

# Part One

**READY FOR MORE:  
THE NEW OLD**

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# 1

## **A WAKE-UP CALL FOR THE CHURCH**

### **A Reality We Can't Ignore**

It was the mid-1950s, and millions of baby boomers were nearing adolescence. Never before had there been such an influx of young people who were drastically shaping the culture. And the church was unprepared. Youth ministry expert Mark Senter writes, “The post-war baby boom caught the church without a strategy for dealing with the sudden influx of people whom the media began to call ‘teenagers.’”<sup>1</sup>

These young baby boomers represented a huge untapped resource for the church, and some people began to work nationally at convincing church leaders that youth ministry was vitally important. These entrepreneurs created a sense of urgency among churches to reach out to this young generation before it was too late.

This idea caught on, in part because of the bulging number of teenagers who were alive. Today, most churches have a youth minister as a part of their staff, and often it is the second or third position they add after the senior pastor. Youth ministry has become a popular degree of study in most Bible colleges and seminaries across the country. It is an expected element of our current church culture.

These baby boomers who revolutionized youth ministry are now entering their fifth and sixth decades of life. They are marching into their later years at an unprecedented rate. And the urgency of ministry with them is just as great as when they were young—perhaps even greater.

The stakes are high. There is much to be gained for Christ or much to be lost. And it starts with whether or not we choose to ignore or embrace this aging reality.

### **Longevity and the Growth of the Older Population**

For nearly a century, there has been an upward trend in people living longer and the older population growing. In 1900, 4 percent of the population was over age sixty-five; in 2001, the figure was 12 percent; and the projection for 2030 is that the proportion of people over sixty-five will rise to 20 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Take a look at some other statistics. You may have seen these before or heard them discussed on a news program, but try to look with fresh eyes at these astronomical numbers and really let them soak in.

- Americans sixty-five and older are the fastest-growing segment of the population.
- In the past century, the number of Americans over age sixty-five has increased twelvefold (from 3.1 million to 37.9 million).<sup>3</sup>
- By the year 2030, there will be 72.1 million people in America over the age of sixty-five.<sup>4</sup>
- An American turns sixty every seven seconds.<sup>5</sup>

### **Life Expectancy**

One of the primary reasons we have so many older adults is that life expectancy is increasing. This is known as the squaring of the pyramid. Take a look at Figures 1.1 and 1.2. In the early 1900s, the number of adults living into their later years was small. Today, people are living much longer.

Life expectancy is the *average* number of years of life remaining at birth or from some particular age in a given population. For instance, in the early 1900s, life expectancy in the United

States was forty-seven. This meant that when a baby was born, he could expect to live until the age of forty-seven. In the year 2009, life expectancy for a Caucasian baby was approximately seventy-eight years (and this number is projected to rise).

That life expectancy in 1900 was forty-seven did not mean that forty-six-year-olds began to fear they were soon going to die. Nor did a forty-year-old look like an old person, with white hair and wrinkles. There simply weren't all that many people who remained alive until old age. The difference today is that we are seeing the majority of people in industrialized nations living into the later years of life.

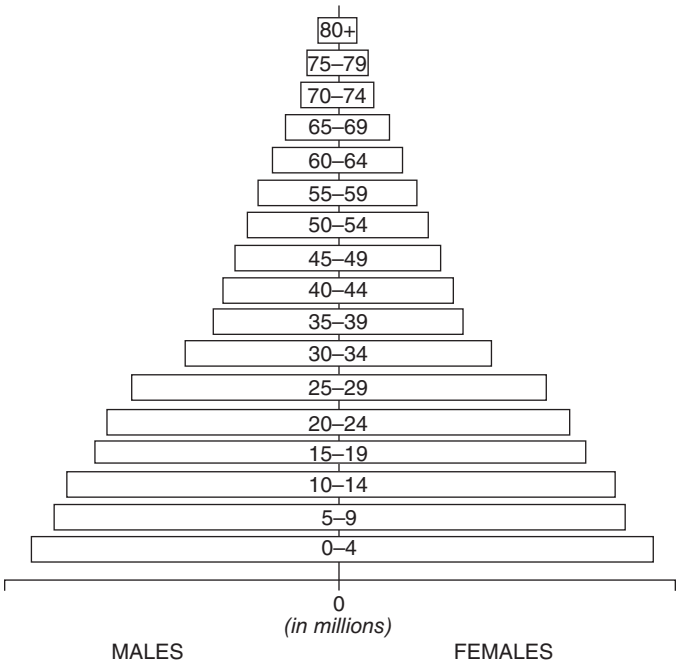
A reduction in infant deaths, immunizations for children, advances in medicine, and overall better health care have been some of the primary factors contributing to the growth in life expectancy. In addition, people are better educated about their health and are practicing better habits that lead to longer lives. Fewer employees are dying in work-related accidents, and work environments are generally cleaner and safer than in the past. All of these factors contribute to people living longer.

## **Birth Rate**

A second reason we are experiencing such growth in the older population has to do with the birth rate. I've pointed out that the percentage of older people is on the rise. Percentages are determined by the composition of the entire population. So if a lot of babies are born, this will raise the percentage of young people and lower the percentage of older people. On the other hand, if the birth rate is low, this will result in a larger percentage of older adults.

The post-World War II baby boom initially drove the percentage of old people in America down because so many young people were suddenly part of the mix. The generation following the boomers was much smaller, fewer babies were born, and the result is now a higher percentage of older adults.

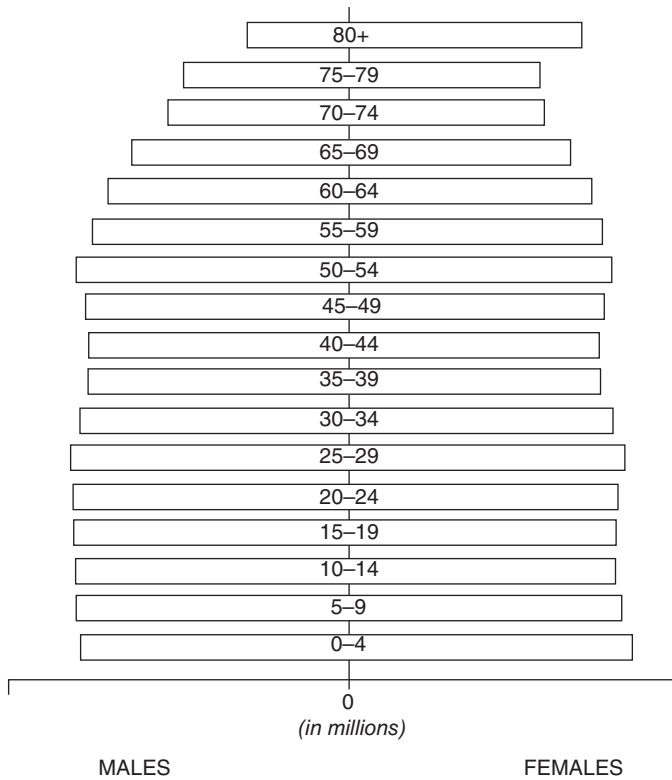
**Figure 1.1 Age Profile of the U.S. Population, c. 1900**



## Global Aging

The growth of the aging population is not unique to the United States. It is being felt by many industrialized nations. Japan is recognized as the world's fastest-aging society; by the year 2015, fully 25 percent of its population will be over sixty-five. Other developed countries, including Italy, Germany, and Greece, have a high percentage of older adults. It's interesting to note that even in developing countries, the number of older adults is growing. Such countries as Colombia and India are experiencing a rapid increase in people over the age of sixty-five.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that across the world, by the year 2018 (if not sooner), people over the age of sixty-five will outnumber children under the age of five. For the first time

**Figure 1.2 Age Profile of the U.S. Population, c. 2000**

Source, Figures 1.1 and 1.2: S. J. Olshansky, "The Demography of Aging," in Christine K. Cassell and others, eds., *Geriatric Medicine: An Evidence-Based Approach*, 4th ed. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003), pp. 39–40.

in history, there will be more older adults than children on the planet.

People everywhere are recognizing the growth of the older population and considering how to both accommodate and capitalize on this phenomenon. One example comes from the city of Shanghai, China, which has recently decided to relax the law permitting couples to have only one child in order to increase the pool of individuals available to provide care for the growing numbers of older adults. Seoul, South Korea, is also looking for

ways to boost the birth rate in order to help balance the population. Some government offices in Seoul plan to provide up to 30 million won, equivalent to about U.S. \$25,500, to families having three or more children.<sup>6</sup>

## **How Does Age Affect the Church?**

We can talk forever about numbers and statistics and the causes for these trends. What does all of this really mean for those of us living in the twenty-first century who care about Christ and His church?

First, it is no accident that God has allowed such a large number of older people to be alive at this moment in time. In His great sovereignty and wisdom, He chose this time to raise up an army of older adults for His purposes. We must tap into God's plan for the members of this generation, to see them come to Christ, grow in Him, and be engaged in meaningful service.

Second, if we take these statistics seriously, we can see that we are not talking about creating some little subsidiary ministry for a few older people who live in our communities and go to our churches. Rather, we should plan and dream for this to be one of the strategic initiatives of the church. In the past, older adult ministry was not seen as crucial to the mission of the church. As we move into the future, this attitude must change. If we want to be churches and Christians who are in step with the demographic trends of our time, we must respond to this one. It's huge.

Third, this ministry is much bigger than the baby boom generation alone. There are hundreds of thousands of older adults in their late sixties, seventies, and even eighties who are looking at aging in a new way. They are seeking meaning and purpose and are capable of contributing their time and talents to Kingdom efforts.

Fourth, older adulthood is becoming a life stage of its own. With the majority of people born expecting to live into their later years, we have an entirely new season of life. Developmental

psychologists used to focus on the changes in childhood and adolescence and then lumped all of adulthood into one category. Now the older years are being perceived as a brand-new stage of life with its own opportunities and challenges—as well as great possibilities for ministry. If we choose to embrace this reality, we have the chance to help define what this new stage of life will be like.

Finally, this is not a ministry for just the United States. Nearly every country in every part of the world is being affected by aging, and opportunities to minister and encourage older adults to live for Christ abound.

## **The New Old**

To minister effectively with the growing older population, we must understand some common characteristics regarding this new generation of adults.

The baby boom generation includes seventy-eight million people born between 1946 and 1964 and reflects the boom in the birth rate after World War II. This is the largest generation in U.S. history and is made up of two cohorts—leading-edge boomers, born between 1946 and 1955, and trailing-edge boomers, born between 1956 and 1964. Leading-edge boomers were influenced by many social movements, including civil rights, modern feminism, antiwar protests, the sexual revolution, and drugs. Today, the majority of leading-edge boomers are facing the empty nest, providing care for aging parents, and dealing with retirement.

Because of their large numbers, as the boomers have progressed through life, their needs and desires have taken center stage. Whether it be the need for more diapers, more schools, or more jobs, this generation has been a driving force behind many of the changes we have experienced in our culture.

As a whole, members of this group were willing to leave behind some of the values of their parents and do things

differently. In many ways, they have approached politics, fashion, child rearing, and religion differently than their parents.

It should therefore come as no surprise that they are approaching the later years of life in a different way than the generations before them.

## **A Different Perspective**

Research sponsored by Merrill Lynch indicated that 70 to 80 percent of boomers want to keep *working* in some fashion after they retire. Interestingly, most of them would like to find different jobs in areas of personal interest where they can make a difference in society. They want work that will allow them the flexibility to travel, spend time with family, participate in leisure activities, and continue learning.

Boomers are also very interested in *staying young*. They plan to remain active and involved with life and don't want to participate in things that suggest they are aging. The idea of sitting in a rocking chair is not appealing to them. One way to see this more clearly is by looking at two general ways in which people age.

Disengagement theory was an early academic theory proposed to explain aging. It stated that the experience of aging involved a mutual withdrawal of the elderly person from society and society from the elder. In my mind, I see images of an old woman being put on a raft and pushed out to sea, never to return again. Disengagement theory isn't quite that drastic, but it does tend to view older people as detaching from this world as they prepare for death.

A second theory that emerged around the same time period as disengagement theory was activity theory. Activity theory stands in complete contrast to disengagement. Proponents of this theory believe that the best approach to aging is staying active. Even if someone's general routine changes—say, from working full time to working part time—the emphasis is still on being

involved. Most people today—especially baby boomers—are proponents of this particular theory of aging. Boomers want their later years of life to be very similar to their midlife.

Finally, as boomers approach their later years, they are *searching for purpose*. They may look for purpose through relationships, education, and even leisure pursuits. Others will seek to discover ways they can use their time and experience to serve the needs of those around them. They want their lives, as they get older, to be productive and meaningful—to really count for something. Rather than approaching these years as a time for slowing down, they view this period of life as a time of exciting possibilities.

Although baby boomers do have their own approach to aging, many of their ideas and lifestyle choices with regard to their later years are similar to those of the previous generation. Someone commented to me that even though he was a few years older than the leading-edge boomers, he agreed with many of the thoughts and impressions that boomers have regarding aging. He wants to stay healthy, plans to keep working, and wants to be involved serving and making a significant difference with these years of his life. So the way that boomers view aging will also resonate with people slightly older than those in the boomer age group.

## **A New Focus for the Church**

Nearly every industry, from travel and leisure to health care, has invested countless hours researching the current demographic trends and the impact they will have on society. Businesses are studying how to develop products that will attract aging people. For example, Chico's is a woman's clothing store that appeals to boomers and older women because it offers stylish clothing that fits more loosely but doesn't look dated. Companies like Johnson & Johnson have begun to design bottles that are easier for arthritic hands to open. The auto industry is studying how to design cars better suited to the growing number of older drivers.

Some states are even redesigning roadway intersections to make them safer for older motorists.

So what about the church? Despite the greater attention being paid by industries to the growth of the older population and the new ways in which boomers are approaching aging, it appears that many churches are ignoring this reality. Why?

***An Obsession with Youth*** I was only nine years old, but I still remember the sights and sounds of my dad's fortieth birthday party. Friends and family started showing up at our house wearing all black. Mom pulled a wheelchair out of the closet for Dad to sit in and draped an afghan over his shoulders. Everyone had joined together to mourn the death of my dear father's youth.

For quite some time, our society has not exactly celebrated getting older. Birthday cards lament being "over the hill" or "out to pasture." Adults (especially women) are often unwilling to even tell their age.

It hasn't always been this way. During colonial days, some researchers report, old age was preferred over youth. In meetings, the elderly sat in the positions of highest status. People even wanted to dress in such a way that they looked older. Men's clothing was cut to narrow the shoulders, broaden the waist and hips, and make the spine look bent. Women wore long dresses, and both genders wore white wigs.<sup>7</sup>

As the United States (and other countries) became more industrialized, the value attached to the elderly began to wane. Scientific knowledge grew, technology improved, and the need for older people to share their wisdom and experience became less important. Over time, being young has become the preferred status.

Today, we live in a culture that values youth, and we are constantly bombarded with the message that being young is what we should strive for. People use makeup, hair color, and other things to maintain a youthful appearance. I have even seen a surge in news articles focused on medical treatments to help

people stay young. One recent article spoke of hormone therapy in which women spend as much as \$500 per day to inject hormones into their body that will enable them to look and feel younger.<sup>8</sup>

And while most of us would say that this example is pretty drastic, there are ways in which our churches have bought into the same mind-set as society—that younger is somehow better. We proudly communicate that “ours is a church reaching out to young families.” And we believe that growing churches are those that are appealing to the younger generation. If there are too many old people in a church, the common thought is that the church must be dying.

Is it possible to be a vibrant, growing, active church that intentionally seeks to reach middle-aged and older adults? Absolutely. But far too many churches in too many communities are failing to take an honest look at their demographics and pay attention to whom God has put in their path. As already noted, the older adult population is growing, meaning that there will be a constant flow of people turning sixty, seventy, and eighty for many years to come. As long as we discover effective ways of reaching these adults, our churches will never have to die.

In 2002, Caloundra Church of Christ in Queensland, Australia, was concerned it would have to close its doors. The church had about sixty people at the time, and the leaders said, “We need a youth minister or we are going to die.” Richard Pearce began working with the church first as the interim minister and then later as the full-time minister. As Richard began his ministry, he realized that the church was located in a growing seaside community and therefore would never be forced to close as long as the congregation reached out to the people who were moving into the area.

The coastal community attracts large numbers of retirees each year, as well as young people who are looking for jobs. Within six years, the church had grown to an average of 250 people on a Sunday morning by attracting both the young and

the old. Richard explains that the church tries to have a variety of ministries that reach out to both age groups. A volunteer ministry team serves the young adults, and another team focuses on the older adults. There are play groups and socials for young moms in the area and a youth ministry and junior church program. There is an annual senior adult convention, as well as walking groups and other activities for older adults. In many activities, the church makes an effort not to segregate by age but to mix the generations.

Richard estimates that 70 percent of the people attending are over the age of fifty. The congregation has seen young people come to Christ as well as older adults. Richard says, "Many of the adults in their fifties and sixties may have gone to church in the past, but they never realized they could have a personal relationship with God."

**Ageism** Not only is our society obsessed with youth, but we've also grown accustomed and, dare I say, even comfortable with the negative attitudes surrounding aging.

In 2009, the TV competition *Britain's Got Talent* featured a forty-seven-year-old contestant named Susan Boyle. Susan got a lot of media attention because she didn't fit the stereotype of an up-and-coming singing star. She looked middle-aged and dowdy without much fashion sense. When she came onto the stage before the three judges and the large audience, you could sense the skepticism and distaste. The camera even panned to one young woman who was rolling her eyes. You got the impression that people were saying, "Why would someone her age be doing this? What makes her think she stands a chance of being taken seriously?"

The term used to describe the negative attitudes hurled at Susan Boyle and many other people in our world is *ageism*. The term was coined in 1969 by Robert Butler, a leader in the field of gerontology, to describe negative perceptions and attitudes toward older people, aging, and old age in general. It's

one of the reasons why the church may be ignoring the aging population.

At its worst, ageism, like racism or sexism, is a form of discrimination. It's devaluing someone because of age.

Maybe you are saying, "Hey, wait just a minute! We value everyone in our church." I believe we want to value everyone, but often one age group is emphasized more than another.

I know of a large and growing American church that puts a strong emphasis on missions. Just before the 2008 Summer Olympics were to be held in Beijing, this church's older adult ministry began to invite older adults to be a part of a team that would travel overseas and do ministry during the Olympics. Twenty-four willing and able fifty-plus age adults signed up for this endeavor. They were excited about working in an orphanage in China and providing other services to people in need of the love of Christ.

The missions team at the church, including the missions pastor, agreed to let the group go but was unwilling to list the team in the missions brochure or to include them in the formal introduction and prayer service for short-term missionaries. In short, the missions team said, "Sure, they can go, but we aren't going to back them with financial help, public prayer support, or recognition."

More conversations revealed that the committee was concerned that one of the older members might fall ill or that the older people wanted to go on the trip merely for sightseeing. So in other words, these committee members held some ageist attitudes—that older people are sickly and only interested in leisure activities and that mission trips of this sort should be left to the young.

Before you go shaking your head in judgment at this church, would you be willing to take a hard look at yourself? Have you ever given time in the Sunday service to a high school youth group who went to Mexico? Has the congregation listened to the participants' testimonies and applauded their efforts? Have you

given the same amount of platform time to a group of older adults who have gone on a mission trip or participated in a significant service project? Does your staff or even your budget reflect which age group you value most? Do you ever neglect to ask the input of older church members because you believe they will not have much to offer? Ageism has affected all of us. It's crept into our churches without our recognizing it.

Unfortunately, older adults themselves have bought into the negative images of aging. In fact, Linda Woolf of Webster University in Saint Louis, Missouri, said that the greatest limitation facing older adults is not mental or physical handicaps but the negative stereotypes that exist regarding aging. This is a main obstacle to older adults' continuing to grow in the Lord and serve Him to their fullest capacity. Many of them believe the lies that they no longer have something to offer or contribute.

Although ageism is most often associated with older adults, it is technically descriptive of any judging on the basis of age. Young people can experience ageism just as older adults can. In 1 Timothy 4:12, when Paul instructs Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he is young, Paul is telling Timothy not to let ageism affect the work God wants him to do. This is the same message the church needs to proclaim today regarding the later years of life. If Paul were to visit our churches, he might say, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are older. Do what God has called you to do!"

Just as we should strive to become churches that do not put limits on people because of their race or gender, we must work just as hard not to restrict the potential of adults because of their age.

### **The Time Is Now**

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Mark Senter, who said that when boomers were advancing in record numbers into their teenage years, the church was caught off guard, without a strategy to reach this group. My fear is that unless the church wakes up to the aging population, we will once again fail to be ready for

what is about to hit in full force. We simply cannot afford to ignore this issue.

For one thing, this new generation of older adults represents a huge network of potential Kingdom laborers. Boomers have discretionary time, wisdom, and experience that are too valuable to ignore.

I was reminded of the great impact this generation can make when I talked to David, who works for Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry committed to serving the persecuted church. David was an insurance company vice president when he was laid off at the age of fifty-six. He wasn't planning to retire at the time and attempted to find work with some other company, but God had different plans for him. Even before losing his job, David had been exposed through a newsletter to Voice of the Martyrs and its work to help Christians around the world who were living out their faith and often persecuted for their beliefs. He began volunteering for the organization as a speaker and even traveled overseas to further the group's efforts. The ministry soon became a burning passion within his soul. Nearly four years after leaving his corporate job, while he was in China serving with Voice of the Martyrs, he received word that one of the ministry's key leaders had died in a car accident. The group immediately asked David to replace him.

When other sixty-year-olds might be settling into retirement or looking forward to more time with grandchildren, David and his wife uprooted themselves from the home and community where they had spent much of their lives. They left behind their adult children and grandchildren, aging parents, friends, and church. They moved several states away to a small community where Voice of the Martyrs has its headquarters. And there they started a new life and ministry.

David's business experience and organizational skills make him well suited for the managerial role in which he is now serving. He confessed that he makes about 25 percent of the income he made in his corporate job. But he was quick to tell me he would be happy to do the job for free. He is passionate

about the ministry and the work God is doing and is using his energy for the cause of Christ.

We could travel the country and find other stories like David's. People who in their middle and later years are choosing to do something significant that is advancing God's mission in this world. However, I know there could be many, many more adults unleashed into meaningful ministry if the church would begin to call people in their fifties, sixties, and seventies out of a leisure-focused life and into one of service. Imagine the impact to be made on our world. Imagine the yet-to-be-discovered ministries that would reach out to people who are hurting. We need to be leaders that raise the expectation of how older adults are to spend their later years.

A second implication to consider in ministry with this generation is the number of older adults who are lost, without hope, in need of a relationship with Jesus Christ. If we continue to focus all of our efforts on reaching a younger generation for Christ and ignore the older generation, millions of people will face an uncertain eternity.

To begin to love boomers, we must jump into their world. We have to understand their daily needs, interests, and burdens. As boomers search for meaning and purpose in their lives, we offer the only lasting purpose that exists. Recognizing their needs, issues, and desires will be the first steps in loving them and hopefully being used by God to point them to Christ.

Finally, the church has a moment in time, right now, to create a new paradigm for aging. A biblical, God-honoring view of aging. Yes, culture does focus on the young and ageist attitudes abound—but we can be a force that stands counter culture. We can show the world what it means to value people of all ages, rather than marginalizing certain segments of the population. We can communicate that God has a purpose and a specific role for everyone to play, regardless of age.

I think it's going to be an exciting, challenging, and rewarding ride. Won't you join me?