



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

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## A Best Practice: Ministry to those who are Growing Older

In an article, “Have Churches Abandoned the Elderly?” (<http://sojo.net/blogs/2013/10/23/have-churches-abandoned-elderly>) Stephen Mattson says:

- In an evangelical Christian climate obsessed with change, cultural trends, and trying to stay up-to-date and relevant, it's **easy to undervalue the elderly.**
- In many ways, Christians have suffered from the sin of apathy, being **guilty of ignoring a large segment of believers — the elderly** — who are continually forced into the shadows of our ministries, leadership structures, publicity campaigns, vision, and dialogue.
- ... who cares for the elderly? That assignment goes to whoever has enough spare time, usually an associate pastor or volunteer group, delegated to make hospital visitations and deliver shut-in meals — but **few go beyond providing those basic services.**
- It's easy to stereotype "old people" as complainers and people who are out of touch, but it's time to start honoring the elderly within our churches and realizing that **they have just as much value and worth as everyone else** — they are God's creation!
- In many ways, avoiding, ignoring, and abandoning the elderly isn't something that happens intentionally, but is done out of convenience — because building relationships with them is just too hard. Christ calls us to serve and love everyone. Are we?



Several past **GEMS** issues have surveyed many vibrant ways parishes are responding to the needs of the eldering. This issue explores some principles and ideas from four of the many resource available today.

As you read these ideas:

- What are you already doing?
- What practices and methods might you introduce and add to your ministry with those who are growing older?



In “Shut Down the Bus Tours: What Older Church Members Should Really Be Doing” (<https://careynieuwhof.com/shut-down-the-bus-tours-what-older-church-members-should-be-doing/>),

Carey Nieuwhof suggests:

- Too many churches have played into the trap of trying to cater to the needs of perfectly capable over-50 adults in their church, as though they were **a demographic to be appeased, and not mobilized.**
- The default in many churches is simple: provide programming for over-50 adults that caters to their needs: potluck lunches, Bible studies and social gatherings for their demographic, and, of course, bus trips. Really? **As in really—this is as good as it gets** for people moving into their prime and then into their senior years?
- Here are **four reasons** it's time to kill the bus trip mentality far too many churches adopt for their over-50 attenders.
  - **Life isn't about serving you.** I'm not saying you can't take a vacation or enjoy the life God has given you, but a thirty-year vacation? Seriously? How many rounds of golf can you play? How many beaches can you lie on? How many 4:30 buffets can you eat?

When church leaders cater to appeasing needs, they miss the mission potential of a generation. You can fill your life with activity, or you can fill your life with purpose. It's your

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

choice. I'm choosing purpose. You aren't the mission. The mission is the mission.

- **The next generation wants and needs the older generation.** Biblical community is more nuanced and powerful than hipsters ministering to hipsters and seniors ministering to seniors. It's about pairing up the generations to learn from each other, serve side by side and build into each other.

Serving together intergenerationally keeps older adults young and helps make the young wise. It does more than though.

Serving together creates significance. I love the way Reggie Joiner puts it: people will not believe they are significant until you give them something significant to do.

Kara Powell, in her research, found that having generations serve together in a way that builds relationships between those really helps teens and young adults find or keep their faith.

- **Not mobilizing older adults squanders resources.** As you soon discover by talking to many successful business people, there's an emptiness that comes with success and money. The reality is that the emptiness they feel in your soul is actually filled by giving, not getting.

Church leaders who are able to help people see that this is what they're missing will be able to leverage resources to fund the next generation. Increase your standard of giving before you increase your standard of living.

It's more than money, though. While foolishness plagues both old and young alike (some people don't grow wiser in their senior years; they just grow older, there are decades of accumulated wisdom that get wasted if it's not leveraged for the sake of others. There can be a significant wisdom that's lost if years get spent only in business, at the lake house, eating potluck lunches and taking trips.

- **Sacrifice kills entitlement.** Given the current decline in church attendance and engagement in North America and the West, passing the faith onto the next generation has never been more urgent. In
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fact, I believe the greatest thing this generation can do is sacrifice to bring faith to the next generation.

Leveraging time, wisdom, insight, relationship, money and influence—essentially, your life—for the sake of the young is the greatest legacy you can leave. No generation in history has had more resources than the current generation over 50. Leveraging them for the sake of the next generation is perhaps the best thing we can do with them.



In an article, “20-Something Ideas for Youth to Minister with the Elderly” (<https://www.o.ca.org/parish-ministry/yya/ideas-for-youth-to-minister-with-the-elderly>), V. Rev. Michael Anderson offers these practical suggestions:

- Talk to the youth!
- Do an oral history of the parish.
- Celebrate elderly parishioners' names days.
- Plan regular visits to the hospital and nursing homes in your area.
- Have your parish's youth group form a “Sunshine Committee.”
- Record a book for seniors who have difficulty with their eyesight.
- Prepare and host a meal honoring one or more senior members of the parish.
- Form work groups to offer various services that elderly require.
- Adopt a grandparent.
- Ask a senior to be part of your parish's youth ministry team attending activities and events.
- Record the priest's sermon each week, make copies, and distribute them to homebound and hospital bound seniors.
- Prepare Pascha baskets, Christmas packages, etc. for seniors who cannot prepare the foods.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED



- Raise money for seniors to go on a trip together.
- Raise money for a senior charity organization like AARP or a nearby adult facility.
- Invite seniors into youth group meetings and church school classes to discuss how they have seen the parish grow and change.
- Form a youth choir to visit nursing homes and homebound parishioners.
- Start an apprenticeship program.
- Visit elderly parishioners whose family does not live nearby.
- Have seniors raise money for youth events.
- Start a mentoring program.
- Talk with the elderly in your parish!



In this article, “Maturing Adult Faith Formation Part 1) (<https://fashioningfaith.org/maturing-adult-faith-formation-part-1-leader-article-journal-article?locale=en>), Richard P. Johnson, Ph.D., begins by saying the average age of today's Catholic is rising; clearly the average age of the people in the pews is rising!

Certainly there are some parishes where the average age is younger than others, but by contrast there are others where the majority of parishioners are already retired. Because of this advancing chronological giftedness, church leadership is often tempted to ask the question: How are we to sustain our mission and ministries with so few younger parishioners?

Perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps a more salient question might be: **How can we use and share the harvest of wisdom resident in our more senior parishioners to extend our mission and ministries?** Such a shift moves us from a mentality of scarcity to a mentality of abundance.

In his article, “Shaping a New Vision of Faith Formation for Maturing Adults”

([https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/lifelong\\_faith\\_journal\\_1.1.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/lifelong_faith_journal_1.1.pdf)), Richard Johnson names these sixteen fundamental tasks:

- Develop basic faith formation competencies with a strong spiritual base.
- Define a new personal paradigm for aging that is built on a spiritual framework.
- See retirement as a holy journey of peace and purpose.
- Build spiritual companionship skills into the intergenerational patterns of the Christian community.
- Develop ways to see illness through a lens of faith.
- Understand wellness as a spiritually holistic concept.
- Learn the essentials of giving care in a way that encourages spiritually growth.
- Understand the connection between spiritual growth and good mental health.
- Link the experiences of the middle years with God’s grace.
- Connect the experiences of the maturing years with God’s grace.
- See all relationships as opportunities for expressing the love of Jesus Christ.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- Stimulate a new openness to the ongoing work of the Spirit.
- Rise to the role of spiritual mentor-coach.
- Recognize the innate power in one's own spiritual story.
- Enter into a renewed practice of prayer.
- Recognize the essential wonder of our advancing walk with God.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at [www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com)

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*  
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *Guided by the Directory for Catechesis: Transforming the Vision and Practice of Parish Catechesis:*  
<https://twentythirdpublications.com/products/guided-by-the-directory-for-catechesis>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Seasons of Adult Faith website: <http://adultfaith.weebly.com/>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:  
[https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons\\_of\\_aff\\_-\\_journal\\_special\\_issue.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf)