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Susan Giboney

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Our Senior Members: Respecting, Serving, and Mobilizing

Susan Giboney

During each season of life I find myself desiring to research and learn as much as I can to navigate it successfully and effectively while honoring God in the process. Well, I have entered seasons of adolescence, college and graduate school, marriage, parenting, mission work, teaching, widowhood, grandparenting, caregiving, health problems, and now my senior years! Just last week I was having my annual ice cream sundae evening with our youth group and was asked to talk about growing old. I guess I have become the visual aid in that category now. The students responded to my question about what they visually see in the aging members and they mention wrinkles, gray hair, faulting steps, shaky voices, etc. So, I told them a few stories of my life and challenges I faced and experiences of our family. Then, after reading Galatians 5 about the fruit of the spirit, I asked them what they might see that is not visible in our senior members. Hopefully they will see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Role models and mentors with these traits are needed for all of us. But as we age we realize we are the ones who must demonstrate such character in spite of the current culture, health problems, or changing expectations.

Respecting Our Seniors

However, how do we respect our seniors at church? Do we view them as outdated nuisances whose value is simply to give money or add to the membership count? Or do we value them for their wisdom and faithful example as respected teachers? Some of my college students have said to me regarding older people: “I like young churches because old people scare me.” “I don’t want to lose my passion for the Lord like they have.” “Sometimes they use their age to be blunt and disrespectful.” And lastly, “They smell like lavender and cats and I am afraid they might break.” Well, perhaps young and old need to consider our aging church population in order to understand, serve, and mobilize them!

Aging is not a disease nor is retirement a four-letter word! Lord willing, they are both inevitable and can be a wonderful season of life. Basically we are a “first half of life” culture with little to no consideration for the second half except maybe for retirement financial plans. Recently I heard that we are overly prepared for the first half of life and underprepared for the second half. In *Graying of the Flock*, James Knapp gives evidence that the church has an older population and few leaders neither take advantage of nor understand the implications.

Yes, we all enjoy a good laugh, even about our aging citizens, such as: “Don’t let aging get you down. It’s too hard to get back up,” or “My teacher says little girls can grow up to be anything they choose. Why did you choose to be an old lady?” Psalms 90.12 encourages us to “number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Numbering probably means using our days purposefully to gain wisdom well into our old age.

Probably all of us have read about characteristics of generations such as (1) boomers are the wealthiest and most active generation and claim they never will retire; (2) builders are children of the great depression and are financially conservative but the most generous givers at church; and (3) elders are “the Greatest Generation” and are loyal, patriotic, and love tradition.

Current population reports state that in 1900 the life expectancy was 47 and that grew to 78.8 in 2012. The number of people ages 65 and older is expected to double in the next twenty-five years. Population demographic shifts in the next fifty years in the U.S. population show from birth to age 14 an increase of 36% while at the same time the senior adult population will increase 127% and ages 14–44 increase only 24.2%. Women outlive men by about seven years, yet there are more widows than widowers because men tend to remarry and to younger women. Our nation has more senior citizens than adolescents, but more youth ministers than senior ministers. We definitely need our youth ministers, but what does this imply for our seniors? To a large extent the future of the church is senior adults—and many of these are women!

Senior citizens are a great yet unused resource for our churches. Most retirees do not want to be idle but to live lives of substance. Just as youth ministers are trained to understand adolescents so do members need to understand the senior years. But seniors also need to be reminded to listen and be approachable. I am thankful a young woman at church told me that the mother of her adopted son was in prison. So I went to the prison to visit with the biological mother and saw great need and now have been teaching in the women’s prison for several years. Seniors need to listen because God will surprise them with how he will use them! It is neither helpful nor realistic to compare most elderly with those unique seniors who swim the English Channel at 70 or run a marathon at 84. However, running a faithful life with a faithful family until death is a marathon worth acknowledging!

Sometimes seniors feel marginalized in our current culture—ageism does exist. Usually calling something *old*, such as an old suit or an old hymn, is not a compliment. But to call something *young*, such as young thinking or young acting, is generally a compliment. When we see someone we haven’t seen in a long time sometimes we say, “You haven’t aged at all!”—as though aging is shameful (although we all like to hear that)!

Not only is technology changing rapidly but also how we do church is changing. These changes, if not handled with love and understanding, can accelerate miscommunication and lower spiritual morale and result in fewer seniors thriving in the churches. It is helpful to honor and show respect to seniors as changes are made. Seniors want to feel comfortable asking questions, making suggestions, and requesting help without feeling they are a burden or a problem or simply wrong! Jesus taught us in Matthew 10.28 not to fear those who could kill our bodies but rather to fear those who could kill both body and soul.

In Holly Allen’s book *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, she says time together with all ages helps us to understand and respect each other more. It makes us want to know them better and want to take care of them. Intergenerational churches find that they seek to understand different styles of worship and music better as well as work well in ministry together and, when an elderly person dies, even children and teens attend the funeral. A recent report from Kara Powell of the Fuller Youth Institute stated, “Being involved in intergenerational worship and relationship was one of the variables most highly correlated to young people’s faith.” In the March 2015 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, a study surmised that successful aging is rethinking and expanding one’s worldview in light of new information and experiences. A marker of successful aging is recognition that the process never ends—that lifelong learning requires unlearning and rethinking. That is the challenge for seniors.

Understanding Their Season of Life

Respecting our seniors is vital, but also understanding their season of life is too. I would like to say, “Please be patient with me as I was with you when you were a child. You were slow then, you selectively forgot things, you got sick and needed care, you had to be taught new things, you rambled on about your day and wanted me to listen with rapt attention, you were afraid of new experiences, you wanted me to keep you company when you were lonely, and yet you wanted independence—and now I need that!” Our elderly know when they are a burden to someone’s schedule and sometimes step aside not to impede the progress of the younger and busy ones. I encourage members to be sensitive to that and the loneliness it causes. Seniors want to be invited or asked, so seek out senior members and tell them you need them!

In our places of worship we need to understand and respect aging bodies, providing microphones or seating areas to minimize extraneous noise for individuals with hearing loss; good lighting, large print, and

transportation for those with blurred vision or loss of sight; handrails, an arm to hold, one-level floors, and no loose rugs for members with mobility issues; sturdy chairs with good balance for those with limited muscular strength; safe and comfortable temperatures for people with sensitive skin; and last but not least, convenient parking areas. With age may come special needs but our hands are still able to help; our eyes, to see good to do; and our ears, to listen to the hurting. We want to know our lives are still of value, still count, and that we are leaving a legacy to this world.

I was pleased to read in a recent report from the Barna Group that skeptics were more drawn to a congregation in which the older people regularly connected with and shared life experiences with younger adults! They liked a church that has older adults who provide life lessons and advice to younger adults. So, our senior members are good for encouraging, not discouraging, and attracting members of the community! Church classes might be encouraged to spend time with, ask specific questions of, and dialogue with the elderly. All would learn a lot from each other! Seniors can write articles, develop a friendship ministry, be prayer partners, teach skills, serve as family helpers, be good counseling listeners and wise responders, lead a ministry team, aid missionaries, teach classes, correspond, work a phone-calling list, host meals, visit the ill, facilitate a caregiver or grief support group (note *12 Conversations* in the following resource list), prepare communion, organize a library, assist children's ministry, adopt a local school, and enjoy fellowship together. Senior ministry does not have to be formal or separate from other ministries at church.

Think about how your church can better respect and understand the senior members. What are some basic needs the church can minister to them? Which of these developmental issues challenges you the most? Your attitude toward aging has everything to do with how well you relate to and deal with maturing adults and consequently how helpful you can be to these members.

Four Issues of Concern

In my study and research on our aging population I found four main issues of concern: parenting the adult child, grandparenting, caregiving, and grief and loss. Having personally experienced all of these issues, I was drawn to studying these seasons of life.

One of the important issues an aging member experiences is how to parent an adult child. After my oldest daughter was married and left home, it grieved me that my home was not her home anymore. I knew I had a changing role and wrote in my prayer journal "how to parent my adult child." It is a natural progression for a child to leave home, but some stay around longer than expected due to the economy or specific needs. Conflict is inevitable, but it is important to remember that children are not responsible for our happiness—ultimately they will lead their own lives that will bring them happiness independent from us.

Sometimes children disappoint us or don't meet our expectations, but we must remember this is where hopefully honoring of parents continues even if obedience ends. Young adults want their parents to trust them with confidence in their training for finances, problem solving, relationships, health, and—as it says in Hebrews 5.14—to discern good from evil. God is now in control: you are not. Some quick suggestions that might help are to listen to them and be open to their thinking; always keep a relationship with them; be their confident cheerleader; when they marry, be supportive and encouraging but not intrusive; develop an inner serenity in spite of and because of this transition; live your life not as a burden to them but as a blessing; and as you age, allow them to help you.

Ah, the issue of grandparenting—what grandparent is not glad to talk about that? (I have ten grandchildren who are all amazing, of course.) But the issue could also be . . . what grandchildren? Many young adults may not marry or decide not to have children. Maybe surrogate grandchildren at church or in the community would fill that void. Proverbs 17.6 says that children's children are a crown to old men (and women). Studies reveal that adults who have had good relationships with their grandparents show heightened self-esteem, a greater chance of success in later life, and a strong sense of family values. There are various forms of grandparenting such as surrogate, grandparenting from a distance, and grandparents becoming caregivers.

Prior to becoming a grandparent it is important to strive for strengthening family bonds, clearing up strained relationships, asking forgiveness, and communicating on a positive level. Establishing a healthy relationship with your own children will do nothing but benefit a future relationship with their children, your grandchildren! Do what is needed, as much as possible, to make peace in your family or get the help necessary to achieve it.

Some quick suggestions I have found helpful as a grandmother are to be supportive from a distance, even if they live near by; be a comforting presence and cautious with criticism; offer to care for the grandchildren to give refreshing time to the parents; know your boundaries as well as preferences of the parents; give wonderful memories to the grandchildren through special times together, trips, and fun (my grandchildren love it when I have “Grandma Camp” in the summer for them); share their heritage with lots of storytelling; give a wholesome attitude toward aging (laugh at ourselves and we all will laugh together); share resources appropriately; be a living example of a servant of Christ (you are a role model of service and faith to them); and affirm them with hope and belief in who they are and what they will become.

Former first lady and author Rosalynn Carter said, “There are four kinds of people in the world: those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregiving.” So the issue of caregiving does or will apply to us all. Approximately fifty million Americans provide the majority of help needed by relatives or friends who are elderly, ill, or disabled and these figures are only going to grow. Most live at home and are cared for by a family member with the average age of 48, so many of our church members of middle age are assuming a caretaking role which exacerbates many family issues.

Some caregivers experience depression and sadness, anger and guilt, worry and resentment, isolation and loss of relationships, and even loss of employment. I experienced such need when caring for my disabled sister, ailing parents, and dying husband. Caretakers need to be acknowledged, encouraged, and assisted. It is a time to be compassionate and sensitive, not judging or ignoring. Our church community needs to be attuned to and aware of these quiet family servants! Do you know a caregiver you need to reach out to and encourage? Even people adept with financial planning are helpful to talk about wills, trusts, and healthcare power of attorney. The best way to prepare ourselves for living well is to prepare ourselves for dying well. Discussions with our families about care, finances, possessions, etc. are difficult but vital for this stage of life.

Paul states, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor 1.3–4). His declaration will guide us, bless us, and encourage us as we minister not only to caregivers but also to those experiencing grief and loss.

There are many types of loss and grief such as the loss of a child or health or identity. There is also the loss of a pet or job or possessions. The loss of reputation and certainly the grief of losing a spouse can be added to this list. Our seniors are more likely to experience such grief and loss. And with this loss sometimes comes a new identity, such as widow or widower or single. Personally I did not like the title of widow and had difficulty using it for a while. It is a lonely time, especially at church. Who do you sit with now? Where do you go after church? This is definitely an issue of which the church community might become more attuned.

Some quick thoughts about ministering to people with suffering and grief are to refrain from second-guessing decisions for the healing process, nor make them feel they are at fault for what happened; help simplify physical demands with cleaning, food, shopping, fixing, or transportation; and do not be hurt if they do not want too much help but instead desire the quietness of their home. Remember this is not about you! Also, it is fine to ask questions about what is happening or to talk about the deceased; listen well not to critique but to suffer with them (lamenting is scriptural!); remember crying is therapeutic; do not force a relationship that has not been there before nor ignore a relationship that does exist; keep in mind that grievors may have spiritual doubts or anger and worship may be difficult for them; and pray with them because this is an incredible spiritual journey. And do not forget them in years to come: it is lonely to live alone and miss companionship.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Kubler Ross, author of *On Death and Dying*, said, “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.” I think these beautiful people are our seniors! Perhaps it would help for the churches to revise their appreciation and value of these important members!

SUSAN GIBONEY TEACHES AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY AND IS A MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHRIST IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.



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