

CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR OLDER ADULTS TO SERVE

50+ Age Adults Reaching Outside the Walls of the Church

by Amy Hanson

Article Summary

Across the nation, both secular organizations and faith-based communities are recognizing the invaluable resource resident in older adults. A number of leading churches in older adult ministry are finding creative ways of engaging their people in ministry and encouraging them to use their time and resources for Kingdom expansion.

Further Reading

[Churches Responding to the Age Wave: Top Innovations in Older Adult Ministry](#)

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Bobbie Baxter from Northshore Baptist Church with a new friend in Nicaragua.

Bobbie Baxter always wanted to go on a mission trip and did not have the opportunity until she was 80 years old. When other retired women might be baking cookies or watching television, Bobbie joined the Second Half Ministries team from **Northshore Baptist Church** in Bothell, WA (<http://www.nsb.org>) on a short-term mission trip to Nicaragua. She is not the only older adult who has invested her time and energy in the lives of these poverty stricken people. In fact 45-50% of all the volunteers from Northshore that do short-term mission work in Nicaragua are 50 years of age or older.

The mission to Nicaragua was started in 2004 when Northshore Baptist, adopted the small town of Los Cedros. According to Richard Bergstrom, pastor of Second Half Ministries, "Our church has a strong mission mind-set and some of our leaders had a vision to establish long-term relationships in a mission environment. We wanted to make missions real to the entire church, rather than something general. The leadership looked for a place where ministry work was already taking place and we could simply come alongside. Los Cedros was that place."

Northshore serves this community through an elementary school that it built and the Eben Ezer church. The church was already established in Nicaragua and Northshore has come alongside them to assist them in ministry. Over 400 people

have visited the town as a part of church teams that are involved in construction projects, medical clinics, feeding programs, Vacation Bible School, and economic development. Many of these teams include people who are 50+ in age.

Sometimes the retirees from Northshore go back and spend more time ministering in the community. Jack and Katie Day went on the Second Half mission trip and were so burdened that they returned to Nicaragua on their own and spent an entire month in the community in order to forge business partnerships. Tom Gillespie, part of the Second Half leadership team says, "Every missions team that comes back from a trip to Nicaragua has a deep concern that the community be able to sustain itself and this requires that people find jobs. Currently, individuals have to travel quite some distance for employment and spend nearly 1/3 of their wages for their travel. This is why Jack, a retiree from Boeing, felt compelled to use his own business experience to help set-up possible employment opportunities in the community." Specifically, Jack and other businessmen are encouraging a cabinetry company to base their business near Los Cedros. Leona Bergstrom also a Second Half Ministries leader says, "The second half people are apt to go back to the community because they have expertise that they can share with the people and the community. They are the ones with business savvy and life experience."



Jack and Katie Day from Northshore share their testimony in Nicaragua.

ACROSS THE NATION, BOTH SECULAR ORGANIZATIONS AND FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES ARE RECOGNIZING THE INVALUABLE RESOURCE RESIDENT IN OLDER ADULTS.

The experience of 50+ adults at Northshore is not unique. Across the nation, both secular organizations and faith-based communities are recognizing the invaluable resource resident in older adults. Many older people are looking for significance and purpose and are finding

it through service. It is societal myth that once someone reaches retirement age, they desire to simply live a life of leisure and focus on themselves. Instead, research has shown that today's retirees, such as men and women born between 1910 and 1940, have always been involved in volunteer efforts and are continuing this trend into their later years.¹

A number of leading churches in older adult ministry are recognizing that their people need to

be exposed to ministry opportunities and encouraged to use their time and resources for Kingdom expansion.

Those churches that are creating new opportunities for service among older adults are discovering a variety of methods for making this happen. These opportunities are created by:

1. *Making an intentional commitment to emphasize service for older adults*
2. *Allowing many different starting points for new ministry*
3. *Finding age-appropriate means of evangelism*
4. *Serving on intergenerational teams and reaching out to a variety of generations*
5. *Finding creative ways to integrate older adults into the community*
6. *Partnering with other churches to utilize retirees*

This paper will explore how some churches are successfully unleashing older adults to reach out and make a difference for Christ.

Older Adult Ministries Intentionally Become Outwardly Focused

Creating an atmosphere within an older adult ministry where service is an expected and normal thing does not automatically happen. Some churches have neglected to see their older adults as valuable resources full of life experience and wisdom and instead they have bought into the world's lie that once someone reaches a particular age they should "slow down" and "let the younger people take over." It takes effort and in some cases a shift in attitude to build an outwardly focused older adult ministry.

Shortly after **Peninsula Covenant Church**, in Redwood City, CA (<http://www.peninsulacovenant.com>) began their PLUS ministry, Dr. Alan Forsman, one of the strategic planners for Pepsi, talked to the church about the characteristics of the 50+ generation. Rod Toews, pastor of PLUS ministry says, "This particular presentation to our church helped to raise the awareness that the church had really not been doing a good job of valuing the 50+ members. Our older members were feeling disenfranchised and like the church did not really care about them. The first goal of our ministry was to help the older adults feel valued and worthwhile and in doing this we realized that our people had the time and the abilities to be involved in missional things." The PLUS ministry began blessing the community by praying for the lost in the city, being involved in community service clubs and taking the elderly to doctor's appointments. It did not take long until the PLUS ministry was recognized by the entire church as being a ministry with an outward focus. In fact, other ministries in the church began to look to them for support and help in various service endeavors.



The PLUS ministry at Peninsula Covenant is a community of those over 50 who enjoy fellowship, spiritual growth, service and fun together.

The PLUS ministry mission statement says that they are: “A Community of those over 50 in which God’s purposes for their lives are fulfilled through fellowship, spiritual growth, service and fun.” To ensure that each of these areas get adequate attention, PLUS has a different member of the leadership team championing one of these 4 purposes. This means that service is always an integral part of their ministry.

Mopsy Andrews, pastor of BOLDer adult ministry (Being Our Lord’s Delight) at **Chapelwood United Methodist Church** in Houston, TX (<http://www.chapelwood.org>) is also very intentional about making sure the 50+ ministry is focused on serving. “One of the primary goals of our senior pastor when he first came to Chapelwood was to change the landscape of our church to be outreach oriented. Chapelwood is in an affluent suburb of Houston, and he wanted us to change the image of our church from being inwardly focused to a place where all kinds of people could find love and acceptance.” The older adult ministry embraced this emphasis, and in fact one of the primary purposes of the BOLDer adult ministry is to supply the people for the many service projects organized by the church. BOLDer adults at Chapelwood now serve in a variety of capacities from short-term mission trips, to encouraging people looking for employment, to providing transportation to nursing home residents. Mopsy says, “Our church now has over 300 mission and outreach ministries and over 1,200 BOLDer adults are involved in supporting these ministries.”

Service Opportunities for Older Adults Have Many Different Starting Points

Older adults involve themselves in outreach and service for a variety of different reasons. They may do it for the interpersonal relationships, for the desire to help someone in need, or to reduce their own distress. Studies have also found that volunteerism tends to improve the life satisfaction of older adults and it has a positive effect on their health.² In the body of Christ, people serve as a way of living out their faith.

Even though there are many benefits to volunteering, finding that place where people can invest themselves and really make a difference can be challenging. Churches are using a variety of different strategies in order to help older adults find their “sweet spot” to do ministry.

The Vision of the Church Staff

Some outreach ministries arise out of the vision of a church staff member. At **Grace Presbyterian Church** in Houston, TX (<http://www.gpch.org>) Michele Shultz, the director of 50+ ministries, recalls how older adults from the church got involved serving the evacuees from Hurricane Katrina. “Our missions team became aware of the many evacuees that had nothing. They were sleeping in cars and had a vast amount of needs and though we had many people willing to help, we needed a way to organize the ministry effort.” Michele called upon older adult volunteers at Grace to be the ones to go out and assess the needs of the evacuees. “They would go out and get the names and ages of the people, the sizes of clothes they needed, and any other special needs they had.” The older adult team would then bring the information back to the church where donations had been left and then the items were taken back to the people.

Because of Michele’s vision to utilize older adults in this effort, nearly 75 families were adopted which totaled 250 people.

The Vision of a Layperson

In addition to the staff exposing seniors to volunteer opportunities, sometimes the older adults themselves discover a ministry that they can embrace.

In Beaverton, OR, about 25 to 30 older adults from **Beaverton Foursquare Church**

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(<http://www.beavertonfoursquare.org>) participated in an outing where they toured the Portland Rescue mission, and specifically learned about Shepherd's Door which is a 3 year program for women at the mission. What started as an educational day trip for the seniors, turned into a long-term opportunity to serve and help the less fortunate in the community. "We found out that



A woman from the Shepherd's Door ministry at Beaverton hosts a shower to celebrate a new graduate.

after these women finish the 3 year-program they graduate and begin life on their own, often with nothing. The older adult women from our church now give these women a "shower" where we bless them with many items they will need to start their new life" says Betty Martin,

who is involved with Shepherd's Door. The seniors at Beaverton make these showers special, hosting them in one of their homes with decorations, refreshments and gifts. A portion of the time at the shower is devoted to the women from the mission sharing her testimony. In most cases, once the women from the mission get settled in their new home they usually write and tell the older adults how they are doing. Dixie Frank, an 80 year old woman who helps with the showers said, "These women are starting a brand new life and it is a wonderful feeling to help them start out with some of what they need."

A Combination of Both (Staff-Led and Lay-Led)

Another way that older adults find a place to serve is through a combination of a staff member and a church member's vision. The JET ministry (Job Encouragement for Transition) at Chapelwood has reached out to many people as a result of Mopsy Andrews (staff leader) and Kathy Schenck (lay leader) working together.

Mopsy remembers, "When the Enron disaster occurred at the end of 2001 our church wanted to help and I was a natural choice to lead the ministry as my son had suffered a job loss as a result of the crisis." The JET ministry was designed

to provide mentors to people seeking employment or contemplating a job change. It matches interested individuals with a volunteer mentor that can provide encouragement and training.

While the ministry had been extremely helpful to people in the Houston community, when Kathy came on board about 3 years ago, her knowledge and expertise helped to take the ministry to the next level. Kathy responded to an announcement inviting people to be a part of the vision team to help evaluate and grow the JET ministry. Kathy said, "I saw the program and knew I had something I could offer."

Her professional experience as an executive for a corporate search firm has provided invaluable insights to the ministry. Under her leadership, the team has developed a separate website for the ministry (<http://www.jetjobseekers.org>) as well as a systematic plan for helping to walk with someone throughout the entire job transitioning process. Kathy says, "The heart of this ministry is to make sure we minister to the spiritual component of peoples' lives. Every part of someone's life is affected when they go through a career change. Our job counselors can bring a fresh viewpoint to a difficult situation and help people keep a spiritual perspective."

The Overall Church Culture

Some older adults naturally reach out to others because this attitude of service is embedded in the overall DNA structure of the church. This was the case for Chuck and Marilyn Warner who upon reaching retirement devoted over one year as missionaries to China.

First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, CA (<http://www.evfreefullerton>) teaches its people to be outwardly focused and provides opportunities for church members of all ages to serve those in need. One way they help the church body to learn this value is through an evening commissioning service for the short-term missionaries. Doug Haag, lifestage pastor at First Evangelical Free says, "We have a very strong missions emphasis at our church, in fact we send 200 to 300 people out each summer to do overseas mission work. This is simply a part of our entire church culture."

Chuck and Marilyn caught this vision and each summer they would use their vacation to go to a different continent to explore the land and seek the Lord's direction. They wanted to find the place where God would have them serve once they reached retirement. Sometimes they did this through church-sponsored mission trips and other times they traveled on their own. Their diligence resulted in the Lord directing them to Asia.

He retired from his job as an engineer and she retired as a school principal and they went to a city in Kum Ming, China. Their desire was to get to know the people and to open up a mission field in an area that was virtually closed at the time to mission work. The Warners had no support system and no privacy. Doug says, "They were not even able to worship in their apartment because they were being monitored by the communist government and so they went to a public park on Sunday mornings in order to worship God." Now over 15 years later as a result of their work, there is a Christian radio broadcast, evangelists, medical workers, and pastors who are all serving in that region.

Because of family reasons, the Warners had to return to the states, but they still are investing the later years of their lives in mission efforts. Chuck linked up with an International Bible representative in the Fullerton area and has collected the funds and organized the effort to send 80,000 Reach 4 Life Bibles to children in regions around the world where AIDS is so prevalent. Both Marilyn and Chuck are active prayer warriors for international missions and continue to support efforts to help bring the gospel to people.

Older Adults Find New Ways to Evangelize Their Peers

Just because people are older does not necessarily mean they have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Often this age group of people is forgotten in terms of intentional evangelistic efforts. The mission of **Community Christian Church** in Naperville, IL (<http://www.communitychristian.org>) is "Helping People Find Their Way Back to God," and the older adults at Carillon, one of

Community Christian's multi-site campuses, have taken this vision seriously.

A Desire for Relationships

Earl Ferguson, pastor of the Carillon 55+ community, says that small groups have been the key to bringing people into a relationship with Christ. He says, "While our small groups have a component of Bible study, our emphasis is on building relationships."

This is not surprising. Charles Arn writes that one of the reasons older adults are so receptive to the gospel is because they have an increased desire for meaningful relationships.³ The social world of retirees is often smaller than it was when they were working. At this stage of life children have often moved away, retirement has altered previous relationships with coworkers, and old friends and even family members may have died.

Small groups provide a way for new relationships to be formed and discussions about serious life issues can take place in a safe environment. Loren Hagen, a retiree who lives in Carillon, is a small group leader and he says that when he shares personal stories from his own life then others in the group can identify and feel a connection.

Loren admits that he wasn't always as quick to see relationships as an important way of leading people to Christ. He originally felt that to do

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Loren Hagen leads a small group in the Carillon Community.

evangelism you simply poured the gospel message into someone and asked them to make a decision. But he has since come to believe in the process of friendship evangelism. “Basically a non-Christian is invited to one of our groups and gets to know the people. They may do things one-on-one with each other such as shopping or playing shuffleboard and slowly over months they build a relationship. Each week they come to the small group and are studying the Bible and hearing other people talk about the lessons and in turn they begin to get excited about God.”

Norma Cochrane, a women’s small group leader and coach for the Carillon church, recalls praying for 5 years for the husband of one of the small group leaders. “Al had grown up as an atheist and off and on would come to small group but never gave an indication of where his heart was at with God.” One Sunday morning, Earl invited people to be baptized in the clubhouse pool and Al came and stood by the swimming pool. Earl asked him, “Are you thinking about getting baptized?” And Al, a man in his late 70s, replied, “Yes, but I’m scared to death of water.” He was baptized that day and his life has been transformed. Sara Bills-Thwing, a leader in the Carillon ministry, said, “Al’s life has totally changed. There is a difference

now in everything he does.” Norma said, “He had never made a bed or cooked a meal and then his wife broke her ankle, and he actively cared for her needs. He is a happier man now and does everything differently. He even plays the mandolin on the church worship team.”



NORMA COCHRANE

A Response to the Changes of Life

A second reason that Charles Arn says that older adults are receptive to evangelistic efforts are because of the many life changes they are experiencing. Whether it be caring for an aging parent, discovering how to spend their retirement years, or coping with their own health problems, the later years of life bring with it many difficult adjustments and life questions. Some developmental psychologists see the later years as a time when people reflect on their past and make plans for how they want to live out their remaining years. This becomes a great window of

opportunity for Christians to speak to their non-Christian friends about spiritual things.

Jon Sween, a 61-year old member of Northshore Baptist Church lives near a 55+ community in Bothell, WA. He has partnered with another Christian living in the community to try and reach their neighbors for Christ. One of the innovative and successful events that Jon has been a part of is a monthly movie night. Bill Backlund who started the movie nights says, “The concept is to better establish a Christian worldview within the community as well as to make some new friends.” Bill and his wife Pat pray and watch many movies and then try to choose those that have some spiritual principles that can be discussed after the movie. The evening includes a meal, then watching a popular movie in a room that has state of the art equipment, and then concluding with discussion about the themes and concepts presented in the show. There are typically between 50 and 90 people from the community who attend these evenings. Bill says, “The movie nights help us to focus on those who like movies with a message and I hope God will use this effort in the years to come.”

Uniting the Generations Makes For Greater Impact

The writer of Psalm 71:18 says, “Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.” Some retirees are living out that verse by ministering to the younger generation, while others are doing ministry shoulder to shoulder *with* those that are young.

Two Generations Serving Together

Michele from Grace Presbyterian has as a goal to break down the silo approach to ministry. In the past, the children’s ministry, the young married group, and the senior adults all did their separate ministries. She is intentionally trying to tear down these barriers. One of the most effective ways this is happening is by two ministries joining together to serve a need in the community.

The Well, a ministry for 20 & 30 year olds at Grace and the 50+ age adults are working together to maintain an apartment for families of

patients that come for cancer treatment at Houston's MD Anderson. The Church Apartment Ministry (<http://www.churchapartmentministry>) is supported by various churches in the area. A family or individual rents the apartment for a minimal cost and stays from two weeks to three months. The Well and the 50+ ministry see that the apartment is furnished, cleaned and made available to families. The young adults do most of the cleaning and maintenance on the apartment as well as providing the man power to help a family move in. The older adults from Grace will personally visit the families and the patient, as well as offer to bring them to church and pray for them. In addition, the food ministry at Grace will provide meals to those families staying in an apartment.

Another place that intergenerational teams can participate together in ministry is on the mission field. Eight women from Chapelwood served together in Tapachula, Mexico with children of prisoners as well as some of the mothers of these children. Of the eight women on the team, five of them were 55+ age adults. Far from being a luxury trip, this part of Mexico is one of the poorest in the country.

The women worked with nearly 41 children who were hungry for quality time with loving adults. Part of their time was spent teaching a Human Sexuality curriculum and helping the children discover that they have been created by God and can break the cycle of teen pregnancy that is so apparent around them.



The intergenerational team of women from Chapelwood in Tapachula, Mexico.

Mopsy says that the prison system down there is very different than the American system. Children can live together with their mother in prison, however very little provision is made for them. Mopsy tells of one instance where a woman whose heart was very hard agreed to move out of a crowded prison to a different area and didn't tell her son but simply abandoned him. She says, "This side of the ministry is very difficult, but the idea of being able to make a difference in the lives of these people—even if it is just for a week—is a huge motivation."

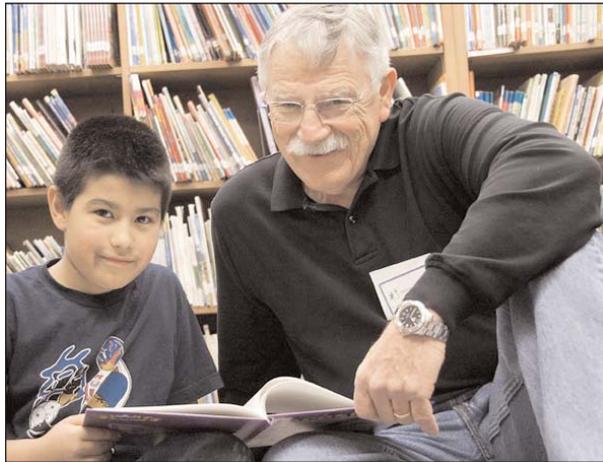
Working together as a team, the women who made the trip together were able to focus on the needs of others—rather than focus on their age differences. Mopsy says, "Every single one of the team members contributed in a unique way through their own God-given gifts. Two of the younger members of the team spoke Spanish fluently which was a tremendous help and one of the women set up a blog so that the Chapelwood congregation could follow the trip online. Others on the team nurtured the children one-on-one while some planned and organized group activities for the children."

The trip not only served the children and mothers in Mexico, but also created a long-lasting generational bond among the eight women from Chapelwood. Mopsy says, "Friendships that cross age lines are rich because the wisdom and experience of the older women are seasoned with the insights, enthusiasm and energy of the younger women. Age was not something that separated us, rather our varied ages gave us different perspectives and approaches in working with the 41 children and their incarcerated mothers."

Older Adults Serving Young Adults

It is not a new discovery that older adults have wisdom and life experience to pass on to the younger generation. However, there is an increasing geographical separation among generations, making it hard for connections to occur between the young and the old. Adult children get jobs and move away from their original hometown and consequently grandchildren do not grow up around their

grandparents. David Corbin and Josie Metal-Corbin, two intergenerational researchers say, “Historically in our society, the elders served as models for the young, as advisers, as spiritual leaders... and as decision makers in the community.”⁴ Opportunities for these kinds of relationships are not as common as they used to be but some older adults are attempting to make a difference. They are volunteering in their community as mentors and positive role models for young people.



A member of the big brother program at Beaverton Foursquare reads with a student at a local elementary school.

Some of the older adults from Beaverton Foursquare have become big brothers and big sisters to students at an elementary school that is across the street from the church. Michael Kinsman, pastor of older adults, says, “The senior adults are trained through the school and then meet one-on-one with a student at least once a week. They provide tutoring or just meaningful conversation with the young person.” The senior adult makes a commitment for the entire school year to invest in the life of their child. Those that have participated are passionate about the ministry and hope to get other older adults involved.

First Evangelical Free Church partners with California State University of Fullerton in hosting programs where international students can interact with adults from the church. Each year nearly 40 to 50 of these students are adopted by older adults. The ministry, called Alongside, is a way for the seniors to help and support these

international students while they are away from family and trying to adjust to a new culture. The older adults befriend the student, help arrange housing for them, share meals, and invite them to holiday gatherings.

John Coulombe, pastor to senior adults, has always encouraged the seniors to get involved in this program. He says, “It is life-changing for our seniors. At first they are reluctant and a little uncomfortable with a different culture. In fact, for many of them it has been a long-time since they have been around non-Christians. But soon they begin to love the young people. The experience stretches them and impacts *their* life as well as the student’s life.”

Charlie Henry, along with his wife, had brought into their family many international students. When he passed away, one of these students spoke at his funeral and told of how he had led her to the Lord and had made a life-long impact on her in just the one-year she had known him. With affection, she called him, “Uncle Charlie.”

The far reaching effects of intergenerational ministry are hard to measure, but most would say that they are very important. Despite the trends of the culture that separate people by age, the need for connection among the generations is great. Outreach ministries that link those that have no role models with those that can be mentors provide an important service.

Older Adults Are Creatively Integrating into their Communities

From 1952-1962, the Kansas City Studies of Adult Life observed thousands of adults and their responses to aging in order to come up with some theories to help explain the aging process with a theory of aging. The disengagement theory surfaced as one of the explanations for how

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people age. It states that the best way to approach the later years of life is by slowly withdrawing from society. This painted a rather dismal view of aging and in fact many older adults do just the opposite. Rather than disengaging they actively involve themselves in life and look for ways to influence others. Some churches are strategically working to get older adults involved in their communities where they can be salt and light to their world.

Rod Toews, the 77 year old pastor of PLUS at Peninsula Covenant, has a vision to have one of their 50+ age adults as a member of every social club in the seven cities that surround their church in Northern California. Rod himself is a member of the Redmond City Rotary Club. He stresses, "It is more than just membership but rather being actively involved." Rod had the opportunity to do the funeral for one of the women in the club. "Her husband knew that I was a pastor and asked me to conduct the service. Since then, he has started regularly attending the church." Rod also reflects, "I've been more involved in one-on-one evangelism through

this club than I've ever been in my life." Right now, there are PLUS members in 5 of the social clubs in the area. Rod keeps a roster of all the clubs (nearly 20) and continues to encourage the older adults to get involved in one of them.



Rod Toews at the far right with members from the Redmond City Rotary Club.

Some older adults just need a fresh vision to see their current community work as having ministry potential. Kay Kirkbride, a retired registered nurse, was nominated by a friend to be a member of the Oregon Governor's Commission on Aging. Her background in gerontology, home health, and hospice made her perfectly suited for the role. After being approved by the governor, she started her three year term on the commission. Her involvement has included work on an educational piece regarding end of life issues and helpful tools for caregivers.

Within the past year, Kay has become a part of the Older Adults Leadership Team at Beaverton Foursquare. She has been able to bring to the team the needs and issues of the elderly that are being discussed at the governor's meetings. Her willingness to build a bridge between the community and the church has resulted in the development of a number of workshops on end-of-life decisions, legal issues, and hospice care. In regards to her community work, Kay says, "The government is asking faith-based organizations to step up to the plate and partner with them in dealing with the coming age wave. They know they can't do it alone and they need the Church." Kay says that she has always tried to live out her faith in her workplace and this is giving her yet another opportunity to do so.

Rosalyn Encarcion, director of senior adult programs at First Evangelical Free Church desired to find ways that the older adults from the church could be a blessing to the community. Less than one-year ago, under her leadership, the church joined the Fullerton Collaborative group (<http://www.fullertoncollaborative.org>). This organization consists of nearly 30 non-profit agencies and groups that meet monthly to combine efforts in serving the community. Rosalyn attends the meetings with another member of the church (John) who is a retired police chief. "At the meetings we hear of the various needs that these organizations have. Most often, their greatest need is for people to volunteer. After hearing of a need John and I go to the groups individually and ask them to tell us more about their particular project and how we might help them." In one instance, the police department actually came to them because they had heard of the volunteers they had available. "We asked them, how can we serve you? And they indicated how much a help it would be to have their cars washed. Our church put together an intergenerational team, consisting of senior adults as well as young people that spent a day washing their cars." The police department has been impacted and now is more apt to come to the people of the church when they need help. "When the police see a home of an elderly person that's yard is not following city code, they will now come to us and ask us if we have a group that can go and work on the elder's yard."

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Rosalyn says, “Our goal is to make sure our church would be missed if we were gone from the community. But even more specifically, I want our older adults to discover the creative ways that they can make a difference in the world.” The Fullerton Collaborative exposes the church to a variety of service opportunities that they otherwise may not have known about. “We don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but rather join up with work that is already happening.” Rosalyn is currently working with the Orange Caregivers Resource Center to match older adults that have been caregivers with current caregivers in order to offer them a phone call of encouragement and support. Rosalyn is excited about this

opportunity for it provides a way for those seniors that are homebound because of frail health to still have a meaningful impact in someone’s life. She is passionate about finding new ways to involve older adults in significant service opportunities. “You just have to find out what the needs are in the community, and then present those needs to the seniors and show them that there is a way that they can make a Kingdom impact.”

Partnerships with Other Churches Open Up New Ministry Opportunities for Older Adults

Memorial Assistance Ministries (<http://mamministries.org>) is one program in Houston that exists because of the collaborative efforts of many area churches. The purpose of MAM is “to help families and individuals who find themselves in temporary crisis and in need of assistance to maintain self-sufficiency and avoid homelessness.” When the organization was in its beginning stages there were about 13 churches who participated, today there are as many as 30 churches that support the ministry.

One of the critical components of the ministry is the resale shop which is supplied with various items that are donated by church members. The

proceeds from the resale shop go back into the ministry to help to pay electric bills, make house payments, or even purchase bus tokens for needy individuals.

Pat Haltom, a retired woman in her 70s volunteered weekly in the resale shop for over 22 years. “The shop was staffed 100% by retirees,” she reports. “On an average, about 15 senior adults volunteered each day of the week.” Generational studies have shown that older adults tend to be very loyal and committed to the causes which they support.⁵ It is often their willingness to give of their time and money that sustains important ministries like the memorial assistance of Houston. Don Wilcox, Encore Generation Leadership Community director, says, “It is hard to know where many of our churches and organizations would be today if it wasn’t for the tireless efforts of men and women of the Builder generation who continue to give of their lives.” Those older adults that are willing to look beyond the walls of their own church are able to realize ministry opportunities that they otherwise would have never known.

The Royal Family Kids Camp (<http://www.rfkc.org>) is one of those ministries that relies on the love and experience of retirees. The purpose of the Royal Family ministry is to provide abused, neglected and forgotten children a week’s worth of positive memories in a camp environment. Founded over 22 years ago, the success of the ministry depends on churches being willing to adopt a week of camp each summer. The church financially supports camp for their particular week and provides the volunteers. There is an average of 75 kids who attend a week of camp, with a volunteer counselor for every 2 kids. In addition, each camp has approximately 3 sets of grandparents. The week is structured so that all of the kids have the opportunity to interact one-on-one with a grandma and grandpa. Walt and Maxine Williams, members of First Evangelical Free Church, have been volunteering as “grandparents” at the church’s week of camp for the past six years.

Walt says, “The kids come and you do what grandparents do—spoil them! We bake cookies, pop popcorn, do magic tricks for them, and

simply spend time with them. And in the midst of these activities the kids open up and talk and we have the chance to love them. Throughout the whole week of camp, the grandparents are a part of the activities that go on and many of the kids come up and give us hugs and interact with us just as a grandparent and grandchild should. It really is an incredible ministry.”

Retirement—An Opportunity to Make a Kingdom Impact

Serving is what God calls His people to do. Regardless of age or experience, those that make themselves available to Him will be used in unexpected ways. For example, when Hal Haltom was 60 years old, he attended church like he typically did each week on Sunday. Sitting in the pew, he heard the familiar words preached from Matthew 25 where Jesus says, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Hal recalls, “The words the minister said that morning coincided with my own feelings regarding service. I felt like I wasn’t fulfilling my calling and I wanted to do something challenging that would make a difference in peoples’ lives.”

Shortly after, Hal went looking for a way to serve within the prison system in Houston, Texas. He went through an extensive training program that culminated in him participating as a one-on-one mentor to inmates. For five years, he faithfully went on Monday nights to visit, study the Bible, and pray with those that many have forgotten.

attorneys for inmates, he has built relationships with the family members, and he has patiently encouraged, prayed and waited on the Lord. “They have become my friends, and many of them I stay in touch with after they are released from prison.”

Why does a retiree who has been doing this ministry for 17 years continue? “God called me and I must care for these men. There is a crying need. Two million people in this country are in prison, with 200,000 of them being in the state of Texas. We have a social problem that is overwhelming, and I must do something to make a difference.” Hal tries to influence other retirees at Chapelwood to invest their lives in prison ministry.

Hal doesn’t consider retiring from his ministry. “I knew a 92-year old man who would go to the prisons to minister to the inmates while in his wheelchair! If he could do that, I certainly can too. The need is so great—I will continue to serve in the prisons as long as I am able.”

Demographers speak of the increased longevity of people. In 1900, the average life expectancy was 47 whereas now, 100 years later it is 77 years and increasing!⁶ Due to advances in medical technology, better health care, and increased education, people today are living out a full life span. Often this is referred to as the squaring of the pyramid. Has God given people longer life to spend it purely on leisure activities? Hal would say no.

The word *retirement* is never mentioned in Scripture. In fact, the Bible speaks over and over of men and women who God used mightily in their later years. Consider Abraham, who fathered a child at the age of 90 or Moses who

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HAL HALTOM

As Hal grew older, the drive to downtown Houston each week became too much, so he began ministering to prisoners in Sugarland, TX. This time his mentoring took place on Thursday nights, and today, at the age of 77, Hal faithfully continues to invest himself into the lives of these men. At times he has given his own money to hire

AGE DOES NOT HAVE TO BE A LIMITATION.

at the age of 80 led the Israelites to the Promised Land. Likewise, today's Church has an opportunity to show the world that age does not have to be a limitation.

The words of Paul in Philippians 3:13-14 provide a poignant reminder of how Jesus' followers can approach the later years of life: "...Straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."



AMY HANSON

Amy Hanson is a freelance writer for Leadership Network, as well as an educator, speaker, and consultant in older adult ministry and gerontology. She was the active adult (50+) ministries director at Central Christian Church in Las Vegas, before moving to Nebraska to complete her Ph.D. in Human Sciences. She teaches several aging courses at the college-level and has conducted research on volunteerism among older adults in the church. Amy lives in Omaha, NE, is married to Jon and they have a three-year old daughter named Ella. You can find out more about her ministry by visiting www.amyhanson.net.

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** Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.*



DON WILCOX

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ENDNOTES

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