

REACHING BABY BOOMER RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED BOOK: Hanson, Amy. *Baby Boomers and Beyond: Tapping the Ministry Talents and Passions of Adults Over Fifty*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2010.

LAST CHANCES FOR CHURCHES TO REACH 50 MILLION AMERICANS

Thom Rainer

My generation was the largest generation. It was the generation businesses and churches wanted to reach. We were the sixties generation. The self-indulgent generation. The “me” generation. The Vietnam generation. The Watergate generation. The Civil Rights generation.

And now we are the dying generation. I’m not trying to be morbid or sensational. I’m simply reporting census realities. We were born between 1946 and 1964. The oldest among us is 67 years old. Mortality is inevitable. We are shrinking in numbers.

During the baby boom that followed World War II, more than 76 million live births were recorded in the United States. At the time we were the largest generation in history. We have since been supplanted by the nearly 80 million Millennials born between 1980 and 2000.

But here is the harshest reality about my generation. We estimate that only about one-third of Baby Boomers are Christians. That means that 50 million adult Americans in this generation are unchurched and have yet to be reached with the gospel of Christ.

And time is running out.

Here are a few (hopefully) helpful facts about the Baby Boomers and churches. Of course, our findings depict the majority of Boomers, not all of them at any one time.

- **Most churches, if they have an intentional outreach ministry, gear it toward the younger generations.** That is understandable. But relatively few church leaders are asking the question, “What can we do prayerfully and strategically to reach the Baby Boomers?”
- **Most of the unchurched Boomers do not have an anti-church mentality.** They are more receptive than most imagine.
- **Most of the unchurched Boomers would not be caught up in worship wars.** They have a wide tolerance and even fondness for many musical and stylistic approaches. A church’s worship style would most likely not be a hindrance to reaching a Boomer.
- **Though Boomers are fast becoming senior adults, they will not appreciate many churches’ approaches to senior adult ministry today.** They want to make a difference, not simply be entertained and take trips. You may very well reach many Boomers by demonstrating how the Christian life is the only true life of meaning, and how they can make a difference as a believer.
- **Boomers are becoming increasingly introspective.** They are asking life questions that really matter. Their receptivity to matters of eternal import could be great right now.
- **This generation largely doesn’t want to talk about retirement.** They speak more in terms of career shift or new vocational opportunities. They are not ready, and probably never will be, for traditional approaches to retirement.
- **The Boomers are thinking about relationships now more than any point in their lives.** A simple but powerful way to reach the unchurched in this generation is to get Christian Boomers to connect with them. Many Boomer Christians haven’t invited someone to church in years. Now is the opportune time.

As you celebrate this new year, allow one sobering reality to be before you: more than one million Baby Boomers will die before the year concludes. If it took you five

minutes to read this article, ten Boomers died while you were reading. By 2015 the death rate will increase significantly.

We have but a few chances left to reach the lost and unchurched among the Baby Boomers. Time is growing short.

“Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest’”(Matthew 9:37-38, HCSB).

Those Elusive Baby Boomers

By Missy Buchanan

Not long ago I sat in a church reception area waiting for an appointment. I couldn't help but overhear a conversation between two church volunteers. They were active senior adults, most likely in their mid-to-late 70's. They were lamenting the fact that not one baby boomer had signed up for an upcoming event to be hosted by the church's senior adult group, the Amazing Grays.

Based on their conversation, I discovered that the women had put a lot of effort into planning a special dinner which was intended to welcome the first wave of baby boomers into the ranks of their church's senior adult ministry. The volunteers had followed the suggestion of the older adult council and had identified those members and visitors who were born between 1946 and 1955. The women had even crafted colorful invitations and mailed them in anticipation of a great response.

Now three weeks later, the women were torn between being very angry and being totally discouraged.

Actually, it's not an uncommon scenario in churches these days. As congregations begin to respond to the coming age wave, many are trying to steer boomers into current older adult ministry programs. The problem is, it's just not working.

In her book, *Baby Boomers and Beyond: Tapping the Ministry Talents and Passions of Adults over 50* (Jossey-Bass 2010), Dr. Amy Hanson tackles important truths that churches need to hear about ministry to boomers, a group increasingly known as the “new old”. In fact, I believe every church leader should read this book in preparation for the fast-growing aging population. Hanson offers great insight into both the similarities and differences between boomers and their older counterparts. She also suggests practical strategies for meeting the ministry needs of all older adults.

According to Hanson, a primary key to understanding boomers is to realize that they are keenly interested in staying young and are likely to resist anything associated with aging, old, or senior. Just consider our culture, which sends a strong message that aging well is all about remaining young, active and healthy. It’s not surprising that an invitation to join a group called the Amazing Grays would be met with little interest by boomers. In fact, boomers would likely consider such a group as something for their parents or slightly-older counterparts, but not for them. It’s not that they intend to snub their older peers, it’s just that they don’t see themselves in this role.

So what’s a church to do? Hanson points to the importance of choosing names that won’t repel people. She notes that some congregations are beginning to gravitate toward labels like “Second half ministry” or “Encore generation” while other churches are choosing to stay away from any term that reflects an age-related image.

Hanson also points to another important reality that churches often miss. As people age, they become more diverse, not less. Just think about it. At age 75, some people have traveled extensively; others have only occasionally left the town in which they were born. Some are still working, either full-time or part-time; others have been retired for decades. But the greatest difference has to do with physical and mental abilities. Some are active and healthy at 75; others are living with chronic disease or

disability. Understanding this diversity is a first step in creating meaningful ministries which will meet the needs of the over-50 crowd.

Learning to think about ministry to those over 50 in today's world requires a new paradigm. It may even require tossing out some tired labels in favor of fresh identities. As the frustrated volunteers are discovering in their failed attempt to embrace aging boomers, it means rethinking what's-always-been-done. That's the first step... and the most difficult.

What Church Leaders Need to Know About Ministry to Aging Baby Boomers

By Amy Hanson

Chances are you've heard some of these statistics, but try to take a fresh look and really let them soak in:

- Americans 65 and older are the fastest-growing segment of the population.
- In the past century, the number of people in the United States under the age of 65 has tripled; however, the number of people over 65 has increased by more than a factor of 12.
- Today, there are approximately 78 million baby boomers in the U.S., with the oldest boomer turning 63 this year (2009).
- By the year 2030 there will be 72.1 million people in America over the age of 65.¹

Nearly every industry, from travel and leisure to health care, is working overtime to respond to these unprecedented numbers. But the church is lagging behind, and as a whole, little focus is being directed toward responding to this age wave crashing on our shores

As I travel across the country, I speak with church leaders who are aware of the demographics but simply don't know how to prepare. I hope the following suggestions will spur your thinking and encourage you to expand your view of older adult ministry.

Let go of the "one-size-fits-all" mentality. One of the most common challenges facing today's traditional senior adult ministry is the inability to get the "young-olds" to participate. So often I have senior adult pastors or senior members in a

congregation come up to me and say, “We have a great program on the third Thursday afternoon of each month, but we can’t get those who are in their 50s or 60s to attend. What should we do?”

In order to reach the large number of people who fall in the 50-plus range, we must recognize their uniqueness.

One of the most researched principles in the field of aging is that we become more diverse as we age. If you gather a room full of preschoolers you will find that developmentally, they are basically doing the same things. But as we get older, our differences increase.

By the age of 80, some people have never left the state in which they were born, while others have traveled all over the world. Some have doctorate degrees, and others didn’t finish high school. And probably one of the greatest differences among people is their health. Some are running in marathons while others are frail and living with disabilities.

This kind of diversity among people requires diverse ministries. Churches with fruitful 50-plus ministries have a variety of different ways to reach people, including motorcycle clubs, caring-for-aging-parent seminars, grandparenting events, and even special boomer events.

One church in Bothell, Washington, hosted a Baby Boomer Bash a few years ago to celebrate the first boomer turning 60. Beatles music, yellow and orange decor, pizza, and dancing were all part of the evening. The emphasis was on recognizing and affirming people at this particular stage of life.

Find ways for older adults to integrate into the entire church. When I was growing up my home church had promotion Sunday (I suspect many of your churches did, too). It was a really big deal for grade-schoolers to move from one Sunday school class to the next, older one. We were proud of each year’s accomplishment and excited to meet our new teacher.

But let’s face it, as adults we typically do not like this. We don’t want to be promoted and told we must fit into a certain mold.

In academic literature, this is called *age-grading* and it refers to using age to dictate what opportunities and privileges people can enjoy. For example, we may think it is appropriate for our 25-year-old niece to be getting married, but we have great reservations about our 85-year-old father marrying.

A few months ago I was visiting with a former state senator who is in his 70s. I asked if he participated in his church’s weekly senior adult program. He looked at me like I was crazy and said, “I don’t want to be with those old people!” He proceeded to tell me about his intergenerational Sunday school class that included young families,

singles, and retirees. He had found his place to belong and his place to serve at the church, but for him it was not within the formal older adult program.

As leaders, our goal should be to see older adults involved in every aspect of the church, growing in their relationship with God and serving him wholeheartedly. While specific programs and ministries dedicated to reaching older adults are valuable in connecting people and helping them grow, success can never be solely measured by how many come to these events.

Consider eliminating the word senior. Most people over the age of 50 perceive a senior as someone they are not. *Old*, *elderly*, and *senior* are all words that tend to stir up negative attitudes. Some churches find success by using positive terms for their ministries, such as: Adults 50 & Better, Life after 50, or Second-Half Ministries.

A number of churches and national ministries are using the term *Encore* to describe this new generation of older adults. When a concert or performance ends and we stand to cheer and applaud, we are pleading for an encore. Essentially we are saying, “That was great! Please come back out and give us some more.”

We want to encourage older adults to finish well, just as Paul describes in Philippians 3:13, 14: “I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Make evangelism and spiritual growth a priority. In the past a traditional senior adult ministry often placed a strong emphasis on fellowship. The foundation of ministry was built on potluck luncheons and bus trips. While nothing is inherently wrong with these activities, sometimes we can neglect to look outside the walls of the church to the millions of older adults who do not have a personal relationship with Christ.

The truth is, not all older adults are Christians. Statistics such as “64 percent of Americans who accept Jesus as their Savior do so before their 18th birthday”² have been used to justify why so much energy must be spent on children and youth ministries. And while these are important areas of work, perhaps the reason for such a low number of conversions in the second half of life is because we have not invested time and resources in that area.

Another important point: while many older adults may practice religious habits, such as going to church, not all of them have let the truths of the Bible transform their life.

The reality is that boomer age and older adults represent a wide-open door for ministry and evangelism. We cannot assume all older adults are Christians or that all older people are spiritually mature. “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are

ripe for harvest” (John 4:35).

Emphasize the importance of serving. One of the myths about aging is that the later years of life are a time for relaxing and living a life of leisure. In the college-level gerontology courses I teach, I ask students to imagine themselves at 75 or 80 and what it is they will be doing. Most of them say they will be playing bingo or lying on the beach; few of them see themselves working or volunteering. But in reality, the vast majority of older adults report they want to be involved in something productive. Research demonstrates that people who volunteer tend to be healthier, live longer, and have increased life satisfaction.

Older adults have skills, experience, and time to contribute to meaningful service. We simply must expand our view of what it means to serve in the later years of life.

I believe it is no accident God has ordained such a large number of healthy, active, and capable older adults to be alive at this time in history. The church has an incredible opportunity to reach this group and unleash them to significantly impact the kingdom. Let’s not miss this chance.

¹“A Profile of Older Americans: 2008,” Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; available at www.mowaa.org/Document.Doc?id=69.
²Available at www.barna.org. Search by Topic: Evangelism.

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Here come the baby boomers...again! Are you ready?

By John Schachinger

At one time it seemed that baby boomers were respectfully drifting out of the limelight, no longer in the crosshairs of desirable demographics. Little was heard about them unless it was a dire warning that boomers will bankrupt the Social Security system, overwhelm medical care, or introduce another line of loose-fitting jeans. Even in the church, boomer ministry had long been eclipsed by a vigorous Gen X and youth ministry. But all that is changing, drastically, and in ways undreamed.

Baby boomers, roughly 76 million strong in the United States, are aging. Born at about the time the armed forces were returning home after World War II, this largest demographic group in North America is about to enter its most significant stage of life.

Sociologists call this an Age Wave, and just like a wave it's forming below the surface, gathering momentum. When it begins to crest it will overwhelm everything in its path.¹

Boomers will live longer, have more leisure time, more disposable income, more educational opportunity, and more mobility than any generation before. As we age (I'm a boomer!), we are rediscovering a commitment to personal and spiritual growth and will be making some significant contributions in that arena.

In the past, we have overwhelmed and transformed every stage of life we've encountered. From the cradle to young adulthood, entire industries have sprung up or been revolutionized to feed, clothe, entertain, and educate our societies.² Mega and Seeker Churches have arisen, in part anticipating the mass (yet to happen) return of baby boomers to the church.³

We revolutionized and transformed youth and young adulthood, and we'll also revolutionize retirement. Although we haven't put it together yet, boomer aging will bear little resemblance to the senior centers and retirement communities today. We'll face our mortality in our own way, and when we do we'll do it in such numbers that North America will actually shift from a youth to a senior culture.

Like many other institutions, churches will be overwhelmed and challenged by the demands and opportunities offered by aging baby boomers. However, our attitudes toward senior ministry and the absence of targeted evangelism to those over 55, could leave us ill-prepared to meet the transformation of aging about to overtake us.

According to accepted sociological age categorizations, the first boomer will turn 65 in 2011. This is the time to ready ourselves for the coming changes this generation will

bring to our churches. This preparation requires two steps: an enlightened approach to aging, and an understanding of the forces defining boomer maturity.

Views of aging

Most of us would describe aging as a fairly predictable linear progression from childhood to adulthood and on into maturity. It is a series of stages, each preparing for the next along the way.

During adolescence and young adulthood we acquire the education and skills to pursue a career, accept responsibility, and start a family. We enter adulthood advancing our careers and raising our families.

Around age 55 or so our productivity begins to peak, we might experience a midlife crisis, and then accept the fact that our best years are now behind us. What follows is a comprehensive, inevitable decline.

We then enter retirement and aging, and largely devote ourselves to recreation, leisure, and obsolescence. By now our major decisions and life course have been determined. We've progressed as far as we can and it's time to move to the sidelines.

Although simplistic, this summary describes a linear view of aging born out of the industrial revolution. It has prevailed, more or less, for about 150 years.⁴ Although it may have worked, it has also produced most of the prejudice we have about our elderly in many cultures today.

Linear view of aging

The linear view of aging tends to cause us to define vital, growing churches, as those with younger families. Demographically speaking, we choose communities with younger families as being more favorable environments for church growth.

The linear view assumes someone over 65 is less likely to be converted. It narrowly defines senior ministry as consisting almost entirely of recreational projects and social gatherings. It tends to view the seniors in the congregation as a liability group that requires care-taking rather than care-giving. If seniors are involved in church

leadership it's assumed they are conservative, risk-averse, and change-blocking. It may even assume that the church will be better off when they step aside.

The linear view of aging, according to Fredric Hudson, "creates social prejudice against the old, and it keeps those in midlife and retirement reminiscing and looking backward, wanting younger bodies and dreams. . . . [thus robbing] thousands of people of enormous possibilities that they are capable of attaining as they get older."⁵

Such a linear view may hamper the outreach and spiritual growth of countless unchurched seniors.

The cyclical view of aging

In contrast, a *cyclical* definition of aging is not only more helpful for ministry, but provides a more accurate picture of the process. Cyclical aging sees progress from childhood to maturity as a series of life chapters (adolescence, young adulthood, maturity, retirement) marked by transitions from one chapter of life to the next. Each transition is a fascinating period of time when we reassess and reinvent ourselves in light of six core values: (1) a sense of self; (2) achievement; (3) intimacy; (4) creativity and play; (5) search for meaning; and (6) compassion and contribution.⁶

Adult life is described as a reoccurring cycle of these six core values. Adolescence, young adulthood, maturity, and retirement are all life chapters with their own transitions from one stage to the next. As we approach each chapter and its accompanying transition, we cycle through these six core values, re-evaluating, renewing, and reinventing ourselves.⁷

As we age we also define and emphasize these values differently. Young adults, for instance, are more outwardly directed when they define their values. They seek a sense of self, achievement, and intimacy. Values such as the search for meaning or compassion and caring are generally less developed at this stage, or put on hold in the face of the immediate need for a career and relationships.

Ministering to seniors

Seniors however, have already acquired a sense of self and achievement. This frees them to search for meaning and to express the sense of compassion and caring that had gone unexplored earlier in life.

The six core values come together to define the senior adult life cycle as a time for:

Spirituality—Seniors describe a deep appreciation for universal meaning and mystery.⁸ They're eager to experience a profound sense of otherness, or a sense of God.

Personal integrity—No longer driven by careers or advancement, seniors turn their attention to making a difference in their world. Social activism, altruism, and leaving a legacy mark this life cycle; what Bob Buford aptly calls moving from success to significance.⁹

Mentoring—The quest to acquire and share knowledge and wisdom is very important to seniors and they will work to create an environment for that exchange to take place.

It is critical then for churches to understand that whether or not we're converted or churched, as we age we are hard wired to seek out some sort of significant, serving, spiritual life.

In addition, there are two factors that will define boomer aging: life expectancy and memory.

Life Expectancy—Boomers will retire on the heels of skyrocketing life expectancies. Age 65 is already considered questionable and even laughable as a retirement marker, as health professionals push life expectancy and more important, life *quality* well into the 70s and 80s and beyond.

The sociology of an entire generation actively living beyond 75 is not something we're used to, or have thought much about, and we can only speculate about how an entire generation will spend an extra 20 to 25 years of quality life. Furthermore, when

such a generation numbers 76 million (in the United States), it means we're facing a dramatic social upheaval.

Memory—The events that ushered boomers into early adulthood have not left us. The late 1960s and early 1970s were not only traumatic, they were intensely, albeit naively, spiritual.

Regardless of the degree of participation, the lifestyle experiments and the activism of this period deeply imprinted every one of us. The advent of EST, Lifespring, Silva Mind Control, and the general rush of self improvement plans of the late 1970s, were all manifestations of the boomer spiritual quest.

Churches should be acutely aware of the spiritual subtext that marked the late 1960s and early 1970s, and that earned boomers the title, *A Generation of Seekers*.¹⁰

Our spiritual memory will resurface dramatically as all these forces come together in a seeking generation turning 65 and 70. The church that can be there to mentor us in this quest will be the church that finally ministers to what has largely been a lost generation.

Five initial steps in ministering to aging boomers

There are five steps that will begin a ministry to aging boomers:

Examine your own aging process. What are you learning about yourself and your core values? What transitions have you experienced? What does Jesus Christ mean to you now that you missed when you were younger? What about a maturing spirituality? How could you impact someone who is aging and rediscovering a spiritual quest?

Examine your church's attitude toward aging. Are your aging members considered an asset or liability? Are they a vital part of your church or are you waiting for them to move out of the way? Does your church see them as care-givers, or care-takers? If you knew an age wave was approaching how would your present attitude change?

Develop a ministry for the aging—now. Our present older members are the pioneers of this coming age wave and they can teach us a lot about aging. We need to spend time with churches in our communities who effectively minister to seniors; then read, research, and work with what we have. We don't need to be revolutionary, but we need to get something going. In doing this, we will not only reach our senior members, but possibly also develop significant relationships with their boomer kids, whose biggest present stressor is caring for their own aging parents.

Make no mistake, they're watching how we treat their parents, and if they're unchurched, this kind of ministry can be critical.

Watch for trends. Boomers will not age quietly (they've never done any thing quietly!). They'll write, publish, and network. Currently there are numerous boomer Web sites that come and go, and watching them can act as an effective trend indicator. Rather than recommend any specific site I'd suggest entering "baby boomer," "baby boomer aging," "baby boomer spirituality," etc., into a search engine and choosing the sites you find most helpful.

Some sites are nostalgic, some are informational, but together they give insight into boomer attitudes toward aging.

Acquaint yourself with the literature. Several excellent books have been published during the past decade. Here's a brief list:

Age Wave (Bantam Books) and **Age Power** (Penguin Putnam) by Ken Dychtwald. These have great statistics, sociological insight, and a wake-up call for social change. **Half Time**, by Bob Buford (Harper Collins/Zondervan) is one of the better Christian approaches to life after 50.

Prime of Your Life, by Woodrow Kroll and Don Hawkins (Fleming H. Revell) is one of the first Christian how-to manuals on aging.

The Adult Years, by Frederic M. Hudson (Jossey-Bass). Although a little new-agey at times, Dr. Hudson's book remains the seminal work on self-renewal and aging in the twenty-first century. The bibliography alone is worth the price of the book.

Catch the Age Wave, by Win Arn (Beacon Hill Press). Good first step for churches looking to begin a ministry to senior adults.

The Baby Boomerang, by Doug Murren (Regal Books). A valuable single-volume review on boomer ministry. Interestingly enough, this book was released the same year (1990) as Dychtwald's *Age Wave*.