



EncourAGING and Equipping Congregations for Older Adult Ministry

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years of ministry

March 2022

Are You a Part of a New Cultural Phenomena?

Recent research by Rev. Dr. Carl P. Greene is the focus in this continuing series of interviews with leaders in older adult ministry for ALOA. Dr. Greene, who has a passion for ministry with overlooked demographics, also serves as the Executive Director of a network of churches.

By Dr. Mary Manz Simon, ALOA Board

You introduce “early old age” (EOA) as a new cultural phenomena. How is EOA defined?

Greene: Early old age (EOA) refers to the “young-old” age category. This currently applies to baby boomers, the postretirement period stretching from age 65 to 80. Given changes in mortality, plus the health and functionality of this age bracket compared to 100 years ago, there is a new “robust elderly” age class. However, the specific study of this ministry has been minimal.

What is unique about this demographic?

Greene: Those in this young-old category are spiritually sensitive. While there are a number of gains, from retirement blessings to the possibility of grandchildren, the acute losses bring a greater focus on spiritual needs. Losses might include personal health changes, loss of loved ones, loss of key relationships, change in identity

with retirement and caregiving. In addition, mortality is more real than earlier in life.

Why should congregations pay attention to “early old age”?

Greene: There are “pull factors” that can be specifically offered to this age group. However, few studies examine how religious organizations draw older people to congregations. Ask yourself, “Does my church provide ministry opportunity specifically for the early old age?”

Generally, churches offer ministry to older adults who need assistance, yet have not been as quick to provide ministry with the EOA group. EOA individuals have life experiences, talents, and skills that can bless others. If your church provides these ministry opportunities, you are in a select group!



Rev. Dr. Carl P. Greene reports on his research into Early Old Age and what that means for ministry in our churches.

ALOA’s purpose:
Equipping persons in the second half of life as disciples of Jesus Christ for their service to family, church, community and world.

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How does this narrow perspective impact a congregation?

Greene: Outreach focuses on younger people. After all, **we have older people figured out because that's who tends to be in our churches!** We fail to maximize the potential of the young-old.

We also are inclined to forget those young-old who are "dones" -- people who left the church earlier in life due to dissatisfaction but are now reconsidering their faith.

What are practical ways to introduce "early old age" to congregation leaders?

Greene: Story Telling. Some of the most innovative approaches to blending small groups and deepening faith commitment involve storytelling.

The vast majority of EOA adults attended church at least sporadically. Most grew up and retained identification as a Christian—even if they were not practicing that faith most of their lives.



Successful churches take personal stories seriously, including a person's backstory. Rather than acting as though someone

in their 60s has never heard a Bible story or has never had some sort of faith experience, effective churches invite people to tell their story. Even before someone has publicly professed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, these churches provide opportunities for people to tell their faith story.

Where do they sense God leading them on their journey? Where have they witnessed

God's hand in their lives? Through processing their own story in community, many recognize their desire for an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ.

How do silver mission churches (those serving predominantly older adults) support this storytelling?

Greene: They provide training or technological tools to help individuals record their story digitally. As a result, EOA individuals who experience a new sense of belonging share their life journey with family and friends. They express why their lives are different now. One of the most often mentioned goals for EOA individuals is that their grandchildren will hear their story.

What are other characteristics of effective silver mission churches?

Greene: Congregations provide a place to belong. Most EOA adults now coming to faith have left church at some point across their youth or adult years. They need a compelling reason to return—but promoting Christian beliefs and Christian behavior are insufficient on their own.

Congregations focus on loss not gain. Losses are more important than gains. To explain: as people age, they are naturally going to try to maximize their gains in life, such as extra time in retirement, connecting with grandchildren, or savoring the afterglow of a great career. At the same time, they will compensate for losses: death of loved ones, health declines, loss of relationships at retirement, along with hushed losses such as sex drive.

Churches don't compete well when it comes to gains. A lakefront summer home near grandchildren vs. a Bible Study is not naturally going to yield to increased belonging at church. Losses are more likely to yield belonging.

Congregations offer small groups. From per-

sonal perspective, many entering EOA have been burned by a church in their past. There is another factor, too. After living through the 1960s, the Watergate era, and their own corporate experience, many in this age bracket are wary of any organizational structure.

The most welcoming small groups are clearly faith based, but not an explicit ministry of the church. This is not a bait and switch approach—the Christian foundation is explicit.

These small groups have an informal feel without business meetings, officers or committees. Organizational structure is not obvious.



Small groups must be emotionally safe. As participants process their losses, they want to know

that others are authentic and mutually vulnerable. There is a need for ministry *with*, and not ministry *to* through this context.

What are common mistakes congregations make when trying to serve this population?

Greene: Approaching EOA with traditional old age ministries. An easy trap is to use the model that worked in previous generations of having meetings, officers, and structure.

Today's EOA respond to service oriented, nimble, ministry-oriented activities.

Those in the 65-80 segment yearn to impact others. The small group design needs to bridge beyond a self-help group and offer opportunities to make a difference. If the only focus is on getting people to belong with others facing similar losses, the engagement is short-term or an individual remains at a surface level of belonging.

Webinar on Ministry With EOA Adults

August 25, Noon ET
Rev. Carl Greene will take a look at some practical approaches congregations can undertake to engage EOA adults, leading to congregational flourishing and missional living. Register at aloaserves.org

So how do congregations support deeper belonging?

Greene:

Through service projects.

Service projects are great equalizers and bridgers. Whether a long-term church goer or a small group attendee, each person is on equal footing when it comes to sweating through a short-term project.

Individuals can “try out” skills, talents, and abilities for a greater purpose. When someone feels like they are no longer merely a recipient of chaplaincy, their sense of belonging increases with the challenge. A community-oriented project engages with purpose and meaning, even amidst loss.

Are there online examples of effective EOA ministries?

Greene: While I do not have personal connections with Live Oaks Church, note their specific focus on EOA baby boomers: liveoakchurch.org/efca-article-on-live-oaks-church/.

What other resources offer additional information on EOA?

Greene: While not EOA specific, look at ALOA's *Faith Stories*. Resources here are well suited for adapting to engage EOA adults.

A number of podcasts and blogs are beginning to wrestle with this subject. An interesting one is: careynieuwhof.com/shut-down-the-bus-tours-what-older-church-members-should-be-doing/

You might not agree with it all, but this sort of writing certainly pushes us to consider our approach as churches with EOA.



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PROJECT UPDATE

Congregational Centers for Resilience & Aging Project

Now that we are finally able to meet in person with groups and at regional and national conferences, we have finally had opportunities to introduce the ALOA Congregational Centers for Vital and Resilient Aging Project. These include Best Practices Conference in Phoenix and a number of judicatory meetings.

Progress on the project was seriously impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic, but we have been hard at work gathering resources for ALOA's Toolkit for Older Adult Ministry. We've developed four main components: Spiritual, Social, Education and Intergenerational, and have discovered and incorporated a significant number of resources in each area. Creation of the Toolkit as an electronic resource gives ALOA the ability to easily add new resources to the various component sections as they are discovered. This should make it a relevant resource for congregations to utilize on an ongoing basis, enabling them to provide more intentional older adult ministry.

With restrictions on gatherings being lifted in many areas, we are now able to begin in-depth conversations with congregations about conducting in person consultations. This will be a major focus of our work going forward. **We are thankful for the continued support of the ELCA Lutheran Services for the Elderly Endowment for providing a grant in support for this project.**



This newsletter is a publication of **Adult Lutherans Organized for Action** © 2022

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