



Missouri District

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD

Bearing Fruit with Older Adults

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The righteous flourish... planted in the house of the Lord... They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright. Psalm 92:12-15

Seniors were among the first to be identified as most vulnerable to the Coronavirus. The US population of seniors is 16%; yet in the LCMS they are 24% of our membership. While the graying of our Synod raises concerns for reaching young generations, seniors are bearing “fruit in old age.” In many churches, seniors are the backbone of our discipling children, caregiving, community outreach, volunteerism, and generosity. Coronavirus has endangered seniors, but they remain “full of sap and green.” Read through to examine the challenges and opportunities for our churches working with and among seniors.

Faithful Adaptations

With the exception of “The Great Flood,” no event in human history has limited church gatherings on a global scale like Coronavirus. The Holy Spirit and His Church, however, didn’t miss a beat. Christians continued to devote themselves to worship, scripture, prayer, and fellowship connections. Every generation got involved. Low tech or high tech, we found ways to be “in touch,” caring for one another and giving generously to those in need. We adapted.

Listening and “enlisting” seniors in ministry will add capacity and depth to the discipleship of your entire church. Here’s a sample of enlisting seniors from around that Missouri District that is bearing fruit among us.

- “A senior couple watched the church’s worship services on Facebook. As the quarantine became longer, they took on a formal role as online host/hostess for our broadcasts. They love the job and are doing great!” (Concordia-Sikeston, Pastor Mark Martin)
- “45 volunteers formed to be ‘on-call’ to shop or help in other ways for seniors or anyone who does not want to go out in public.” (St Paul-Des Peres, Pastor Glen Thomas)
- “Elders took gift bags to all households who hadn’t yet returned to worship. It included the new “Portals of Prayer,” a devotion book, and a cloth face mask that our members made.” (St. Matthew-Lee’s Summit, Pastor Craig Otto)



- “A group of senior men who met on Wednesday mornings for Bible study and fellowship set up chairs around a shade tree, socially distancing, and abiding by other guidelines. The joy on their faces is a sight to see.” (Concordia-Kirkwood, Pastor David Meggers)
- “We do extensive phone calls and even offer “tech support” to help people get connected to Zoom meetings” (Timothy-St. Louis, Pastor Andrew Dinger)
- “Our online services are not passive. They are designed for active participation. The bottom quarter of the screen carries all the words of the liturgy and of the hymns. Several families gather at their older family members’ house to do the service together.” (Immanuel-Joplin, Pastor Greg Mech)

Guiding Principles

By the grace of God, our churches (and seniors along with them) adapted more quickly than we ever imagined possible. Then came “re-opening.” This was not, however, a “grand” re-opening for all. Sample surveys in the Missouri District indicate there is no predictable attendance pattern in re-opening. The numbers shift weekly and generationally in urban, suburban, and rural settings. What was true for last week’s worship (both in-person and on-line) is subject to change. As we move forward with seniors, here are three guiding principles to consider and discuss in your congregation.

- **Relationships Over Programs:** Programmatic fellowship activities valued by seniors have stopped. Now is the time to accelerate organizing, enlisting, and “planting” seniors into new ministries including handwriting, phone, and technology connections with other seniors.
Scripture: *“They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright!” (Psalm 92:13-15)*
Leadership Questions: Who are those seniors in your church “full of sap and green”? How can you “listen” and “enlist” them in new expressions of senior ministry? What senior ministry programs have we lost to the pandemic? What was their founding purpose? What opportunity does this season give us to re-vision senior ministries in new and more personal ways?
- **Grief Care:** Seniors are “seasoned” people and highly adaptable from a rich life of faith, wisdom, and experience. They don’t resist change as much as criticism suggests. Their real fear is loss. Aging is a journey of many losses– accelerated by the pandemic. Ministry in, with, and among the many griefs and losses of seniors is the discipleship they need.
Scripture: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)*
Leadership Questions: What losses are older adults experiencing in your congregation? How does our in-take of news media impact our thinking emotionally and spiritually? How can we help one another acknowledge, grieve, and come to Jesus with these heavy burdens? What are we learning from the promises of God’s Word in our devotional life? How might changes in our routine, and even in our church’s routines, actually become a lighter burden and greater grace? How can seniors provide grief care for young adults, parents, and children experiencing many griefs without nearly the life experiences and perspective of seniors?



- **Walk Rather Than Sprint:** There was not, and will never be, a mass re-opening day beyond COVID-19. This is a process for every activity and relationship in our churches and communities. We live in times where ministry is fluid and a hybrid of many points of connection rather than “big events.” Leaders need to acknowledge, care for, and help people prepare for more changes. As a church family, we need be patient in suffering and gracious to our leaders in times of constant change, restoring and forgiving one another when we stumble. This is a time to move forward with shared perseverance and encouragement with the Lord, rather than waiting for it to be “over.”

Scripture: *“Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:1-5)*

Leadership Questions: Where are our seniors? Who have come back quickly? Who are left behind? What are some examples of our church re-learning how to “walk” rather than “sprint” in this time? In what ways have we gone too fast... or too slow? How has this impacted the most vulnerable among us? What lessons of endurance and character has the Spirit been teaching us? What testimony of hope can faithful seniors give our church to encourage all?

References and Resources

- **Joyfully Aging: A Christian’s Guide** (CPH 2012, by Rich Bimler)
- **ALOA: Adult Lutherans Organized for Action** (aloaserves.org)
- **Lutheran Senior Services—Resource Archives** (lssliving.org/news/resources)
- **Rich and Charlie Resources** ([facebook.com/Rich-and-Charlie-Resources-1942414976020469/](https://www.facebook.com/Rich-and-Charlie-Resources-1942414976020469/))
- **LCMS Reporter January 2019—Older Adults: An Overlooked Ministry Resource** (lcms.org/2019/older-adults-an-overlooked-ministry-resource/)
- **Christian Century--10 Guidelines for Pastoral Care During Coronavirus Outbreak** (christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/10-guidelines-pastoral-care-during-coronavirus-outbreak)
- **CDC—COVID-19 Guidance for Older Adults** ([cdc.gov/aging/covid19-guidance.html](https://www.cdc.gov/aging/covid19-guidance.html))

Next Steps

Invite two or three of those seniors to join you over the phone or zoom or under a tree to talk about this paper. Give particular attention to one or more of the “Guiding Principles,” scriptures and leadership questions that may be most appropriate to where your senior ministry is at this time. Critical to this conversation is “at this time.” This is not a conversation of what will happen some day in the future when “normal returns.” These questions are asking us to consider ministry with seniors in this extraordinary time and place.



1. Choose a Guiding Principle (Relationships over Programs, Grief Care, or Walk Rather than Sprint). Read the scripture and discuss the leadership questions. Take notes on your insights.
2. What is one action step we will try among seniors that has surfaced from our discussion of this Guiding Principle?
3. What resources (including people) do we need to implement this step?
4. What will be the timeline and the people involved in taking this next step?
5. How will we follow-up and evaluate our efforts?

This article was prepared by Bill Geis with our thanks from dozens of pastors and church workers who shared their experiences in ministry. The Missouri District offers coaching resources to congregations working on their mission and ministry plans. Invite us to follow-up with your senior ministry team. Contact Bill Geis at bill.geis@mo.lcms.org.

