



The Case for an Intentional Older Adult Ministry in Your Congregation

By Scott Douglas, Staff for Older Adult Ministry, A Ministry of ABC

If you lived on an island in the middle of the Pacific ocean, and you knew that within a few hours a wall of water was on a collision course for your island, what would you do? Sound like the plot line for a movie? It could be, but something like this actually occurred on April 1, 1946. A “tsunami” (created by an underwater seismic displacement) hurtled across the Pacific moving south and west from the Aleutian Island chain. At times during its journey, the tsunami might have reached speeds of up to 500 miles per hour, and while it would have slowed down when it approached shallower water (like around an island), the height of the wave would have increased. On April 1, 1946, a tsunami did strike the Hawaiian islands causing tremendous loss of life and property damage.

Coincidentally, in 1946 another kind of tsunami — a social tsunami — started its much slower but equally inexorable movement toward the shores of American society, and it is scheduled to arrive within the next few years. That social tsunami is more popularly known as the Baby Boomer generation. January 1, 2011, the first boomer will turn 65 years of age, and over the following 18 years, 76 million other boomers will join the ranks of elder America.

This event is unprecedented in our history, and its impact on American society is difficult to fathom. As a result of excellent medical technology, we are living longer, but we are also struggling with the chronic ailments that accompany a longer life. Alzheimer’s, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, prostate and breast cancer, heart disease are reaching pandemic proportions. The vast majority of American medical universities do not have a geriatrics

program — just a few years ago only three such programs existed in the United States!

On the other side of this article is an “age demographics fact sheet.” The data raises a number of significant questions. Will our society be prepared to handle the financial burden of 76 million retirees — two thirds of whom are currently not prepared to care for these expenses? How will 76 million older adult boomers wield their political influence? How will society distribute scarce resources (particularly health care resources) among this older segment of the population? Who will care for those 76 million aging boomers? How will so many longer lived boomers make meaning in their later years? How will our churches respond?

Recently, the Older Adult Ministry Cabinet of Association of Brethren Caregivers surveyed a small number of Brethren congregations on the topic of older adult ministry. The results were disappointing but not particularly surprising. Only a few churches have anything like an intentional program for older adults, and the programs that are offered do very little to address the questions mentioned above.

A “social tsunami” is on its way — an age wave. It’s impact on our society and our church will be significant and felt for many years. The church has much to offer in response — if it chooses to do so. What will your church do?

The Older Adult Ministry Cabinet and the staff of ABC encourage you to contact our office to learn more about what your church can do to prepare for the coming age wave. Call Scott Douglas, ABC staff representing Older Adult Ministry, at (800) 323-8039.

Age Demographics Fact Sheet

A World of Elders¹

There are now about 629 million people in the world age 60 or over.

Some representative countries:

China now has 10 percent over 60; by 2050, 30 percent is projected;

Mexico now has 7 percent over 60; by 2050, 24 percent is projected;

United States now has 16 percent over 60; by 2050, 27 percent is projected; and

Brazil has 8 percent over 60; by 2050, 24 percent is projected.

**The first
Baby Boomers
will turn
65 years old
Jan. 1, 2011.**

Demographics in the United States²

- In 1770s, the birthrate was 7 children per woman.
- In 1930s, the birthrate was 2.1 children per woman.
- After World War II, the birthrate jumped to 3.8 children per woman.
- Beginning in 1946, 76 million children were born over an 18-year period, creating the Baby Boomer generation.
- Of today's boomers, one-third are well off, one-third will work longer to gain resources for retirement, and one-third are deeply in debt with no pensions.
- In 1900, 4 percent of the population was 65 or older, and 40 percent were children or teenagers.
- By 1990, 12.5 percent was 65 or older, and only 24 percent were children or teenagers.
- Projected by 2030: 22 percent will be 65 or older; only 19 percent will be children or teenagers.
- Today, the majority of Brethren are 50 years of age or older.

Life Expectancy Increases²

- Through 99 percent of human history, average life expectancy was less than 18 years.
- During the last century, average life expectancy has risen from 47 years in 1900 to 76 years today.
- Currently, there are 78 million Americans past the age of 50 (This is about equal to the total American population 100 years ago).
- By 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts there will be more than 115 million adults over 50 years of age — a 50 percent increase.
- Currently, there are about 100,000 anti-aging projects underway.

Wealth and Politics²

- 50+ adults control more than \$7 trillion in wealth; that's 70 percent of the total.
- They own 77 percent of all financial assets, represent 66 percent of all stockholders, own 80 percent of all money in S&Ls, buy 48 percent of all luxury cars and 74 percent of all pharmaceuticals.
- During the 1990s the percentage of Americans with income of \$100,000 or more has tripled.
- Nearly 70 percent of Americans 65 years of age or older voted in 1995.
- Only 33 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 24 voted.

Some of today's 85+ population are fit and independent, but 62.5 percent are so disabled that they can no longer manage basic activities of life without help.

Boomer Bliss² — 63 percent feel good about family and friends; 61 percent consider themselves emotionally balanced, and 47 percent say they are spiritually fulfilled.

Boomer Concerns² — 80 percent are not saving enough; 71 percent have no time for leisure activities; 69 percent need to pay more attention to health; and 61 percent think their career growth is stalled.

1. *Sojourners Magazine*, Jul-Aug 2002, pp.34-35.

2. The balance of the demographics were taken from Ken Dychtwald's "The Age Wave Is Coming," his congressional testimony on March 19, 2002 in support of SB 953.