



Churches Are Losing Senior Adults

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In the News

Many news stories are written about people leaving the church, but one trend that rarely makes the headlines is the exodus of older members. These losses are having a profound effect on the life of the church and the welfare of senior citizens.

"Unlike younger generations, seniors don't typically leave with dramatic announcements or angry social media posts," reports *Religion Unplugged*. "They simply fade." A faithful couple disappears from worship, a Sunday school teacher does not return to the classroom, and a widow stops attending when her friends die. Instead of confrontation and uproar, there is simply a void when an older member quits the church.

This exodus matters, because seniors are the backbone of weekly attendance in vast numbers of congregations. In many churches, particularly those with less than 200 in attendance, seniors make up the majority of faithful members, and most churches depend on them to be faithful givers and consistent volunteers. When older members leave, churches are hurt by the disappearance of money, energy and talent. Losses among younger generations are certainly significant and concerning, but the disappearance of seniors is a trend that cannot be ignored.

A pastor named Bob Ferguson recently asked a group of 12 older men about their church participation. Writing in *Ministry Architects*, he reports that they had all been heavily involved in church leadership at one time, participating in what would be called "mainline" or "moderate" churches. Ferguson asked, "How many of you attend church more than one time per month?" The answer: zero. Then he asked, "How many of you once attended church three Sundays or more a month and were active on boards, committees, etc.?" The answer: all 12.

Then Ferguson asked, "Why do you not attend church like you once did?" Their answers centered around three categories: (1) "I usually go out on Saturday evening; I am just too tired or lazy to get up and go." (2) "I don't have children or young people at home to take to church." (3) "I've been there, done that ... and don't need it anymore." For these 12 men, church attendance no longer affected their life in a significant way, nor did it give them a vital sense of community.

Ferguson concluded, "These men were not angry or upset at church. They had heard nothing politically that had pushed them away. The women-in-leadership issue was a non-starter -- they were glad that women were fully involved in leadership positions. Music choice did not bother them." The reason for their absence was, quite simply, "that church provided little or no meaning to their lives. They were glad the church existed and felt that churches helped children, youth and families -- but had nothing to offer them."

According to *Religion Unplugged*, recent data confirms that senior adults are slipping away. In the year 2000, about 60% of Americans over the age of 65 attended church weekly, according to Gallup. By 2020, that figure had dropped to 45%. This is a 15-point decline in 20 years. Pew Research, which has followed the Silent Generation (people born before 1946) and older Baby

Boomers, reports a similar drop of nearly 10 percentage points in religious attendance within the past decade.

This is a significant trend, and it should not be seen as an inevitable consequence of aging. Yes, health challenges and mobility issues are a factor, but are not the whole reason. Many seniors drop out when their peers pass away and loneliness sets in. Others feel ignored when the church focuses most of its attention on children's ministries, youth events and young families. And some feel sidelined by changes in worship styles and leadership.

The impact of these losses is significant, especially in the areas of finance and ministry strength. The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) has found that adults over 65 contribute about 40% of all donations to churches in the United States. When they drop out, the loss of offerings affects daily operations, missions and outreach efforts.

The impact on ministry is equally significant, since seniors are among the most dependable volunteers. They teach Sunday school classes, work in the church kitchen, help in the office, and provide service behind the scenes. "It is not an exaggeration to say that when seniors drift, churches weaken," concludes *Religion Unplugged*. "If the church does not intentionally draw seniors back in, we will forfeit one of God's richest resources for discipleship and growth."

An example of continuous engagement is found in the life of Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, who died recently at age 106. A nun who taught at numerous Catholic schools, she became famous as the chaplain to the Loyola University men's basketball team. According to *NPR*, "she prayed with student athletes, encouraged them, gave advice about the team's performance and even gave scouting reports about other teams." TWW Team Member Bill Tammeus says that Christians should focus not just on

long life but on "how God calls us to live it. And part of that has to do with having some fun along the way."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Fading From the Pews: The Departure of Older Church Members. *Religion Unplugged*](#)

[Why Senior Guys Quit Coming to Your Church! *Ministry Architects*](#)

[Loyola's Sister Jean, Who Became a March Madness Icon, Dies at 106. *NPR*](#)

Applying the News Story

If you are an older adult, think about your involvement in church and talk about what keeps you engaged. If you are a younger church member, reflect on the contributions of your older members and discuss what your church can do to support members of every age and stage of life.

The Big Questions

1. Where do you see evidence that your church is losing older members? How do these losses affect you personally? How do they impact your congregation?
2. If you are a younger church member, how can you do a better job of caring for seniors? If you are a senior, how can you help your peers? What would you be willing to offer: practical help such as transportation to worship, assistance with technology, or a friendly visit?
3. What can your congregation do to better engage older adults? How could their involvement be more fun and satisfying for them? Where would you see value in intergenerational service projects or small groups? How would people of various ages be helped by such efforts?

4. How could your church invite seniors into visible leadership and mentoring roles? Where do you see value in their personal stories, wisdom and faith?
5. If you are a senior, what help do you need with loneliness, health concerns or caregiving burdens? If you are a younger church member, how can you address these issues with compassion, hope and practical help?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Leviticus 19:32

You shall rise before the aged and defer to the old, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. (For context, read [Leviticus 19:32-37](#).)

The book of Leviticus gets its name from the Levitical priests who served as leaders of religious services among the people of Israel. Leviticus contains a mix of religious, civil and moral regulations, and at the heart of the book is chapter 19, which contains rules about holiness -- especially holiness in social ethics. Holiness is the central characteristic of God, and it has multiple meanings for the people of Israel: separateness, righteousness, justice.

The chapter begins with the command of God, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (19:2). One of the most important statutes, later incorporated into the Great Commandment of Jesus, is "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 18). Near the end of the chapter, God says, "You shall rise before the aged and defer to the old." This command to respect elderly people is an echo of the commandment "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12), since older persons often stand in the same relation to younger people as parents do to children. In this verse, deference to seniors is connected to respect for God.

The chapter concludes with additional commandments that help to define a life of holiness: "you shall love the alien as yourself" (v. 34), you "shall not

cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity" (v. 35), and you "shall have honest balances" (v. 36). All of these statutes and ordinances are part of being a holy people who follow a holy God.

Questions: How is respect for older people a part of the practice of your faith, if at all? What is the value of deference to the old, in church and community? How is it connected to holiness? In places where this respect has been lost, how can it be regained?

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" ... (For context, read [Ecclesiastes 12:1-14.](#))

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book which contains the words of "the Teacher," identified as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). The book addresses the ultimate questions of life and death, beginning with the observation, "All is vanity" (1:2). The Teacher -- called *Qoheleth* in Hebrew -- takes a cold-eyed look at the world, insisting that all is worthless, meaningless and absurd.

In chapter 12, the Teacher turns attention to youth and aging, encouraging people to "[r]emember your creator in the days of your youth." In verses 3 through 6, he gives a poetic description of old age: "the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working" (v. 3); "one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road" (v. 5); and when life comes to an end "the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken" (v. 6). In death, "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity" (vv. 7-8).

For seniors facing the end of life, this description can be bleak and unnerving. But the Teacher ends with words that can give guidance and

encouragement to people at every stage of life: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone" (v. 13).

Questions: How can the church do a better job of ministering to people near the end of life? What specific activities can engage seniors who are losing pleasure in much of what they have enjoyed in earlier years? At any stage in life, how can you find meaning and purpose in fearing God and keeping his commandments?

Luke 1:41-42

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (For context, read [Luke 1:39-45](#).)

The gospel according to Luke is part of a two-volume work, with the second book being the Acts of the Apostles. Luke mentions women more than the other gospel-writers, and has special concern for people on the margins of society. This is shown clearly in the first chapter, when a young woman named Mary learns from the angel Gabriel that she will become the mother of Jesus. She is also told by the angel that her "relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son" (v. 36).

To confirm the veracity of this news, Mary travels to Elizabeth's house in the Judean hill country. Luke tells us that when "Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb." Then Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit," a form of inspiration which is frequently reported in Luke and Acts. She declares Mary to be blessed by God, along with "the fruit of [her] womb." Elizabeth also commends Mary for believing "that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (v. 45). Mary responds with a song of praise.

Questions: In what ways does the older woman Elizabeth help the younger woman Mary? How is she able to strengthen the faith of Mary in a way that a younger woman or man could not? What can older Christians learn from Elizabeth about how to encourage the younger generation?

Acts 14:23

And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. (For context, read [Acts 14:21-28](#).)

The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke after he finished his gospel, which reported "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (1:1). The book of Acts tells the story of the first Christ-followers, with a focus on the ministry and mission of the apostles, a group of leaders whose title means "messenger" or "one who is sent forth." The early chapters focus on Peter and the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, while the middle and concluding chapters tell of Paul and his missionary journeys through the Mediterranean region.

In chapter 14, Paul and Barnabas travel through the region around Antioch. There, "they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith" (v. 22). They also "appointed elders for them in each church," knowing that the followers of Christ needed trustworthy leaders. Acts tells us that elders served in the churches of Antioch, Jerusalem and Ephesus. These elders were deserving of respect, and they were given responsibility for preaching and teaching. They also performed functions including general church governance, the laying on of hands, and anointing the sick.

Questions: Why do you think Paul and Barnabas selected elders to lead the churches of Antioch, as opposed to younger followers of Christ? What type of

maturity do you think they possessed? How is the church helped by mature Christians today, and what can be done to keep them engaged in ministry?

For Further Discussion

1. [In *Ministry Architects*, Bob Ferguson recommends](#) that churches try to re-engage older men by "handing over a worthwhile project to them and then stepping out of the way and letting them do it. Let them see that they are a valuable and necessary resource to the Kingdom of God -- and not just the program of a local church. Start a mentoring program where they walk alongside youth and young adult males. Staff a soup kitchen once a week or month -- and get them to do that." How might this be done in your congregation? Be specific. Where would you see value in it?
2. TWW Team Member Mary Sells notices that "[Nobel prize winners](#) are largely in their 70s and 80s and that people are so valuable with experience and contributions. ... The winners this year will forever change some medical treatments and advances in computing." What are the valuable experiences and contributions of the seniors in your life, and in your church? How can their achievements change your congregation in a positive way?
3. [According to NPR](#), Sister Jean Delores Schmidt talked in her memoir "about setting aside daily quiet time and maintaining a forgiving spirit. Still basketball was never far from her mind. Bill Burns, a former Loyola athletic director was particularly struck by the way Sister Jean faithfully watched games from home and kept in touch with Ramblers during the Covid pandemic -- calling them and sending them emails." He notes, "For someone that's 80 years older than those guys, to still be able to maintain that relationship with them and to have to adjust on the fly and do it in some ways technologically was pretty impressive." What aspects of Sister Jean's life as an older Christian impress you? How could such practices improve your life, or the life of your church?

4. Biblically, there is such a thing as "a good death," says TWW Team Member Frank Ramirez. It comes when one is "old and full of years." What does this mean to you? How can the church do a better job of preparing people for a good death?

Responding to the News

Engage in conversation with older members of your congregation, and find out if the church is continuing to help them to grow in faith and commitment to Christ's work. Do not take their participation for granted, even if they have been active in church for many years. Discuss ways that you can support them, personally and congregationally. Look for an opportunity to create an intergenerational fellowship group or mission project that will help people of different ages to develop deep-spirited friendships.

Prayer

God of Mary, Elizabeth, Paul and the elders of Antioch, we thank you for the Christian commitment of people across the generational spectrum. We praise you for the faith of older adults who have served you well for many years, and for the belief of younger people as well, whose journey with Christ is fresh and new. Keep old and young bound together in love and Christian devotion, and give us new insights into how to continue to encourage each other. In Jesus' name. Amen.