

## **Senior Christians: a Ministry Blind-Spot**

by Bob Young

I have been writing about Baby Boomers for over 20 years. My wife and I are Baby Boomers. My master's thesis focused on the importance of Baby Boomers in the work of the church and sought to understand how this large force could be more involved in the work of local churches. In the late 1980s when I first began researching and tracking Baby Boomers, members of this generation were on the cusp of assuming primary leadership roles in the church. Today they are on the verge of retirement, with the first Baby Boomers already drawing Social Security. Nonetheless, Baby Boomers are still in position to have a positive impact on the future of the church—perhaps even more in retirement (what many Baby Boomers prefer to call “reinvestment”) than during the family-rearing and working years.

The oldest generations in the church have typically been underserved. Only in recent years have we seen an increased interest in ministry to seniors. Other religious groups have been far ahead of us in the churches of Christ in this regard. Our Baptist neighbors have seen this need for at least 40 years. We are trying to catch up. We are writing books, studying gerontology, and thinking about keeping seniors active and involved in the church. This is often defined as ministry with those who are 55 or older. One of the experts in the area of Christian gerontology lives near me. Dr. James Knapp of Southeastern Oklahoma State University has studied and written about the aging membership of the churches of Christ. We are “graying”. He says that in a typical congregation 20-40% of the members are in that age range (55 or older). Dr. Knapp has examined the statistics for 754 congregations and found the average percentage of seniors to be 23% of the local members. The percentages of older members are generally higher in rural areas and lower in urban areas. The highest percentage he has found was a church of 100 that had 90% seniors and only 10% of the members were 54 and younger. For many years our older Christians have been underserved. Churches hire youth ministers that in many churches serve no more than 5-10% of the church, and a major age group that represents 30-40% of the church and is a significant contributor to the work of the church is ignored. I am not suggesting an “either-or” option but a “both-and”. Even in churches with limited resources, the church cannot afford to ignore the need for ministry focused on the seniors in the church.

What will we do in ministry with those who are 55 and older? The local church where I serve has a 55+ group. Most of those who participate in this group are significantly older than 55. The Baby Boomers represent another generation coming on—those who are today's real 55+ers. We must give better attention and care to our “seniors.” In today's world, ministry is not “to” seniors, it is “with” seniors.

Don Vinzant, minister at the Edmond church, recently told me that seniors fall into three groups: no gos, slow gos, and go gos. The church cannot afford to ignore this group that is at least one-fourth to one-third of its membership. In many congregations, this is the group that gives most of the contribution.

Churches must consider afresh the kind of honor, respect and service opportunities that our senior Christians deserve. We want to include and involve all of the members of God's family—from our infants, children and youth to our seniors. Vinzant describes these as those "who have passed through many winters and still want to help in God's work of reconciliation." Indeed!

My wife and I are "reinvesting" our lives this year, not because we plan to quit, but because we want to do more than ever before, and freeing ourselves from the requirements of daily work routines will allow us the freedom and flexibility to do that. Our story and desire is not unique—it is the story of 1000s of Christians who will reinvest their lives in things they find meaningful, worthwhile and rewarding. The church will miss a great opportunity if it does not find ways to help these find service and ministry in those things that advance God's kingdom.