

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Elders look beyond 'bingo, buses, brownies'

By Maureen E. Daly  
Catholic News Service

At the beginning of the 20th century, one in every 25 Americans was 65 years or older. Today, one in eight — a total of 34.1 million Americans — has reached that milestone. A person who reaches 65 can expect on average to live another 17 years; many live well beyond that.

How are parishes responding to this change? Is senior adult ministry just "Bingo, buses and brownies?"

While older adults do need the opportunity to socialize together, experts agree they need much more than that from the parish, and the parish should ask much more of them.

The U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Laity suggests that parish ministry to older persons be guided by these five principles:

- Older people are providers, not just recipients, of pastoral care. The parish must look beyond serving seniors to embracing them.

- Older people themselves should help identify their pastoral needs and decide how they are met.

- As seniors may differ in age from each other by more than 20 years, older people are as diverse, if not more so, than other generational groups.

- Older people need a mix of activities that connect them with each other as well as the larger faith community, and need those activities to be physically accessible to all.

- Spiritual health is affected by and affects the individual's physical, emotional, mental and social health. Parishes cannot be expected to answer these needs but they should be prepared to direct older people to assistance and to advocate for older people within the wider community.

"Senior adult ministry is going to be as big or bigger than youth ministry and we have to be prepared for that," said Richard Johnson, a gerontologist specializing in the spiritual life of older adults.

Johnson founded the Association for Senior Adult Ministry, based in Wildwood, Mo., "to raise the spiritual fare that is offered to senior adults at the parish level by providing good tools for parish ministers to work with."

The association trains parish workers "to understand senior adults' real needs on a spiritual level, to develop relationships with senior adults and to see retirement living as a spiritual journey," he said.

The organization publishes *Well, Wise and Whole Monthly*, which provides parish ministers with curriculum for formal classes, content for a monthly day of prayer and reflection, and literature for the church



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Joan Melsenzahl (right) and Pauline Iatomasi count collection money with six other senior citizens at St. Lawrence Church in Greece on Sept. 11. Many of the "counters" also volunteer for the parish in other ways.

vestibule and for home visits.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh has created several programs to respond to the changing population. The Elderly Outreach Program trains parish workers to provide service to older and "home-centered" persons.

The diocese's Senior Connection Collaborative was born out of an identified need for coordinated care for persons age 60 and older. The program helps older adults and their families connect with the many services for the elderly: energy assistance, meal delivery, budget counseling, legal services, transportation, home health care and other practical matters.

In her book *Engaging in Ministry with Older Adults*, Doria Carlson stresses the importance of connecting the generations to dispel stereotypes and to allow different generations to benefit from each other.

Carlson suggests volunteer work for the retired include projects that the homebound can accomplish. Older volunteers need to be invited and then given enough information to choose appropriate activities, she said. Like other volunteers, they need feedback on the success of the volunteer project and its importance to the community, she said, adding that they also should be thanked.

With the average retirement age day being 57.5 years, Johnson asked, what are they doing with their time?

"The culture says to them 'Go play.' But the church," he said, "should have a more challenging answer than that."

"Any church that is serious about development and evangelization needs to be serious about ministry to older adults," he said. "— development because seniors hold the checkbook, and evangelization because the church has to have expectations for the armies of retiring adults who are now available to spread the Gospel."

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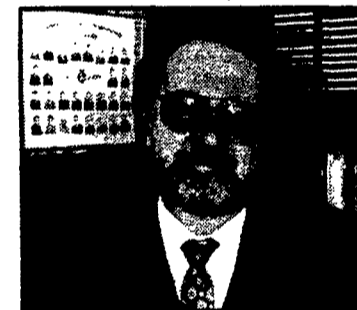
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No two people react in exactly the same way to the death of a loved one! Some people do well by plunging into old routines or setting up new ones. Others need time to adjust without the deceased. They need time to express feelings, to learn new ways of doing things and to put affairs in order. The critical matter is that the grieving person be aware of and willing to deal with the changes death has created. Activity solely for the purpose of escaping feelings and running from the pain will not work. On the other hand inactivity can further depression. The newly bereaved should take time to deal with feelings and then begin the tasks necessary to make life meaningful.

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