

Tips for Improving Communication by Church Leaders with Older Adults

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Good communication is an important part of the relationship process among the pastor, church staff, and congregation. However, having successful relationships with older adults often requires unique communication skills and strategies. Effective pastor-older adult communication has great benefits: Older adults are more likely to participate in church activities, they express greater satisfaction with their church and church leadership, and they have a greater sense of well-being.

When communicating with older adults, make sure to convey respect. Developing good communication skills by church leaders is helpful for gaining the trust and cooperation with older adults. Inability to interact effectively with older adults can be problematic for some pastors and/or church staff, especially if there are generational and age differences. The goal of better communication is that church leaders deliver services that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse older adult population.

When there is poor communication between church leaders and older adults, there is likely to be mistrust and misunderstanding.

Studies show that good communication is a teachable skill. Seminary students who receive communication training improve dramatically in talking with, assessing, and building relationships with older adults.

The objective of this material is to encourage more productive decision-making conversations with older adults. Learning and using effective communication techniques may help you build more satisfying relationships with older adults and become even more skilled at pastoral care and older adult ministry.

Be Careful of Ageism

Ageism, which is prevalent in our culture, is defined as prejudice or discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes. Ageism is widespread not only in our society but also in religious circles, and often among church leaders. Ageism is hard to overcome because it exists everywhere and is so deeply rooted in our culture.

The image of an aging congregation is often seen as outdated, closed-minded, conservative, dying, and hindering church growth. Ageism often causes local churches to neglect the spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being of older adults.

We've all heard the pejoratives: old geezer and dirty old man. Overcoming ageism means no longer using terms like the elderly or senior citizens. Elderly evokes images of frailty and senior citizens is outdated, and dare I say, old fashioned. Being called a senior is fine (but not a senior citizen) and elder is seen as a sign of respect (but not elderly).

Language alone can't eradicate ageism, but it is an excellent beginning for developing a more caring, sensitive, and informed congregation. So how do you refer to the chronologically gifted people in your church and community? A good start would probably be to refer to older people in your church and community as just that: older people (but not old people), since older is simply a descriptor into which people can move.

As a church leader, how do you view your own aging? How do you view the aging of others? One of the most evident truths of the Bible is that old age is desirable. Old age was considered a blessing from God, not a scourge.

The following scriptural texts are just a few of the many examples of God's blessing upon old age:

- *"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you"* (Exodus 20:12)
- *"Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life"* (Proverbs 16:31)
- *"The glory of youth is their strength, but the beauty of the aged is their gray hair"* (Proverbs 20:29)
- *"Is wisdom with the aged; and understanding in length of days?"* (Job 12:12)
- *"The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon...In old age they still produce fruit, they are always green and full of sap"* (Psalm 92:12,14)

As church leaders, both pastors and laypersons, we are called to *rethink* aging in our own lives and to *reframe* aging in our churches and communities. We should avoid talking about aging as decline, deterioration, and dependency. Granted, old age is often associated with negatives – growing frailty, declining independence, the loss of loved ones, and the approach of our own death. However, research shows that older persons are better positioned than younger adults to cope with

stresses, depression, worry, and anger, and they experience more enjoyment, happiness, and satisfaction in life than younger people.

More people are living longer lives than ever before. With this longer life expectancy, older adults bring a wealth of knowledge, experience, wisdom, and faith. Arguably, older adults make up an incredibly diverse demographic in our churches and communities that varies in terms of physical and cognitive ability, economic power, lifestyle and religious experiences, and social connection. Aging is not a problem to be solved, but a gift to be embraced.

Use Proper Form of Address

Within the church, informality is viewed as being friendly toward someone, and the use of first names is often seen as acceptable. However, it is important to ask older adults what they would like to be called.

Establish respect by using formal language. As one older adult said, *"Don't call me Edna, and I won't call you Sonny."* Use Mr., Mrs., Ms., and so on. Or, you might ask older adults about preferred forms of address and how she or he would like to address you. Avoid using familiar terms, like dear and honey, which tend to sound patronizing. Also, don't refer to older adults as young man or young woman, which implies that their actual age is less desirable.

Be sure to talk to your church staff about the importance of being respectful to all members, especially those who are older and who might be used to more formal terms of address.

Make Church Buildings and Related Facilities Accessible

From the church parking lot to the inside of the church building, be aware that older adults may need to easily and safely access church entrances and exits, restrooms, classrooms, and sanctuary.

Church leaders should also check church signage and the accessibility needs of older adults. Are all areas of the church well marked with clear signage so that older adults with vision concerns can easily identify certain locations? Are hearing assistant devices and sound systems available, well working, and in good order? Are parking lots, sidewalks, and stairs easily accessible and in good repair? Are the restrooms ADA compliant? Are there handrails in the hallways, stairs, and ramps, and – if needed – at entrance and exit doors?

Demonstrate Empathy

The desire to maintain some semblance of control is a primary concern for older adults. As adults age, there is an overwhelming feeling of personal losses: health, sense of worth, physical strength, and authority. No longer working or raising a family, older adults may feel that they have outlived their usefulness. Experiencing a sense of meaning and purpose is of great importance for persons of all ages but this is especially true for older adults.

In addition, faith development for older adults is often tested and refined through the frequent experience of loss, illness and disability, retirement, search for meaning and purpose, widowhood and death of loved ones, and changes in role, social position, and economic conditions.

Being supportive with care and counsel is important. Watch for opportunities to use sermon illustrations and scriptural texts that relate to the needs and well-being of older adults. Provide information about aging issues and older adult resources in your church library, in your church newsletters, and on your webpage. Demonstrate empathy in conversation, preaching, teaching, and counseling.

Don't Assume That You Know

As a church leader, don't assume that you know what it means to be an older adult or what older adults want or need. Each older adult is unique and the older population is very diverse. No two older adults are exactly alike. Older adults are individuals in their likes and dislikes. Older adults vary in their age, health and cognitive status, education and economic status, living arrangements, family structure, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and lifestyle choices. Presuming that you know everything you need to know about older adults will only get you into trouble.

Similarly, ask questions instead of making assumptions when it comes to your actions in relation to the older adult. Don't develop or start an older adult ministry program without first seeking the guidance, suggestions, and wisdom of older adults in your congregation.

Asking questions offers older adults a greater sense of respect, worth, and regard. Offering options give older adults a greater sense of control of their immediate environment.

Be Careful About Language

Avoid language that is demeaning such as identifying homebound or home-centered church members as shut-ins or providing congregational care programs with titles such as parenting your parents rather than titles such as assisting or managing your parents' care.

Keep in mind that when older adults see little interest directed at them by the church, they gradually lose their sense of having value and worth, which dampens and diminishes their faith development and their spiritual maturity.

Basic theological and religious concepts that church leaders well understand may be confusing and misunderstood by older adults. Using unfamiliar terms or not explaining clearly what is meant may prevent authentic connection between church leaders and older adults. Use language that is clear, familiar, and well understood. When we connect with older adults, we can communicate. Once we have good communication, we can develop the relationship that is at the heart of our mission as the church.

Compensating for Hearing Deficits

Age-related hearing loss is common. About one quarter of people between the ages of 65 and 75, and half of those over the age of 75 have disabling hearing loss. Here are a few tips to make it easier to communicate with a person who has lost some hearing:

- Make sure older adults can hear you. Use a microphone in worship services and in classrooms.
- Talk slowly and clearly in a normal tone. Shouting or speaking in a raised voice actually distorts language sounds and can give the impression of anger or be demeaning.
- Avoid using a high-pitched voice; it is hard to hear.
- Face the person directly, at eye level, so that he or she can lip-read or pick up visual clues.
- Keep your hands away from your face while talking, as this can hinder lip-reading ability.
- Be aware that background noises, such as crying babies, can mask what is being said.

- Avoid holding meetings in places where there are other conversations taking place, such as restaurants or other crowded locations.
- If possible, provide sign language interpreters during worship services and project hymns, scriptural text, responsive readings, and prayers in large print on screens or monitors during services.

Compensating for Visual Deficits

Visual disorders become more common as people age. Here are some things you can do to help manage the difficulties caused by visual deficits:

- Make sure there is adequate church lighting, both inside and outside your church buildings.
- During worship services and in classrooms, make sure there is adequate lighting, including sufficient light on your face. Try to minimize glare.
- If older adults have difficulty attending and participating in church worship services and Sunday school, consider alternatives such as live streaming your services and/or recording your services.
- When using printed materials, make sure the type is large enough and the typeface is easy to read. A 14-point print size works well.
- When printing a newsletter or other paper materials, black ink on white paper is best. The higher the contrast between the ink used for printing and the paper upon which it appears, the better. Black on white has the highest contrast.
- Likewise, black ink on a white screen is better when projecting on a screen during worship or when used in teaching.
- Have large-print worship bulletins, inserts, hymnals, songbooks, and Bibles.

Nonverbal Signals and Communication

Body language is another important consideration. As human beings, most of our communication is non-verbal. Eye contact, spatial distance, touch, and non-touch are all important considerations when working across cultural and racial groups. For example, pastors may be trained to look parishioners directly in the eye, but many ethnocultural groups see this as impolite.

With spatial issues, there are older adults who are uncomfortable with closeness and touching, while others communicate at closer distances and are most

comfortable when being greeted with a hug versus a handshake (when we're not in the middle of cold and flu season).

There are as many nonverbal indicators as there are verbal indicators that predict the success of our communication with older adults. When communicating with older adults be particularly sensitive to such factors as timing, pauses, tone of voice, facial expression, body language.

Start communication with the right attitude, including making friendly eye contact, a caring handshake, if appropriate, and a warm, welcoming smile. Being fully focused on the older person and engaging in active listening is extremely important to good communication.

Recognize the Need for Continuity and Familiarity

Religious change and different styles of worship and music can be bewildering. Older adults may feel isolated within their own place of worship and at odds with the pastoral staff. Although the world is rapidly changing, many older adults have a need for continuity and familiarity in their lives.

Older adults need the presence of familiar religious symbols, hymns, and rituals to support their continuing identity as members of the church. Church leaders that recognize this need can greatly improve their communication with older adults.

Steps To Improving Communication

Step One: Have an open mind. Recognize that no two older adults are exactly alike. Each older adult is unique and an individual. It is essential that as pastors and church leaders we are open to a worldview about aging that may not be like our own. It is essential that we understand our values and beliefs and not impose them upon others, but are open to learning from others.

Step Two: Recognize your belief about aging and older adulthood. As pastors and church leaders, it's important to learn about your own aging and your beliefs about growing old. Be aware of your internalized ageist messages and work to overcome them. Self-awareness is critical to assess one's implicit and explicit biases that may negatively impact your ministry with older adults.

Step Three: Engage in continuous learning. Effective fulfillment of ministry requires that pastors and church leaders learn as much as possible about a group that is different from themselves before engaging with that group. Pastors must engage in continuous learning about aging and be willing to change their ministry practices as new information about aging and older adults evolve. It is helpful for congregations to do an annual survey of older adults which could inform pastors and church leaders of their needs, interests, and abilities.

Step Four: Do a community resource assessment. Pastors and church leaders need to know what resources are available in the community that serve the needs of older adults. This step requires pastors to learn about services available and help older adults know about these resources.

Step Five: Be in ministry together. Because pastors and church leaders often control church resources, a power differential can occur between a pastor and church leaders and a group of older adults. Instead of viewing the pastor and church leaders as the ones who bring all the expertise, skills, and knowledge to the faith community, the pastor, church leaders, and older adults should be equals. In this way, the pastor and church leaders build their effectiveness as professional helpers, while older adults are empowered to build upon their abilities to engage in ministry and to handle crises and overcome obstacles.

In Conclusion

Reframe aging in your church and community. How you choose to frame aging in your congregation and communications, and the language you use, matters. In our society, aging is often characterized as an inevitable, negative process of physical and mental decline and loss. Aging is commonly associated with vulnerability, dependency, and death. Begin by reframing aging in your congregation and create an environment where people have a more positive view of the process and experience of aging. Recognize that people have different experiences of aging due to a variety of factors including genetic makeup, life experiences, socio-economic and educational opportunities, and health. By changing our attitudes, we have the potential to create a church where everyone enjoys later life.

Ultimately, as church leaders, we must learn what it means to see ourselves as members of an aging society in which we are called to be in ministry.

Additional Resources for Intentional Older Adult Ministry

Ageism Unmasked: Exploring Age Bias and How to End It by Tracey Gendron, PhD (Steer Forth Press)

Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century: An Inquiry Approach by Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. (Discipleship Resources)

Aging Faithfully: The Holy Invitation of Growing Older by Alice Fryling (NavPress)

An Age of Opportunity: Intentional Ministry By, With, and For Older Adults by Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. (Discipleship Resources)

Celebrating the Graying Church: Mutual Ministry Today, Legacies Tomorrow by Richard P. Olson (Rowman & Littlefield)

Ending Ageism or How Not to Shoot Old People by Margaret Morganroth Gullette (Rutgers University Press)

The Gift of Aging: Growing Older with Purpose, Planning, and Positivity by Marcy Cottrell Houle, MS and Elizabeth Eckstrom, MD, MPH (Cambridge University Press)

Our Wisdom Years: Growing Older with Joy, Fulfillment, Resilience, and No Regrets by Charles Garfield, PhD (Central Recovery Press)

Seasons of Caring: Meditations for Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregivers by ClergyAgainstAlzheimer's Network (US Against Alzheimer's)

Stage (Not Age): How to Understand and Serve People Over 60 by Susan Wilner Golden (Harvard Business Review Press)

Third Calling: What are You Doing the Rest of Your Life? By Richard and Leona Bergstrom (Re-Ignite Press)

This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism by Ashton Applewhite (Networked Books)

What Does the Bible Say About Old Age? By Ronald D. Witherup (New City Press)