

Beginning with One Thing

By Nancy Gordon

Congregations often have ideas and expectations of what an Older Adult Ministry should look like. When they decide they should be doing some sort of Older Adult ministry, a committee is formed, research and planning is done, and ultimately a plan for the ministry emerges. At that point a search is often undertaken to find the right persons to lead the endeavor. This is a good process and it often works. But it is also committee intensive and sometimes energy and enthusiasm are lost as the process runs its course. And often so many needs and possibilities are identified that it all becomes a bit overwhelming.

Another way to begin an older adult ministry is to begin with one small thing. Perhaps there is a need that one or two persons have identified and they have ideas of how they (and maybe some of their friends) can meet that need. It could be ways to help the frail members who no longer regularly worship with the congregation to stay connected. It might be providing rides to appointments. Or it might be hosting a regular gathering of older adults around a common topic or interest. There are numerous possibilities—but the most important thing is to have a person or persons who see the need and have a passion for filling it. One way to know whether or not a new ministry should be developed in a congregation is the presence or absence of persons who have both the passion and the gifts for that form of ministry.



Recently I attended a workshop that described one such ministry. The ministry is Senior Share—a monthly life story sharing group a ministry of Grace Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, Illinois. The group meets once a month from early spring to late fall. (Winter is tough in Chicago!) This ministry is led by Renee Roeschley, a member of the congregation who is a spiritual director and has a heart for older adults. The SHARE in the title is an acronym for **S**taories of **H**ope, **A**ccomplishment, **R**emembrance and **E**xperience.

The group was conceived as a formation tool for older adults. It is a time and place where they can gather together to share life experiences and to discern and to share how God has been present in their lives. The group is open to older adults in the church and older adults in the neighborhood of the church. One gentleman from the neighborhood attends who attends is an atheist, but he comes for the opportunity to tell his story. The participants in the group have found the experience beneficial in many ways. It's given them an opportunity to understand their own story and allow it to speak to them. They are more mindful of God's presence in their lives. And it's a place where they are not put down, ignored, or marginalized. Instead they are able to experience the value of their lives for themselves and others.

This is not a big senior adult program. But it is a way for a congregation to provide significant ministry and nurture to older

adults in its midst and to older adults in the church's neighborhood. This is not the only way to begin an older adult ministry. But it's an example of beginning and doing one

thing to minister to older adults. So what's the one thing that your congregation might be called to do?



Life Review A Natural Place for Ministry

By Donald Koepke

In my work with staff at long-term care communities I find that one of the strategies of spiritual care that is received with the most enthusiasm is life review, a process of encouraging and enabling one to reflect on the meaning of their life rather than just chronological recollections. Life review is essentially a process of "Kairos," literally meaning time. While life memories might begin with "I was born on September 18, 1926", life review rather involves questions like, "What has been the impact of you being born when you were?" Life review delves into the meanings of those facts, how they have shaped and formed who we are today.

Noted psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl (author of *Man's Search for Meaning*) suggested that a person just doesn't have memories. Instead a person is his or her memories. He proposes that what one remembers is the accumulation of meaningful events and experiences and form what he calls the "rich granaries of the past." Frankl also suggests that older adults have the advantage because they can reflect on what has been rather than anticipate that which may or may not happen. As one becomes older, that person 'has been' many things. In other words, nothing is chance and what has been is ... in our thoughts, values, beliefs and meanings.

This makes for a wonderful opportunity in ministry that touches lives and makes a difference. Pastor Ed Lindberg of First

Christian Church of Fullerton, California writes:

"As part of the Sr. Adult Ministry of First Christian Church, Fullerton, six people recently completed reading and responding to *Remembering Your Story*, a very helpful book by Richard L. Morgan. Through the experience each of the six participants, plus their leader, reflected on their journeys through life. Most helpful to me was the opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which my life has evolved over time and to see how my life has been blessed by so many gifts and insights which have been shared with me by mentors, family members, friends, teachers and others. This experience has helped me to be a more grateful person for both my past and the present."

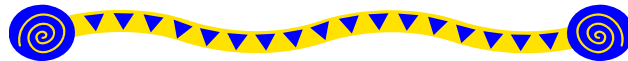
One woman wrote, "This class has been very meaningful to me personally. I learned a lot about myself by being forced to look at my past. I would encourage anyone to do this."

Another woman wrote, ‘This helped me to get started telling my story. Also, I found it so interesting I want to form a group and lead them through the experience of reading and discussing Morgan's book.’

A man wrote, ‘This class was very instrumental in helping me to learn how to start writing my life story. By sharing the exercises with others, it triggers your memory. I feel it is important for everyone to pass on their legacy to their family.’

Another man wrote, ‘Great series of sessions. I had written my bio but this helped me to incorporate my spiritual path.’

The good news is that life review doesn't require attending a class. While the stimulation of the memories indeed stimulates and helps one focus on the journey, there are portions of Richard Morgan's book that would be appropriate for home visitation. A volunteer ‘friendly visitor’ could use some of the questions in the back of the book to make their visit more than just “talking about the weather.” There are even questions that an interviewer might ask a person in order to videotape one's life-history/meaning. What a wonderful gift that a videotape of a loved one talking about the meaning of their life would be for families!



STORY-SHARING RESOURCES

Renee Roeschley—Senior Share

Renee Roeschley leads the Senior Share Group at Grace Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, IL. She has put together a document that gives the benefits of such a story sharing group, guidelines for participants and leaders and some resources. She can be reached at reneecr.1@juno.com.

Osher Life Long Learning Institute's Life Story Center

<http://usm.maine.edu/olli/national/lifestorycenter/>

This web-site has reflections on the reasons we tell stories and how the stories we tell about our lives provide meaning and resources for future decisions. Story telling also creates communities; telling life stories to one another binds people together. The site has suggested questions around several themes and is a great resource for individuals and groups involved in the life story process.

Looking Back and Giving Forward: Finding Common Ground for Positive Aging: A Lumunos Call Workbook for Elders (2010).

A 7-session workbook designed to be used by older adults in small groups, this material challenges elders to be identifying their call for the present and future based at looking back on their earlier life experiences. Workbook and leader's guide are available from Lumunos at www.lumunos.org.

Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups

James E. Birren and Kathryn N. Cochran, 2001, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

This book begins by providing practical helps for leaders of autobiography groups. Topics covered include the reason for doing autobiography groups, the characteristics of a good leader and small group dynamics. The second portion of the book provides detailed guidance for 10

meetings of the group, each meeting built around a theme. Sample publicity pieces, handouts for meetings, and suggestions for subsequent meetings are also included. This material is based on the authors' long experience of facilitating autobiography groups.

Remembering Your Story: A Guide to Spiritual Autobiography

Richard L. Morgan, 1996, Nashville: Upper Room Books

Richard Morgan wrote this book to put together a practical "how-to" to spiritual autobiography. It is designed for small group use and has topics and exercises for ten group meetings. Additional questions are included at the back of the book for those who want to continue on in more depth. Although designed for group use, it could also be used by individuals who want to reflect on their life story. There is a separate study-guide available for use by group leaders.

The Great Story & Your Story; Connecting the Bible to Everyday Lives

Richard L. Morgan and Beth Sanders, 2008, Marysville, Ohio: Lifebio.

A small workbook designed for 12 sessions for a group of older adults. Each chapter contains a Biblical story, reflections by Richard and Beth on that story and questions for individual and group reflection and discussion. The book also contains suggestions for writing a spiritual autobiography and an ethical will. For information on obtaining copies contact Beth Sanders at info@lifebio.com.

Spiritual Storytelling: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Autobiography.

Richard Peace, 1996, Colorado Springs: Navpress.

This is designed as a small group discussion guide that includes 5 sessions to encourage participants in the writing of

their autobiography and then subsequent sessions for the sharing of the autobiographies. The initial five weeks are organized around the theme of "pilgrimage" and each session includes a short study of a portion of Abraham's life and pilgrimage as a way of reflecting on that theme. The second half of the book includes chapters on "how to" write a spiritual autobiography. A group leader's guide is also included.

The Reverend Nancy Gordon has been director of the CLH Center for Spirituality and Aging since 2008. The Reverend Donald Koepke was the founding director of the Center and is now Director Emeritus.