

I sat in on a discussion the other day that caught my attention. It was an informal group of clergy and amidst a host of other topics that arose; the demographics of the Church came up. It is no secret that our churches are older and grayer. What surprised me somewhat was that the consensus seemed to be that the fact of an older population presented many problems and made it more difficult for the Church to carry out its mission.

“There is no one left to do the work!”

“They are all too tired or too frail or too sick!”

“My members are stuck in a time warp; no one wants to do anything new.”

There is undoubtedly some truth in every one of these statements! But they unfairly characterize a whole generation. I know there is no easy way to deal with the reality they reveal, but I suspect the depth of feeling expressed by these clergy in these words, speak to a different problem. It is a problem of vision! It is a problem of assuming that because older adults often do not have the “get up and go” ability that they once had, because they cannot or will not do the tasks in the church they once did, that there is only one thing left to do with them. It is time-consuming and often burdensome. The assumption on the part of too many is that the church’s relationship to older adults is now solely about ministering to them.

What a sadly mistaken vision that is! Many, if not most, older adults still want to serve, still want to be useful, still want to spend their time giving, rather than receiving. We do them and ourselves a disservice when we don’t find creative ways in which they can engage in ministry with us. To do so means to worry less about the aging of our congregations and more about envisioning new ways to be “church” in an aging environment. Perhaps a gift the aging brings to the church is the forcing of a new look at our way of doing ministry, of being the Church. Personally, I have never seen a church that had too few committees. I have never seen a church create a new world (usher in the reign of God) via committees and boards. The ministries that I have seen begin to do these things have been relational in nature. They have challenged individuals to live out their faith in the world around them, rather than in the church building. Older adults have an abundance of time to be relational and are generally very in tune with one-on-one evangelism. This is ministry they can perform and, if challenged, they will perform it. I see too many older adults doing ministry in this relational way to doubt it is largely a matter of “*our*” seeing the ministry of the church in the same old way that blocks creatively involving older adults in ministry with us.

Hint: Look at the people (older and younger), discuss with them their passion for doing ministry; discuss with them what they can and will do in sharing the Gospel; and then create a vision for being the church where you are, even if it means restructuring or doing away with committees, boards and such. I would be interested to lead a workshop in your church on these thoughts. (203-929-2787)

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