

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Adapting Ministry to Aging Baby Boomers

I have followed the boomer generation since 1983, tracking the impact of their lifestyle, attitudes, and interests on general church ministry. Like others I have noticed that boomers have always made their own rules, and now they are redefining how to grow old. "The generation to grow up with remote controls, we invented channel surfing and attention-deficit living," notes author Michael Gross. "That taught us to be infinitely adaptable."

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As boomers reinvent old age, gerontologist Ken Dychwald says they "will age rebelliously." And, as boomers push the age profile of churches in the United States higher, they are also demanding a different array of services than the same age group a generation ago. My observations lead me to conclude the following regarding aging boomers.

First, as boomers age they continue to be different than the generation preceding them. Generational personality does not change much after the bulk of the generation reaches thirty years old, and boomers are not likely to suddenly wake up and like older forms of ministry. Expect boomers to ask why, tell it like it is, let it all hang out, prefer informal activities, like change and variety, think the system is the problem, be cause-oriented, desire to experience life, and have a low view of institutions. In short expect boomers to act and think much like they always have, except with more maturity.

Second, as boomers age they are offended by "old" stereotypes. They like to be characterized by the following words: active, alert, contributor, experienced, healthy, independent, and worker. Most boomers think of themselves as ten to fifteen years younger than they actually are. They dislike being labeled "senior citizens," "old," or "retired." In short expect boomers to be turned off by any ministry that portrays them as frail, aged, or sedentary.

Third, as boomers age they aspire to be unique individuals. They want to be part of the decision making for any ministry that they are expected to attend, and will not respond to a program that is developed for them without their input. They

**For information on scheduling
Dr. Gary L. McIntosh**

call toll free . . .

1-877-506-3086

e-mail . . .

cgnet@earthlink.net

Internet . . .

churchgrowthnetwork.com

write . . .

PO Box 892589

Temecula, CA 92589

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resist the “poor dear syndrome” and senior discounts. In their way of thinking a ten percent discount means they are ten percent depreciated. Boomers never wished to wear fashions that made them look mature, and they continue to appreciate the music of their youth, as evidenced by the continuing success of concerts by Glen Campbell, Paul Anka, and the Beach Boys. Any church ministry that is designed for their parents will not attract aging boomers. They are attracted to ministries that help them look back with pride to their youth, while helping them launch the next chapter in their lives. To be successful, ministry to boomers must appear youthful, healthy, vibrant, and worthy of their time and energy.

Fourth, as boomers age they continue to search for the next new adventure. Whether it is short-term mission trips or ski outings, older boomers still look for new experiences. Most recently they have made sports utility vehicles extremely popular. It is true that they rarely drive them off the road, but they have an adventure from their driveway to the grocery store and back. In short they are attracted to church ministry that is challenging and adventuresome.

Fifth, as boomers age they continue to accelerate their careers. Boomers are changing their lifestyles but staying involved in the work force. They are buying vacation and second homes, as well as enlarging their nests to include home offices and fitness centers. While churches continue to offer noontime luncheon meetings for seniors, working boomers cannot come due to their jobs. In a word aging boomers are attracted to ministries that are high quality and which make allowances for their work schedules.

Sixth, as boomers age they continue to search for spiritual meaning. While boomers have always demonstrated a “spiritual” bent, whether in a mystical or a traditional religious sense, throughout most of their lives many boomers have simply ignored the church. However, it is now apparent that aging boomers struggle with the same spiritual, emotional, and life-stage issues with which previous generations have wrestled. All the instincts of the baby boomers are saying, “Slow down. Figure out what's important.” They are attracted to church ministries that speak clearly and specifically to their concerns, and ones that make a difference in their lives.

Seventh, as boomers age they continue to break the rules. Boomers have always challenged the status quo, and they are doing so as they reinvent themselves today. Aging boomers will need room to re-frame traditional seniors' ministry to fit their own needs and desires.

What do these insights on aging baby boomers mean for your church's seniors' ministry? What changes do you need to make today to be fruitful?



Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D. is
President of the Church Growth Network

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