Who is Missing from your Pews?

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Aging Seniors

People 65+ represented 12.4% of the population in the year 2000 but are expected to grow to be 19% of the population by 2030.

According to a 2010 Gallup poll “senior citizens are proportionally the largest segment of the population to attend church according to long-term Gallup data.” Elderly people who regularly attend religious services had healthier immune systems than those who didn’t. They were also more likely to have consistently lower blood pressure. This may be good new but what can we do to keep them in the pews?

Those With Temporary Disabilities

Most likely, we all have a disability—from cataracts, broken limbs, surgery and the recovery there from, to torn ligaments, and a temporary illness. The spectrum of what defines a temporary disability is very broad.

And as we age, we will most likely add to our list of temporary disabilities and move forward to permanent disabilities.

Those with Disabilities

According to the U.S. Developmental Disabilities act: “Disability is a natural part of the human experience.”

Why Are They Missing?

Let’s think about some of the internal barriers that keep people from attending a church.

Architectural and Physical Barriers—Can people even get in the building? Can they come to the rail for Communion? Are people expected to sit in the aisle instead a part of the pew? Can they use the restrooms?

Information and Communication Barriers—Often people have no idea what to expect, and stay away out of fear, expecting the worse, or not knowing how they are supposed to act or if they are expected to give money, or what to wear.
Who is Missing?

We must recognize that families who have a child or an adult with a disability want and need a worshipping community. (This is true for all families who have children.)

It is hard work just to get there. They need to feel welcomed, and hope that you will get to know them and their family members.

Many times, they feel embarrassed if their child/adult speaks out during prayer or dances in the aisle. We must remember that children already have a relationship with God, and we should not stifle or inhibit this. Providing glaring stares, shaking of heads, or encouraging the parents to take the child to the nursery only cause humiliation and discomfort. Many will leave the church never to return.

Maintain an attitude of love, compassion, and acceptance for the family.

Why are the Missing?

People need to have access to some kind of information ahead of time. Does your website cover any of these areas? What about your Sunday Bulletins. Do they provide ample instructions? Are they large enough to actually read? Do you use one font or do you use lots?

The use of some color combinations can make signs, bulletins, and presentations unreadable to those who are color blind or with color deficiencies, such as red/green, or yellow/blue. [Other information on vision may be found under Vision Issues.]

Attitudinal Barriers—Many people who are disabled or differently abled who could use support and accommodations stay silent and will not make their needs known. This is due to fear and stigma, or believing that they are bad, or not important. People who have had bad experiences in the past with churches, or church ministers or priests are fearful of what to expect, and might think your church is the same.

So, how do you welcome someone new to your congregation? If the person has a disability, who do you speak to—the individual or the person assisting them? Do you talk to them or about them? Do you lean down to where they can see your face?

How about the aging? One should not assume just because they are aging that they are hearing impaired.

Visitors should be assigned a “shepherd” or “doorkeeper” to help them become acclimated to the facility and routine of the service.

Technology Barriers—While we all are moving forward in the world of technology, we must remember that not everyone has email or uses the latest phone services for texting or sending pictures.

Systematic Barriers—How do you incorporate your aging into volunteer opportunities? Everyone wants to be included so how can this work for those with disabilities?

What about your parking? Are there marked areas for those who need to park close?

Sounds, Smells, and Light Barriers—Low lighting creates barriers for people whose vision is impaired.

Sounds are a barrier to people with certain types of Autism and to people with hearing impairments, and the adaptive devices they use. People can and have died to strong scents. When congregations are using incense, it is...
Why Are they Missing?

**External Barriers**—These are things apart from the facility that keep individuals from coming to worship.

**Transportation**—As we age, one of the first things we may lose is our ability to drive. We have to depend on others to get us where we need to go. Does your church have those who would be willing to drive these individuals to and from church?

**Health Issues**—One thing we should all strive to offer is a person centered place of worship—not diagnosis centered. This means, do not label the person by their disability. Say “child with autism” rather than autistic child. This slight change can subtly change one’s perception of a child with autism. Use people first language. In fact, go one step further and just know this is a child. There is no need for a label. Health issues can be devastating, but churches should be those places were everyone comes together. It should not be a place of gossips but one of understanding. Talk to the adult or if a young child, the parent. Find out what will make them most comfortable. Find out what works best in the home. See how you can incorporate those things easily in your church. For some, it is as simple as padding for the pews or a solid chair for sitting ease.

**Alzheimer’s/Dementia**—Individuals need the safety of their worship space. Many individuals like to listen to hymnal or “old” music they grew up with. There is also the familiarity of communal prayers. Can you find storybooks with beautiful pictures to use or use Ipods with pre-recorded music?

**Vision Issues**—In addition to some of the issues previously mentioned, it might be helpful to be visual in your presentations. This might include the use of inanimate objects, like puppets, pictures, and videos to help engage the individual without intimidating them.

**Loneliness**—According to a UK study, “…being lonely and isolated is not only miserable, it is a real health risk.” Social isolation is associated with a higher risk of death in older people regardless of whether they consider themselves lonely, research suggests. Have you reached out to your shut-ins? Do you send them your newsletter? Does someone call and check on them on a regular basis? As we age, we tend to lose our circle of friends and sometimes, become shut up in our homes. Invite them back. See how you can connect them to members of your parish. Can they become prayer partners for your children or youth?

**Income and Economic Issues**—Most individuals don’t or won’t discuss these issues. But recognize that it is possible that members of your church are suffering or will soon face these issues. Retirement, death of a spouse, job loss...all cause unexpected changes. Your food or casserole ministry may need to step in to be sure these individuals have nutritious meals.
Why is this Important?

In the Service of Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer, we are asked several questions, two in specific: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” and “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” We answer, “I will, with God’s help.” Opening the Door Wider is one way to live out our Baptismal covenant.

Genesis 1:27 “And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” We must remember that each of us are created in God’s image.

The Bible teaches that every member of the body of Christ is valuable and worthy of honor; just as every part of our physical bodies has a special purpose. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor” (1 Corinthians 12:21–23). In addition, the Bible teaches that each member of the body of Christ is related to the other members in such a way that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). People with disabilities are an integral part of the body of Christ and belong in our churches.

The 5 Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion are:

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
To respond to human need by loving service
To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Why is this important? It is who we are, what we are called to do and be, and it is the right thing to do.

Resources

Sabrina Evans—Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma

Oklahoma Developmental Disability Council
2401 N.W. 23rd Street, Suite 74
Oklahoma City, OK 73107
(405) 521-4984 or 1-800-836-4470
Fax: (405) 521-4910
E-Mail: staff@okddc.ok.gov

Disability is Natural—www.disabilityisnatural.com