

OLD PEOPLE NEED JESUS TOO!

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The world has adopted the youth culture, and in this respect the church is little different from the world. Older people tend not to be valued in the world, and for the most part they are not valued in the church. Our church wants a youth specialist. We advertised alongside some 50 other churches. Not one wants a specialist for seniors

Although it may be true that, overall, there are more older people than younger people attending church, there are still many who don't. According to a 1998 survey, out of almost eight million people in England aged 65-plus, less than a million went to church.

Sadly many churches do not exercise a truly all-age ministry, with the result that activities for the under-eighteens tend to out-number activities for the retired by at least two to one. Furthermore, the activities which churches do have for older people fall into essentially two categories: they are either an expression of social concern for 'outsiders' (e.g. luncheon clubs for the elderly) or devotional meetings for the 'insiders'. There is little with a distinctively evangelistic edge.

In my own church we have developed a clear strategy, offering bridge-building activities, such as our annual 'Holiday at Home' - run after the holiday club for children. The activities at both these events are very different, yet the aim is essentially one. Then we invite people to a monthly Sunday afternoon 'event', which is fast-moving and hi-tech in presentation and only lasts for 45 minutes. It is a 'Seeker service' for those 'older in years, but young in heart', where the claims of Christ are clearly spelt out. The great draw of this Sunday afternoon 'event' is that it is followed by 'the best tea in town'! It attracts large numbers, many of whom have no connection with our church. Our next project is to run an Alpha course for older people.

Develop a strategy for the sixty plus:

1. Encourage older people to socialise. Just like young people, older people have social needs. Churches need to provide opportunities for social activity, where older people can enjoy themselves and make friends
2. Encourage older people to grow. The sad fact is that some people are stunted as a result of past experiences. Here is a massive pastoral challenge to ensure that older people continue to be 'green and full of sap' (Psalm 92.14)
3. Encourage them to use their minds. Just as life doesn't end at 60, neither should life-long learning. Minister should be concerned for the good of people, rather than as fodder for the church machine.
4. Encourage people to grow spiritually. With the beginning of the retirement years there is an opportunity to develop one's prayer life.
5. Encourage older people to face their mortality. Older people need to be helped to cope with the stages of role-reversal and of dependence, when they can no longer be the kind of active people they were.
6. Encourage older people to continue to serve the Lord. Paul Tournier believed that every retired person needs a second career with goals and a mission, that must be distinguished from leisure activity
7. Encourage older people to seek and use opportunities for evangelism. Retirement marks the onset of a series of life-changing events. These can

provide 'windows of opportunities' in which people can move to receptivity of the Gospel