to you?" In fact, the most helpful comment on the subject came in response to a different but related question about reaching young adults. A member of the committee noted "It's not generally the governance or the structure or the administration … There's something that needs to change culturally."

I believe this is correct, that the disconnect between young adults and the rest of the church is more cultural than structural. Although such efforts are helpful, strategies like simply ordaining more young adult clergy or placing more young adult leaders on church governance bodies will not by themselves make churches more attractive or responsive to young people. What we need is a broad and inclusive conversation about the values each generation brings to what it means to be Christ's church in the world. Young adult ministries will flourish, and churches more generally find young adult membership, if the values Millennials bring with them to church find a place to take root as part of a wider vision.

Developmental Margins: Ministry with the Transient and Self-Focused

Jeffrey Arnett believes that in the twentieth century we saw in the West a new stage of human development. It formed as young people delayed marriage and responded to new economic realities. It is a time of wandering. In this new stage, the thoroughly transitional years between high school and stable family life are marked by:

1. identity exploration
2. instability ("in love, work, and place of residence")
3. self-focus
4. feeling in-between
5. possibilities/optimism

This in-betweenness is a huge part of why congregations are so flummoxed about young adults. Churches have some stable schemas for serving children, youth, parents, empty nesters, and elders. While of course these other groups are always changing too, it's fair to say that emerging adults are a special kind of moving target, no longer youth but not quite adults as the church understands them.

Surely this liminality is at least part of the cause for the cultural disconnect described above. How can churches meet twenty-somethings where they are developmentally, supporting them in their transitions without condescension? How can "emerged" adults (young parents and even the recently married) stay connected with their less stable young adult almost-peers? How can the self-focused still contribute in a mutual way in intergenerational relationships? These are the sorts of questions begged by Arnett's foundational research. Those who are finding creative answers suggest some helpful ways forward in young adult ministry.

Emerging Ministry Models

Now that we have surveyed the landscape somewhat, I want to talk about some specific approaches that seem to be working. Before I begin, let me own up to the fact that the work of this chapter—call it curating ministry development anecdotes—depends on having a large, diverse network of connections and supplementing with research. I work at Virginia Theology Seminary outside Washington, DC, so a majority of my organic network is Episcopal and "East Coastal." While I have done my best to overcome this limitation, and while I think there is more that unites than divides the churches with respect to young adult ministry, the bias of my perspective will be lost on no one. Please bear it in mind and adapt things as necessary.

Finding Critical Mass: A Move toward the Regional and the Post-Denominational

An increasingly common way to address the critical mass problem is for a number of faith groups to band together to find a workable quorum for young adult fellowship and other gathered ministry. Just as judicatories and larger regions have long employed youth coordinators to resource congregations and to organize larger gatherings, so now many are hiring young adult ministers with a similar mission.

There's a related trend happening in college ministry. Once, campus "chaplaincies" functioned like university student organizations for particular denominations. Increasingly today we see 1) multiple denominations sponsoring unified ecumenical ministries (probably the oldest of these trends); 2) campus missioners tasked with bringing students from multiple colleges together for regional student fellowship, and 3) dissolving distinctions between young adult ministry and campus

ministry, especially as congregations step in to fill the gap when standalone campus ministries lose their funding or where a standalone ministry never existed.

Examples of this first trend are probably only as far away as your nearest major college campus. A significant effort emblematic of the second and third trends is a network coordinated in part by the Episcopal campus chaplain at New York University. Her article about the group's evolution included a number of best practices that I have seen put to good use in many other contexts. These include "start[ing] with relationships"—a lesson churches everywhere are (re)learning with help from community organizers after years in the program-based wilderness—and letting go of competitive worries. She notes that "a multi-parish peer group is not a threat to the church home where an individual worships" (Young).

I have been part of a similar network in the mid-Atlantic. Commonplace is a yearly young adult gathering for prayer, fellowship, and leadership development. It started in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington and has grown to become a regional event with participants from up to five hours south, west, and north. Our denomination is looking to sponsor similar events in other regions. I will discuss some of the lessons of this particular gathering in a later section.

But speaking of denominations, let me say a little more about the trend toward post-denominational ministry as related to the problem of critical mass. I do not mean that ministries with strong denominational ties necessarily need to downplay this aspect of their heritage in order to grow. We are taking the wrong lessons from what we've learned about young adults if we turn toward the generic. Indeed, I argue below that authenticity is a key virtue of young adult ministry.

For example, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, founder of House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, makes no bones about her

strongly Lutheran theology. Frankly, it surprises me how many young adults are so excited about liberal Christianity grounded in a "low anthropology" (i.e., a theologically pessimistic view of human nature). But Bolz-Weber preaches from her historically Lutheran perspective with passion, hope, and gratitude, and it should be no surprise that that authenticity is connecting with people. So let me be clear when I say Lutherans should try to be the best Lutherans they can be. Ditto Methodists, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, etc. As former National Council of Churches general secretary Michael Kinnamon is fond of putting it, our areas of denominational distinctiveness are "gifts we hold in trust for one another."

What *no* denomination can afford to continue is our habit of trading on denominational loyalty alone. In the Episcopal Church, we have watched campus ministries flounder when they take the approach of "We'll be a home for all the Episcopalians on campus." The truth is that many of the Episcopalians aren't looking for such a home, and many more don't particularly care if the Episcopal Shield happens to be on the sign out front. Lovett Weems of Wesley Theological Seminary summarizes the current research on the impacts of denominational identity like this:

> [V]irtually everyone agrees that if the primary attribute that the church leads with is "we are a [name of denomination] church," people will not tend to find that church compelling. The spirit and direction of the church must be much *more focused on basic Christian beliefs* and meeting the needs of people to appeal to new members. On the other hand, growing churches are finding that the many people who come to them from other denominations or as new Christians (key characteristics of growing churches) are *more than willing to learn* the denominational heritage and theology

represented by the church. (Weems, emphasis added)

So a post-denominational approach doesn't silence the tradition. It just acknowledges that the broader Christian tradition is much more important than the way denominations slice and dice that tradition. Our denominational identities are a factor in how we reach and serve young adults, but mostly because they help us form distinctive, authentic Christian communities that don't assume a membership model of the past ("everyone who grew up Methodist will join our group"), nor require a degree in the history of the Reformation in order to keep up with community worship and prayer practices.

This is good news for faith formation leaders. We've long known that the message of the gospel, the power of personal relationships, and the freedom to explore the rich diversity of the Christian way are all much more important factors than denominational brand identity in the forming of a mature and lively faith. That this reality seems to be sinking in with denominational powers-that-be is an exciting development indeed.

Changing Church Culture: An Emphasis on Service in Community

No accounting of young adult faith formation and spiritual development would be complete without mentioning faith-based service-year programs. Following the popularity of secular programs like the Peace Corps, Teach for America, and AmeriCorps, almost every Christian denomination has created some program for service domestic or abroad. (Actually, many of these faith-based programs predate their secular counterparts. According to George Anderson, the Jesuit Volunteers were up and running in everything but name by the time

even the Peace Corps came along in 1961.) These programs are a terrific response to many of the developmental realities of emerging adulthood.

- They provide food, housing, and employment at a time when economic realities leave many without work.
- They bring young adults to areas of great need at the time in their lives when they are most optimistic about making a difference.
- They often incorporate intensive vocational discernment in the broadest sense during a time of big choices about the future (read: "How is God calling me to be a disciple in whatever I do with my life" and not just "Is God calling me to ordained ministry?").
- They provide connections to faith communities at a time when young adults are least likely to seek out such connections.

But I want to discuss these programs under the rubric of changing Christian culture because I believe they are providing a positive model for how being the church is about more than worshipping together on Sunday mornings.

I have had the pleasure of spending significant time as a sort of embedded observer in several service corps communities, both Episcopal and not. At their best, they serve as catalysts for (rather than simply islands of) outreach in their host communities. Participants become living signs of what it means to be a Christian in the world. Sometimes this presence is a much-needed reminder. The director of one such program speaks of these ministries as fundamentally diaconal: interns bring the needs of the world to the caring attention of the church. In so doing, they are changing church culture. Many of us admire the Jesuit Volunteer Corps' goal that participants be "ruined for life" (Anderson): ruined for materialism and

extravagant American lifestyles, ruined for living lives disconnected from other people, from the Spirit of God, and from God's call to do justice and love mercy. The love of Christ working such ruin among our young leaders is serving, if not as the wider church's salvation, at least as a prophetic call to return to the core of Christian discipleship.

I believe it is working. This ethos is taking hold in other intergenerational and young-adult-oriented places. **Thad's** is an experimental Christian community in Santa Monica committed to sharing Christ's love "in positive, transformative and practical ways." I can think of few better ways to demonstrate that commitment than to hold an ordination at a laundromat. The Rev. Scott Claassen was ordained a deacon at "Laundry Love," a Thad's ministry that brings church members together with homeless people (to the extent that that's a helpful distinction) for a night of fellowship and free quarters, detergent, and dryer sheets (Blumberg). I remember the hubbub that arose in church social media circles shortly after this ordination happened. Sure, there was some anxious conversation about the appropriateness of the venue. But most of the conversation got it right: this was a powerful way for the church to align its proclamation with its actions.

Claassen's ordination aside, Laundry Love also illustrates that the trends and approaches we're discussing are not unrelated. Many secular and faith-based organizations are finding that an emphasis on service helps them overcome the critical mass issues springing from Millennials' distrust of institutions and their waning religiosity. The *2013 Millennial Impact Report* found that 73% had volunteered in 2012 through some nonprofit organization (22). That's a heck of a lot higher than the 18% who regularly attended religious services. Are those two numbers apples and oranges? Of course. But the point is that service connects with young adults in a way that doesn't always happen with worship or church activities. (For a

longer discussion of this phenomenon see Chapter 11 in *Fresh Expressions and The Kingdom Of God,* written by my friend and colleague Mike Angell.) Laundry Love springs from Thad's mantra that "people are the new program." And it is a perfect example of how prioritizing not just people but service can help church communities meet Millennials where they are— *and* meet more of them. It may not be easy for most Millennials to invite a friend to church. But inviting them to serve? That is a way to plant the seed of faith.

Changing Church Culture: The Lens of Authenticity

In 2013, psychologist David Gortner published *Varieties of Personal Theology: Charting the Beliefs and Values of American Young Adults.* Among its findings were that social capital and education levels were far more significant factors than religious background in shaping the theological beliefs of young adults. In fact, "[r]eligion tends to reinforce dominant cultural patterns in personal theologies, but otherwise is minimally influential in producing meaningful variations from dominant cultural patterns" (313). In other words, says Gortner, an upbringing in a faith community doesn't seem to have mattered much for most of today's young adults when it comes to their beliefs about God and the world. Yikes.

On the other hand, this research found that "many young adults engage in [the] work of theological re-evaluation and reinvention—regardless of their affiliation or involvement with actual religious institutions" (328). This is basically what James Fowler told us thirty years ago when he observed young adults synthesizing tacitly beliefs (synthetic-conventional faith) and revising implicit beliefs in light of stepping out of their social system of origin (individuative-reflective faith) (173, 177). Robert Wuthnow gives us still another way of

speaking about the faith work of this time of life transition, one that immediately resonated with me when I first heard about it:

> The single word that best describes young adults' approach to religion and spirituality—indeed life—is *tinkering*. A tinkerer puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand. In a culture like ours, where higher education and professional training are valued, tinkering may have negative connotations. But it should not. Tinkerers are the most resourceful people in any era … They get things done, and usually this happens by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from here, and a contact from somewhere else. (Wuthnow, 13–14, emphasis original)

When Christian Smith and Patricia Snell notice lots of "religious tradition switching" (110) and "syncretistic spiritual practices" (137) among young adults, I believe they're encountering characteristic behaviors of Wuthnow's "Generation of Tinkerers." Moreover, Wuthnow believes their often-individualistic approach to faith is the natural result of the lack of support religious institutions have offered them in their developmental transitions, especially compared to the relative investment in youth support (12). Gortner too calls for a reconsideration of and reinvestment in the role of ministers in helping young adults "forg[e] lives of meaning and purpose" (329).

So a way that we can both change church culture and further respond to young adults' developmental needs is to be a place where they feel safe to be themselves: anxious about their economic prospects, conflicted (or not) about their sex lives, doubtful about historical doctrines of the church, etc. We have to be not just tolerant of tinkering, but pro-tinkering co-tinkerers. As in *every* developmental stage, the people we serve need to be encouraged to own their faith, to make it real and concrete in their individual lives. In this respect, I am particularly fond of the motto of the catechumenate program at Christ Church Cathedral in Indianapolis: "Your questions are not *in* the way—your questions *are* the way" (emphasis added). I am convinced that this is the appropriate backdrop for understanding the overwhelming emphasis, in communities successfully reaching young adults, on *authenticity*.

This theme has been particularly important at the Commonplace gatherings I mentioned earlier. At the first event, the major portion of the evening was given over to invited participants sharing personal faith stories. Each speaker was encouraged to make sense of the idea of "resonance." They each decided for themselves what that meant. I was struck in particular by those who offered reflections from the perspective of their work vocation: music, technology, teaching. The sum of these parts was the clear proclamation that God is present and active outside the church as well as within, in the everyday lives of people finding their way.

The storytelling wasn't the only way participants were encouraged to exercise their individual expressiveness. Musical and visual arts were incorporated into our worship and prayer. The musicians who were gathered for the evening played traditional hymns in non-traditional arrangements on some instruments I had never seen used in worship (including the harp!). Prayer stations allowed us to share our intercessions and thanksgivings with God through drawing, writing, and sitting with images. My favorite aspect of the evening was a designated live note-taker's work drawing together the evening's themes; he stood up front and painted an entire canvas in the span of our time together. I enjoyed taking in the result during the closing worship as a way of resonating, in a new way, with what had been

shared. It was a holy thing to see the fruit of our creativity laid before God as an offering.

At the expanded Commonplace event the following year, my colleague Jason Evans of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington made a very helpful distinction in a workshop about making space for young adults in congregations. Working from survey data about churches with proportional representation of young adults, he proposed the following discernment question for any congregation to ask their young adults: "What can we build together?" He likes "What can we build together?" rather than "What do you need?" because it encourages authentic contributions to the wider church from a contingent who loves to tinker, to hack together, to build *with* and *on* what they already have. By contrast, "What do you need?" smacks of consumerism and the notion that the church has the answers if young adults will only allow it to dispense them.

The lens of authenticity is helping guide many young adult ministers and church planters in their search for resonant ministry models, and many of them are finding success by gathering around food and drink. **Pub Theology** brings the church to an authentic young-adult gathering place and usually destabilizes the expert-novice distinction that is so present in lots of parish-based theological formation. Presbyterian pastor Adam Walker Cleveland has written several blog posts about his experience with this approach (start with "Theology Pub (2.0) in Ashland, Oregon"), and RENEW International offers resources for the licensed Roman Catholic version, which is called **Theology on Tap**. If music and praise trumps reflection and study in your community, **Beer and Hymns** is a more recent but related development. Lutheran author and pastor Keith Anderson has a helpful "How to Host Your Own Beer and Hymns Night" post.

The **Dinner Church** model puts the *supper* in the Lord's Supper and helps demystify this sacrament by putting it back into its original context: table fellowship. Here a founding model seems to be St. Lydia's, now in Brooklyn. Although it is a couple of years old, I recommend the mini-documentary produced by StoryKeep as a great introduction to the St. Lydia's approach. Here's an excerpt that should make any faith formation minister rejoice:

> Earlier in my life, I had an idea that going to church meant making certain proclamations and adhering to certain theories. But being at St. Lydia's and sitting down every week next to strangers, I found that, in that moment when I passed the bread and the bread is passed to me, that God is present and I feel connected to something bigger than myself. (StoryKeep)

It would be wrong to think of these approaches as merely luring in young adults with promises of food and booze. Again, it's about meeting young adults where they already are, trusting in Christ's presence among any gathering of the faithful and the seeking, easing barriers to invitation, and acknowledging that the kinds of faith questions you'd ask in a pub or at a dinner table are just as legitimate as the ones you ask in the pastor's office or parish hall.

I would not be much of a digital missioner (my official job title) if I did not finally mention the intersection of digital media with young adult ministry. Online spaces are a primary outlet for all kinds of authentic expression among young adults, including religious expression. While I don't think we should assume that young adults demand or even particularly desire that all our faith formation practices have an online component, I do think strategic efforts in this area can lead to additional "faith touches" amid busy young-adult lives, can reach new young adults where they are (see Naughton and Wilson, 43), and can help the church continue to embrace the cultural fullness of American life in the twenty-first century.

A ministry to watch in this department is **The Slate Project** in Baltimore. This Lutheran-funded, ecumenically shepherded church plant promises "Christianity Without the Crap," already a strong appeal to young adults' longing for authenticity in faith. Four times per week, Pastor Chesnut and company create savvy faith content intended both for the in-person Slate Project community and for followers online. Here's how he frames these efforts on The Slate Project's website:

> Meanwhile, over at Facebook and Tumblr:
>
> Jesus Coffee Monday (#jesuscoffee) – kick-start every week with a relevant topic connected to the Jesus Movement
>
> Throwback Thursday (#tbt) – ancient/amazing quotes from ancient/amazing sources
>
> Slate Project Saturday (#tsp) – video updates from this new community
>
> And, on Faith Interrupted:
> Blog posts with more detailed (as in longer) musings about faith, service, and more. Read! Leave comments!

A recent Throwback Thursday post just before Reformation Day included an inspirational quote from Luther about everyday Christian vocation. A Jesus Coffee Monday post by co-pastor Sara Shisler Goff asked the question "Just 'Cause It Is In the Bible, Do We Have to Agree With It?" And a Slate Project Saturday video by Chesnut told the story of Pentecost, following up on a previous video about the Tower of Babel. If you haven't seen one of Chesnut's videos, I highly recommend you check him out on YouTube. Intercutting dramatic performance of the text, video clips from popular culture, and evocative images overlaid with text, they represent a giant leap forward in biblical storytelling for the twenty-first century.

Upon my most recent viewing, I immediately thought of the Apostle Paul's famous faith formation questions in Romans 10:14: "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" Chesnut is modeling for us all a new kind of proclamation, in the native media of young adults: Not slick, but real. No preachy, but faithful. Not gimmicky, but grounded in the culture that surrounds us. If that's not authentic gospel witness, I don't know what is.

Supporting Spiritual Development: Young Adults as Pilgrims

In his 2011 book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church … and Rethinking Faith*, Barna Group president David Kinnaman writes about three categories of church "dropouts"—nomads, prodigals, and exiles. Nomads are "[w]andering from church" and "wrestling with faith," Prodigals are "rejecting" Christianity or leaving for another faith, Exiles have come to the conclusion that, in effect, the church as we know it is the last thing their relationship with Jesus needs, that they can be more faithful by exiling themselves from "cultural Christianity" to seek a deeper, authentic faith in Christ (69, 69, 83). While I know not everyone embraces Barna's work, what I like about Kinnaman's categories is their groundedness in the Christian biblical and spiritual tradition. His discussion of exiles, for example, is inspired by the prophetic tradition of Daniel and Ezekiel, Jews who were forced to live in Babylon but nevertheless "blessed and renewed the people of God" (88).

[Exiles] sense that the established church has internalized many of "Bablyon's" values of consumerism, hyperindividualism, and moral compromise instead of living in-but-not-of as kingdom exiles. As a consequence many of today's exiles … feel isolated and alienated from the Christian community—caught between the church as it is and what they believe it is called to be. (Kinnaman, 77)

So there's a sense in which exile is the problem (these young adults have left the church, after all!) and a sense in which exile is the solution (for they have left largely for good and faithful reasons). The exiles certainly have not abandoned the God whom they trust is still with them and indeed is still active in the place of their exile—call it Babylon, or twenty-first-century America, or "the world," or whatever.

Young Adults as Pilgrims

Faith formation is for all kinds of young adults: ones who have stayed in church, ones who have left, ones who have found other churches and communities in their time of exile, and ones who might be open to such communities. I think we can capture something of Kinnaman's nomads and exiles, and something of the special developmental situation of young adulthood regardless of one's orientation to the church, if we imagine young adults, all of them, as *pilgrims*.

Though it is true that all of life, and especially the life of faith, is a journey, I think young adulthood is a journey of meaning and adventure in a particularly intensive way. Leaving home, launching a career, starting a family—these are foreign lands indeed. Remembering this may guide us as we minister to these pilgrim travelers. "What are you seeking, pilgrim? What is your quest?" If young

adulthood is to be a time of dynamic faith formation, these are the questions we need to ask over and over again.

The participants in many campus ministries and many young adult fellowships do not seem to be on pilgrimage together. At its worst, the campus ministry I participated in during college was where I went to *escape* the pilgrimage, to grab a home-cooked meal and chat with friends after church and take a break from all the pressing questions of what I was going to do with my life. (I can't resist a one-sentence soapbox here: Calling them "chaplaincies" only reinforces this problem, as if higher education were something to be survived rather than engaged.) I've attended some groups of 20- and 30-somethings that felt the same.

But a pilgrimage is just a trip if there is not both a journey and a meaning connected to the journey. There is some risk that young adults are not asking big life questions during this time in life. There is a much greater risk that they are asking them without any consideration that church or even God might have anything to do with them. I have stressed the need to focus on relationships (people before programs). As those relationships deepen, we gain the trust to share the road together in an intentional way.

I've had the chance to talk to quite a few young adult ministers about how to help create this space for meaning-making, how to mark that—as a group—we are growing in faith, how to reach out for guidance and support from others, and how to invite Christ into our hearts as we travel by the Spirit. "Pilgrims in Christ" happens to be the name of the intensive, year-long catechumenate program at the parish I serve in Washington, and that connection has guided my listening and my contributions in these conversations.

I don't think a traditional, formal, *weekly* catechumenate program like Pilgrims can fly in any standalone young adult community, though I have been shocked by the numbers of young DC professionals who make the journey as a

small but significant minority in this adults-of-all-ages experience. I do think that the idea of the catechumenate, the idea that there is a body of Christian knowledge and a distinctively Christ-like way of living, resonates with young adults. How should we describe it, this spiritual curriculum? At Commonplace 2014, my colleague Melanie Mullen and I tried to jot the big items down:

- basic knowledge of the Bible and ways of reading it for spiritual fulfillment;
- basic knowledge of church traditions and worship and a commitment to letting them shape us over time;
- basic knowledge of theology and an ability to use it to reflect on everyday life;
- basic knowledge about prayer and spiritual practices and a willingness to explore them in a committed way;
- a passion for justice and mercy and a commitment to serving others and the common good;
- a sense that we are "in this together" as a people, and that we come together as community to share our joys and sorrows, to mark the major passages in life.

Your community's list might be different depending on your tradition, your gifts, your theological commitments. But whatever is on it, it's your responsibility—probably informally but with a sense of direction and accountability as well—to help the people you serve make their meandering way through that territory over time.

Programs may be out. Formal curriculum may be deadly. Service may be the starting point, or fellowship over beers or a good meal. But a pilgrimage requires a sense of direction, progress, and thorough exploration. If we're serious about forming faith that will continue to sustain young adults as they age, we have to trust that the Christian spiritual tradition has much to offer. We need to give it a chance to do its work, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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Faith Formation with Midlife Adults

Jim Merhaut

Midlife adults today are primarily Generation X adults. Developing effective practices and approaches to ministry with midlife adults means that church leaders will become conversant in the values and convictions of Generation X and will develop programs and resources that connect with this particular group of midlife adults. This article addresses important ministry implications for reaching out to Generation X as midlife adults, but it will also address midlife adult ministry practices and approaches that are relevant and will continue to be relevant for all generations at midlife adulthood, focusing primarily on ministry in the midst of the midlife crisis.

Jim Merhaut is a professional life coach, leadership consultant, writer, retreat leader and national speaker. He is an author and co-author of nine books and dozens of other publications. Jim is a 28-year veteran in church ministry having worked in churches, schools, administrative offices and retreat centers. He most recently served as the President and CEO of Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center. Jim offers keynotes, retreats and workshops around the country, specializing in ministry leadership, marriage skills, lifelong faith formation and spirituality. He is also a professional musician and recording artist with singer/songwriter, JD Eicher. (www.CoachingtoConnect.com)

Faith Formation & Generation X Culture

In a world that changes so rapidly, it is a given that every generation will have been formed at least in part by experiences that were nonexistent for the generations that came before them. Some of each generation's experiences will also be obsolete by the time the next generation reaches the formative years. This has not always been the case.

For thousands of years before the industrial revolution, culture changed at a snail's pace. The formative years for individuals of one generation were remarkably similar to the formative years of the generations both ahead of and behind them. In those days, you listened to and sang the same songs that your parents and grandparents heard and sang. You ate the same food they ate. You did the same work they did. You used the same tools they used. You wore the same clothes they wore. This trans-generational consistency made it relatively simple to meet the formation needs of everyone at the same time while using the same basic approach for all.

Times have changed! And, yes, that is an understatement. Starting with the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, subcultures began to develop within a single culture in ways that had never occurred prior. Families that had been farmers for centuries were now seeing their young adult children abandoning the farm to move to the city and pursue a completely different way of life. The technological revolution of the twentieth century only accelerated the explosion of subcultures and generational differences.

Now it is an accepted fact of life that parents and children will have been formed with vastly different cultural experiences. Experiencing culture differently, the subculture experience is like developing a language within a language. Parents with teenage children both speak English, for instance, but they often *feel* like they speak foreign languages. We've come to expect it and even feel as though it is a natural thing, as if the generation gap is God-ordained.

And so the church, an institution founded upon a principal of unity, finds itself struggling to deliver a message to distinct groups of people, each capable of hearing the message only if it is delivered in a particular way, the way of their subculture. In a single church gathering there may be five generations present—five different ways of understanding the world! This is nothing short of a perpetual Pentecost experience. The purpose of this article is to help leaders learn the language of Generation X and respond to it with ministerial approaches that Xers can hear and embrace.

Gen X Tolerance

Generation X often doesn't feel at home in churches because these midlife adults espouse tolerance of different cultures and different preferences as highly virtuous in the midst of churches that often appear to be intolerant. When churches say that God condemns certain sexual orientations or preferences, Gen X claims that God is big enough to welcome everyone. When church communities of a particular race or culture hesitate to reach out and welcome people of other races or cultures, Gen X will proclaim that it is the mission of the church to break down racial barriers and to promote multicultural ministry experiences. Churches that try to create strong doctrinal boundaries for the sake of identity leave Gen Xers confused for they believe that openness is the identity of the church. After all, according to Gen X, isn't God everywhere and actively pursuing everyone?

Generation X has not been as supportive of churches as previous generations were. The dogmatic tendencies of religion are distasteful to Xers. They prefer an open disposition to diverse groups of people and schools of thought. While older generations valued loyalty to the

group, Xers believe there is nothing wrong with identifying with a number of apparently opposed groups. In fact, they think it is a virtue to cross lines that were formally impenetrable walls. Interracial, intercultural and interreligious friendships and marriages exploded with this generation and they've successfully passed this trait on to their children. So churches should prepare for more tolerance as Millennials come of age.

Effective ministry with Generation X will bear a softer doctrinal tone. Definitions of sin that are illustrated by a list of behaviors are not helpful. Sin in the mind of Xers is epitomized by barriers to relationships. Whereas parents from previous generations would willingly disown a child who violated a sacred law embraced by the family, Generation X parents will stand by their children who stray from long-held sacred traditions and point to the laws of love, mercy and inclusion as the supreme guides. Generation X expects institutions to bend to human realities.

Rules that define who is "in" and who is "out" need to be reconsidered. Behavior generally is not considered a reason for rejection in a Christian community according to Generation X. If someone wants to be a member, the institution has an obligation to find a way to accept that someone and journey with them. Institutions should change for the sake of people, not the other way around. Generation X is interested in learning what is in the person's heart beneath the person's behavior. Doing ministry with attention to intention is a key way to reach out to Generation X. Enforcing membership rules based upon a list of do's and don'ts is a sure way to push them out.

Generation X also believes that every organization needs a prophet, so to speak. In other words, churches need whistle-blowers. Group think is not in Gen X's DNA because their parents openly battled against each other and often encouraged their children to take

sides. There was no united parenting front for Gen X. Challenging the group from the inside is a Gen X way of participating. They are not interested in "playing ball" to keep the peace. They don't really feel at home unless there is some kind of disturbance.

Implications

Ministry with Generation X needs to be open to a prophetic edge. Expect midlife adults in your congregation to be critical of everything. Effective leaders will be open to feedback. James Kouzes and Barry Posner assert and provide evidence for their assertion that the best leaders are the best learners. A necessary part of learning is being open to feedback, especially negative feedback. (Kouzes & Posner, pp. 129-30) There is no short supply of feedback from Gen X and the effective ministry leader will accept it as oxygen that is necessary for programmatic growth and vitality. Dismissing the feedback as petty whining or complaining is a temptation that leaders need to avoid. Leaders can work to put a positive spin on any critique and find a way to use it for growth even if it is delivered in a way that is hard to swallow. Once you are a trusted listener, then you can teach and nurture the skill of constructive criticism.

Develop a culture of learning in your organization. Deliberately create conversations in which church members feel very free to speak what is on their minds. Encourage members to appreciate the value of having issues out in the open. Master the skills of conflict management. Never seek to avoid disagreements. Face them head on and deal with them with honesty, openness, respect, and effective practices for negotiating towards productive solutions based upon solid evidence.

Consider using this process to settle differences or to develop solutions to expressed needs in your congregation. Decision-making and problem-solving processes like the one

outlined below meet many of the needs Generation X has.

1. Create ground rules for discussion:
   - All participants are free to express opinions respectfully.
   - Expressions of anger and frustration are not helpful and are out of bounds.
   - If inappropriate expressions of anger occur, the discussion will take a recess until all parties calm down.
2. State the problem or issue clearly:
   - Propose the problem or issue
   - Invite others to propose it in their own words.
   - Adjust the language of the proposal until all agree that the problem or issue has been stated clearly.
3. Brainstorm solutions without comment or judgment:
   - All participants contribute several potential solutions to the problem or issue.
   - All ideas proposed are open for consideration, even unreasonable and ridiculously expensive ideas because they may spark the creativity that is necessary to come up with the best solution that is both reasonable and affordable.
   - There should be no discussion of any idea that is raised during the brainstorming phase. The purpose is solely to create a list of options, reasonable and unreasonable.
4. Clarify the options:
   - Invite participants to comment on any of the options.
   - Invite participants to ask questions about any of the options.
5. Rank the options:
   - Invite each person to rank each option on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being their favorite options.

- Any option that receives a ranking of less than 5 by most of the group should be removed from the list unless compelling and convincing evidence is presented that sways the group's opinion.
- Options that are ranked above 5 by 2/3 of the group or more should be discussed further.
6. Select an option
   - Discuss the highest ranked options further
   - Select the one that emerges as a solution that all parties can endorse
7. Work the solution
   - The process is not complete until the group moves forward and acts on the decision.
   - Make specific and measurable short term and long term plans to bring the decision to life.
8. Celebrate your success:
   - Thank the group for their contributions with a special thanks to the Gen X prophet who pointed out the problem or solution in the first place.
   - Offer a prayer of thanks to God with the group recognizing the blessings that are associated with your good work.

Gen X Suspicion

Building trust is a key to success with Generation X. They will not be loyal to you because of the office you hold. You will have to earn their trust and respect. Healthy doses of organizational transparency and interpersonal honesty will take you far in the Gen X world. Your level of ministry competence is also very important. Gen X will not initially trust that you know what you are doing, but when you display your competence regularly, you will gain their respect.

Organizational Transparency is a key to success with Gen X. These adults have seen the moral collapse of so many institutions, including their own families, that they are always expecting you to let them down. They have been taught by the school of hard knocks to suspect that something is being hidden, something that is going to sting them. They are always waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop. Your role is to prove them wrong. Ministry leaders need to make extra efforts to show Gen X adults that everything is being done above board. There are no backroom deals being cut. Turf wars are exposed and squelched immediately. Financial records are available for anyone to review. Planning processes are inclusive and dialogical. There are no topics of discussion that are off the table. Questions are asked out of authentic curiosity rather than with a pre-determined answer in mind. They are not impressed with trickery and fantasy; rather, they want authenticity.

Interpersonal Honesty is a general leadership trait that is important for all ages and generations, but Gen X at midlife is poised in a unique way to hunger for interpersonal honesty. Honesty is the #1 character trait that people around the world want in their leaders. (Kouzes & Posner, 17) It is something that all leaders should practice, but church leaders working with midlife adults who happen to be Gen Xers have several reasons to make honesty their best and top policy. Honesty builds trust, which is something Generation X experienced in unusually broken ways in their lives. The government broke their trust. The church broke their trust. The corporate world broke their trust. The media broke their trust. Their parents broke their trust. They will not trust anyone who is not completely honest with them. What Boomers will forgive, Gen X will expose. What Gen X will expose, Millennials will quietly walk away from. Gen X will fight back if you break trust with them through dishonesty or broken promises. Gen X, growing up in the shadow of

the Boomers, expects to fight to be noticed and nothing brings out their fight more powerfully than dishonesty and broken trust.

The threat of exposure and the fear of war with midlife adults are not the only, nor the most important, reasons to be honest with them. Midlife adults are at a point in their life when they are ready to pull back from the hyper activity of earlier years and settle into the warmth and slower pace of intimacy. Honesty builds interpersonal trust and sets the tone for deeply intimate relationships, the cornerstone of Christian faith. Midlife adults will respond to any programs and initiatives that help church members become more authentic with each other.

Competence is another requirement for effective ministry with Gen X adults. You need to prove that you know what you're talking about and that you understand why you do what you do in ministry offerings. While older generations often preached that the "doctor knows best," Generation X believes that the doctor with the best track record knows best. Because Generation X suffered so many personal and institutional betrayals, all trust has to be earned, and demonstrated competence is how a professional minister earns it. Competence, by the way, also makes the Top Five of the Kouzes-Posner list of desired leadership traits, coming in fourth after honesty, forward-looking and inspiring. (Kouzes & Posner, 17) It would not be surprising if it rose to a higher position on the list if Gen X adults were the only ones included in the survey.

Church ministers need to be both smart and compassionate—sly as a fox and gentle as a dove, as long as your fox-like characteristics are full of integrity. Studies of Generation X parents reveal that they really want leaders in their communities to know what they are talking about. They want physicians who can give clear and proven advice on how to keep their kids physically healthy. They want teachers who use

proven methods in the classroom and who are willing to open the classroom door to parent participation, which Xers know is a key to educational success. They want their church staffs to be able to give sound advice on how to nurture their children into a healthy and helpful relationship with God. (Roehlkepartain, 46)

Gen X Parents

Where previous generations were impressed when kids "did it by themselves," Xer parents want to show their kids how to function and thrive in the world. They'll have meaningful conversations with their kids. They'll devote huge amounts of time to the organizations that work with their kids. They'll read to their kids. While some colleges and universities found this characteristic of Gen X parents to be intrusive and labeled them in a derogatory way as *Helicopter Parents,* this high level of involvement can be a great blessing to a church. Finding parents who will volunteer for your programs with children is easier today than it was thirty years ago.

Church ministers who want to be successful with Generations X parents will loudly and regularly proclaim that the ministry door is always open to parents. Keep parents informed about the progress of their children and teens in your programs. Tell them when the kids succeed and when they struggle. Give them tips about how they can reinforce at home what you are doing at church. Never leave them out of the loop or guessing about what is happening in your programs.

Family Learning

Faith formation for Generation X parents can take the form of a variety of family and intergenerational programs. If you've always dreamed of diving into the family and intergenerational ministry ocean, the time is now. Gen X moms and dads will be there to

support your efforts. Programs like *Logos* from GenOn Ministries or *Family-centered Religious Education* (*F.I.R.E.*) from Liguori Publications or online intergenerational resource websites like *Vibrant Faith @ Home* or *Fashioning Faith* are all great ways to get started into intergenerational faith formation.

Family Service

Create family service learning experiences. You can send groups of families away for a weekend or a full week in the same way that you typically send teens on service trips, but these family service trips will be far more powerful than your teen trips. It has been demonstrated in research and in practice that teens who participate in service learning experiences with their parents are far more likely to continue to serve others as adults than teens who serve in age-specific programs. A primary goal of any service learning program for teenagers is to help them establish discipleship habits of service that will last a lifetime. Teen-only service learning programs are missing the most powerful ingredient that will help them achieve that top goal: parents!

Service experiences for Gen X parents and their kids don't have to be full-blown complicated programs. You can facilitate, promote and encourage a wide variety of simple family and intergenerational service and service learning experiences that are both gathered programs and experiences that happen away from your campus. When something needs to be done around your church, contact a handful of families to get the job done. It could be tending gardens, preparing a mailing, switching out prayer aids in the worship space, cleaning, etc. All of these simple experiences of service have long-lasting positive impacts on the lives of families.

You can also promote neighborhood service among your members. Remind parents that it is important for them to demonstrate caring service to people in need who live right under

their noses. Every neighborhood has someone who needs a little help. It might be a young family with a newborn, or a neighbor struggling with an illness, or an elderly neighbor who can't keep up with the house or property. Promote the idea through preaching, teaching and advertising that your families are the families in the community that look out for the needs of others in every neighborhood. Encourage your families to serve others to the extent that it will make others wonder where they get this passion for service. It's a great way to evangelize because sooner or later, someone will ask why your families are different in a good way from families who are not connected to your faith community. All Christians should raise that kind of curiosity. Your Gen X families are ripe for this kind of community-changing activity. It gives them the time together that they need, it gives them the sense of accomplishment and purpose that they crave, it gives people in need the help they deserve, and it gives your church a good name in the community.

Family Worship

Family prayer, worship and discussion groups are a great way to build family faith. Keep families together when they are offering ministry hours at the church. As much as possible, don't make family members come to the church for programming at different times, with teens coming at one time and younger children coming at another time. Family togetherness is a strong and positive value of this generation, a generation that feels they were unjustly starved of it when they were children. Gen X parents will appreciate it if you invite their children to participate in church worship and prayer ministries with them. Whole families can serve as ushers. Whole families can sing in the choir. Whole families can assist in a variety of worship leadership roles.

Faith Formation & the Midlife Crisis

The midlife crisis is an opportune moment for churches to intervene in the lives of midlife adults to provide helpful and relevant faith formation opportunities and resources that will help people successfully navigate the tumultuous experience of midlife maturation. Church leaders can help members recognize the typical signs of a midlife crisis and then encourage them to explore the crisis as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Psychologist, Vivian Diller, offers a series of questions that help midlife adults discern whether or not they are experiencing a midlife crisis. Here is an adaptation of her assessment questions:

1. Have you been feeling down or empty for long periods of time with no relief? (This is different than mood swings, which come and go.)
2. Do you get enraged over small things or have violent outbursts with your family and friends? (Again, this is not the same as feeling irritable on and off.)
3. Do you feel detached? Have you stopped engaging in activities or hobbies that once gave you pleasure with your mate, friends or at work?
4. Do you find yourself constantly thinking about your mortality, the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life?
5. Are you deeply dissatisfied with your primary relationship?
6. Are you thinking of quitting your job or fantasizing about never working again, even if you can't afford to retire?
7. Does the life you envision ahead exclude the people or activities you are currently attached to?

8. Are you questioning your faith or your religion? Are you seeking a deeper connection to spirituality?

9. Do you keep thinking about running away or taking a break even if you have responsibilities that keep you from doing so (such as being a spouse or a parent)?

10. Are you flirting with the idea of having an affair or have you started one? Are you spending inordinate amount of time on your computer engaged in online chats with strangers?

11. Are you making sexual gestures towards others—a young co-worker, your child's teacher or coach, someone you met at a bar or party—seeking their attention even when it feels inappropriate?

12. Do you have a desperate desire the freedom, independence, or adventure, regardless of how it impacts others?

13. Are you acting recklessly, like driving your car too fast or engaging in other impulsive behaviors like you may have as a teenager? Are you dressing like your much younger daughter/son? Spending more time with people half your age not in a generative or mentoring way but as a way to escape your own generation?

14. Have you gained a lot of weight? Are you binging on junk food? Have you lost a lot of weight, lost interest in food or gone on crash diets? Are you obsessively exercising?

15. Are you drinking too much, often by yourself?

16. Are you overusing prescription or recreational drugs?

17. Are you obsessing about your appearance, trying to 'anti-age' and overdoing it on cosmetic procedures or plastic surgery to look younger?

18. Do you find yourself looking in the mirror and think, *I don't recognize myself.*

Any one of these thoughts, feelings or actions by itself does not constitute a crisis, but if an adult identifies with most of them they may indicate that he or she is in the midst of a midlife crisis and should seek guidance in the form of education and/or coaching, counseling, and spiritual direction. Faith formation leaders can help individual church members assess whether or not they are experiencing a crisis and then guide them to the help they need to successfully navigate the crisis.

Programs and resources that help midlife adults reflect deeply on the path their lives have taken up to this point are helpful. Midlife adults need to be guided as they think about the goals they set earlier in life. Most adults have career goals, community participation goals, intimacy goals, family goals, personal goals and faith goals. These goals need to be clarified and evaluated in terms of their current status. How have they been met? Are they still unmet? Are they goals worth keeping? Are there new goals that need to be established?

Identify ways to help midlife adults reflect upon where they have been and where they are going in light of their current commitments. Help them listen to the inner voice of God calling them to a more abundant future. Here are some recommended program and resource ideas to consider:

- Develop prayer and reflection groups that address crises as opportunities.
- Create a series of pages on your website with reflection questions and audio and video segments that address midlife adult issues.
- Send regular emails to midlife adults with links to helpful articles about the midlife crisis.
- Organize a book club that focuses on books that address midlife adult themes.

- Develop and distribute a pamphlet that includes both the signs of crisis and referral information.
- Publish a series of podcasts on your websites consisting of audio interviews with older church members talking about how they successfully navigated midlife and what role the church played in their growth.

Faith Formation & the Digital World

Generation X was the first generation to produce high school and college term papers digitally. While the most inventive technological minds belong to other generations, (the Baby Boomers claim Bill Gates & Steve Jobs, both born in 1955; the Builder and the Silent Generations claim Jack Kilby, born 1923 & Robert Noyce, born 1927, inventors of the microchip that made Silicon Valley famous; the Millennials claim Mark Zuckerberg, born 1984, a primary force behind the .com boom) the transforming tech consumers, though, are found in Generation X.

Today's midlife adults are the first large scale technology users and the first generation that is really challenging churches to get comfortable with digital delivery of faith formation content. The technology demands of Generation X are the driving forces that sustain the digital revolution and pressure organizations, businesses and churches to get with it. The Pew Research Center reports that Generation X is the age group with the highest rate of technology use except for Millennials, and they are a close second to Millennials in every category, actually using digital games, e-Books and tablets at the same rate as Millennials. (Zickuhr, 2010)

The pressure to digitize often results in sloppy efforts that end up focusing more on a glitzy tech show than real Christian ministry.

The church staff that uses technology effectively for faith formation will be a staff that is deeply dedicated to a clearly defined ministry mission. Churches are first and foremost about the work of building relationships of communion. The central mission of every church is to promote the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God is built upon loving relationships. Technology ought to be used only when it serves the church's central mission. Rev. Bruce Miller of Christ Fellowship Church in McKinney, Texas puts it this way, "Our focus is not technology, but how we can use that technology. … The church's purpose is the same, but how we reach people is changing." His particular church is using software called *Meet the Need* that connects people in need with others in the community who can assist them. In this way, technology is being used as a tool that helps to connect people and build relationships.

Sermons and Presentations

The lecture model is dead, and Gen X is trying to bury it! It is not wise to lecture a group of people that includes Gen Xers if your lecture consists of you and a podium. Even if you are the most gifted vocal orator, there are people sitting in front of you who are primarily visual learners. You do them violence by not teaching to their learning strengths. There are also lots of other kinds of learners in front of you. There is no excuse today for presenters who do not engage multiple senses in every learning session. Digital technology helps us do just that.

I recently sat in a church in Kentucky and enjoyed a deeply engaging sermon that included video clips, maps, a guest speaker along with the pastor, music, photos, live drawings on a digital tablet that were projected onto the screen and more. Every piece of media and every sensory experience served the purpose of driving home the key point of the sermon, "God Is Faithful!" All of the software that this pastor

used is easily accessible to almost any church community. Most people have it in their homes!

Websites

Websites remain a powerful way for an organization to express itself on the Internet. While website design companies are out there for churches with large tech budgets, template websites are very affordable and increasingly adaptable for churches that want a nice-looking and versatile website at an affordable price. The template services have pre-designed pages and features that are easy to add and edit. There are too many website template companies to list here, but a few to get you started on your search include: Weebly.com, Wordpress.com, Wix.com, and Squarespace.com.

Here are several keys to successful faith formation website development:

- *Simple navigation*: Make it easy for members to find what they are looking for. Each link should clearly show the visitor where his/her click will lead.
- *User-pleasing appearance*: Keep pages, especially adult faith formation pages, clean and uncluttered.
- *Provide interaction*: Web 2.0 is all about user interaction. More and more Internet users want to be able to add content to your website. Gen X wants to be heard. Let them be heard through your website. There are a variety of ways to allow this without losing control of your content:
  o Create a blog page and invite parish staff persons to add short articles, videos, and/or podcasts on a weekly basis. Visitors can make comments, but you can set the page to send all comments to your email inbox to be approved before they are posted. Approval usually only requires the push of a button.
  o Add opinion polls to your website. The results of the polls will help you get to know your parishioners better.
  o Video editing software allows you to create videos with quizzes embedded right on the video screen. The video will pause while the user takes the quiz.

Survey Software

Surveys are important and easy ways to stay in touch with the pulse of your church community. Surveys can provide general evaluations of programs as well as immediate information about how parishioners are thinking and feeling about current events in the news headlines. This kind of information helps you respond to parishioners with relevant faith formation resources. Surveys are particularly relevant for Generation X because they are naturally critical. Surveys give them an opportunity to make their prophetic presence known.

It is critically important to use the results of your surveys whether you like the results or not. A common mistake of organizations that use surveys is to develop them to get desired results rather than to get the truth. A bigger mistake is to get the truth and ignore it. When you ask people to take the time to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, you need to take the results seriously and develop a response that is relevant and timely.

Here are some survey tools that are easy to use and very affordable (most survey tools are free up to a certain number of uses or responses): Surveymonkey.com, Zoomerang.com Surveygizmo.com, and Polldaddy.com.

Your website, used in conjunction with a survey tool, will give you the flexibility to make resources available to church members quickly.

Email Marketing Software

While email use is still significant, it is declining rapidly and giving way to social media and texting. Still, Generation X is relying upon email and it shouldn't be ignored as a viable way to communicate with midlife adults.

The uses of email marketing software are many. It can become a primary way you inform members about upcoming events. You can use it to announce and distribute survey questionnaires. The beauty of it is that once you've paid your low monthly subscription fee, you can send as many emails as you want without any additional cost. The emails are colorful and dynamic. They can include photos, graphics, videos, podcasts, etc.

Here are a few email programs that you should consider: ConstantContact.com, MailChimp.com, and Flocknote.com.

Mass Text Messaging

Texting is now more common than phone calling. There is much information that you can pass along in a text message with equal or better results than a phone call. For one, it creates a written record that is easily accessible. But be careful, texting is not necessarily your best option. When you want a deeper personal impact, a voice-to-voice encounter can be more powerful.

Mass texting gives you the ability to spread short, simple messages to a targeted group of people quickly. It's a great way to send meeting reminders or cancellation notices. More and more churches and other educational institutions are using them as effectively as businesses.

Podcasts

Podcasts are simple voice recordings that can be added to a website or shared through an email or text message. Sermons or even sermon snippets are always excellent sources for podcasts. Members can listen to them in their cars to remind themselves about what they heard last Sunday. You can also make podcasts with simple prayer instructions and reflections. It might also be fun and educational to interview church members and post the interviews on a special page on your website. You can even record a phone interview with an author or some other faith formation specialist and build an online program around the podcast.

Any digital recording device will allow you to create a podcast. Most cell phones have these recording devices built right in. The same software you use to edit videos can be used to edit podcasts, but there is free audio editing software called Audacity that can be downloaded at http://audacity.sourceforge.net/download/.

Editing software allows you to import a recording and make changes to the audio track such as cutting out undesirable sections where you said "um" or when the dog started barking. You can also add music and sound effects.

Video

Christians in the 21st century, like most people, are highly visual in their learning orientation, and video learning is increasing in popularity. Generation X is the television generation. They got excited in school when a teacher pulled out the VCR/TV combo and you can still produce warm feelings in their hearts with a judicious use of video technology.

Video production software is now a no-extra-cost item included with almost any new computer. These software packages make it easy to produce simple educational videos that can stand by themselves or supplement a larger learning project.

Videos can be easily embedded into websites and emails. They can also be sent to

cell phones and distributed through social media. Of course, they can be shown on a large screen or on a digital television set for gathered programs. The important question to answer about video usage in programming is how does the video enhance and not distract from the core content of the session. Video, as with all media, is a tool that should help you deliver a strong learning session. It should always be used in the context of a greater faith formation effort designed to bring people together in communion with each other and with God. Imagine dedicating a page on your website to introducing new parishioner families with a short video of your pastor interviewing the family members.

If you're not into video production, there's no need to worry. Someone has probably already produced and published the video you are thinking about for your program, and it's probably available to you on YouTube.

Online Meetings & Webinars

New digital media allows you to connect with people in many ways. It's often difficult to get people to attend meetings at the church building, especially when there is a threat of bad weather. Why not have some of your meetings online. Church members can join you from the comfort of their own homes.

Webinars are another way to meet with people online, but a webinar is usually designed to be for larger numbers of participants who are attending for educational purposes. Generation X will welcome adult faith formation opportunities that they can access from their homes.

Webinars are a great way to offer formation to church members in addition to gathered formation programs. Webinars can also be creative teasers for gathered programs. Offer the content online, and call people together at a later date to do the group activities and other processes. Webinars can also help a church save

resources by bringing in a national speaker without having to pay the airfare, room, and board for the speaker. The speaker can present online. With this set-up, it is possible to have a gathered group of participants at the church viewing the webinar on a large screen while other participants login from home. A little creative planning could make this an enriching experience especially if there are good follow-up opportunities built around the next Sunday worship service when the whole community is gathered together. At-home participants could be invited to a small group experience after the service to reflect upon the webinar presentation.

Here are some suggestions for software that supports online meetings and webinars: AnyMeeting.com, GoToMeeting.com, GoToWebinar.com, WebinarJam.com, and many more.

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn are among the most common names in the world of social networking. Anyone can set up an account for free and be connected to hundreds and even thousands of people in a very short time. More and more organizations are creating social networking accounts to promote their causes and communicate with their members.

Churches can use social networking to communicate in a less formal way with members about programs and events while also using the same software to offer inspiring messages on a regular basis with little effort. The participants have the greatest ability to create content and interact with each other. Relationship building really does happen on these websites, and many young people first meet their future spouse on a social networking website. Elizabeth Drescher observes, "Further, social networking participation tends to enrich rather than diminish participation in face-to-

face relationships" ([www.episcopal cafe.com/daily/technology](www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/technology)).

Conclusion

Involvement, diversity, acceptance, suspicion, technology, integrity and authenticity have all been used to capture the spirit of Generation X, the current midlife adults. They challenge our institutional approaches like no generation before them. Our success with them will be dependent upon our adaptability, our integrity and our competence. We need to broaden our faith formation delivery systems to use technology generously and judiciously. Church leaders who recognize the spiritual significance of the crisis that is so common at midlife can help midlife adults avoid serious life mistakes if they can be encouraged to recreate their futures while honoring their current commitments and re-engaging in them with fresh perspectives. If midlife adults successfully push the church to grow in these areas and develop new ministry approaches that are meaningful and relevant for this stage of life, they will have done all of us a great service.

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Faith Formation with Mature Adults

Janet Schaeffler

A ll research and projections are telling us we are getting older; those in their later years will be a larger segment of the population than the youth. "Nearly every industry in society, from health care to entertainment, is scrambling to respond to this age wave that is crashing on our shores" (Roberto, 35).

This article will look at key principles for adult faith formation, especially those that touch mature adults, key characteristics of mature adulthood which influence learning, potential themes for faith formation for mature adults, and effective practices and approaches.

Janet Schaeffler, OP, an Adrian Dominican Sister, is currently ministering in freelance work as an adult faith formation consultant and presenter. She teaches graduate courses, and is a facilitator for online courses at VLCFF (University of Dayton) and C21 Online (Boston College). Among her most recent books are *What We Believe: Praying and Living the Apostles' Creed* and *Parish Leadership for Improved Adult Catechesis*. She has also created GEMS (Great Endeavors Mined and Shared), a monthly newsletter of best practices in adult faith formation.

Principles for Adult Faith Formation with Mature Adults

We are privileged (since the work of Malcolm Knowles and many others) to have a body of research and practices which describe the ways adult learn. The following are only a few of the many principles to guide adult faith formation.

Connect to Mature Adult Needs

Adults' readiness to learn is directly linked to needs—needs related to fulfilling their roles as workers, spouses, parents, Christian disciples, and more; and coping with life changes (divorce, death of a loved one, retirement). "The content of programs offered in parish ministry for maturing adults rises out of the real situations in which such people live, including moments of transition and daily life" (Johnson, 16). "From the idea of developmental tasks, the concept of 'teachable moment' emerges: the idea that one may need to learn something new in order to cope with the tasks of a certain developmental stage" (Dean, 11).

All ongoing learning and formation relating to real life needs to help mature adults grow in new understandings and new ways of acting. "Our ministry to maturing adults needs to have utility. Maturing adults asks: *How can this improve my life in a concrete way?* Theory is nice, but it's too removed from the everyday lives of spiritually maturing adults to sustain their interest. They are looking for great ideas, inspiring concepts, motivational insights, and global perspectives, but they want them in ways that make a down-to-earth difference right now." (Johnson, 21)

Design Ministry *With* and *Through*

Because today's older adults are living longer, are healthy and energetic, ministries with them needs to be viewed as being *with* and *through* older adults rather than *to* older adults. Zanzig reminds us: "Build the faith community 'from the inside out,' not from the top down. We will listen, discern, dream, plan, and minister *collaboratively,* i.e. as a genuine community of disciples with a shared mission." (Zanzig, 5)

Incorporate Age-Specific & Intergenerational Elements

Ministry for/with maturing adults needs to be both age-specific and multigenerational. Intergenerationality and communities-of-like interest are both needed—the comfort of our own environments as well as the challenge that comes from different ways of thinking and perceiving, deeper experiences of understanding and doing. "The church is most healthy when it offers diversity. Age diversity is perhaps the most universally recognized diversity in most churches. All the various age groups in the church are intertwined. The ability of one cohort of people in a church to successfully meet the developmental challenges of one stage provides the needed communal context for other cohorts of persons to successfully address their proper and appropriate developmental tasks as well. We are not in isolated developmental boxes; we are all in the same pot. When one ingredient doesn't or can't express its unique flavor, then the others cannot express themselves fully either. One part or element of the parish or faith organization system affects and is affected by every other part...." (Johnson, 44)

Design Holistic, All-Encompassing Programming

Adult faith formation is all-encompassing: "…parish ministry for maturing adults pays attention to three dimensions of growth: spiritual, psychological, and physical" (Johnson, 15). the "content" for adult faith formation for maturing adults needs to be broad, wide, and deep.

> We know from research that adult learners will choose the learning activity that best fits their learning needs, preferred modes of learning, and time constraints. In order to accomplish this, faith formation with Baby Boomers needs to provide a variety of content and learning activities, and a variety of models for faith formation that include activities in physical places and virtual spaces. (Roberto, 39)

> Realize that one ministry type does not meet all the needs of older adults. Some older adults will enjoy meeting together for a weekly or monthly noon luncheon program, while other older adults would rather be part of a mission team or take part in a community service project. Some older adults will be available during the day; others will be working and available only at night or on weekends. … some older adults will enjoy singing 'old familiar hymns,' while others enjoy singing praise songs. Remember: no two older adults are exactly alike; therefore, no single ministry will reach everyone. (Gentzler, 54)

(To help your church discern the needs of maturing adults check out the article "What Are We Providing for Adult Faith Growth?" (http://www.janetschaeffler.com/AFF-Helps.html)

Opportunities for mature adults need to incorporate various methods:

- individualized: online opportunities, reading, videos, etc.
- within home life: conversations, prayer and rituals, etc.
- in small groups: taking place in various locations (church, restaurants, libraries, homes, etc.)
- in large groups: retreats, workshops, speakers, etc.
- throughout the life of the church: worship, service, ministry and leadership
- within the neighborhood, the community and world: opportunities offered by various civic, religious, educational organizations

These various methods/opportunities remind us of another important principle (which can relieve the worry and workload of s church staff): One congregation doesn't have to do everything. Be a clearing house and a curator by alerting maturing adults to the vast array of educational, formational, prayer and reflection and service opportunities in the area.

Adults today learn in multiple ways. There was a large body of research conducted during the 1980's about adult learning. The consensus was that roughly 85% of what adults learned then was not in a formal setting, classroom, or lecture hall. That was ten-to-fifteen years before the internet. There has been a significant paradigm shift with adult learning today driven by the internet, online learning, online resource centers, and social media (peer to peer sharing). If 85% was the informal percentage in the 1980's, just think what it would be today. What it will be tomorrow?

Characteristics of Mature Adulthood

Gary McIntosh describes the Baby Boomer generation as educated, media-oriented, independent, cause-oriented, fitness conscious, activists, quality conscious, and questioning of authority. He describes the characteristics of Baby Boomer church members in this way. Baby Boomers are:

- committed to relationships, rather than organizations
- wanting to belong, rather than join
- supportive of people, rather than programs
- longing to live their faith, rather than only talk about it
- wishing to be seen as unique individuals, rather than a monolithic group
- desirous of designing their own programs, rather than only attending ones developed for them
- yearning to serve others, rather than only being served
- craving meaningful activity, rather than empty days (McIntosh, 300-303)

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot reflects on the journey of learning in her book *The Third Chapter*: it "crosses borders and covers landscapes that are rich with complexity and color. The geography is rocky and irregular, beautiful and tortured, full of hills and valleys, open vistas and blind alleys, and menaced by minefields. The path moves forward and circles back, progresses and regresses, is both constant and changing. The developmental terrain grows more layered, patience trumps speed, restraint trumps ambition, wisdom trumps IQ—'leaving a legacy' trumps 'making our mark', and a bit of humor saves us all." (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 173)

Most adults in their mid-50 – mid-70s are eager for continuous learning and growth.

. . . . research indicates that maturing adults may require more change, more growth, and more personal development in their senior years than they did at any other time in their lives. There are two reasons for this. First, maturing adults gradually experience a new freedom from societal, career, and familial accountability. This new freedom in and of itself can usher in new perspectives, new thinking, and a new view of themselves. Routine ways of thinking, feeling, choosing, and acting are prime for change. . . . Second, maturing adults experience more losses than at any previous stage. Adult development-alists are discovering that loss can best be seen as behavioral change stimulators. In most cases, when loss is properly framed and compassionately understood, it enhances rather than inhibits interior growth and development. (Johnson, 13-14)

Leaders in adult faith formation have realized that a motivation for ongoing learning flows from the needs of the participants. Moberg categorizes the needs of maturing adults into several categories; categories, of course, which are overlapping in life and learning:

1. *The Need for Meaning and Purpose*: This need relates closely to the deeply ingrained desire to maintain one's personal dignity and self-esteem (a need that often surfaces for newly-retired people).
2. *The Need for Love and Relatedness*: Sharing companionship, conversation, intimacy, laughter, a hug, or caressing touch and giving one's self to others by work or service help to satisfy this need.

3. *The Need for Forgiveness*: Most of us have experienced failures. . . . these can be resolved through accepting the forgiveness of God and others.

4. *The Need for Spiritual Integration*: We need to know and to feel ourselves spiritually integrated beyond our own existence into an absolute order of existence.

5. *The Need to Cope with Losses*: Even losses can enrich one's life journey for each provides an opportunity for spiritual growth and development.

6. *The Need for Freedom to Raise Questions*: Usually it is cathartic for people to share. . . . questions with a sympathetic listener.

7. *The Need for Flexibility*: Moving along in mature adulthood can be a period of life in which many changes are imposed upon people, despite whether they desire and seek them.

8. *The Need to Prepare for Dying and Death*: Much of this preparation seems purely physical and materialistic, but also old emotional accounts from past mistakes and grudges can be settled.

9. *The Need to Be Useful:* This is a form of the need to love others and, in turn, to receive love from others. One of the reasons that adults are choosing to stay very active in part-time work, in service, etc. after retirement flows from this need.

10. *The Need to Be Thankful*: The life review (an approach we will look at in more detail later) can stimulate a balanced perspective that includes one's happy experiences, profitable accomplishments, and good circumstances.

Potential Themes for Faith Formation with Mature Adults

As obvious from the research and a look at the characteristics of maturing adults, those in their mid-50s through the mid-70s crave continuing learning. More and more today, practitioners in adult faith formation are realizing that there are no dividing lines between the "content" of faith learning and life learning.

> Ideally, religion is coextensive with life. The so-called secular experiences of adults are pregnant with the possibility of religious meaning. . . . When adult religious education concentrates solely on topics perceived as sacred or holy, the implication is that a host of educational needs and interests arising out of daily life are trivial, a sort of second-class reality. What shapes a person's religious response, however, is the totality of his (her) experience and not simply that part of life experience perceived as sacred. Likewise, a person's religious response influences the manner in which he (she) experiences all of life and not just a segment of life designated as sacred. (McKenzie and Harton, 6)

> Since all experience has the potential for learning, the division between sacred and secular fades away. In viewing life's experiences as God-given, and our capacity to take note and organize those experiences into meaningful frameworks as a gift of grace, our journey of lifelong learning is at every moment a sacred one. Whether the experience and struggle to make meaning of it are painful or joyful, the whole process is sacred. Whether the learning event takes place within a religious context or outside of one, the moment is God-given. Lifelong

learning and the faith journey are one and the same." (Brillinger)

Everyday Life

Congregations can provide workshops, resources and support aimed at addressing the realities of the maturing ages of life including topics such as:

- simplifying life
- caring for the body—nutrition, exercise, fitness
- sharing faith with grandchildren and caring for grandchildren
- managing life transitions: new types of work, retirement, loss of loved ones, death and dying
- living as an empty-nest family
- developing marriage relationships in the mature years
- managing mature adult life issues: wills, living wills, organ donations, Social Security, Medicare,
- participating in travel and leisure activities
- discovering or developing artistic and creative talents

Another life-issue that touches many in this age group is sudden unemployment (for various reasons). Churches are offering various helps to walk this journey. St. Joseph Church in Lake Orion, MI hosted several sessions on the spiritual challenges of being unemployed, thoughts from an employer, the emotional effects of unemployment, and practical tips for seeking re-employment. (For more information: http://www.stjosephlakeorion.org/stewardship/resources/unemployment.html)

The Life of Faith

A May 2010 article in *U.S. Catholic* magazine advocated for Yellow Banana Schools of Theology in our churches. "I don't buy green bananas. I may not still be here when they ripen and turn yellow" (Donovan, 29). This proposal was precipitated by the realization that most congregations give much time, resources, and personnel to children, and some to adults, but very little to the maturing population and the elderly. These Yellow Banana Schools would be an

> . . . . endeavor powered by the urgency of age. The courses, like a ripe banana, should not only be short but also sweet. . . . Yellow not green! Short and interesting if not fun. The sweetener would be the choice of a dynamic, questioning facilitator to run the sessions instead of an answer-giving teacher or a dull, lecturing scholar. Most courses would run one session, seldom two, and never three. The curriculum would be determined mostly by the students themselves, because as we age, our felt needs increasingly become our real needs.

> What to teach? Professional educators would no doubt refer to a student body that is over 55 as being "nontraditional," like the student bodies found in the nation's community colleges. It is said that about 60 percent of what is taught in community colleges is remedial. This remediation is needed not because the students are slow but because, for one reason or another, they need updating. The same can no doubt be said of the students in the proposed Yellow Banana School of Theology. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults introduces those interested in Catholicism to its beliefs and practices. The Yellow Banana School would aim at updating mature Catholics. (Donovan, 29-31)

Life's Transitions and Losses

As crucial as it is to have designed, scheduled opportunities for ongoing faith formation in congregations when were the life-changing moments in your life and your family's life. Probably most of them happened outside of "pre-planned" self or family improvement sessions or adult faith formation sessions on various church themes. Upon reflection, most people realize that usually their deepest faith growth occurred during the unpredictable situations—and even crises—of normal, everyday life.

Diane Tickton Schuster names our reality:

Adulthood is filled with transitions: geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, unanticipated illness, divorce, and the loss of loved ones. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to 'finish unfinished business' or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive educational institutions as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help regain 'order and stability' in their lives.

Dean reminds us that transition is a constant reality. "Adulthood is characterized by periods of stability followed by periods of transition. This is a direct finding of Levinson's studies, but also can be implied from Erikson's work. It seems as though we ace tasks with which we try to cope, only to find that there are more tasks after that. Resting (a stable period) is short-lived. In Erikson's terms, once a crisis is successfully resolved, there's a new crisis waiting around the corner." (Dean, 12)

As crucial as congregations are at these times of transitions, Miller reminds us that our response, our walking with people during transitions, takes many forms; it's not only "information." "Discipleship is not a small group or classroom topic. It is a lab project, a choreographed dance, an art taught under the eye of a master." (Miller, 159)

Thus, the task for churches is to be aware of all the transitions which are touching the lives of the maturing adult today. Since adult faith formation is all-encompassing, what are the programs, processes, support and resources which people need during the various transition times of their lives?

Johnson suggests a program of mini-courses flowing from the life transitions of older adults, such as: "The 12 Keys of Successful Aging," "How to Find Peace and Purpose," "The Dynamics of Personality in Later Life," "10 Spiritual Developmental Tasks of the Middle Years," "A Faith-based Perspective of Sickness," "A Holy Understanding of Wellness," "Praying: the Heart of the Spiritual Journey." (Johnson, 60-106)

Prayer & Spirituality

More and more researchers in developmental theory—as well as practitioners/leaders in our churches—point out that the maturing adult is at a place and space in life where prayer can deepen. Feldmeier explores various prayer methods which open the door for people at this stage in life: meditation, *Lectio Divina*, centering prayer, contemplative prayer, Ignatian contemplation, consciousness examen. (Feldmeier, 194-201) For ideas on what churches are doing to encourage the journey of prayer see "A Best Practice: Prayer Forms: www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS__45.pdf.

There is also a deepening understanding of spirituality—especially if spirituality is understood to encompass all parts and parcels

of our everyday life, not just our prayer life, as important as that is.

Mature adults need fresh ideas about spirituality and faith. I listened to a 65-year-old woman recently who thought I might think her odd because she wanted to explore more deeply what it means to be a contemplative in prayer and action today. Many of her friends felt the same way. They were afraid to ask their church to help them.

Maturing adults need is to be invited into optimistic, growth-filled, practical information and formation regarding a maturing spirituality. They welcome how-to's which enable them to stay active, energetic, involved and open to spiritual growth and change which will affect their entire lives.

Effective Practices & Approaches for Faith Formation with Mature Adults

Learning in the Virtual World

Whatever the topic or theme or program or resource that a congregation offers mature adults we should always try to offer it virtually as well as in a face-to-face setting? For example:

- Offering small groups involved in Bible study the opportunity to engaged in sharing their faith and daily life-challenges via Skype or other web conferencing service, or in a Facebook group.

- Sharing online resources and faith formation programs and activities (such as online learning) for mature adults that they can use on their own and/or which can supplement real-time gatherings. Leaders need to become curators of programs and resources, and help people to find them. (For a compendium of curated digital resources go to: CuratingFaithFormation.com.)

- Prepare for a gathered program by offering people online resources. Rev. James Shopshire, Sr., professor of Sociology of Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary, observed: "One method of adult Christian education many like, is to receive by e-mail a news story, text and questions, which they see ahead of time then can meet on Monday to discuss, 'God's views on the news.'" The Episcopal Church of the Annunciation in Cordova, TN links their Bible study with an ongoing blog: http://www.buildfaith.org/2014/10/15/a-church-reinvents-adult-education-with-a-bible-and-a-blog.

- Offer opportunities to learn about technology. Even though the research shows that the Boomer generation (and older) are becoming more and more proficient in the use of technology, many still have questions, and want to learn more. Often libraries and community education programs provide learning opportunities. Could churches provide a tech room where people can learn to use the new technologies with workshops staffed by experts, and involve the younger generations who can serve as guides and mentors?

- Offer online courses for adults to learn independently or in small groups. These courses are already designed and available from universities and seminaries, as well as on iTunes University

Conversation

Adult faith formation nurtures active participation of each and every person through ongoing and spirited conversation. "Adults grow in their faith best when they have the opportunity to engage in conversation with other adults about things that matter" (Regan, 71). Regan explains how and why "sustained, engaged and critical" conversations are an "important dynamic in enhancing a faith that is living, explicit, and fruitful:

- enhances our ability to express our faith
- gives us the opportunity to come to clarity about what we think and believe
- provides a context for seeing connection between faith and life
- strengthens our faith as we hear about the faith of others" (Regan, 72-73)

Commenting on recent research regarding brain health, and suggesting seven scientifically proven, results-oriented exercises, Rosenthal recommends: "When you read a book or article share what you learn with someone else. Rather than just recounting the facts, identify and discuss the theme(s) in what you read and how they relate to your life." (Rosenthal) So many advantages of conversations about things that matter!

Our task is to create learning environments that invite mature adults to participate in transformative teaching and learning that leads to more faithful living. Such emancipatory education involves open and dialogical experiences where deep listening, on-going reflection and mutual respect are practiced. Being free to raise hard questions and to explore "what if" possibilities can help older adults grow in faith and in discipleship that offers compassion and works for justice.

No matter what the gathering or occasion – face-to-face or virtual—opportunities for conversation are crucial.

Small Groups

One key method for conversation, of course, are small groups. More and more research encourages adult faith formation opportunities to include some version of small groups.

"Our parishes have become so large, so anonymous, and we've been allowed to attend them instead of participate in them. Today, people don't drop out of Church as much as drop in –occasionally! My hope is that little faith-sharing groups will continue to emerge, connected to parishes. The base community and the institutional parish need one another. The parish needs the small fervent group to keep it honest, to allow and encourage those who want to ask the deeper questions, those who want to go further, those who want to learn to pray, to minister, to study, to advocate, and to lay down their lives for the poor. And the small group needs the parish to avoid becoming sectarian, narrow, or lost in personality and trendiness. They must regulate, balance and challenge one another." (Rohr and Martos)

Weber reiterates four benefits of small groups:

- Community building: A small group serves as a community or congregation within the congregation.
- Educational development: Small groups provide a wonderful opportunity to engage people in study.
- Spiritual enrichment: Far too many Christians limit their prayer life to one minute before meals and one minute before going to sleep. Many find themselves just too busy to pray.
- Mission outreach: Each small group is required to look beyond themselves by engaging in ministry beyond the group. (Weber)

Share Faith Magazine expands Weber's thoughts, suggesting "10 Reasons Why Your Church Should Have Small Groups."

1. Small groups foster close relationships and integral community.
2. Small groups provide a comfortable introduction for nonbelievers to the Christian faith.
3. Small groups provide an ideal way to care for the needs of people within the church.
4. Small groups provide a way for Christians to live out their faith instead of merely hearing more preaching or teaching.
5. Small groups participate in focused prayer for one another.
6. Small groups provide a comfortable atmosphere for openness.
7. Small groups allow for mutual edification among believers.
8. Small groups encourage better learning.
9. Small groups provide a source of encouragement and accountability.
10. Small groups help to cultivate leadership within the church. (ShareFaithMagazine)

These small groups can take various forms:

- *Circle of Trust*: Created by Parker Palmer, this small invites adults to a challenging (as well as comforting) small group experience.

- *Study Groups*: These groups meet to study Scripture, recent books, movies and videos, justice and peace issues, or a variety of other topics. Their main goal is the on-going growth and learning of the participants.

- *Gift-discovery and strengths- development groups*: Winseman recounts the experience of St. Gerard Majella Parish in Port Jefferson Station, New York and their journey to become an alive, engaged parish. One of the helps in their plan was to use the Clifton StrengthsFinder followed by groups that focused on identifying parishioners' gifts and talents, creating a unifying bond among their members. In this experience, as group members encourage one another in developing their talents into strengths, the spiritual journey they take together deepens their faith. (Winseman, 113-123)

- *Accountability groups*: These groups meet in order to help participants face the challenges of everyday life and become better people. Members hold each other accountable for living up to the expectations of their faith tradition, and encourage each other in their efforts.

- *Support groups*: These groups address the various circumstances and/or challenges people live with in their lives, and offer the encouragement and assistance of others who are facing or who have faced similar situations and difficulties.

People who have been members of small groups for a long period of time have shared their ideas concerning what makes small groups thrive:

- Having a shared vision: knowing why they are gathering
- Taking the time and effort to identify and dedicate themselves to common goals
- Engaging in prayer and rituals holds a prominent place in the life of the group
- Sharing the work of facilitating, hosting, and providing hospitality.

- Building strong relationships through social time, good communication, mutual respect, and more.
- Engaging in regular evaluation and review of expectations
- Doing something together, such as engagement in service and works of justice, bonds the group together.
- Engaging in earnest dialogue, conversation and spirituality call members back.

Book Clubs

Book clubs or groups can be a beneficial way to nurture spiritual growth, build community, promote lifelong learning, help members make new friends and expand their horizons, and more.

Book clubs run the gamut, encompassing the reading of all types of books. Some devote themselves to one kind, one theme, but many are eclectic. Patrick White, professor of English at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, has noted, "You can't get people together to talk about literature in a serious way over time without touching on spiritual matters." He adds, "Let's face it, no one is going to say to each other, 'Hey, let's get together. . . . and promise that we'll grow together as spiritual beings.' It's too terrifying. So we say, 'Do you want to get together and read some books? Oh yeah. . . . And it will also be fun and interesting.'"

Book clubs can happen face-to-face (at churches, homes, coffee shops, etc.) or virtually. The diverse timing and formats of book clubs lend themselves to the schedules and life situations of the maturing adult. Wanting to be involved in the parish but unable to do something at night, a 74-year old woman began a daytime book club at St. Regis Church, Bloomfield Hills, MI, inviting all parishioners. At another church, a woman, realizing that many mid-50s through mid-70s adults are caring for aging parents began an online book club. Since many of the members are in this life situation often their books focus on this reality.

For various helps and suggestions for books and/or questions, there are a multitude of online sites:

- www.bookclubs.ca
- www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs
- www.ezinearticles.com/?Book-Club-Questions&id=222106
- http://classiclit.about.com/od/bookclubs/a/aa_bcquestions.htm
- www.americamagazine.org/content/catholic-book-club.cfm
- http://www.uscatholic.org/bookclub

For a unique process of inviting and gathering adults for a church book study, go to: http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems__14.pdf.

Support Groups

Support groups can be a powerful opportunity for the ongoing formation maturing adults are often craving: support for their day-to-day, real life challenges and events. Members of a support group typically share their personal experiences and offer one another emotional comfort and moral support, feeling less alone. They may also offer practical advice and tips for coping and thriving, to feel more empowered. The advice and help may take the form of providing and evaluating relevant information, relating personal experiences, listening to and accepting others' experiences, providing sympathetic understanding and establishing social networks. Sometimes a support group may also work to inform the public or engage in advocacy.

Support groups come in a variety of formats, including in person, on the Internet or by telephone. They may be led by professional facilitators or by group members. Among the

many life issues which support groups for those in their mid-50s through mid-70s can focus on:

- married life
- empty nest syndrome
- young adults returning home
- divorce and separation
- death of a spouse
- death of a child
- depression
- living with cancer or other diseases
- addictions
- family members in the military
- grandparents raising children
- caregivers
- adults of aging parents

Gift Discovery & Strengths Development

God calls each of us to be who we are, who we uniquely are created to be, with our gifts and strengths. More and more churches are seeing this as one of the goals of adult faith formation: to encourage and support each person in the maturing and deepening of their strengths and gifts as they grow to be their best selves, who God created them to be.

Tools abound today to help congregations walk with their members in discerning their strengths and gifts. Among them *are Called and Gifted* (http://www.siena.org/Called-Gifted/called-a-gifted), *StrengthsFinders* (http://strengths.gallup.com/110440/About-StrengthsFinder-2.aspx), and Spiritual Gifts Survey for Maturing Adults (Johnson, 107-113)

As adults in their mid-50s through mid-70s discover new journeys in life, a deeper understanding of who they are, the uniqueness of their gifts and strengths can be a crucial support for the new ventures. The fascinating and helpful reality is that many churches are not simply providing tools for people to discover their strengths, but continuing to walk with

them as they understand more deeply, use them in many areas of their lives and direct them toward new adventures. (For more ideas see "Empowering the Living of Gifts" at www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS__19.pdf.)

Programming for Communities of Like Interest

Nearly a century ago Henry Ford invented the famous assembly line that is credited with putting Detroit, and the world, in the "Mass Production" business. When he introduced the Model T, the marketing message was essentially, "You can have any color you want as long as it is black." Donald Tapscott, the author of several books on today's digital world, uses a different term to describe what drives business today: "Mass Customization." In effect, "you can have whatever you want customized to your wishes."

What does this mean for adult faith formation? We can no longer approach adult faith formation with a "one-size-fits-all" mentality. All we have to do is look at our congregations and we easily realize the diversity and, therefore the reality, that different groups need different things. Parents of young children need something different than empty nesters. Those who have just lost a job have unique needs. People who are new to the Christian faith need something different than those who have been deeply practicing the faith for years Gentzler notes,

Use lifestyles, not age, as the determining factor for ministry. Chronological age is not important in ministry with persons at midlife and beyond. Rather, lifestyle issues are more important. For example, grandparenting concerns are not just for people who are retired. . . . the question becomes: "what are the common concerns that all grandparents, of whatever age, may

experience?" Create small groups around common interests, concerns, or careers." (Gentzler, 53)

Certainly, there are times when "mixed groups" are extremely important; we learn from the wisdom and experiences of each other. Yet, many congregations tell us that they have better responses to offerings when the opportunities are for specific groups, for communities of like interest. For example, a scripture study programs for men, at times convenient for their work schedules; or a program exploring various forms of prayer tailored to couples, to those in grief, to baby boomers, to just retiring.

Many congregations offer courses or workshops or small groups targeted to specific groups, such as: Effective Grandparenting; Relating Effectively to your Adult Children; Balancing Love, Work and Life; The Loneliness of the Empty-Nest; Support Group for Adult Children of Aging Parents; Planning to Age Gracefully (and Have Fun Doing It)?

Intergenerational Opportunities

Intergenerationality is crucial in our ministry to all members, especially with those adults in their mid-50s through mid-70s. "People who age well often have growing relationships with younger people and are involved in learning and growth opportunities." (Gentzler, 54)

During a workshop Rev. Ramonia Lee, chaplain of an interfaith center recounted that age-segregated ministries often do not appeal to Boomers; ". . . . they will take advantage of every possible opportunity to mix with the generations," Lee said. "They want partnerships with other groups in the church and the community, including mission groups, choirs, coffee conversation groups, even confirmation classes with older members studying with the children."

Likewise, intergenerationality benefits the younger generations: "Social scientists have

worried about how few opportunities our contemporary culture offers for inter-generational exchanges, and the extent to which this generational segregation deprives younger people of the opportunity to witness the generativity, engagement, and aging of older people." (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 241)

Kotre claims that, for any culture to flourish, younger people need the examples, witness and stories of real-life people growing older and acquiring wisdom. (Kotre, 41)

Roszak notes,

"Wise elders play an important role in various indigenous faith traditions, and the emergence in our time of more older people embracing Fowler's universalizing stage has substantial cultural and spiritual implications for the future of human civilization. We know the world population is growing older with a promise of future hope that only a few researchers have noted (Roszak).

Our youth also lack inspiring adult models – at several levels. "Cultivating wise elders needs to become an integral dimension of adult catechesis for the future" (O'Murchu, 118). Road Scholar reports that their grandparents-grandchildren travel programming is their fastest growing offerings.

Fortunately the awareness of—and the planning for—intergenerational learning is growing. Churches respond to inter-generationality in numerous ways: small groups, faith formation opportunities, prayer and worship, service and outreach. One example of bringing the generations together in service is exemplified at Grace Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX where they participate in Church Apartment Ministry (http://www.churchapartmentministry.org/apartment/home.php), in which Grace Presbyterian maintains an apartment for families of patients coming for cancer treatment at the Texas

Medical Center. The Encore 50+ Ministry coordinates this outreach; the young adults of the congregation do most of the cleaning and maintenance as well as helping the families move in. The older adults visit the families and patient, offering to bring them to church, and provide meals.

Another activity employed by many churches for enjoyment as well as learning is movie afternoons or evenings. Some congregations host these events only for adults, or only for teens, or only for children, but many bring all generations together.

One way to connect with and build on intergenerational programming, especially in faith formation, is to shape all offerings of the congregation—intergenerationally as well as with specific age groups—around one specific theme. If the year's theme is prayer, in addition to the intergenerational learning opportunities, events and offerings can continue that theme for those mid-50's through mid-70s. For an illustration of how three different churches have incorporated the themed-approach, see www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS__44.pdf.

For resource and more information on intergenerational faith formation go to: http://www.IntergenerationalFaith.com.)

Personal and Communal Practices

Many mature adults grew up when their identity flowed from a life of spiritual practices. In recent years, more and more people have advocated for the return of spiritual practices, such as hospitality, Sabbath moments, living gratefully, seasonal celebrations and rituals, service/justice, savoring beauty, nature, pilgrimages, forgiveness, suffering, art, mindfulness, journaling, simplicity, wonder, quiet. This return to spiritual practices especially appeals to maturing adults because there is a link to the past coupled with a practical application to life today. Effective and valuable adult formation within our

congregations would include a study/reflection on the meaning and understanding of each practice and a variety of ways to experience and live the practices. (See Living Well Christian Practices at LifelongFaith.com.)

Life Reviews

For many, life reviews and legacies are a meaningful spiritual practice and effective faith formation experience.

> In our later years, the pace of making sense of our entire life quickens. Internal and external forces converge, giving us the opportunity of gaining a global perspective of how God has been at work in all the days of our lives. We search for the patterns, themes, successes, and failures that have combined into the amazing amalgam we call our life. In our later years, we arrange the facts of our life into a cohesive whole. We take stock of our life as we never have before. We see new themes, new strands, new waves in our life that we missed in our day-to-day living. (Johnson, 102)

Inviting and equipping people in mature adulthood to purposefully reflect on their lives is a constructive approach to cherish life, to deepen meaning, and to share legacies. Keeping in mind the varying learning styles and people's different preferences, there are numerous ways to invite people to participate in this: writing memoirs, previewing and assembling photo albums, taping memories and stories, expressing life moments and history through art, creating memory gardens, giving away mementos/distributing possessions to others, developing family histories or genealogies, making trips to family homes or pilgrimages to locations of family/spiritual significance and autobiographies or life histories.

Incorporated into these life histories, adults in their maturing years might also be invited to

reflect on their legacy. What are they passing on to the seventh generation (a Native American tradition)? A reflective time to think about the following questions, and perhaps write them down for their families, can be very affirming:

- What are four of the spiritual gifts God has given you?
- To whom would you like to give these gifts?
- What are four of the talents God has given you?
- To whom would you like to leave these talents?

At one church, a person's real-life journey of writing a spiritual autobiography touched many others. Mary had no idea why but she felt led to begin writing her life story. It was a few months after her husband died, a very difficult time in her life. No one suggested journaling, jotting down her thoughts and feelings, or writing the story of her life, but, all of a sudden, Mary felt a yearning to write her story. An outline formed in her mind, flowing from "the houses she lived in" and thus her spiritual autobiography began.

After its completion two years later, Mary gave copies to her children, brothers and a few friends. With its conclusion, Mary realized that the writing of her story brought much healing during a time of grief, and although she didn't start out to intentionally write about the God moments—how God was present—it became obvious that those times just naturally surfaced.

A couple years later Mary participated in a program, *Becoming Well, Wise and Whole in our Maturing Years*, with Richard P. Johnson. As Johnson spoke of some topics that are helpful to maturing adults, he mentioned the power of writing a spiritual autobiography. Mary said, "All the bells went off. I knew all the good it had done for me; I was very sure of the beneficial things it could do for others."

Thus, with the support and encouragement of the adult faith formation coordinator at her church, Mary created a workshop on "The Whys and Hows of Writing a Spiritual Autobiography." The purpose of these gatherings was to share with the participants a method, some tips, and helpful do's and don'ts for writing a spiritual autobiography. As the participants began writing, and then re-gathered at each subsequent session, they talked about what they had written, about their experience of writing, about what was happening to them in the process writing. In this sharing, people experienced being a community standing on holy ground.

Service

Many experts challenge congregations to create compelling opportunities for service and outreach, for as a researcher at Peter Hart Associates commented: "For this generation of older Americans, volunteerism is about something much more substantial and real than taking up time in their day. . . . it is about filling a need, their need to both make a difference and be involved" (Hart, 3).

> . . . . not only do outreach program stimulate individuals, they motivate and galvanize your entire ministry around an identifiable purpose that is clearly visible. This needs to be seen as a vocation, not simply volunteer activities. (Johnson, 55)

The variety of opportunities for the mature adult planned and offered throughout churches include service within the congregation as well as outreach to the community and beyond. Such delivering Meals-on-Wheels, providing transportation, mentoring, serving in homeless shelters and soup kitchens, serving as companions to people in need, sharing job skills and expertise with those in the community, visiting nursing home and the homebound, singing in a choir for worship or concerts, and providing home repair for those in need.

Conclusion

Gary McIntosh helps us to summarize many of opportunities available for ministry and faith formation with Baby Boomers or mature adults by offering these recommendations.

1. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **adventurous**. Rather than mall walking, consider hiking in the mountains, cross-country skiing, or snowshoeing. Remember: Boomers have always seen themselves as a youthful generation, and they still do!

2. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **fun**. Rather than potluck luncheons, consider catered parties, fishing trips, paint ball competitions, and team-building camps. Remember: Boomers are not looking for a seniors' ministry; they are seeking an older youth ministry.

3. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **significant**. Rather than being served, consider serving others by building a home for Habitat for Humanity, assisting missionaries, helping out-of-work people to find a job, or tutoring children. Remember: Boomers desire to make a difference in the world by taking on great causes.

4. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **educationa**l. Along with Bible studies, consider CPR, basic first aid, personal health, managing finances, and public speaking classes. Remember: Boomers are an educated generation, and they wish to continue learning to the end of their days.

5. Building a ministry for Boomers that is **spiritual**. Rather than offering simplistic formulas, consider prayer walks in the neighborhood, intercession teams, and a variety of small group sharing. Remember: Boomers are a mosaic of sub-groups, and it will take a multi-dimensional approach to spiritual formation to reach them." (McIntosh, 300-303)

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Faith Formation with Older Adults

Dorothy Linthicum

W hen answering the question, "Who is your target audience?" most church leaders will say young people, or Millennials, or young families, or the unchurched. Very few will say their churches are focusing on people over 75. Yet look at the people sitting in the pews, or serving on altar guilds, or ushering, or pledging, or manning the food programs. Many are nearing 75 or are already in that age group.

Can a church be vibrant if it offers well-rounded activities for all ages, but targets older people? A church in Pennsylvania plans to explore that question:[i]

At a recent retreat, the lay governing body at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Montrose, PA, decided to focus the church's ministry on older people at the church, in the community, in two senior

Dorothy Linthicum, an instructor at Virginia Theological Seminary, has studied and taught courses and workshops about older adult spirituality and ministry at the seminary, conferences, and dioceses. As program coordinator for the Center for the Ministry of Teaching (CMT), she shares responsibility for maintaining the physical and virtual Key Hall Resource Room and for critiquing and compiling the annual reviews of the Vacation Bible School materials that are posted in late February on the CMT web pages. She continues her role as editor of Episcopal Teacher, a quarterly publication of the CMT.

living apartment complexes, and in one nursing home.

St. Paul's, which was founded in 1831 and is housed in a historic worship space, made a gallant effort in 2008 to create a ministry for young people that included additional personnel, new furniture and redecorated space, curricula, and supplies. After four years, the vestry concluded that other churches in the area were better equipped to serve young families.

When the Rev. Paul Towers, rector, first described the situation at his church, my heart cried out, "No," and my mind began a mantra, "you can't have church without children." But somewhere in that clatter of inner voices, another thought slipped into both my mind and heart.

At the eFormation Conference 2014 at Virginia Theological Seminary in June, one of the plenary speakers, Meredith Gould, asked us, "Who is your target audience?" She answered her own question by saying it should be the people sitting in the pews, not some unrepresented demographic. From my observations, the people sitting in pews at many of our churches are nearing or over age 65. This apparently is the case at Father Paul's church.

St. Paul's has decided to approach their new ministry to older people carefully, beginning by asking church members and people in the community what they want or need. They intend to begin slowly, and build a ministry that can be sustained.

Father Paul came to us with a basic question, "What will ministry to older people look like?" He has gathered resources about programming and guidelines for adult ministry, but there are

no blueprints for the ministry that his church hopes to create.

Father Paul is quick to point out that this new ministry in still in the planning phase. Changes in the worship space are already underway: a new surround sound system designed for people with hearing impairments is now in place, and new cameras are being installed to broadcast the primary Sunday worship service in high definition. Older people in the community will be able to worship weekly through a cable television broadcast of the Sunday service at St. Paul's.

There are many questions the church needs to answer. Will St. Paul's no longer have intergenerational worship and community events? How will it welcome families and younger individuals that are attracted by their ministry?

The demographics of the area, which is a magnet for retirees that are a part of the Baby Boomer bulge, indicate that there is a strong base for both a vital church and ministry to older people. Maybe more churches should ask the question, "Who is our target audience?"

Most churches are not ready to abandon their courses of action to focus entirely on aging, but there are practices and approaches that could lead to richer, fuller ministry with older people in our churches and communities. This article will look at how churches can respond with meaningful ministries to keep this group a vital part of congregations.

Spiritual Well-Being

Churches have a different role in the lives of older people than social service agencies. Governmental agencies on aging in many areas throughout the country provide a range of social, medical, psychological, and emotional services for both older adults and caregivers. Churches can promote those services as resources for the community, without duplicating programs and presentations about topics such as writing wills, setting up medical directives, among others. (If these services are not available, however, the religious community can work together to fill this need.)

The key component churches can provide to older populations is in the realm of the spiritual. While the spiritual well-being of people of all ages is obviously a goal of religious organizations, this article will focus on practices that are targeted to older adults.

In 1971 researchers, service providers, and religious leaders were invited to a White House Conference on Aging to discuss a number of issues, including spiritual well-being. That ignited the religious community in the United States to form the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging, which had representatives from the major Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish religious bodies. This definition came out of that group's deliberations in 1977:

> Spiritual well-being is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community, and the environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness.[2]

Donald F. Clingan, the first president of the coalition, has been working with that definition for over 25 years and concludes that it "speaks clearly, especially to older adults."[3] In a foreword of a book about spiritual well being and aging, he adds commentary that accompanied the definition. The spiritual, Clingan writes, is not one dimension in life, but "it permeates and gives meaning to all life." It goes beyond physical, psychological, or social good health to embrace an affirmation of life. "It is to say 'yes' to life," says Clingan, "in spite of negative circumstances." An affirmation of life, which is rooted in a community of faith, acknowledges the destiny of life to love oneself and others.[4]

He adds that seeing God as supreme being and creator of life enables us to grow in wholeness as individuals, responding to God in love and obedience. Because human wholeness is not attainable in a lifetime, life gains significance through a person's relationship with God. We learn to live into the possibility of becoming whole. Clingan says that the coalition's definition and commentary on spiritual well-being "has an eternal quality. . . . it does lift up the centrality of a relationship to God, the Supreme Being, the Creator of life, which is universal to all faiths, and certainly is an imperative to spiritual well-being in all our lives."[5]

Ministry for Wholeness

As the coalition's definition makes clear, we cannot separate our spiritual lives from the wholeness of life. At the same time, it is helpful to distinguish among ministry for the body, mind and soul, with the intent of weaving those disparate parts into a whole cloth. The ensuing discussion will examine practices and approaches to ministry in each of three areas—physical, mental, and spiritual—with the understanding that each is only a part of the whole person.

The practice of ministry to the whole person results in programming that touches all three areas. At the same time the mix of activities should reflect the needs and contexts of each congregation. Programming should never be planned without the active input of the targeted

audience. Activities should be created for "us" by "us;" those are created solely by staff or well-meaning people for "them" are doomed to fail. The ministries suggested below reflect earlier observations made about the development, generational, and spiritual characteristics of older adults in the Builder Generation.

Body

Physical changes include not only the body, but also how those changes affect volunteer activities, the places people live, and those who are caregivers.

Honoring Past Work

The Builder Generation has provided the leaders and workers that are still the backbone of many civic and religious organizations. This is due to their commitment, reliability, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good. As this generation moved out of the workforce and into retirement, their actions and beliefs often became visionary or idealist. In churches and other religious organizations, many mission and outreach initiatives domestically and overseas began with the efforts of people who are now over 75. This group also provided the hospitality that made church communities so inviting, from luncheons for older members to receptions at funerals.

Many of those still actively involved in ministry projects are often weary and ready to move on to other pursuits. Younger generations, however, seem to have limited time and little interest in hosting receptions or continuing traditional events. This is a time for people of different age groups to clearly assess which activities should be continued and which are no longer feasible. Instead of letting traditional events die a quick or lingering death, which results in resentment and hurt, congregations should celebrate the role the

events played in the life of the church and the people that made them possible. The efforts of people over many years to create hospitality or to meet a community need deserve more than a line in a worship bulletin. The Builder Generation laid the foundation that allows the current congregation to change and grow.

Changes in the Body

Changes in the body are often seen and described as losses: a *loss* of hearing, a *loss* of vision, a *loss* of dexterity, among others. These changes often turn sidewalks, entrances, and aisles into barriers.

To test the accessibility of the buildings and grounds of a church, enlist the youth group to conduct a survey. Not only will the congregation learn about their facilities, the youth will also gain a new understanding of older people. Several groups have published simulations of aging; begin with one created by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at Texas A&M University and available for free download.[6]

The loss of mobility can isolate people in their homes, especially if they no longer can drive and cannot navigate mass transit. As Internet use becomes more prevalent with older people and they move to broader bandwidths, software such as Skype can bring families and friends together.

Middle school youth at First Presbyterian Church, Kilgore, Texas, make monthly visits to older adults, according to Roberta Ingersoll.[7] Members of the visitation ministry team drive youth in teams of three to visit older adult members of the congregation and local nursing homes. "The youth are given conversation starters and a devotional to offer during the visits,' says Ingersoll. "Skills are developed, faith is shared, and multiple relationships are built." The youth take pictures of the visit, leaving at least one picture with the person visited and bringing another back for the

group's scrapbook. A group like the Kilgore youth could also help set up a Skype conversation among family members of an older adult. Grandparents could not only talk to their children and grandchildren, but also see them in real time.

Other churches designate work weekends where groups of all ages help older people rake leaves, clean gutters, and other chores. This kind of service recognizes the gifts that the Builder Generation has shared in their communities over the years.

Aging in Place

As noted earlier, most older people want to stay where they are, preferring to grow old in their own homes, "aging in place."[8] Successful aging in place, however, demands that homes not only provide continued enjoyment and stimulation, but also support declining functional limitations. Too often this decision gets made by default; people of all ages have an aversion to nursing homes and even well-planned retirement communities. Churches have an opportunity to partner with local and community agencies to help older people make more informed decisions about their future living arrangements

Many homes, for example, do not have the architectural capacity to adjust to the needs of aging bodies. A team of architects and construction experts from the church and community could advise older residents about the feasibility of adding chair lifts to staircases, making bathrooms handicapped accessible, and widening doorways. Expert advice can be offered about other issues, such as transportation. Older residents need to consider not only their own mobility, but also transportation options for caregivers who may not have cars.

The pairing of people in their 50s and 60s who are beginning to think about future living arrangements with people in their 80s who are

aging in place could be beneficial for everyone concerned. The Builders could help the Boomers with the realities of independent living arrangements, while the Boomers might be able to resolve some of the challenges the Builders had not anticipated. This kind of bond might result in a much deeper relationship over time.

Caregivers

Reaching out with support to caregivers should probably be a part of every church strategy for working with older people. In his first monograph, *I'm Old,* written when he was in his late 80s, Milton Crum argues that more time and effort is spent dealing with caregivers than old people themselves.[9] However, in reading Crum's later work, *I'm Frail,* it is becomes clear that he assumes primary responsibility for the care of his wife, even while both are living in an assisted living facility. Many mature adults with health issues of their own assume caregiving responsibilities for a spouse, partner, or friend.

Most caregivers of all ages need more support than governmental agencies and care facilities offer. The loneliness of the task and its long hours are demanding enough to test anyone. Churches can support caregivers in the congregation through support groups and short-term palliative breaks.

Mind

Too often when the terms *mental* and *older adults* are paired, thoughts quickly move to dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Even for those who fall prey to dementia in their late 80s and 90s—and half of this group maintains their mental faculties—there are still years of retirement to deal with, savor, and enjoy. Adults over 75 have already begun to deal with issues of loss in every facet of their lives.

Dealing with Loss and Loneliness

A reality for people over 75 is the loss of love ones—spouses, friends, and other family members. Women are especially hard hit: 64 percent of men over 75 are married, while only 18 percent of women in that age group are married.[10] Women continue to be more likely to outlive their male spouses as they age. Along with this lost is another reality that feeds feelings of loneliness. In a major study of women over age 65, Karen Scheib asked women how their congregations perceived them. They said they were invisible.[11]

Sheib proposes three practices for the care of older women that are also applicable to all older adults. She notes that the practices are "grounded in a vision of the church as a community of gracious inclusion,"[12] but extend into the general community as well.

1. Through narrative practices of care, people can find a sense of self and view their place in the world through the stories they tell about themselves and the world. This will be discussed in more depth in the section below on *holy listening*.

2. Practices of tending relationships and caring for communities nurture the interpersonal, family, and communal connections that form mature adults' lives. Tending relationships includes both pastoral counseling and support provided when loss and grief occur. Sheib says communal care encourages interaction between individual and communal identity and spirituality. One way to provide this kind of care is support groups for women and others. Programming—such as "meet and eat" events with entertainment or a light program—does not meet the deeper needs of some mature adults, who long for more in-depth content. Many older adults also prefer intergenerational activities that stretch them psychically and mentally.

3. Practices of prophetic witness challenge cultural attitudes and policies that are oppressive generally to all older adults and specifically to older women. Congregations can choose to advocate for public policy, especially around issues of economic security, caregiving, and abuse.[13]

Jane Sigloh's reflections about the second half of life in *Like Trees Walking* suggests loneliness be consecrated and turned into something holy. She believes loneliness can be a positive experience that leads people to fulfillment. "A place where, in the ultimate depths of each individual soul, we can meet God. And where we can hear the voice of God, the way Elijah did, in the sound of sheer silence."[14]

Churches can provide the space and the permission for mature adults to create "gardens of solitude." Being surrounded by people and involved in multiple activities may pull someone momentarily from their loneliness. Solitude for some does not always occur in the absence of activity. But we can learn together how to protect the experience of loneliness, which allows people to "feel the thirst of the desert."[15]

> There's really no such thing as 'privacy' in solitude, because we have generations of friends and neighbors and brothers and sisters and cousins and in-laws with us—united through Christ, one to the other. And the bond is so tight—even with those who are strangers—that we can't let go of them even when we climb up various ladders to find our solitude. So how can we be lonely?[16]

Keeping Close to Family

Research into family systems with older members goes against societal beliefs about relationships between mature adults and other family members. While generations are less likely to live under one roof, older adults report close relationships with children and grandchildren, who often live within driving distance.

Churches can provide settings to help generations spend time together as families. Vacation Bible Schools, which commonly last a week, are a good place for grandchildren who are spending time with grandparents. While children are involved in the program, grandparents can share their skills and talents as volunteers, doing tasks from storytelling to making creative snacks to teaching a craft.

Many churches also schedule weekend retreats, which welcome extended family members into the church community. Other intergenerational activities, such as mission and outreach opportunities, embrace family members of all ages.

Technology

Pew studies show that people over 75 are becoming more tech savvy than ever before. Those that use the internet are very likely to communicate by emails and use it for search functions.[17] More and more people in this age group are also using some format of social media and have purchased smart phones. Often they are frustrated with the lack of detailed instructions about using new software and their own fears of "breaking" an application or losing their data.

As churches turn more and more to digital ministry and online communication, they could assist older members in using new technology for faith formation and for general communications. Boomers will soon be moving into the over-75 age group, and they will be bringing their interests and skills with them.

Statistics show that more and more older people are purchasing and using smart phones and different forms of tablets. One of the features of both these technologies is accessibility to software applications, *apps*, for a wide range of functions. Millennials, who create most of the available apps, assume users share their trial-and-error method of learning the usage of new tools. Older people, especially those over 75, prefer written guidelines or one-on-one instruction.

Pairing Millennials in churches with older people for "App Sundays," is one way to bridge the knowledge gap between generations, with younger people listening to needs, suggesting appropriate apps, and teaching their use, and older people sharing their related experiences and humor. A learning and teaching atmosphere is conducive to building relationships that go far beyond random apps. Requirements for this kind of gathering include wireless internet availability, younger people (including adolescents) willing to be teachers, and older people with open minds.

Many organizations provide online spiritual and worship resources. Using them is not difficult; finding them may harder for some older people. Help in bookmarking resources can open up a new way of thinking about God. The brothers at the Society of Saint John the Evangelist,[18] for example, provide online daily meditations, audio clips of prayers and chants, and seasonal reflections. Those using tablets or computers can enlarge the typeface of written material as needed; the volume of audio portions is also at the control of the user.

A wider use of electronic tablets across all age groups has particular applicability to older people, who often find smart phone keyboards difficult to use. The same people tapped as "App Sunday" teachers could assist mature adults in selecting a tablet and service provider that meets their needs. While the many options for

devices provide choice, they also add confusion, especially for those already uncertain about using new technology.

Because older people are also using social media to a greater extent, online communities can be formed that allow people to share their thoughts and activities. A Facebook page with limited accessibility would allow a group of older women, for example, to support each other, sharing joys and sorrows, and facing loneliness.

Thoughtful Programming Content

Content that is intellectually stimulating, and thought-provoking is often missing in programs targeted to older people. While older adults certainly participate in general offerings for all adults, these are often available only at night or in 45-minute segments on Sunday mornings.

While lighter community-building functions are enjoyed by many, some would gravitate to events with more substance. Older adults interested in this kind of programming can provide the leadership to start and sustain it. In addition to denominational resources, content is available or no or low cost from sites such as the nonprofit TED Talks.[19] TED is devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short talks (18 minutes or less).

Several new Bible studies are also available to help group go beyond a basic discussion of passages. The *Covenant Bible Study,*[20] which uses filmed segments of scholars who take a contemporary approach to ancient texts. They are joined by the segment hosts: one a Presbyterian pastor and the other a United Methodist pastor. The format provides a new way to think about biblical texts, using a new lens for seeing how the texts interact across the millennia.

Memory Impairment

Caregivers of older people, especially elders with dementia, tell us that memories can still provide feelings of safety and contentment. Unlocking those memories from brains with twisted neurons is possible, requiring only a few simple prompts. A story that takes a person back to childhood often brings a smile; occasionally the older person picks up the strands of the story and retells it in slightly new way.

At a recent seminar on aging, we explored the making of personal memory boxes that could be used to help people recall favorite memories, whether they experience memory impairment or not.[21] One participant noted, with excitement, that the preparation of a memory box gave her something positive to do now that could later give her control over her thoughts in the future. Providing a safe place where people can face and name their fears, especially for those over 75 who may be reluctant to do so, is an important ministry of the church.

There are several ways to help people begin the creation of their own memory boxes or to gather materials for a friend, spouse or family members who can no longer do so themselves. While the product is focused on an individual, the process of gathering words, images, music, art and photos is communal. Sharing the components of a memory box during the gathering process gives people the opportunity to explore their past and name the ways God has worked in their lives.

Memory boxes can be explored through a series of gatherings at a church or other setting, which can be scheduled over several weeks or in a retreat setting. People who might be reluctant to share an intimate story about God's presence in their lives are more open to talking about music that touches their hearts and their memories of a story or family photograph. Moving from the comfort of a fond memory to

finding God in that memory might be easier for some.

Another way to discover how God has acted in individual lives is through the crafting of spiritual autobiographies. "A spiritual autobiography focuses less on the people, events and experiences of a person's life and more on what these people, events and experiences meant for him and how they formed him or shaped the course of his life. It allows the writer to communicate who he is as a person and what is important in his life."[22]

Sharon Pearson, editor and Christian formation specialist at Church Publishing says that the sharing of spiritual autobiographies "builds a group faster than anything else. And it provides the individual the chance (some for the first time) to reflect on where God has (or has not) been throughout the stages of their life."[23] She includes resources that outline the methodology for creating spiritual autobiographies. Most denominations and religious organization promoting spirituality offer similar resources.

Through the writing of spiritual biographies people begin to identify tangible objects that reflect their deepest memories. The objects chosen not only have the power to evoke a pleasant memory, but also to reflect God's presence in the events of a person's life.

Spirit

Spiritual wholeness can be elusive, especially among those who have resisted doubt and uncertainty in their faith. Its importance can be overlooked or shoved aside in the busy-ness of everyday life. Those over 75, comfortable with being in the Builder Generation, may find it difficult to move beyond a faith defined only by community mores, to beliefs forged and strengthened during times of doubt. There are ministries that can help mature adults fashion their faith through holy listening, mentorships,

knowing God, and facing death—both their own and those they love.

Holy Listening

In the planning of a women's retreat about the spirituality of aging for a small, ecumenical church in a beach community, we explored the need for "holy listeners," people who could help participants deal with personal issues and concerns raised during the retreat. The church only has part-time clergy support, whose primary responsibility is Sunday worship. Given the number of women expected to attend the retreat, the leader probably would not have time to meet with all those who wanted to explore their ideas and concerns further. Retreat planners soon realized that their work around holy listeners could likely have an impact beyond the retreat.

As the planners wrestled with who should be invited to this ministry and how it should take place in a retreat setting, they decided some training was needed. They used these guidelines to structure the tasks of holy listeners:

1. There must be absolute confidentiality unless a person shares a suicidal or similar thought. That rarely happens, but if it does, a clergy person is a good resource in this situation.
2. Listeners are not therapists. Questions should only clarify or help the person hear what they are saying. Listeners might respond by saying: "I heard you say. . . . Is that how you are feeling?" or "Tell me more about that."
3. Listeners should refrain from offering advice. In the best situation a person discovers within herself the solution to an issue or problem. If that doesn't happen, perhaps the person needs to live in the situation a while longer.

4. Don't be afraid of silence. You don't need to fill the space with words. Sometimes the Holy Spirit needs silence to do her work.
5. Set a time limit and stick to it. There are always exceptions to every rule, but going over your time limit might be an indication that a person needs more than a listener.
6. Ask the clergy for a list of counselors or therapists in your area that you could refer people to. This takes a burden from listeners if a situation goes beyond their comfort zone. They can offer the list and gracefully back out.

The purpose and role of holy listeners is to allow participants the chance to explore their own lives and situations a little deeper. Participants are the ones doing the work; the listener gives them the grace to do so.

As people in congregations age, there is an increasing need for those who can grant the very needed grace of listening. "Explaining ourselves," says one writer, "and finding that we are pretty good people after all is like forgiveness of sin; acceptance as we are—warts and all—is what we strive for and is what I think gives meaning to life."[24] He believes that just sitting still to listen to older people talk about their lives is grace.

The concept of the life review is a process of rationalization in which people persuade themselves that they've led pretty good lives.[25] James Thorson applies this concept in instructing his students as they listen to older people review their lives that they "1. Don't have to correct any historical misinterpretations that they catch, and 2. Have the power to give absolution." He notes that the students are astounded by this. "But I assure them that people who are hung up on a problem or guilty about past actions just might benefit from absolution, from a listener telling them, 'I can

see how it was perfectly natural for you to feel or act that way.'" [26]

How holy listening is provided as a ministry in a specific congregation will be based on its unique context. Initially the ministry may be a team of people who visit church members who live in retirement communities or nursing homes. People who offer a listening ministry usually report that they receive the same grace that they grant.

Modeling Mentorship among Older Adults

In *Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults,*[27] Richard P. Johnson has an approach that speaks directly to the need for churches to be more than a feel-good place for elders to gather. He calls for church leadership to be more active, more assertive, and more focused on ministering to older parishioners.

"A new vision of this ministry," he says, "will include an advancing appreciation for this later time of life as having immense spiritual purpose: that [it] is specially designed by God to bring people ever close to both God and their true selves." Johnson created a model for providing spiritual mentoring that recognizes a range of needs and desires. In his model he challenges churches to deal with issues of everyday living in the modern world allowing congregations to live more fully as followers of Christ. His model also addresses the social issues of peace and justice, the "fundamental interaction of care and compassion, and the spiritual issues of prayer, good will, wholeness and compassion." It could also be used in tandem with a program around the topic of aging in place that pairs younger and older adults.

Too often churches assume older adults can take care of their spiritual lives themselves without any help from the church community. Johnson explores the creation of a mentor

program, pairing people in their 60s, the young-old, with people over 85, the old-old. In *Parish Ministry,* he outlines a series of mini courses to teach basic skills and foster compassionate attitudes for understanding and working with older adults. An important part of his paradigm is holy listening.

Both younger and older participants benefit from the program. The (relatively) younger adults provide both companionship and support for those over 85, including running errands, helping with transport to doctors' offices, making minor repairs, among other tasks. The more mature adults offer wisdom and experience for the journey younger adults are just entering. In explaining his stages of faith development theory, James Fowler described each person's need for guidance from someone with experience to enter deeper levels of faith and spirituality.[28] In the sharing of stories and the act of listening, both people in a mentor relationship can understand God in new ways.

Thorson argues that spiritual well-being is found among older people who share themselves. In some ways, he says, it exemplifies grace, although grace is a gift freely given and undeserved. He notes that it is like beauty: we know it when we see it, but it's difficult to describe. Similar to beauty, people see spirituality in different places and in different ways. Spiritual well-being, he adds, "might be something that one can work on and develop." Providing programs that encourage older people to share themselves might be a way churches not only increase spiritual well-being, but also open lives to grace.[29]

Knowing God

One writer suggests that too much time and energy is spent crafting language to describe spiritual well-being when the definition is fairly easy: "Spiritual well-being is being on friendly terms with God."[30] That means spending time with God, in silence, conversation, and prayer.

A number of older people accustomed to prayer books or more formal prayers during worship find it difficult to be in conversation with God. They sometimes revert to language of the King James Version of the Bible, which makes conversation stilted and unnatural, or simply feel inadequate to address God in more familiar language. Short courses on different ways to pray could be offered at retirement residences, at church gatherings, and in homes. Courses can also be targeted to people of all ages as intergenerational programming.

For over 40 years researchers at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago[31] have conducted thousands of interviews with Americans through the General Social Survey to detect trends, make comparisons among groups, and see how people change over time. One of their discoveries was that older people in general are happier than younger adults. While they experience significant losses, they report less anxiety and difficulties with financial and interpersonal problems.[32]

In another study using data from the General Social Survey researchers found that advanced age was positively correlated with passive positive emotions, but negatively correlated with active emotions.[33] While older people have both more positive emotions, at the same time they have more passive emotional states. On the other side of the equation, younger adults have higher levels of anger and anxiety and also higher levels of depression than other adults. They were also more likely to have financial worries, troubled emotional relationships, and work-related stresses.

Elders in the church have much to offer, especially to younger adults who could profit from the serenity and calm that is sometimes more evident in older people's lives. Churches might explore prayer and silence with an intentional pairing of younger and older adults. Younger adults might suggest walking a labyrinth or taking a prayer hike in a park. Older

adults might counter with learning to be present in motionless silence. A mixture of active and passive activities would benefit young and old alike. Both could learn how to be "on friendly terms with God."

Facing Death

In a recent email message, Milton Crum, former professor and writer, talked about facing his own death after learning about the death of an old friend.

> "When Käthe and I lived in West Virginia, Dora and Ralph were good friends. Ralph died in a car accident when he was about 80, still active and in good health. When Dora became too old to remain in her home, she moved into an old folks' home. At first, she remained well and active enough to enjoy living, but decline in vision and gait stole most of her joy. Following is my response to the announcement of Dora's death:

> *Thank you for the announcement of your mother's death. The tone and picture combined to catch the spirit of such a lovely person.*

> *Ever since I received it, I have tried to sort out my feelings. Envy keeps popping up.*

> *When your father was killed, I felt sad for Ralph and Dora because they could have enjoyed more happy years together.*

> *I felt sad when Dora told me that in a way she was glad that Ralph had been killed before he reached the old age she was experiencing because he would have been miserable. That meant she was finding old age miserable.*

> *There comes a time when the party's over, it's not fun anymore, it's time to go home.*

> *I'm at that point except for Käthe who is now very weak and receiving hospice care.*

> *The central question is what kind of dying process will precede going home. That's why my envy. Dora has completed doing what I still must do.*"[34]

It is this "dying process" that most of us fear, even though death itself may be a friend. Most people live with the hope that they will remain active to the very end, and then die quietly in their sleep. Regretfully, this is not the end most will experience. Sherwin Nuland in his best-selling book *How We Die* suggested that there were two options for facing death: "One is to battle death using all the weapons of 'high-tech biomedicine.' The other option is consciously acquiescence to death's power."[35]

Richard Rohr in his book *Falling Upward* [36] agrees with Nuland that our churches, medical profession, and even families focus on surviving rather than thriving. Survival is an easy trap to fall into, and an issue for both caregivers and elders to be intentional about. Since this topic is assiduously avoided by people of all ages, one option may be selected over another by health professionals or others outside family circles.

Churches can help individuals and families first to articulate the best option for them, and secondly to prepare living wills and other documentation to make their wishes known and legally binding. A beginning point might be reading and discussing *How We Die*, by Nuland in small groups. A second step might be the preparation of living wills with the help of community social agencies or knowledgeable church members.

Conclusion

In describing the human condition, Paul said in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians:

> "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. . . So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is

wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure."[37]

Many people over 75 have lived these words, through the losses they have faced, through illness and disease, and in the uncertainties of simple survival. And yet research shows that they are more likely to express contentment than younger, more active people in the prime of health. This older generation has much to share.

Perhaps by spending more time with older people in our congregations and personal lives, listening to their stories, or just being in their presence, others can benefit from the wisdom of elders. This generation has much to teach the bubble of Baby Boomers on the cusp of entering this phase of life. Being with elders can perhaps take away some of the fears of aging felt by many Boomers, many of whom refuse to even be identified by any term related to aging, such as senior citizen or mature adult.

At the same time the "outer nature is wasting away" for many older adults, their inner nature is being renewed daily. All who walk with them in this journey can get a glimpse of the "eternal weight of glory" that awaits us all.

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