

**A Model for Church Revitalization:  
The Role and Treatment of Existing Older Congregants**

by

Letisha Darlene Green

Divinity School of  
Duke University

Date: April 2, 2024

Approved:



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Dr. William Willimon, First Reader



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Mark Tidsworth, Second Reader



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Dr. William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2024

ABSTRACT

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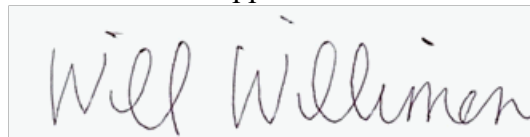
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## **Abstract**

The startling consistent decline of church attendance in the United States has created a flurry of new church start activities and revitalization efforts. Most literature and efforts focus on what new things must happen to reverse the decline. In those efforts, older existing congregants are often overlooked and ignored, at best, or viewed as obstacles and the root of the problem, at worst. This leads to combative relationships between revitalization leaders and congregations caught in the crosshairs. This combative approach is inconsistent with the message of Christ and detrimental to the needed revitalization efforts.

This project seeks to introduce a model for the treatment and role of existing older congregants during a church's revitalization. The model includes the treatments to Ascribe Value and to Optimize Minimal Change, and the twofold role to Engage in Ministry.

In my process, I engaged existing writing and research on church revitalization and aging in the church, applied acute theological perspectives to these writings, and provided real-life examples of how these insights can come together for a more complete treatment and engagement of existing older congregants in healthy and sustainable church revitalization.

*To all the saints who have gone before*

I dedicate this writing to those who have worked tirelessly to build the church only to seemingly have their work forgotten. That you might know that what you did before us, is why we can do what we do after you. I acknowledge you in these pages but know that even without public acknowledgement, your faithfulness stands.

*To God who gives me life*

I am not deserving of the incredible good that my life has held. I am in awe of the most mundane provision and the most awesome responsibility afforded to me by the One who holds my breath. From the time I turned 43, I knew that I had lived a full lifetime of blessings. Everything since has just been gravy. Thank you, God, for this bonus time. These are the good ol' days.

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## Acknowledgements

In 2003, I came as a new church planter into a 130-year-old congregation, Mellow Memorial United Methodist Church in St. Louis. I was relatively young and overly ambitious, but with a heart for the elders of the church. Bob Stevens, already in his 80s, came out of retirement to assist this revitalization effort. Bob, and his wife, Florence, taught me through trial and error how to better treat and engage the existing older congregants at Mellow Memorial UMC even as I launched a new church in their midst, The Connection United Methodist Church.

I thank Bob, Florence, and the people of Mellow for their patience and for the lessons they taught me. I ask forgiveness for where I did not treat well or engage fully the elders in the work that was before us. I thank Rev. Ann Rathert and now Bishop Robert Farr for giving me the opportunity to undertake such a challenging revitalization and new start. May we continue to grow in our understanding of how to lead in the revitalization of existing churches.

I give special thanks to those who have walked with me through this time of doctoral study. My husband, James, and son, Levi, have sacrificed precious time and resources to support me in my studies. My colleague and friend, Kelly, has listened to and encouraged me as I have walked her through the weeds of this work. First United Methodist Church of Festus/Crystal City, where I currently pastor, has been a training ground and an example of how revitalization can begin. My brother, sister, mom, and their partners have provided a loving place to rest over family dinners, Super Bowl parties and whatever other occasion we could find to celebrate. I am deeply grateful.

## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

### **Personal Introduction**

When I arrived as pastor of First United Methodist Church of Festus/Crystal City (First UMC), I was elated. I discovered a congregation of 138 average worship attendance with Midwestern middle-class faithful people. The budget was \$325,000, and the 100-year-old but well-maintained building was located on Main Street USA. I was coming to First UMC after pastoring nine years at a new church start in a poor and crime-ridden section of south St. Louis City. At the city church we had about 100 people attending with a budget of \$125,000, so when I arrived at First UMC, I perceived it as a significant step up in resources, faithful attendees, leadership potential, and location. I was very encouraged and ready to get started.

I quickly learned that First UMC did not view themselves as a church with potential. The people of First UMC remembered a time when they were a church of 300 in attendance rather than 138. They still felt the bitterness and betrayal of a twenty-year-old church split that had strained friendships and caused many people to leave. The faithful people of First UMC were watching an eleven-year decline in attendance. For a decade, finances and ministries were shrinking. They were also still reeling from a well-intended but divisive all-church vote on a building project spearheaded by the previous pastor. The result was a sixty-forty split voting down an ambitious plan for building and growth. The pastor was moved to a different church after this divisive vote, and the people were left to sit with their division. Some had dug in, not wanting the change, and

had a victory. Some felt their chance for turning the declining tide had been lost and felt defeated. All feared that the bishop charged with appointing their next pastor would send someone ready to speed their decline and close them down.

Thom S. Rainer would have placed First UMC in the category of a very sick church due to its ten-year decline in attendance, times of intense conflict, revolving door of recent pastors, rarity of new members, and the “good old days” having passed by ten years.<sup>1</sup> Rainer offers little hope for a church in this state. He predicts a slow decline to death in most instances. This death prediction comes with the assumption that the existing older congregants are not salvageable. It places blame upon them for the decline when often it is a failure in leadership or a changing community that these congregants do not know how to reach.

Perspective makes a great difference. From where I had been in the city, I had an optimistic view of the potential revitalization of First UMC. However, from where First UMC had been a decade ago, the congregation of First UMC was bitter and discouraged. Which direction First UMC headed next depended on what happened next. The path of revitalization would require the proper role and treatment of existing congregants. This path is a model of revitalization that ascribes value, optimizes minimal change, and engages in ministry.

### **Statement of Issue to Be Addressed**

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<sup>1</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways To Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville, IN, B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 93.

The presenting problem noted above is that of church decline. We have been cautioned by practical books on steps for church revitalization to *Renovate or Die*.<sup>2</sup> Many church revitalization experts rightly name the problem of declining churches and note that part of the solution is updating worship. Robert Farr insists that even the small family churches need to aim their worship at a nine-year-old and his or her family, which means the addition of video, modern music, shorter messages, and small groups.<sup>3</sup> All are proven methods but do not address the problem or potential of the existing, usually older, congregants. Writing like Farr's generally frame these "old faithful" in terms of the resistance expected from them. Pastors are encouraged to deal with their resistance noting that if you lead, you bleed.

Mark Hallock writes that congregations with poor health and bad habits need a pastor who can move quickly and with toughness, yet gently. He calls for "a shepherd that is willing to endure getting bit while he works to help the church break bad habits and form new ... [who can] present new sheep to the flock without the old flock running them off out of fear or callousness."<sup>4</sup> There is truth to his claim. I have experienced many bites in my time at First UMC, but the problem is that this combative stance is often the primary expectation and prevalent attitude in church revitalization efforts. Rather than beginning with a collaborative approach, it assumes a power struggle between the old and the new. It negates the hopeful love that considers that perhaps the older congregants

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Farr and Kay Kotan, *Renovate or Die: Ten Ways to Focus Your Church On Mission* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Farr, *Renovate*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Hallock, *Leading Church Revitalization: The Posture, Priorities, Practices, and Perseverance Needed for the Long Haul* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2022), 180. Note: The inclusion of writing from Hallock, or others with similar theological views on leadership, does not indicate support of his gender exclusive writing. His repeated reference to elders (pastors) and their wives and children is narrow and does not recognize the women, single, and childless persons called and equipped by God to serve as elders (pastors).

want new people in the church, too, but just do not know how to reach them. What we need instead is a deference toward hopeful love that sets an attitude of teaching, guiding, and shepherding instead of competing. Every generation matters to God. Rather than dismiss the older congregants, as though they are the problem, Sam Rainer names addressing the widening generation gap as one of the four reset buttons to press for church revitalization.<sup>5</sup> Blaming, fighting and ignoring are each non-starters.

The deeper problem of church decline that I will address is how the existing older congregants are treated and engaged during the revitalization process. Most models of revitalization focus on new people, new worship services, and new ministries, and do not provide a theology or methodology that considers the treatment or the role of existing congregants. Often, the older existing members are considered a liability, undervalued, and left behind. Some consider this a necessary cost of reaching new people for Christ. As an Elder in the United Methodist Church who has both planted churches and been a part of revitalizing existing churches, I have special interest in helping churches with healthy theology and sustainable renewal practices that care for both the existing congregants and the new believers.

Note that I am not advocating for the care of existing congregants because they are the ones to lead the revitalization. The existing congregation's value, particularly the old faithful, is not that they can do the revitalization in and of themselves. Often the old faithful truly are out of touch with the community and uncertain of how to reach out in that way. We can help them learn to reach out<sup>6</sup> to an extent, but we cannot rely on the old

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<sup>5</sup> Sam Rainer, *The Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow* (Carol Stream: IL: Tyndale House Publishing), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Adam McLane, "3 Lies of Church Growth Experts" (Adammclane.com, July 10, 2008), <https://adammclane.com/2008/07/3-lies-of-church-growth-experts/>.

faithful exclusively, or even primarily, to reach new people. The value of their role is found primarily in other areas of church renewal.

### **Topic Significance and Its Feasibility**

I contend that building a revitalized congregation upon discarding the existing older congregants is inconsistent with the ministry of Christ. This attitude of dismissal lays a shaky foundation for spiritual formation and future ministry. Continual mistreatment of our existing aging congregants will only exacerbate the problem of a declining church. Faithful revitalization of an existing congregation requires care for our aging congregants. I further contend that the experience and tradition that the existing congregants possess are assets to a robust future. There are ways to engage these forebearers of the faith that will enhance revitalization efforts while minimizing the ways that those revitalizing the congregation fear their older congregants' presence and influence may be detrimental. The concerns about the older congregants impeding progress are valid. It is a reality many churches face. However, the solution is not to marginalize and weaken these believers. A new model of care and engagement is what is required.

We must remember that church revitalization is not a secular marketing endeavor, but rather a theological and spiritual pursuit.<sup>7</sup> Exploring the biblical themes of aging provides a theological foundation for discussing the difficulties and the opportunities

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<sup>7</sup> Kent R. Hunter, *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017), 51.

inherent in ministry with the aging.<sup>8</sup> Rather than shallow, quick fixes, we must pursue a theological and spiritual renewal. Often the attractional- and consumer-driven models of church leave a wake of damage for those who do not sway with the winds of change. To truly be Christ's church, however, timeless hallmarks of discipleship, mission, and sacred partnering must not be lost.<sup>9</sup> The existing older congregants are key to reviving this aspect of church life. Their engagement and insight into these practices are invaluable.

It is not just a matter of caring for, or learning from, the aging and their faith, but we should actively uphold the past as necessary for revitalization. Change (revitalization) is building on the past rather than omitting it.<sup>10</sup> Building on the past comes with the tension of needing to displace some of the old DNA while keeping that which is foundational. Drawing on the best of the past requires discernment of what should be kept and what should be left behind.<sup>11</sup> The best of the past is that which encourages the church to remain in Christ, adhering to orthodoxy, while being creative in reaching new cultural landscapes.<sup>12</sup> The "old" is not to be thrown out. Much of the "old" is core to our faith and that includes our engagement of our elders during church revitalization.

The reality is that the world has changed dramatically. Some insist that the church has not kept up with the changes. Instead, we operate on an old model that no longer works in our American society. This is true if you look back to 1950 compared to 2020,

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<sup>8</sup> James Houston and Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Tidsworth, *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church* (Columbia, SC: Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), Kindle, 428.

<sup>11</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Abingdon Press, 2021), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 69.

but that is a short timeframe in the 2,000-year-old story of Christ and the church. Alan Hirsch contends that we need to go back further and discover again a biblical leadership and ministry model that embraces the fivefold ministry from Ephesians 4: apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher (APEST).<sup>13</sup> Part of the fivefold ministry is the teaching and shepherding of our aging congregants into disciples who can look outside of themselves and embrace the full mission of Christ. This includes an embrace of efforts to reach new people and a proper love, respect, and engagement of the older existing congregants.

We should recognize, too, that church revitalization is a massive change and that part of the aging congregation's response to church revitalization is fear and anxiety.<sup>14</sup> We ought not dismiss these concerns but instead care for the aging congregants going through the anxious change of church revitalization. The leader serving in the role of shepherd, along with the new coming congregants, can grow in compassion and love through their ministry to the existing congregants. One must compassionately rethink the assumption that the elderly are simply resistant to any change. We ought to consider that perhaps they are experiencing so much change at this stage in their lives (death of spouse, failing health, loss of income, loss of independence, etc.) that they simply need the one thing that sustains them, their expression of faith through their experience of church, to stay the same.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Hirsch, Alan, *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ* (Colombia: 100Movements, 2017), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Tod E. Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (IVP, an Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020), 24.

<sup>15</sup> William H. Willimon, *Aging: Growing Old in Church* (Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020).



Other church revitalization experts let the pendulum swing too far in the other direction. They believe church growth comes by loving the people in the church first. Through this nurturing they believe it is the growth and development of the existing church members that will lead to new people being invited into the church.<sup>16</sup> I do not adhere to the notion that existing church members can be loved into making their church grow. We must be focused on reaching people as well as keeping people. Mark Hallock rightly names the need to “passionately pursue lost and wandering sheep, while at the same time display deep care for the most fragile and vulnerable in our congregations.”<sup>17</sup> It is this balance that is needed. We cannot neglect either the new or the existing congregants to create a healthy revitalized church.

### **Methodology to Be Employed**

I will survey existing writing on church revitalization and aging in church. I will apply acute theological perspectives to these writings and provide real-life examples of how these aspects can come together for a fuller treatment of the role and treatment of existing aging congregants in healthy and sustainable church revitalization.

My thesis will analyze the theology and methodology of First United Methodist Church of Festus/Crystal City (First UMC) that cared for and valued the existing older congregants while attaining 50% growth in attendance from July 2017 through March 2020. In thirty-three months, the church received sixty new members and grew from 138 average weekly worship attendance to 200. This indicates significant revitalization while

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<sup>16</sup> McLane, “3 Lies.”

<sup>17</sup> Hallock, *Leading Church*, 18.

retaining and caring for existing members. I will utilize examples from First UMC during the stated timeframe to define proven methods of caring for existing congregants.

### **Proposing a Model**

While this paper is not an exhaustive treatment of the topic, I endeavor to lay the foundation for further experimentation and analysis. This model outlines two aspects of how our older existing congregants are to be treated during a church revitalization. They are to Ascribe Value and Optimize Minimal change. This model includes a third aspect addressing the role of older existing congregants. It is the twofold mission to Engage in Ministry.

In many ways these three aspects of the model are presented in order of what must occur, and what has occurred, at First UMC. Treatment must first be addressed, followed by role. It is the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt who is credited with saying, “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”<sup>18</sup> Without proper treatment of care for those around you, particularly the elders of the existing congregation, they will never receive your leadership regardless of what wisdom of revitalization you may bring. You will set yourself up for a fight instead of a renewal. Too many revitalizations begin and end this way. With this care of ascribing value and optimizing minimal change, those leading revitalization have an opportunity to help the older congregants find and accept their role in the revitalization.

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<sup>18</sup> Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University, 2002.  
<https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Quotes>.

These three aspects of revitalization must also remain continuous and simultaneous once established. The roles, once opened with value and a careful approach to change, will happen organically. In conversation, you'll discover a gift of an elder and know how to plug them into the renewal.

Some of the concepts addressed in this paper are common practice in a church revitalization or for a church planter. I will not attempt to explore deeply the necessity of certain actions working toward renewal. Rather, the focus of this paper is how to apply these concepts of revitalization with greater care toward the existing older congregants. Many of the outreach and evangelism methods employed to the young people outside the church walls can be applied in modified ways to the existing congregation. With consideration of the elder's position in the congregation and place in their life span, our church revitalization efforts will be healthier and longer lasting.

## Chapter 2 – Ascribe Value

### Value Elders, 1 Kings 12:6

In 1 Kings 12, we see the value of those who have gone before. This story gives us the lesson of seeking and weighing the wisdom and experience of our elders. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah in the era of the divided kingdom. As Solomon's son, and David's grandson, you would expect Rehoboam to operate with wisdom, but that was not the case. Prior to Solomon's death, the northern tribes, led by Jeroboam, had begun their rebellion against Solomon. Upon Solomon's death, Rehoboam inherited this rebellion, and the rebels demanded an easing of the heavy burden of labor and taxes that Solomon had placed upon them. Wisely, King Rehoboam "consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. 'How would you advise me to answer these people?'" he asked.<sup>1</sup> The elders understood the grievances of the rebels better than Rehoboam could understand. The elders knew the history and the relationships involved more thoroughly. They were up-close witnesses. From their wisdom and experience the elders advised Rehoboam to give a kind answer to Jeroboam and to show the northern tribes favor by reducing their labor and tax load.

Often, we do not like what we hear from the elders. We think we may know better and so we seek like-minded persons to endorse what we want to do. This was the case with Rehoboam. Unsatisfied with the counsel of the elders, Rehoboam consulted with the young men who had grown up with him. They did not have the experience, wisdom, or

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 12 (NIV)

historical understanding of the situation. These young men advised Rehoboam to be harsh and increase the burden upon Jeroboam and the people. Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders and took the advice of the young men, placing heavier burdens on the people along with threats of physical violence. As a result, the northern tribes split from Rehoboam's leadership, and Rehoboam barely escaped with his life.

### **Failure to Ascribe Value**

Rehoboam made the mistake of dismissing the advice of the elders. Though he sought their advice, he did not value their perspective. He failed to listen deeply to truly understand their viewpoint and perspective.<sup>2</sup> Rehoboam did not ascribe enough value to the wisdom and experience of the elders. Though they had witnessed and participated in the events that led up to the current crisis, Rehoboam did not value their insight. He did not heed their warnings. Perhaps he did not ask enough questions or listen deeply enough to the history they held that informed their advice. Without this understanding, Rehoboam could not rightly discern if their experience was relevant to the current situation, and thus the results were disastrous.

The moral of the story compels us to consider the wisdom and experience of our elders. It is a caution not to dismiss their advice but to filter it through the context of the day. The experience and tradition that the older congregants possess can be assets to a robust future. We must find ways to engage these forebearers of the faith to enhance

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Hallock, *Leading Church Revitalization: The Posture, Priorities, Practices, and Perseverance Needed for the Long Haul* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2022), 32.

revitalization efforts while minimizing the ways that those revitalizing the congregation fear the older congregants' presence and influence may be detrimental.

It is not that those leading revitalization should abide by everything the elders say. The church has declined at least in part because the elders do not know what to do. Simply, they no longer know how, do not have the ability or resources, or are unwilling to reach the changing community for Christ. It is some of their decisions that have brought the church to this place of needing revitalizing. Still, their insights into the relationship of the church with the community are valuable and should be considered when making decisions of how to move forward. Their stories and experience matter.

### **Giving Back Life**

The work that most of our declining churches need to undertake is that of revitalization. New church starts have their place. There is a time when everything must be put to rest with proper honor and something completely new must sprout in its place. It could be that there are only ten people left, or the building and location are no longer useful, or the existing congregation is so toxic that resuscitation efforts would only perpetuate the dysfunction. A new church start is what I did in St. Louis. That was what was needed there. But far more existing churches need the work of revitalization. There is a good core of believers, a local community to reach, and the foundations of faith in place. Revitalization is a compound word with the prefix re meaning “again, back” and the verb vitalize meaning “to give life to.”<sup>3</sup> It is the work of taking the good of what

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<sup>3</sup> Word of the Day, January 1, 2022, Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/word-of-the-day/revitalize-2022-01-01/>.

exists and breathing life into it again. We are not making something new from scratch. What currently exists is valuable, and we are giving life back to something that already exists.

The leaders of revitalization often more easily see the renewal potential of a congregation by looking outside the walls to who could come into the church. They can envision a renewal with new faces, but they leave out the faces of those already there. I contend that there must be an *ascribing of value* to the existing congregants to truly do the work of revitalization. Without the existing congregants, you are doing a new church start. In a new church start, the old is discarded and everything is scratched out anew. But in revitalization, we must see the value of the existing congregants and renew our own thinking of their potential. There is no revitalization without the existing congregants.

### **God Working with You**

My first move in revitalizing First UMC was to ascribe value. I sought to help them see the worth that I saw in them and, more importantly, the worth that God placed in them. I needed to remind them of the good they presently held and the potential that is theirs for the taking. The first endeavor was to change the spiritual atmosphere of discouragement and bitterness. I began with a sermon series entitled, “Setting the Spiritual Atmosphere.” I offered two takeaways: God was not done with First UMC, and God wants you, each one in the existing congregation, to join God in the work ahead. In this teaching that pervaded everything we did from the start, I ascribed value to their future and to each one’s participation in it, not just in my eyes, but in God’s eyes. God

values this congregation and its future growth in outreach and ministry, and God wants you to be a part of it. There is no communal revitalization without individual renewal. God is at work and needs your participation. Communally, God is doing a work with us. Individually, you are invited to work with God.

Inherent in this core message of ascribing value is an invitation to join God in the work. A foundational scripture is Romans 8:28, “And we know that in all things *God works* for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”<sup>4</sup> This scripture allows the congregation to see that even in their bitterness and discouragement, God can work the difficulties that they have experienced together for the good thing that God wants to do now. The recent struggles do not negate the future good that God is working to accomplish. Importantly, the good work God wants to do is communal. It is for “those” who love him and have been called. This is the church.

However, there is an alternate translation footnoted in the New International Version that turns this scripture from being God’s promise to the faithful community into being God’s direct invitation to, and even dependence upon, the congregation to participate in bringing about the good work. Note the alternative translation: “And we know that in all things God works together *with those who love him* to bring about what is good.”<sup>5</sup>

It is not just, as most translations say, that God will work all things, including the circumstances that were bringing bitterness and discouragement, together for the good of the church. It is an alternate and equally plausible translation that says that God “works *together with those who love him* to bring about what is good.” God does not just do the

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:28 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:28 footnote with alternate translation (NIV)



work, but God works *with us*, we who love God, to bring about the good. This is an incredible revelation to grasp. The good that God wants to work includes you the existing congregation. The only question to each congregant then becomes, “Are you willing to work with God to bring the good?”

Every step along a revitalization, these truths and this question must be presented. Every person should be invited into the process, into the working of good. These are constant themes: God is doing a good work among us. Your contribution is valuable. Your presence is needed because God works good *with us*. God works miracles *with us*. Will you join God in this work?

**“I guess you won’t be needing me.”**

Four years into the revitalization of First UMC we needed an Associate Pastor to accommodate our growing ministries. He was a welcome addition and began to take the role of preaching in my absence and at regularly scheduled intervals. After worship on Sunday an older certified lay servant in our congregation, John, approached me and said rather dejectedly, “I guess you won’t be needing me to preach for you anymore.” I had completely missed how the arrival of an Associate Pastor would impact the sense of value and the utilization of gifts within our congregation, especially those of this older congregant who had preached for so many pastors, including myself, in previous years. He thought this sign of revitalization was a step toward putting him and his gifts on the shelf. What looked like growth to me was a step toward uselessness for an existing older congregant.

Thankfully, I was quick enough in my thinking to respond, “Oh no! We still need you!” And after a beat, “We will still need you to preach at times. But maybe your next step is to help teach other people to be lay servants and lay preachers.” His face lit up at the possibility. He did still have something to share, something useful to do, and the pastor leading toward revitalization saw it in him, too.

This story fits very well into chapter four about Engaging in Ministry, but the underlying principle of my conversation with John is a core belief that God is at work and that God is still inviting this existing congregant, at 81, to participate in that work. Without that core belief, I would have dismissed John and agreed that his preaching and teaching gifts were no longer useful. I would have devalued John and missed an important aspect of the revitalization God was doing at First UMC.

This causes us to consider the distinctions between a career and our vocation. It is the American way to find our identity and value in our job title earned or degree held. When retirement age comes, and titles and degrees no longer define our duties, what is left? For the Christian, the call from God, vocation, remains. We never retire from being disciples of Jesus Christ. Therefore, our worth and value to God and to the church does not falter, or should not falter, even when our careers end and our titles are removed. As Christians, at every age, we are “given a role to play in God’s salvation of the world.”<sup>6</sup> As my friend John understands, though he retired from his career as an insurance adjuster at age 62, nineteen years later he still works as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> William H. Willimon. *Aging: Growing Old in Church* (Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 137.

## **Unique Gifts and Talents**

There are unique and valuable gifts our older congregants possess. They are unique in that no one else can offer these contributions but them. They have been won over time. There are no shortcuts to obtaining or gleaning from them. It takes time, building of relationships, and an attentive ear. Appreciation must be given to the ones willing to share such gifts. Space must be created for the wisdom and experience to be shared. Conversations must continue to understand how this wisdom and experience is applicable to the current circumstances.

## **Shorthand**

Caryl is 84 years old and serves as the recording secretary for our Church Council meetings. Caryl was already serving on the Council at First UMC when I arrived. When her official term on the Council expired, she asked if I wanted her to continue taking notes. She was willing to continue but was not sure if that would be proper since she was no longer an official Council member. I quickly let Caryl know that I would love for her to continue serving as Recording Secretary even as one without official vote. Why? Her notes are very accurate, and she is the only person I have ever seen who take notes in genuine shorthand!

Shorthand is not commonly used today and has not generally been taught in schools for over thirty years. However, it still works, and Caryl still knows how to work it. After taking shorthand notes at a meeting, she types them at home and emails them to

our church secretary. Every chance I get I am bragging on Caryl's note-taking skills. This contributes to revitalization for Caryl as a person still able to serve her church and to the revitalization of the congregation by the inspiration she provides. It lets people know that something that seems simple can be a great tool when given in service to God. It shows the value in not discarding someone or something just because it is not society's current way of operating or thinking. It shows that there is no stopping point in our life for service to God. These lessons, which could be best learned only from an 84-year-old secretary who knows shorthand, take on greater implications when calling people to hold on to the foundations of our faith, also often are considered outdated. This respect of the old ways sets the stage for holding to the old principles of faith that carry us through this life and into the next.

Our older congregants possess gifts, talents, and skills that are unique. The process of making apple butter, the trick for getting candle wax out of the carpet, and how to play the dulcimer are gifts that are often overlooked or dismissed entirely. Yet, they still have value and can bring a uniqueness to a revitalization that intrigues the young people we so desperately want to see in our churches. At First UMC, we have a quilting group and the county square dancers meeting in our Fellowship Hall. A young person may never step foot into those groups, but his or her existence makes our church more interesting and demonstrates our connection with the community. The example of the presence and activity of older adults is inspiring.

### **Intrinsic Value, *imago Dei***

So far, I have only talked of the value of a congregation and the individual based on God's work and their inclusion in it. However, this thinking could cause a judgment of value based on the work one can or cannot do. This judgment would be an egregious error contrary to the Gospel and particularly detrimental to older congregants who are often physically less capable of working. In his MTh Thesis, Caleb Maxon details how both John Wesley and Aquinas' understanding of the *imago Dei* provides a theologically sound anthropology asserting that every person is valued by God, regardless of age or ability.<sup>7</sup> The *imago Dei* (image of God) offers a fuller understanding of who a person is and who God created them to be.

The concept of a person's value flowing from being made in the image of God was a revolutionary view held from early Christian doctrine. It defied the philosophies that value people based on their accomplishments, wealth, or morality. Gary B. Ferngren demonstrates that in Jesus' time the value of a person depended upon how virtuous they were. "Human worth ... was not regarded in the classical world as intrinsic."<sup>8</sup> Even the Jews who were quite versed in the *imago Dei* concept from Genesis believed that the concept applied only to the Jewish people. There was always a caveat as to who was of value and who was not, who was the *imago Dei* and who was not. It was a new thought that the inherent value of a person, from being made in the image of God, was for all people. C. Kavin Rowe includes this revelation from Jesus as a part of "Christianity's Surprise." The Christians, in the person of Jesus Christ, understood that "whenever you

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<sup>7</sup> Caleb Maxon, "The Mystery of Christ in You: Christology, Anthropology, and Participation in Thomas Aquinas and John Wesley" (MTh Thesis. Duke Divinity School, 2022), 137.

<sup>8</sup> Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 95.

encounter a human being, you simultaneously encounter [Christ].”<sup>9</sup> The implications are enormous.

In a society that highly values good looks and great health, Christian faith defies the world with our belief in an individual’s worth simply for having been created in God’s image. This is revolutionary and sets Christianity apart from the changing trends of American culture. This doctrine is foundational to our belief “that every human life possesses intrinsic value as a bearer of God’s image and the object of redemption through Christ.”<sup>10</sup> It is a tragedy when we hold this concept loosely, allowing a person’s perceived value to be degraded because of age or failing health. However, holding tightly to this value elevates the way we treat one another. It calls us to ascribe value, to love and to serve, anyone in need, particularly our elders in the faith.

The Judeo-Christian understanding of a person’s worth based on bearing the *imago Dei* has impacted our society greatly. C. Ben. Mitchell states that the concept renounces infanticide, euthanasia, slavery, and the oppression of women.<sup>11</sup> It renounces ageism, as well. This theological basis is necessary for the proper engagement of older congregants in church revitalization. Their value is God-given and does not end at a certain age or in a certain situation. Nor does it depend upon their ability to engage in the work. Without a doubt, this claim is a countercultural concept in modern America that places such high value on youthfulness and productivity that older members of society are not valued. It also is necessary to counter the ageism perpetrated by many church

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<sup>9</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity’s Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), Kindle, 632.

<sup>10</sup> C. Ben Mitchell, “*The Audacity of the Imago Dei: The Legacy and Uncertain Future of Human Dignity*,” in *Imago Dei*, ed. by Thomas Albert Howard (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 94.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, “Audacity,” 110.

renewal efforts. Poor treatment of our older existing congregants is a poor treatment of God's image. It misses the mark of Jesus' full message of care for the least of these. We must honor and value our elders as highly as we do our youth and young families. This concept continues to be revolutionary even in the church that proclaims it.

### ***Imago Dei* in Church Revitalization**

When searching for the “fading image of God” in his chaplaincy at nursing homes, Hershel Jonah Matt noted that whatever the physical condition of the person, their living body is “a reminder that in God's eyes the worth of a person does not depend – and in our eyes should not depend – on the efficiency and utility or ‘quality’ and normality.”<sup>12</sup> This belief is foundational to our Christian faith. It is what compels us to reach out to the least of these and treat others with the love and grace that has been given to us. It is what makes us believe that all people are worth our service and mission.

Imagine a church attempting revitalization that lacks the connection of this truth to the treatment of their own older congregants? Who talks of God's love but do not show it, especially to the elders in the faith? Imagine the shallow attempts at discipling new believers that follows. Despite any great theology we may espouse of the *imago Dei*, we would be betrayed by our hiding away and sweeping under the rug a most vulnerable population among us, a population who has been the church and now is being rejected by the church.

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<sup>12</sup> Hershel Jonah Matt, “Fading Image of God? Theological Reflections of a Nursing Home Chaplain” (Judaism, 36 no 1 Winter 1987, p 75-83), 79.

To be clear, we cannot advocate for the care of existing congregants because of what they can give to us. This is not a transactional relationship. There is no expectation that they will lead the revitalization we seek. Certainly, many existing older congregants have much to offer, but their value is not contingent upon their contributions. Their value is found first in the image of God that they bear, in which they were created, regardless of what areas of church renewal to which they may or may not be able to contribute. This must be established and held as a foundational truth.

### **Fleeting Treasures**

Our oldest congregants are fleeting treasures. They are treasures because of their high value and are they are fleeting because our mortality tells us that they will be with us for just a short time longer. This means they require immediate attention in our revitalization efforts. Their treasures must be quarried urgently.

Their gifts of wisdom and experience are unique because they have been cultivated over time. There is no shortcut to having witnessed ninety years of world history. No one can go back and live through what they have lived through or gain the unique lessons that they have gained. How do you make a marriage last sixty years? How do you live through a world war? How do you survive the death of your spouse, best friend, child or parents? Our older congregants have these answers. They can tell us how they persevered when their faith wavered.

At my new church start in St. Louis, I treasured the stories of the older congregants, though their church had closed and their worship service was separated



from the new church start. They told me of the difficulties of the Depression and how the church paid workers to dig the basement out from underneath the building just to provide some work for the local unemployed. This story is a treasure that could only be told by those who lived it. It demonstrated the church's legacy of involvement with the community and with issues of social holiness. When our new church explored launching a nonprofit social enterprise of T-shirt printing to provide employment to people experiencing homelessness, I told the story of our basement dug by those who fell on hard times during the Depression. While we did not pursue this employment ministry at the time, we still knew it was doable because it had been done before. This was the work of the church.

### **Listening to Learn**

As I approached my new appointment to the ex-urban First UMC congregation, I did as all good transitioning pastors should do: I set up a "Listening Tour." This was a series of small group meetings in congregants' homes to ask questions about their church. What do you love about your church? What are your hopes for the future? I met with congregants at a dozen meetings and took notes of the recurring themes. I looked for areas of agreement to obtain some quick wins with my response to this information. I discovered everyone wished the nursery was on the same level as the sanctuary, but installing a restroom there was an obstacle. Within the first three months of my tenure, I short-circuited some administrative loops and accomplished the task. It was a big win for the congregation. I was received as a pastor who listened to the people and knew how to

get something done in short order. I did have to repair some relationships having circumvented the usual administrative process that was in place for these types of renovations. It was an unintentional misstep, but with grace it was a strong first step toward revitalization.

At the listening meetings in arriving at First UMC, I also discovered places of controversy, such as where the congregation's nametags should be displayed and how much room the custom-made piece of furniture took up that held the nametags. This was a silly argument at the surface, but I navigated it a bit more slowly because I knew there was something more to it than wood and magnetic tags. These types of disagreements are sometimes best resolved with no one getting their way. Something new must come instead. The final resolution was an entirely new system of nametags and holders so no existing argument won or lost.

By listening to the existing congregants at these meetings, I also learned of what they are most proud. I heard a recurring theme of mission trips. They reminisced about their times in Costa Rica and at the U.S.-Mexican border, where they built a relationship with a children's home. I thought, "Great! This church has a heart for taking mission trips. What a great thing to revitalize!" Six years and several failed attempts later, I've realized that this was just a fond memory of those who no longer had the physical ability to go. Those newer to the congregation had not the impetus to go. In my seventh year here, we sent four people to Kentucky for our first mission trip during revitalization. A new congregant has come whose heart is for missions. I will nurture this new initiative, and I will speak to the elders of how great it is to see the congregation beginning to look at these wonderful mission trips again. But I know that it is a new initiative. The wisdom

and experience of the elders did not translate to the beginnings of our revitalization in missions.

### **Investment Required to Glean**

Unearthing the great treasures of our elders takes time, building of relationships, and an attentive ear. Robert Farr encourages pastors who are going into new appointments to interview their lay people and to listen for their story, their passions, and their talents. These conversations help to reveal the role they could have in the future of the church. Farr refers to this as “listening with a purpose.”<sup>13</sup> Older congregants need their pastor to listen to them with the same purpose. Giving this time of listening validates their existence and the pastor’s care for them. The conversation is not the end, however. The conversation is a bridge to further engagement. The conversation and the stories shared are a treasure, but they also give hints to the connections to ministry going forward.

During one of my first visits with a small group from First UMC, someone asked how old I was. He wanted to know what my life experiences were, as well. I was surprised by the question but responded by stating my age and telling them of my time in college, being a missionary, teaching public school and then attending graduate school. His follow-up statement explained his questioning. What he really wanted to know was if I had any good stories to tell. I appeared younger than I was, and he wanted to know if I had enough life experience to make interesting sermons. He referred to a previous pastor

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<sup>13</sup> Bob Farr and Kay Kotan, *The Necessary Nine: Things Effective Pastors Do Differently* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 9.

who had great life stories to tell and hoped I could do the same. I do have some stories to tell, but that congregant, 30 years my senior, had more stories to tell, and probably more interesting ones at that.

A way to ascribe honor to older congregants is to tell their stories. This requires that revitalization pastors spend time getting to know them, having conversation, and paying attention to their interactions with others. When their story fits the sermon better than your own, or at least as good as your own, use it, with permission. Choose stories that show their accomplishments or how they made it through adversity. Choose stories that highlight their Christian faith and good character. In this, you honor and value them, and you teach the congregation to honor and value them.

At First UMC I have a congregant who is 56 years old but is living with a rare disease called DiGeorge syndrome among other ailments.<sup>14</sup> His survival to this age is on the side of miracles. He does not attend worship in person due to his compromised immune system, but he, and his wife and daughter worship online and have a lifelong connection with the congregation. When I visit with Bryan in his home, he often mentions wanting to share his story perhaps by video or in written form. He talks of how God has brought him through. He shares of how many times the doctors counted him down and out, but God renewed him for another day. This homebound person could easily be overlooked in a revitalization effort, but Bryan's story is exactly what new believers need to hear. They need to know that even when life is difficult God is there.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. *An Age of Opportunity: Intentional Ministry by, with, and for Older Adults* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2018), Kindle, 1005. Gentzler tell us to use "lifestyle, not age, as the determining factor for ministry." Bryan's age does not make him an older adult, but his illness and required lifestyle places him in that category.

They need to see someone who has been in constant battle for his health can still see God at work and have an attitude of gratitude for the blessings God has given.

Bryan’s story will only be heard by the few who visit him unless I make room in this revitalization for his story. This is a project yet to be fulfilled though I know Bryan is a fleeting treasure. It takes extra accommodation to share the stories of the older, or homebound, in a congregation. We must make time to do the home visit. We must invest in the technology to travel with video-recording equipment, then edit, and upload for presentation. We must make time in worship or in another setting to share the story.

Sometimes the sharing of gifts, talents, and stories is difficult for the older congregants. Beyond the physical effort it takes to engage, there may be an emotional toll, as well. We are not to judge their lives by the standards of today but to hear their stories in the context of the world in which they lived them. We must not take their sharing for granted. Sometimes the sharing is a joy, but sometimes the sharing is painful. We need to listen as they tell of the sacrifices of their own time and resources to “keep this declining church afloat.”<sup>15</sup> We should express gratitude for their history and for their willingness to speak their hard-earned wisdom and experience into our lives. We are to grieve with their stories of war, loss, and difficult times. We are to celebrate their triumphs and victories. In the stories of pain, we are enlightened of our need for change. In the stories of triumph, we are to show gratitude and “draw generously from the genius of those who got us here.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Hallock, *Leading Church Revitalization: The Posture, Priorities, Practices, and Perseverance Needed for the Long Haul* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2022), 32. Note: The inclusion of writing from Hallock does not indicate support of his gender exclusive writing and view of pastoral leadership. Hallock’s repeated references to pastors (elders) and their wives and children is narrow and dismisses the women, the single, and the childless persons called and equipped by God to serve as pastors.

<sup>16</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), 146.

Let us hold again to the premise of the *imago Dei*. Each older congregant is of value because each is made in the image of God. These conversations and investments of time are not simply to appease them. We are not presenting a false presentation of caring. We are building relationships, learning from their lessons, listening for their advice, and considering how they apply to our current situation. Among these gifts are wisdom and experience. They hold the history of the congregation and community. They know what has gone well and what has not. The wisdom they share is not just their own. It is the wisdom of their parents and their parents before them. It is a wisdom passed down through the ages. A revitalization honors that wisdom and holds it for the next generation that we might built upon those who have gone before us for the benefit of those who will go after us.

Mark Sayers speaks of the “partnership of the generations,” a term coined by Edmund Burke.<sup>17</sup> The church is such a partnership. It passes the warnings and lessons of generations from one to the next. It keeps alive the words of those who have gone before and those who will come next. In the United Methodist system, it is called “the connection.” In Christian doctrine it is the “communion of saints.” It reminds us that the present does not exist without the past or the future. We cannot declare the supremacy of one generation over another. We are interconnected and need each other to fully live into God’s promise for the church.

### **Celebrate Contributions**

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 135.

Most older congregants have lived decades contributing to society and to the church. They worked a job, contributed to the economy and a civil society, raised children, volunteered in the Sunday School, sang in the church choir, cooked the church meals, and served on the Church Council. These are not necessary to give our elders value, yet because we value these things we should acknowledge and be grateful for how the elders have contributed to them.

### **Publicly Speaking**

Judy is the organist for the traditional worship service at First UMC.<sup>18</sup> Judy is sweet and loved by all. She views her organ and piano playing as gifts that God can use for the church. She is prayerful and particular. At least twice a year I find a good reason to have Judy play the organ or piano in the Modern service. It is the larger service with the most new people, and I want them to understand how valuable she is to us. I always acknowledge her by name and praise her faithfulness and willingness to take part in the Modern worship service on those occasions. This is for her benefit and for the congregation's benefit. Not only do the new congregants get to hear a great organist, but they also get to see how to esteem our older congregants.

It is essential to honor our older congregants publicly. During a revitalization the existing older congregants will likely assume you do not care for them. Public acknowledgements dispel that notion in great fashion. Mark Hallock states,

“If we want to see individuals like these gain renewed life and passion for the Lord and for ministry, we must express how much we value them. And we must do this a lot. We must brag on others, from little kids to adults,

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<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 3 Optimizing Minimal Change to understand why we still have a traditional service.

both publicly and privately. We must build others up through our words and actions, working to draw out their gifts and ministry dreams that perhaps have been stunted for a long time.”<sup>19</sup>

Howard was an older congregant at First UMC upon my arrival and has since passed at the age of 92. Howard had used his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and simultaneous 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary with his wife Candy as a fundraiser to create a prayer chapel in the church. They installed a stained-glass window and set the room with an altar and pews. After his death someone suggested naming and dedicating the space the Howard Inman Prayer Chapel. I mentioned it to the Church Council, and they agreed. We will make this dedication soon during a worship service. We will invite his wife, who has since moved out of town, and we will talk about Howard’s service and sacrifice and thank Candy for her love and dedication. There is an entire conversation to be had about naming rooms and buildings after people. It can be dicey, and some may choose to avoid these namings and dedications. The pros and cons of this practice is for another paper. What I know for my purposes is that honoring Howard and Candy will do several wonderful things for our revitalization: 1) It lets the new people see the value of longevity and the impact lay people can make, 2) It tells the older people they will not be forgotten, 3) It reminds the older people that their legacy lives on in the church, and 4) It inspires younger people to make contributions that last.

## **Giving Space**

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Hallock, *Leading Church Revitalization: The Posture, Priorities, Practices, and Perseverance Needed for the Long Haul* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2022), 28.



Part of a church revitalization is remodeling the inside and the outside of the building. The physical space needs to reflect the changes that are happening spiritually. The community should be able to see the new life that has arrived by the updates in signage and greater attention to lawn care. Inside, the space needs to accommodate new modes of ministry like a worship band, tech for livestreaming, and an inviting space for children and youth. These changes are necessary and demonstrate to the community that there is new life in these walls, as long as the community is truly invited into the space.<sup>20</sup> However, most every church also has a space that can continue to hold and honor the history of the congregation. Preserving this space can go a long way in conveying the value that the leader and congregation place on the contributions of the older congregants.

In First UMC, there is an outdated library. The carpet is a maroon from the 1980s with heavy matching chairs. There are two glass cases with memorabilia, and black and white pictures and plaques are hung from the walls among the bookshelves. I initially thought that this room should be high on the remodel list. Small groups meet in there for Bible study, and I often meet with families or individuals in that room. I realized, however, that there needs to be a space, one space, that honors the history. It should be a valued space. Every old painting, picture, or plaque should be gathered to that space and displayed or stored respectfully. The carpet and chairs could still be updated, but the historic significance of what is held in that room should be preserved. We are working to add a Keurig and update the rickety glass cases that currently store the archival material,

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<sup>20</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 73.

but the library remains as that space that connects us with the past while housing present and future ministry.

There are other options for granting space. At First UMC we made sure that a way to kneel for communion or prayer remained in front of the sanctuary even when the altar area was being rebuilt to create more space. We have preserved or expanded space for vital ministries that existed prior to the revitalization such as the food pantry, prayer shawls and choir room. We keep space in our bulletin for the pre-existing vital ministries and maintain paper communication through the mail for those who need it even though most communication today is through email and social media.

I have visited churches whose revitalization led to building a new worship space and relocating the congregation. Most impressive are the ones who transformed a well-travelled hallway into a mural that recounted the history of the church. I have seen displays of pictures of the older building and congregation that tell of previous pastors and significant ministries and moves. Every revitalization should reserve space as an expression of value for what has come before. Each revitalization has its own needs for giving the older congregants space. It takes prayer and listening to your congregants to discern what space is most important to keep for their sense of being valued and their connection with God.

### **Actions that Ascribe Value**

Ascribing value to another impacts the way you think and act toward them. This is essential when caring for existing older congregants during church revitalization. We

are encouraged in 1 Timothy 5:1-2, “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat ... older women as mothers.” Treating older congregants as our own mother or father is a high standard. Our actions toward older existing congregants should bring life to them as we work to bring life back to the congregation. Revitalization invites them to participate and values their existence as well as their unique gifts and talents. We should take time to glean the wisdom and experience of these fleeting treasures. This requires listening and a celebration of who they are.

It is notable that the word “value” is used. I can tolerate older congregants without attributing value to them. I can accept their presence without being willing to work with them. These dismissive sentiments keep a division among people. Even an appreciative attitude is not enough. I appreciate the Mona Lisa, but I will not hang it in my office. To value someone, or some group of people, means that I recognize my need for you. I recognize that you add something good to my life and to the lives of those around you. When I value you, I am willing to work with you in ministry and to work with you in a healthy way even through conflict or disagreements.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rodney A Harrison, Jeffrey A. Click and Glenn A. Miller, *Navigating Conflict: A Guide Through the Storm* (Kansas City, MO: ICM Publishing, 2019) 32.

## Chapter 3 – Optimize Minimal Change

### Change Is Necessary

The decline of the church in the U.S. over the past fifty years is sufficient evidence of the need for change. The number of people engaged in worship and attendance have plummeted. There are many other ways besides sheer numbers of people to measure the vitality of a church, but it is not necessary to discover the many facets of decline for this writing. What we can surmise in general terms is that what was once a successful model of being church in the U.S. is no longer connecting with people on the scale that it once did. Without change, we can expect the rate of decline to continue, if not accelerate.

Change is necessary yet the previous success of the church that is held fondly in the memory of our older congregants can be a stumbling block to change. In *Crucial Conversations*, Arnold Toynbee’s insight is upheld in relation to the church: Nothing fails like success.<sup>1</sup> The older congregants remember a time when multi-classroom Sunday School, the great hymns of the faith blasted on an organ, and a forty-five-minute sermon drew a crowd. When people’s engagement in the church began to wane, the tendency was to double down on the tried-and-true methods of bringing people to church. The older congregants with memories of a thriving church from the 1950s may have said, “It worked before so it should work now.” The error is that the church became captors of its

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, 3rd ed.* (McGraw Hill, 2021), Kindle, 108.

previous success. We failed to recognize that the problem has changed, and so must the solution. Applying the same old fixes to brand new problems does not work.

Recognizing that the old ways did work in their time is an important step in revitalization. It would be wise of revitalization leaders to acknowledge the successes of the past and show gratitude for how the existing older congregants maintained a thriving church in their day. Spend time reminiscing with the existing congregants about their great work in the past. Acknowledge their faithfulness and wisdom. Then help them to see how different our society and the community is now. Tell them we want those days of booming attendance again, and we need the innovation and determination once again. Remind them how cutting edge it was to remodel the sanctuary fifty years ago or provide a weeklong Vacation Bible School. Do your research. Discover the risks the church took fifty years ago and remind them it takes that same initiative to reach the new world around us today. Knowing you see their vigor in revival from the past will help them be more open to new vigor and innovation to meet the current time.

Resistance to needed change often comes because the need for change is not readily recognized by the older existing congregants. Mark Tidsworth in *Reshape* notes how volatile experiences, such as the worldwide shutdown from COVID-19, present an urgent opportunity to make changes. The dramatic situation of pausing in-person worship and events made it obvious that the church had to adapt.<sup>2</sup> The crisis proved that the church actually could change if the need was most apparent. However, it is more difficult to accept the need for change when the crisis comes more slowly such as the decades-long decline of many mainline churches in the U.S. Upon my arrival, First UMC had

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<sup>2</sup> Mark E. Tidsworth, *ReShape: Emerging Church Practice in a Volatile World* (Columbia, SC: Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2020), Kindle, 241.

experienced a 46% decline in attendance over an eleven-year span. It was quick enough that people saw the crisis yet slow enough that they balked at the radical action endorsed by the previous pastor. Often congregations wait until they can no longer pay the bills, or support the cost of a clergy, or can no longer physically do the church work they once cherished before they are willing to change.

Change is necessary to address the problem of church decline. However, the cause of the problem is new and different. So must the solution be new and different. Richard Hamm in *Recreating the Church* succinctly defines three major changes to the landscape of the church's predicament. He notes the "hurricane of change" includes shifts in American culture toward secularism, organizational obsolescence within the bureaucracies of the church and the anxiety of decline that perpetuates a cycle of inward focus accelerating decline.<sup>3</sup> Our task is to determine what new response is required to these new hurricane realities. In our response, what must change and what must stay the same? At what pace must this change proceed? This requires prayer, conversation, and an unwavering laser focus on the big Jesus goal.

### **The Big Jesus Goal**

In Matthew 22, the Pharisees are seeking to trap Jesus in his words. They want him to make a mistake and get himself in trouble. First, they present the setup. "Teacher ... we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God ... You

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<sup>3</sup> Hamm, Richard L., *Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Postmodern Age* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007), 45.

aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are."<sup>4</sup> They are taking strong characteristics of Jesus, his refusal to show partiality and his conviction to speak truth regardless of who it may offend, and are manipulating those characteristics to lead him toward a confrontation with the governmental authority, namely Caesar. After this setup, framing the situation in a way that would illicit a lesser man's prideful response, they ask Jesus, "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

The Pharisees hoped that they had sufficiently stirred up Jesus' pride and rebelliousness against authority to cause him to pick a fight with Caesar over money. But Jesus kept his focus. Jesus had a bigger goal. Jesus was after people's hearts. He did not take the bait but turned the trap into a pointed lesson. Jesus sidestepped the fight with Caesar's taxation and instead focused on the people's heart. "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The important thing was not a piece of metal with a temporary earthly ruler's name and image etched upon it. The important thing was a person made in God's image giving their heart and lives over to God. Jesus refused to argue about a coin when people's lives were at stake.

Revitalization pastors and teams must keep the same big Jesus focus and refuse to be drawn into debates that have little to no bearing on leading people to give their hearts and lives over to God. We must determine what changes are necessary to reach that goal. Everything does not need to change, but we need to change some things to make our church a place where new people can hear the message of Christ clearly. We may need to eliminate the distraction by 1970s décor, or a bad sound system, or music they cannot

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV)

relate to, or a building in disrepair. But all those things are secondary. Our goal is transformed hearts of people in the congregation and of those who are not yet here.

### **Change Takes Time**

Our world expects instant results. Patience for success is short. We have been fooled into thinking that the quick solution is the best. The lesson of the hare and the rabbit has eluded us, especially in the area of church revitalization. Edwin Friedman in *A Failure of Nerve* tells us that what is needed is stamina. Friedman goes so far as to say that a quick-fix mentality is a regression of emotional courage and “perverts natural principles of evolution, namely, self-regulation, adaptation to strength, the response to challenge, and allowing time for processes to mature.”<sup>5</sup> Revitalization leaders need to be able to initiate change and not to falter when things get difficult. We must be able to stand the test of time to bring a revitalization to full fruition.

We must remember that it took a long time for churches to get to their state of decline, and it will take time to turn around the decline. As Mark Hallock rightly notes, healthy change takes time and patience.<sup>6</sup> In the case of First UMC, the decline had an 11-year skid. We turned the trend around in the first year but, after seven years, including three COVID-19 years, we have not reached the high of eleven years prior. We will get there. We are on the right track. We have taken in over 100 new members, but we have also had over sixty members pass away at the same time. Such is the case of many

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 59 & 47.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Hallock, *Leading Church Revitalization: The Posture, Priorities, Practices, and Perseverance Needed for the Long Haul* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2022), 55.



declining congregations, it takes time to regain what has been lost. It takes time to reverse the decline and undo the factors that led to the decline.

### **Pressed to Change Too Much Too Quickly**

Revitalization pastors can be bated by others to make changes that are unnecessary, or changes that are necessary but approached too quickly. Sometimes these are well-meaning people without the patience to revitalize. What they really want is a new church start, and they wish to do away with anything old and contrary to their ideas. Sometimes, however, revitalization leaders are met with people like the Pharisees of Matthew 22 who want to sabotage the process. They want to see the revitalizing pastor or team at war with the older congregants so they can impede or stop the process. These Pharisees seek to manipulate the situation to portray the revitalizers as troublemakers. I have had both intentional and unintentional Pharisees at First UMC. Some I have handled with the wisdom of Jesus. Others I have fallen into their trap.

### **A Response to Saboteurs**

Saboteurs are not unique to revitalization efforts. Every worthwhile organization and effort attract those who wish to stop the progress. It is important to recognize that any who work against you are not your personal enemy. These are not attacks on you, but on the work that God is wanting to do. With this in mind, we are on better footing to not deal

reactively to opposition but to self-differentiate<sup>7</sup> in order to be the leaders required for such great a task.

### **The First UMC Remodel Trap**

Before my arrival, in 2016, a controversial plan for a major remodel was voted down 60% to 40%. Shortly after moving into my office in 2017, the blueprint plans for that remodel appeared on my desk. Someone placed them there. That was a trap. Imagine if an older congregant who voted against those plans saw them sitting on my desk. I would instantly be their enemy, and all previous divisions would be resurrected. Every step or conversation I had going forward would be received with an air of distrust believing that I was secretly trying to revitalize the failed plans of the past. Imagine, too, if a congregant who voted *for* the plan saw the papers sitting on my desk. Word would quickly spread that I was reviving the plans, and the 40% would rise out of their defeat to argue their case again. The plans interested me, and I surely looked at them to better understand those ideas, but the plans are now hidden away, out of sight. I later discovered the plans were left on my desk by a staff member who thought it would be fun to stir things up again. Fate would have it that the staff member is no longer employed at First UMC.

Five years later, in 2022, I initiated a remodel of the sanctuary altar area. The sanctuary remodel was the most controversial part of the previous plan, in addition to the

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<sup>7</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 43.

cost. Immediately people began asking if we were reviving the failed 2016 remodel. I emphatically replied that the altar area remake had nothing to do with the 2016 plans. They truly were not the same. The 2022 project was needed to address safety concerns and to make space for new people. Safety was the No. 1 selling point because 1) it was true, and 2) everyone could agree with that need. The bonus was it would add more space on the platform for new people and new ministry.

### **Remodel Optimizing Minimal Change**

After five years at First UMC, the worship band and modern praise team had grown enough to require a makeover of the altar area. Making the change earlier was not necessary and would have prematurely created major change for our older congregants. After five years we needed more space. The topic was approached wisely. Yes, we needed more space for the modern music to expand, but the old altar area was also dangerous. It had three different levels that changed unexpectedly when traversing the choir loft, organ pit, and altar railing area. Several people had tripped or even fallen on that platform. It had also been literally fifty years since the last remodel of the altar area, which was done 50 years after the first rendition of the altar area. It was a fifty-year cycle that was time to repeat.

We made some major changes. We flattened out the entire altar area. We finished the floor with beautiful matching oak hardwood, so the timeless feel of the sanctuary was enhanced. We swapped out the heavy oak pulpit with something lighter weight to ease the changing of the furnishings between traditional and modern services. The paraments

remained that masked the new pulpit. The large hanging center cross remained with the organ pipes on the back walls. We removed the choir modesty rail but kept a second row of pews for the choir to maintain the modesty they prefer. The traditional choir fits well on the second pew. The choir director went along with the changes because we have a good relationship, and he has a keen respect for pastoral authority. It may not have been his preference, but his good character did not make known any opposition that existed. We removed the organ from the pit center stage and placed it to the side. This was done with input from the older organist who had often complained of not being able to see the choir director or congregation sitting on the organ in the pit with her back to the congregation. I had several conversations with her to discuss the new place, and she approved. The new location also eased her transfer between the piano and organ during worship. Our organist's approval went a long way helping others to go along with the concept. The older congregants accepted the changes with little pushback because it was beautiful, the older leaders directly impacted (choir director and organist) were supportive, and the key visuals that were most meaningful to the older congregants were left intact.

The complaints of the altar changes did not come from the older existing congregants. Instead, a new member accused me of catering to the "old folks" and favoring them despite the many changes we made. In our altar area transformation, the accusation came because I did not take out the choir pews from the choir loft area. The new complaining congregant did not have the perspective of the long-term member who just saw their altar area completely rebuilt, their front kneeling rail removed, drums left in the corner of the room, stage monitors sitting next to their changed pulpit and lectern, and

organ set to the side of the room. Leaving two rows of red choir pews, one permanent in the back, was a visual that said to the older congregants that it was still the red sanctuary they worshipped in for the last fifty years. Additionally, the red pews, especially the one bolted to the back wall, were functional. They matched the rest of the pews in the sanctuary and the carpet, which one day will change, but not now. The red pews met the needs of the new Praise Choir, and they did not impede on the stage area. The second row of red pews was left moveable to make the stage more adaptable to new things.

This is what I had to keep in mind: Change only what is necessary. Optimize those changes. Do not change what is unnecessary. The remodel of the altar area was to make space for new people and new ministry. Oak floors kept the look for the older congregants and created a clean space for modern drama and dance. The red choir pews kept the traditional choir comfortable and served the new modern choir just as well. Keeping a moveable kneeling rail gave space for any who wish to kneel in worship, while removing the permanent kneeling rail opened more space for worship arts and removed the barrier between pastor and congregants. Though I had voices telling me to go further, I refused to pick fights with the choir or the congregation over red pews. A dozen other changes accomplished what needed to be done for our missional purpose. I could not be taken off focus by people challenging me with an accusation against my character, that I was favoring one over another. I had to keep the big Jesus goal in mind. Making space for new people.

A Church Council member recently noted that he had favored the 2016 remodel plans. He also saw how I was addressing the same needs the previous plan was meant to address but doing it in a way that was palatable for existing members and at a pace that

the church could sustain. The end goals of more space, updated facilities, more accessibility, and more modern appearance stayed the same. The determination of what changes and at what pace were necessary to accomplish these goals is what changed.

### **Some Things Never Change**

Hebrews 13:8 makes a bold claim. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”<sup>8</sup> This phrase brings great assurance to Christians. It assures us that the person in whom we place our trust, Jesus, will always be trustworthy. The one in whom we look to for strength and guidance will always be the source of life and wisdom. In the context of this scripture, we are specifically being reminded to “remember.” To look back on our faith leaders, their message, and their way of life. We are to “imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). This core foundational truth of Jesus’ constancy connects today’s believers with those who have gone 2,000 years before us and with those who will come 2,000 years after us.

As stated in the introduction, we should actively uphold the past as necessary for revitalization. Change (revitalization) is building on the past rather than omitting it.<sup>9</sup> Building on the past comes with the tension of needing to displace some of the old DNA while keeping that which is foundational. Drawing on the best of the past requires discernment of what should be kept and what should be left behind.<sup>10</sup> The best of the past

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 13:8 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), Kindle, 428.

<sup>10</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Abingdon Press, 2021), 18.

is that which encourages the church to remain in Christ, adhering to orthodoxy, while being creative in reaching new cultural landscapes.<sup>11</sup> The old is not to be thrown out simply for being old. Much of the old is core to our faith. This includes our engagement of our elders during church revitalization.

A church revitalization does not change the core Christian faith of who Jesus is. The message of Christ does not need an upgrade. Thom Rainer in *Anatomy of a Revived Church* begins with a strong message to the church: change or die.<sup>12</sup> Yet Rainer is quick to note that the foundations of our faith are not what need changed. “I want you to hear clearly that the necessary change of which I speak is not change related to God’s foundational, unchangeable truths as recorded in the Bible.”<sup>13</sup> Rainer is careful not to assume that the reader knows that which will not change. He takes time to state it clearly. Our need for a Savior, and God’s willingness to save us in Jesus Christ, remains the same. So, too, it would be a mistake to assume that the congregation undergoing revitalization knows that the message of Christ is not changing. We must be clear that Christ is still the center and the Gospel is still the message. This clarity will not only bring assurance and stability to the existing older congregants, but is also foundational to the spiritual revitalization needed for all involved.

### **The Need for Constancy**

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Anatomy of a Revived Church: Seven Findings about How Congregations Avoided Death* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Rainer, *Anatomy*, 9.

Church revitalization requires a massive change. A quick reading of the complex remodel of the altar area at First UMC is just one slice. Because of the changes brought by a church revitalization, part of the aging congregation's response may be fear and anxiety.<sup>14</sup> Without compassion we can come to the assumption that the elderly are simply resistant to any change. Will Willimon challenges this assumption. As stated in chapter 1, Willimon suggests that the older congregants are already experiencing a great amount of change at this stage in their lives (death of spouse, failing health, loss of income, loss of independence, etc.). Perhaps they simply need the one thing that sustains them, their expression of faith through their experience of church, to stay the same.<sup>15</sup> When framed with compassion, that does not seem to be too much of an ask.

It is important to note, too, that we cannot generalize about older adults. The personality, skills, intelligence, openness to new people and new ideas, physical abilities, and desire for adventure are all quite varied among the older crowd just as with any other age group. Aging is experienced differently by everyone. An eighty-year-old may have more willingness to learn new things than a sixty-year-old or the opposite. Aging is a process, and we all walk through it differently.<sup>16</sup> Do not assume someone is resistant to change based on age.

Conversation is required to discover someone's level of tolerance for change. We must get to know the individual older congregants to discover what is most important to keep the same for them. Maybe that big brass cross on the wall represents a family near

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<sup>14</sup> Tod E. Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (IVP, an Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> William H. Willimon, *Aging: Growing Old in Church* (Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *Aging and Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Inquiry Approach* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 23.



and dear to an individual and should remain for the time being. Or maybe that same cross is an albatross brought in by a pastor who no one really liked, and the people would be happy to see it go. You do not know unless you have regular conversations with the older congregants and give weight to what they have to say. Let them know that their experience and views matter. Let them know that you are not changing things out of your own preference but to reach more people for Christ. It is not change for change's sake. It is intentional and at a pace that creates a revitalization, not a new church start.

### **Keeping the Traditional**

We should care for the aging congregants going through the anxious change of church revitalization. The leader serving in the role of shepherd, along with the new coming congregants, can grow in compassion and love through their ministry to the existing congregants. Part of that care is to only make changes that are absolutely necessary for reaching new people. The greatest of these is worship style. It is clearly understood that for a new church or a church revitalization, worship must move into the 21st century with music, media, service flow, worship space, and sermon delivery. However, this does not mean that there is no place for traditional worship. Revitalization involves providing meaningful worship for the older congregants. This includes providing a traditional worship service that carries older congregants through a church revitalization if, in all likelihood, the older congregants want it.

A traditional service is much easier to provide than a modern service. Generally, the format is consistent, the hymnbook provides the song selections, one organist/pianist

leads the music, and responsive readings are prepared. However, the traditional service cannot be an afterthought. At First UMC we sought to enhance traditional worship by adding a cantor to help lead the hymns. We tried having acolytes, but there were not enough available to serve. Still, the effort mattered. I wear my robe. I even bought a new one when the black was fading. We keep the paraments current with the liturgical colors, and we change the banners for the seasons. The altar is still in the middle of the space with candles and brass cross. The choir still sings, though we have gone from twelve to six people due to illness and death. Our attendance averages thirty-five in a traditional worship service. Those thirty-five people matter.

### **Keep the Best of Before**

The practice of discerning the interplay of tradition and innovation has come to be known as “traditioning.” Jones and Hogue detail the interdependency of tradition and innovation in church renewal. The questions of where we have been are as important as the questions of where we are going. In fact, determining what to carry forward from the past “compel, inform, and give shape to the life-giving futures we’ve imaged.”<sup>17</sup> The foundational truths of our faith and the timeless expressions of the sacraments easily fall into the traditions to keep. Less clear are the traditions of making apple butter, having a sunrise Easter service, or serving pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. These must be negotiated and considered in the context of community and outreach.

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<sup>17</sup> Jones, *Navigating the Future*, 145.

The following are three areas of church life to consider when discerning what of the past to keep.

### **1) Faith Symbols**

In revitalizations we are not usually standing in a newly constructed worship space but on the same floorboards and using the same baptismal font that has been passed on for generations. Ray, 74, has lived his life in and out of the church. His children were baptized at First UMC. Tragically, Ray's son passed at a young age. Each time there is a baptism at the church, he sees the font where his beloved son was adopted into the family of God. He remembers the family gathered to celebrate this joyous spiritual occasion. As our congregation is invited to come by the font, touch the water, and remember their baptism, Ray remembers his joy and his grief. Tears well up, and he is connected once again to his son and to his faith. Revitalization needs a baptismal font. Use the one with history attached. Use the one with meaning. Use the one with years of prayers and praise connecting new believers to those who have come before, families to one another, and our eldest to memories and hope of a future reunion. Keep what can be kept.

### **2) Existing Ministries**

In revitalization you will find some ministries that have persisted even as the church has declined. A careful and compassionate evaluation of each remaining ministry must take place. Some will need to be halted, some will be left to die their natural death,

and some should be championed and renewed. At First UMC there is a prayer shawl ministry. It has existed for several decades. People, mostly women, in and outside the church crochet prayer shawls to be dedicated during worship and then gifted to those in need of a tangible expression of God's love and the prayers of the church. Crocheting and the wearing of shawls are not current trends. A shallow look at the ministry may cause revitalization leaders to dismiss its value or even try to shut it down. In revitalization at First UMC, we chose instead to uplift and encourage the ministry.

The value of this old-school prayer shawl ministry has been great. We utilize the time in worship about every three months to pray and dedicate the prayer shawls. This reminds us that people are hurting outside our walls and that we can be expressions of God's love to them. We take time to share stories of how impactful these prayer shawls have been. This unites us, young and old, in a ministry of compassion and grace. Most amazingly, we have married this older existing ministry with a major new revitalization initiative. Two years ago, First UMC took our first Easter Sunday worship out of our 100-year-old sanctuary and into the local high school's new Performing Arts Center. Instead of reaching 200 people in our sanctuary, we stepped out into a community setting and reached over 500 people in Easter worship. The second year we reached over 600 people in Easter worship. A highlight of Easter is the over 100 prayer shawls that have been given away during our Easter outreach. The guests were amazed that we freely gave these handmade gifts, and they truly sensed the love and grace of God. In keeping an existing ministry, we are uniting new believers and existing congregants while reaching our community with the love of Christ.

### 3) Significant Visuals and Architecture

The placement of the American flag in the sanctuary is much disputed. Suffice it to say, some see it as idolatry stating that the sanctuary should be preserved for symbols that point to Christ rather than allegiance to a worldly construct. Others see it as a reminder to pray for our nation. When you ask the older people in your congregation, you may get another story. The popularity of American flags in sanctuaries waxes and wanes according to our involvement in major conflict. The Civil War, World War I, and World War II saw an uptick of flags in the sanctuary. Certainly, there were unnecessary political undertones, but the congregants of that day had parents, siblings, spouses, and children serving and dying in the war. The horrors of the fighting and the loss of life drove people to God and the church for comfort and hope. They gathered for prayer in the sanctuaries hoping for an end to the war and a safe return of their loved ones. The flag represented their children, parents, and siblings in harm's way, and some whose lives were lost to war.

Before you take the American flag out of your revitalized sanctuary, consider if you have heard all the stories. If it was a new church start, I would not put the American flag into the sanctuary from the start. It is not an expression of worship to God and can even limit the outreach of a new church start with the politics attached. But in an existing church, the flag will be there, in front but far off-stage, reminding us of our beloved family members and friends who have passed. I will not signal to an older existing congregant that their father's sacrifice for our freedom to worship has been forgotten. Do

not love your theology more than you love your people. The pain you inflict is not worth the statement you make.

If you feel, for worship's sake, or for the sake of reaching new people, that the flag must be taken out, or the pews be removed, or any other major visual or architectural change must be made, consider how you can soften that blow. Have individual conversations with those most closely associated to the visual. Perhaps instead of a flag in the sanctuary, a folded flag from a fallen soldier's funeral could be displayed in a non-sanctuary space with a plaque expressing a theologically appropriate prayer for our nation and the world. I have seen more than one revitalized church give the old sanctuary pews to a skilled woodworker to turn them into the central cross of the sanctuary. This is a hallmark of optimizing minimal change: to create the needed change while recognizing and honoring the attached sentiment.

All traditions are not the enemy of revitalization. Rainer states, "Traditions are not inherently evil."<sup>18</sup> Traditions become a problem when they are worshiped above Christ. But tradition can be helpful in passing along the faith and connecting us with those who have gone before and those who will come after us. This connection is the "communion of saints" we speak of in our Apostle's Creed and should be taught to new Christians. Some traditions are to remain, those that transmit our faith in Christ in relevant ways to our community.

### **Do not Hold to the Past, Good or Bad**

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<sup>18</sup> Rainer, *Anatomy*, 30.

These admonitions to honor and respect the past are not because the church is to allow the past to impede progress. While honoring our elders we are equally encouraged in scripture to move forward. This concept is needed whether we are moving forward from a glorious distant past or a recent decline and failure, both of which were present at First UMC. The prophet Isaiah told the people of Israel to “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:17-18). In the immediate context, the prior verses declare the Lord as the one who led them through the Red Sea on dry ground and destroyed their enemies. That was a glorious past that the Lord says to forget, to not let impede the future. In the larger context of the chapter Israel was experiencing captivity and exile. This, too, the Lord says to forget and not let impede the future. The past, good or bad, is not to become an impediment but is to be recognized and honored. The best parts, those which continue the mission of Christ today, should be kept. The parts that do not continue the mission of Christ today must be put to rest with respect.

### **Stepping Aside**

Not allowing the past to impede the church includes not allowing a holding on of titles and positions of power to stall revitalization efforts. Will Willimon speaks of this in the context of pastoral appointments. He recalls a conversation where Lauren Winner, associate professor at Duke Divinity school, encouraged older pastors to step aside and make room for new young Episcopal clergy to serve a church.<sup>19</sup> In the UMC in Missouri,

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<sup>19</sup> William H. Willimon, *Aging: Growing Old in Church* (Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 147.

we have the opposite situation. We have a shortage of pastors and need the older clergy to fill the roles of smaller churches in their retirement years. In revitalization, we are continually called to discern the situation and make contextual decisions of when an older leader needs to step aside so that revitalization leaders, and even new believers, can step into the leadership roles. There does not need to be a complete clearing of the house in one fell swoop. Perhaps the treasurer of thirty years needs to relinquish his grip so that the new young accountant can step into leadership. But perhaps the kitchen leader of twenty years is still the right person, and there is no one yet rising to take her place. There is a process of stepping aside that takes time and discernment to accomplish with grace.

### **Rethink Resistance to Change**

Church Doctor Ministries offers a questionnaire in conjunction with its consultation to determine if a congregation is ready for revitalization. Part of its questioning is about openness to change. This is gauged by asking, “From your perception, what do you think was or will be the greatest era of this church?” The multiple-choice answers range from forty to sixty years ago to starting ten years from now. The answer they believe indicates the most openness to change is “the next ten years.” They believe this response indicates those who have the highest “expectations for the immediate future” and how many “early adopters” are present.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kent R. Hunter, *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival* (New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2017), 146.



This is an insightful question for certain, but it is presumptuous to assume that those who choose times of the past are resistant to change. Congregants who remember great days of ministry in the past are not automatically resistant to change. Many have watched a recent decade of decline and are often simply lacking hope for a return to the vitality once experienced. For some, change that brings growth would be welcome, but in their experience it is unlikely. They may have even seen new pastors come and go with new ideas that created waves but showed no growth. Instead, these new ideas created division and disruption. This understandably reduced their openness to further changes, but not because of a resistance to change itself, but because of the difficulties that change has caused, which has led to no good outcomes. Perhaps it is not a resistance to change but rather a lack of hope.

The impact COVID-19 pandemic had upon the church and our world is yet to be fully understood. One thing we know is that churches had to adapt quickly as in-person worship was halted for extended times. Embracing new technology for online worship, communication, and giving was suddenly a high priority and within a week or two many churches made the update. We learned that the church really could change, and quickly, if a crisis demanded it. Sam Rainer purports that because of this experience, people may be “more willing than ever to accept creative new ideas. Not only have people become more accepting of innovation, but they are also more forgiving of fits and starts.”<sup>21</sup> I agree that this may be a time to more aggressively innovate with the flexibility that was recently forced upon us. However, we must consider the flip side of this coin.

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<sup>21</sup> Sam Rainer, *The Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2021), 20.

COVID-19 took away many loved ones and uprooted many routines giving a sense of instability in more ways than we can name. For some, it may have engrained a greater need for the church to get back to normal, back to how it used to be. A local church in our area used the COVID-19 time with an empty sanctuary to do a total remake of their altar area. It logistically made sense. Perhaps, too, many arguments were avoided while the congregation was not watching the sanctuary change on a weekly basis. However, there also could have been a severe backlash when the congregation returned to worship, so happy to be back in their sanctuary, only to find it had been completely remade. If the people were prepared and already on board with the change, then it was good timing. If the people were uninformed and surprised by the change, it was less than helpful. First UMC had just begun conversations about changing the layout of the altar area, but I knew the people were not ready even if the logistics were optimal. Moving ahead at that time would have been underhanded and deceptive. As with many revitalization observations and principles, context is key. Waiting at First UMC was the right answer. How long this new openness will last or if it even exists in your congregation are their own questions to be answered.

### **Say Yes**

Revitalization requires trying new things. If the current way is not reaching the community for Christ, a new ministry must be tried. The tendency is to do only those things designed to reach new people and younger people. With this exclusive focus, existing older congregants are left behind and disengaged even further. Another tendency

is to look to younger people to create the new ministry without listening to the voice of the older congregants who may also have ideas and passions for connection with the community.

At First UMC I walked into a well-cared building that was being underutilized. We also had existing congregants involved in community organizations needing places to gather. Notably, many of those organizations engaged our older congregants. A first major move in making this connection was updating our Building Policy. This was to be tread lightly. The Building Policy was created fifteen years prior with much consternation, hours of work, and numerous meetings of existing older congregants who had particular concern over the building and the business approach to finances. I knew this because I asked how the Building Policy came into existence. I am grateful for my office manager, Judy, who had been at First UMC for nearly twenty years and whom I could trust to tell me the circumstances of many existing policies. In the Building Policy, the fee structure for weddings and other events was detailed with great care. I studied the Policy to see how we could open our church to these community organizations without charge. The good public relations, relationship with our existing congregants, and the meeting space that we could give to these groups at low cost to us was worth the no-charge policy in my eyes.

I had been alerted that one octogenarian, a creator of the original policy, intended to be at the Council meeting when I was to propose changes to accommodate these groups. The stage was set for a showdown between what I perceived as a helpful step toward community engagement and church revitalization and the work the old faithful had put in to protect their building and finances. Robert Schnase in *Just Say Yes!*, would

refer to the octogenarian's presence as a "shadow mission."<sup>22</sup> Those are the unspoken goals that often undermine the greater goal of reaching our community for Christ. The "shadow missions" to preserve the building and make a profit were working against the goal of opening our church to community engagement and involvement. Schnase notes that these "shadow missions" are often initially appropriate to serve the church's mission. Maintaining a building is important for the function of ministry. Stable finances are needed to do the work of the church. The problem comes when the "shadow mission" becomes more important than the church's mission. The problem comes when the church serves the building rather than the building serving the church.

As I studied the policy of what changes could be made, a moment of grace lighted upon me. I would leave the existing policy intact, praising its comprehensive nature and all those who had worked on its creation, and then I would propose an addendum. This addendum would allow the Council and Pastor to designate nonprofit organizations that are doing good work in our community as "Community Improvement Partners." The addendum was one page and stated:

Nonprofit community organizations that are consistent with the purposes of First UMC may be designated as Community Improvement Partners by the Pastor, or the Trustees, with the Pastor's permission. As partners in mission, Community Improvement Partners may be granted permission to use the building, without fee, as long as they provide their own meeting supplies, and complete their own setup, tear-down, and cleanup. If custodial help is required (setup, tear-down, or cleanup), or if it is a fundraising event, the fee is \$75.<sup>23</sup>

Stipulations for time, space, and precedence of church events were included. The deal was sealed with a list of current Community Improvement Partners: The Jefferson

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Schnase, *Just Say Yes! Unleashing People for Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>23</sup> First United Methodist Church of Festus/Crystal City, "Building Use Policy," Approved July 13, 2021.

County Squares (square dancing group, Jefferson County Quilting Guild, Optimist Club, PEO (Philanthropic Educational Organization), Delta Kappa Gamma (Women Educators), NA (Narcotics Anonymous, two groups), Jefferson County Historical Society, American Red Cross, Giving Something Back to the Community (Black community leaders), City of Festus, Life Through Love Ministries, to name a few. To further avoid any conflict with the older congregant, the list of organizations included at least three organizations in which the potential protestor was a member.

The wisdom of this move accomplished good for many concerned parties. The work of the congregation from fifteen years prior was honored not only by keeping their policy in place, but by openly praising their work in the presence of the Council and the presence of the potential antagonist and creator of the original policy. We further connected the lives of the older congregants and their friends with the life of the church. We sent the message early on that we were not going to dismantle what was working, the existing Building Policy, but we were also going to seek to do even more good together. Truth be told, there is wording in the Building Policy that I would have liked to change, but nothing rose to the level of sending a message of a lack of appreciation or concern for those who have come before us. This whole process reminds us that we do not always have to say “this not that.” In revitalization, it can be of great benefit to say “this and that.”

### **From Policy to Action**

In some revitalizations you can bypass bureaucracy to achieve results. I would caution this approach except for when critically necessary. My desire to say “Yes” to community organizations using our building required a change in Building Policy. I could have skirted the policy, but I chose to take the time to amend the policy and honor the existing structure. Once the policy was made more friendly, I was able to move forward with community partnerships on firm footing. Any questions as to why a particular group was allowed to use the building without charge was easily referred to Council action and our current Building Policy. Future arguments were avoided by taking proper steps from the start.

With the policy in place, revitalization could make greater connections. The first major move was allowing the Jefferson County Heritage and Historical Society to use Room 109 on our main floor to set up a museum. The museum was to be open one night weekly run by the officers of the Historical Society. We were the subject of newspaper articles, public officials came to visit, Historical Society meetings were held in our Parlor to plan the 200th Anniversary of the County, and every piece of advertising promoting the Museum or Historical Society also promoted our church. This action Ascribed Value to the older congregants by demonstrating our desire to honor the history of not only our church but our community. This action Optimized Minimal Change because the room was currently not being used and the Historical Society paid for any improvements needed. This action Engaged in Ministry by helping another nonprofit organization that was doing good in our community. The value of this partnership was highlighted when the museum displayed a picture of the 1957 Twin City Little League All Stars who were the “Ten State” champions that year. To everyone’s delight, one of First UMC’s

patriarchs, who is our choir director and current city mayor, found himself in that picture and proudly recounted his memories of playing ball and winning the championship. You will hear more about the valuable contributions that Mayor Sam, 78, has made toward revitalization at First UMC in Chapter 4.

### **The Final Transition Is at Their Time**

My initial stated goal arriving at First UMC was to grow every service whether traditional or modern. I have made real efforts to do so. As our current culture has dictated, it is the modern service that is growing, and the traditional service that is declining. This is not for a lack of effort, love, or desire. In my setting, new people connect more with modern worship. The hard reality is that as deaths outpace new people in traditional worship, the numbers in traditional worship will continue to decline. Without a drastic change in this indisputable trend, there will come a time when the traditional service is unsustainable. What I know is that it is not mine to say when that time might be. I will defer to the congregation because we can care for our older congregants and reach new people at the same time. Their joy of constancy in the worship and faith family that has sustained them does not detract from the joy of reaching new people in modern worship. In Chapter 4, Engage in Ministry, we will discuss how our older congregants can be a vital part of developing new people into disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **The Mission Is Grace**

The book *Simple Church* makes a pointed analogy between a revitalization of the church and the extreme home makeovers granted to needy families in the television show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.<sup>24</sup> Rainer and Geiger speak of the emotional nature of the remodel.

The lump in your throat usually forms when the bus drives away and the family sees their new home for the first time. The lump grows as you watch the family walk into their newly renovated house. The lump is about to explode out of your throat when the last room is unveiled to one of the family members.

The last room is typically the ‘special room’ that Ty, the team leader, designed. It is an act of grace. Watching the reaction of the recipient of this grace is stirring. Grace always is. The church can learn a lot from this show.

Like the families in the television show, the people of this world are in desperate need of help. The grace of God is still amazing. This has not changed. We, the church, have been entrusted with God’s grace. We are to share that grace freely with the world and with one another. Many of our churches, however, need an extreme makeover to “be the intersection of people with God’s grace.” To give people the best opportunity to experience God’s grace, “churches need a redesign.”<sup>25</sup> Our older congregants understand grace. They have lived it. Those engaging in revitalization should not lose sight of this central focus no matter the outward expression that revitalization may take. Changing the building, hiring staff, deleting ineffective ministries and adding new ones are all efforts toward the one goal: to share God’s grace in moving ways with our community.

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<sup>24</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 57-58.

<sup>25</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 57-58.



## Chapter 4 – Engage in Ministry

When Jesus was forty days old, Mary and Joseph took him to the temple to offer a sacrifice for Mary’s purification and to present Jesus for sanctification before God.<sup>1</sup> Anna, a prophet, constantly worshiped at the temple, fasting and praying. She approached the holy family and began to prophesy. She gave thanks to God and spoke of the child and the coming redemption of Jerusalem. Anna was eighty-four years old!<sup>2</sup> Anna’s presence, her faithfulness, her knowledge, her boldness, and her voice were significant enough to be recorded and passed down for 2,000 years in the Gospel according to Luke. There is no other mention of Anna in scripture, but she made her most memorable impact on history as an octogenarian.

### Who Holds the Future?

An argument can be made as to who holds the power to shape the future of the church. Is it the older adult or the young new believer? Richard Gentzler makes the bold assertion that “the future of our congregations is in the hands of older adults, for they help shape and mold the church’s ministry by their leadership, presence, gifts, and service.”<sup>3</sup> He notes particularly the influence older congregants wield by their financial

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<sup>1</sup> Rynna Ollivier, “Understanding Why Mary and Joseph took the Babe Jesus to the Temple,” Meridian Magazine, December 31, 2017, <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/understanding-why-mary-and-joseph-took-the-babe-jesus-to-the-temple>.

<sup>2</sup> The full story of Jesus’ presentation is found in Luke 2:22-40. It includes the words of the Simeon’s prophesy concerning Jesus. The Holy Spirit had promised Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died. We may infer that Simeon, too, was old, but his age is not clearly recorded as Anna’s is recorded.

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *Aging and Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Inquiry Approach* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 13.

giving and their decision-making positions. Adam McLane, a blogger with a youth ministry education and background, affirms the strong role of existing congregants. He rejects some of the common notions of church renewal, including the idea that you must be more focused on reaching people than keeping people. McLane believes it is the growth and development of the existing church members that will lead to new people being invited into the church.<sup>4</sup>

I appreciate Gentzler and McLane's high regards for the influence of our older congregants. It is a defense for ascribing value to our older congregants. While it is true that older congregants wield a great amount of power when they finance the church and hold the positions of leadership, I assert that they do not make the future of our congregations alone. What happens next is not only in their hands. I contend that the future of our congregations depends upon the partnership between the older and younger generations. We must be in ministry with one another.

### **Twofold Ministry**

I use the term "ministry" broadly. It includes what may be labelled evangelism, discipleship, outreach, or mission in traditional terms. Ministry is doing the work of Christ inside and outside the walls of the church. Ministry is serving others and making disciples of Jesus Christ. In a revitalizing church, engaging in ministry with older congregants is a twofold endeavor that must occur simultaneously. One is the ministry in which the older congregants are active in serving others. The second is the ministry in

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<sup>4</sup> Adam McClane, "3 Lies of Church Growth Experts." Adammclane.com. July 10, 2008, <https://adammclane.com/2008/07/3-lies-of-church-growth-experts/>.

which the older congregants are receiving service directed toward their needs. It can be simplistically stated as the *ministry given* and the *ministry received*. These two aspects when combined create an interaction among the revitalizing church and the existing older congregants that we can call ministry “with.”

The ministry given is active. An older congregant is serving the mashed potatoes at a community dinner, praying through the prayer list every day, or sharing their secrets to a fifty-year marriage with a new couple. The older congregants are actively participating in the missional work of the church. This is a mission the older adults are given by God and recognized by the church and leadership as needed and valid. It is not a time filler or busy work. It is the older adult being in ministry with the revitalizing church.

The ministry received is passive. The older congregant is a recipient of the ministry of the church. This is when the especially newer and younger congregants serve the older congregants. The younger congregant delivers a meal to the older congregant’s home, prays with them over the phone, or visits them in the hospital. The older congregant is in need and the revitalized church sees it as their ministry to care for these. This work is an expression of Matthew 25 when Jesus tells us to feed the hungry and visit the sick.

This chapter takes time to explore separately *ministry given* and *ministry received* to help us see how ministry *with* can most fully take place in the context of a church revitalization. You can keep these terms in order by placing the older congregant at the center. They are either giving or receiving the ministry of which we speak.

## We Need Each Other

When considering ministry *with*, it is important to outright reject the notion that older congregants do not or cannot have a faith and ministry that is alive and active. It is important to completely embrace equally the ministry needs and contributions of both older congregants and new believers in the revitalization of our churches. Karl Vaters believes that a church of older congregants can be vital if it is done intentionally. Vaters states that older congregants must be trained in ministry, be willing to be sent in mission, and have a focus on the future.<sup>5</sup> These are important areas of focus for older congregants, which we will explore further, but we must address the undeniable reality that older congregants have fewer years left to spend in ministry. The most vital congregation built solely on older adults will still be short-lived unless they are reaching younger, even if just a decade or two younger, people for Christ. We cannot be fooled by the “elder boom”<sup>6</sup> that America is experiencing as the baby boom of 1946 to 1964 expands the population now falling into retirement years. This demographic shift has helped First UMC experience growth in this demographic, but the demographic shift is temporary. A congregation built upon older congregants alone, even the youngest of the boomers, is destined to decline. A better use of Vaters’s criteria for a vital older congregation is not with older congregants alone, but with a revitalization that reaches across generations. This leads to a long-lived vital congregation that is multigenerational.

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Vaters, “Grandma Went to Woodstock: 5 Principles for Pastoring a Vibrant Older Congregation,” May 15, 2023, <https://karlvaters.com/grandma-went-to-woodstock>.

<sup>6</sup> Ai-Jen Poo, *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 24.

Older and younger people need each other. The new believers provide an inroad for reaching a changing world. They bring an understanding of the new generations we wish to reach. Their insight into the next generations' social patterns, felt needs, and patterns of communication are invaluable. In fact, no one can understand the next generation better than those who are in it. Many outreach and mission efforts fail simply because the ones reaching out have no understanding of the ones they are trying to reach. Older generations need new generations to reach the world for Christ.

The older congregants bring historical understanding, community influence and often more discretionary time and money than their younger counterparts. "Some aging adults (not all, but perhaps more than we admit) have the gifts of time, financial resources, patience, wisdom, experience, and skills that are badly need among many in the congregation and in the congregation's neighborhood."<sup>7</sup> Young families may have more energy and health, but it is spent first on their children and jobs. The flexibility that older congregants often have is needed for ministry in the church.

What one lacks the others supplies. We are dependent upon one another. Is this not how God intended it? The church is called to be united across dividing lines of age, gender and race to complete the mission of Christ to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Ministry crosses generations as they care for and work with one another. Galatians 3:28 teaches us that, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This list is not exhaustive. It would not be a stretch to also read, "There is neither young nor old, for you

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<sup>7</sup> William H. Willimon. *Aging: Growing Old in Church* (Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 142.

are all one in Christ Jesus.” We are one in Christ. We are united in Christ. When we act with that unity God commands anointing and blessing (Psalm 133). We need each other.

The two aspects of engaging in mission are essential to a healthy revitalization. They overlap in the role and treatment of our older congregants. These aspects are of equal importance to create ministry *with*. We will first look more in depth at the mission given. We will consider the active work in which older congregants can engage.

## **Part One – Ministry Given**

### **Gift of Faithfulness**

Faithfulness can be measured by many markers, one of which is attendance. Who shows up for worship, to serve, and to other church-related events? A Gallup poll highlights the difference among generations. 66% of adults born before 1946 belong to a church, compared to 58% of baby boomers, 50% of Generation X and 36% of millennials.<sup>8</sup> At First UMC, the oldest congregants are more consistent in their attendance. Boomers and younger often miss for vacations, children’s or grandchildren’s ball games or dance competitions, a weekend at the lake or just recovering from a busy weekend. The oldest generation makes church attendance a higher priority and have less competition in their schedules for attendance. They gift our congregation with their faithful presence.

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “US Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup.com, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

Gentzler notes that older congregants may not move at the same pace as the new younger believers, but they are “vital to the spiritual health and continuity of the congregation.”<sup>9</sup> Their engagement and insight into practices of faithfulness are invaluable. Mark Tidsworth names the life-giving movements emerging in the modern church. The “shift” is away from membership, attraction, and consumerism, and toward the timeless hallmarks of discipleship, mission, and sacred partnering.<sup>10</sup> These practices are central to the faith of many of our older congregants. While our elders participated in building the membership-driven church, the attraction and consumerism models came later. Through these changes many of our older congregants sustained the core practices of discipleship, mission, and sacred partnering that Tidsworth sees emerging. Our faithful elders can share from their experience of faith and engage new believers in these core practices. A “sacred partnering” that transcends generations is possible. The faithfulness of our older existing congregants builds relationships and grows a church that can stand the test of time.

### **Gift of Generosity**

In my almost seven years into revitalization at First UMC we have received over one hundred new members. On most weekends in worship, the majority of those in attendance are new congregants who have come during this time of revitalization. However, of the top twenty givers for 2023, only four are new congregants. There is a

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<sup>9</sup> Gentzler, Jr., *Aging and Ministry*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Tidsworth, *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church* (Columbia, SC: Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015), 42.

very real gap in giving between our existing older congregants and those who are new to the church during these seven years of revitalization. The older congregants are holding 80% of the top giving slots though they comprise less than 50% of our attendance. This is anecdotal but according to Barna research elders, defined as those born before 1946, are bigger givers both in attitude and in action. Elders are twice as likely as others to say that serving God with their money is an urgent priority. When it comes to the goal of “having enough money to give charitably,” elders are higher than average. Additionally, a higher percentage of elders, compared to Generations Boomer, X or Y report giving \$2,500 or more.<sup>11</sup>

In a church revitalization the hope is to bring new people to Christ. It takes time for those new to the faith to develop in the area of financial giving. They must be taught why generosity matters. They must see others doing it and sharing why they do it. Once new believers adopt a theology of generosity, it can take some time to rearrange their finances to be able to give, especially at the level of elders and other long-time believers. The elders can provide the ministry of generosity as the revitalizing church develops new believers into generous Christians.

### **A Framework for Engaging in Ministry Given**

We can now use the framework from Karl Vaters for exploring the older congregant’s engagement in ministry specifically as it related to the context of a

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<sup>11</sup> Barna Group, “Generations & Generosity: How Age Affects Giving,” *Generations*, Sep 26, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/generations-generosity-age-affects-giving/>.



multigenerational church revitalization. Vaters states that older congregants must 1) be trained in ministry, 2) be willing to be sent in mission, and 3) have a focus on the future.<sup>12</sup>

### **1) Trained in Ministry**

The Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church encourage the involvement of older congregants in ministry. Among their advice is to engage them in learning opportunities and to “invite them to learn about new ideas and resources for ministry. Older adults want to continue learning, and your willingness to help says that you value them.”<sup>13</sup> In the context of a church revitalization, several avenues of training and education may need to be pursued.

For some, the decline of the church came due to the changing demographics of the neighborhood. Often a predominantly white church in the city is unsure how to respond when the neighborhood becomes predominantly non-white around them. Fear and prejudice can cause the white residents to flee the neighborhood while still driving back into town for their beloved white worship service on Sundays. The training needed in this revitalization situation may be on anti-racism, the plight of first- and second-generation immigrants, the city school system, the needs of the LGBTQ community, or the capabilities and successes of the new people group. In some cases, purely anti-

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Vaters, “Grandma Went to Woodstock: 5 Principles for Pastoring a Vibrant Older Congregation,” May 15, 2023, <https://karlvaters.com/grandma-went-to-woodstock>.

<sup>13</sup> “10 Ways to Involve Older Adults in Ministry,” September 2006. Originally appeared in the Spring 2001 issue of *Center Sage*, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/10-ways-to-involve-older-adults-in-ministry>.

Christian behaviors and attitudes toward others needs enlightened. In other cases, innocent ignorance has created the divide, and education is the cure.

Another aspect of training may be a skill for the needed community outreach. Perhaps in a revitalization effort, it is determined that the church could open for two hours after school so that children do not have to go home to an empty house while their parents work. The congregation may have decided that they would provide snacks, charging stations for phones and devices, and room for playing games. Older congregants can certainly be a part of this mission but may need training on the rules of gaga ball so that one can serve as a referee. They may need trained on how to charge a phone or iPad or what the trending snack is that brings that extra step of personalization letting the children know the church really cares about their needs and wishes. These may seem small educational opportunities, but they bridge gaps between those inside the church and those outside the church, between the old and the young, between the Christian and the one who does not know about Christ.

Older adults can also be trained to be in ministry with one another. Revitalization is benefitted by older adults who find meaning in gathering with and caring for one another. Depending on context, it could be advantageous for a church revitalization pastor to make older adult ministry an important pillar in building this new revitalized church. A leadership team can be formed from among the existing older adults who would then need to educate themselves on the needs and talents of all the older adults who are in the church. There is a training aspect happening in this approach advocated by Gentzler. These older congregants must learn about one another, identify needs, investigate the community for resources, and then develop a vision and plan for how to minister to other

older people both in the church and outside their walls.<sup>14</sup> This intentional approach not only revitalizes the existing older congregants but also creates open doors for older members of the community to engage with the church.

In ministry to one another, a vital aspect of training may be in visitation. Older adults can be guided on how and when to make a hospital visit, how to pray for others, and how to take communion to those who are hospitalized or homebound, depending on your tradition. Just as any other age group, there may be people willing to serve in this ministry but do not feel they would know what to say or how to pray. Older adults can be empowered for this work of congregational care. Many will be able to demonstrate a more empathic connection with the hurting than the pastor could provide because the older congregant has more life experience with age and health issues.

Training for engagement in mission must be done with an understanding of the older congregant's current health. Care must be given to watch for changing abilities and effort must be made for that adaptation. Gentzler considers three stages of ability: Go-Goes, Slow-Goes, and No-Goes.<sup>15</sup> Rather than dismiss the No-Goes as unable to be in mission, consider all that can be done from home or from a rehabilitation center. If there is a livestream of the worship service, a No-Go could learn to watch the service online and engage in the chat with others who did not go physically to service that day. The No-Go can be taught to post a link to the bulletin or to electronic giving. They can be trained to respond to questions and offer prayer, all from the confines of their home.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. *An Age of Opportunity: Intentional Ministry by, with, and for Older Adults* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2018), Kindle, 396.

<sup>15</sup> Gentzler, Jr., "*Age of Opportunity*," Kindle, 1057.

Older congregants can lead small groups or share their faith story in worship. They may not have been a vocal leader early in their life but now they realize they have so much to share. Revitalization leaders can connect older congregants' wisdom with newcomers' faith development. Have a Golden Night when four couples who have been married for fifty years share their words of wisdom with younger couples. Some older congregants may be ready to share, others may need taught how to write or share their stories. They may need help reflecting on what made their marriage last this long. With some training and self-reflection their contribution to mission would be irreplaceable. Only a couple who has been married fifty years can tell someone how they did it.

## **2) Willingness to be Sent in Mission**

Retirement is a big accomplishment in America. It is often seen as a well-earned continuous vacation. Many save financially for those days and expect to spend their retirement years travelling, going out to dinner with friends, enjoying family gatherings, and living in full relaxation mode. Some transfer this way of thinking to their church life, as well. They feel they have served their time on church committees, children's ministry, and decorating the sanctuary for Christmas. Now they want to sit and watch others work. However, never in scripture is there found someone who retired from ministry. Ministry, whether clergy or lay, is the call of a lifetime. The Psalmist in 71:18 asked of the Lord, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to

the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.”<sup>16</sup> Even when we are old, we are still called to witness to God’s power and might, especially to those younger.

Randy Starkey was one of the founding pastors of Victory (now Grace Life) Church in Pevely, Missouri. In his retirement I invited him to preach at First UMC. From the pulpit, and often in personal conversation, Starkey proclaimed with zeal, “I’m not so much retired as I am reFIRE!”<sup>17</sup> He understood that stepping out of the role as lead pastor at Victory Church did not mean he was stepping out of ministry. On the contrary, his release from daily pastoral duties has allowed him to “refire” for other opportunities. Starkey is currently leading a Celebrate Recovery ministry and regularly participates and leads mission trips to Russia. The way ministry looks may change over time, but it does not ever go away.

In a church revitalization the hope is to reach new believers of any age. It is the younger generations who are least likely to have faith in Christ, and so we place much focus there. As younger people come into an existing congregation there is a communication barrier. Social media comes naturally for young people communicating with one another. They never lived at a time that electronic devices were not the main way to connect. To bridge the gap among the generations, and even between older congregants and their own grandchildren, training can be offered to older adults on technology and social media. Whether it is texting and Facebook, or the currently more fashionable Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, a basic understanding of any one of these

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 71:18 (NIV)

<sup>17</sup> Randy Starkey, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed,” Sermon delivered September 29, 2019, at First United Methodist Church of Festus/Crystal City.

platforms can connect congregants with one another and older congregants with their younger family members.

Apart from the retirement mentality, a lack of willingness to be in ministry may be a result of a lack of confidence in having something to offer. Older congregants may see themselves as no longer at their prime. They physically or mentally may not be able to do the gymnastics they had in the past, and it may cause them to feel they have nothing to offer. This is when the revitalization leaders must not scold but encourage. Gentzler considers our time of aging a time of opportunity.<sup>18</sup> Our older congregants need to be reminded and encouraged toward a life of continued ministry and an opportunity to leave a legacy. Dave Ferguson, in the book *Hero Maker*, teaches us to have ICNU conversations. It is “one person call[ing] out the greatness in another person.”<sup>19</sup> In these conversations we recognize the gifts and talents in the older congregants and say to them, “I see in you ...” this gift or that talent. We then help them see how they can utilize those gifts and talents in ministry. These conversations are not only permission-giving but also empowering.

### **3) Focus on the Future**

Spirit-inspired ministry is required for revitalization. One cannot take the success story of another revitalized church and use it as a plug-and-play answer for the future of your congregation. It is not a particular method or program that guarantees results. The

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<sup>18</sup> Gentzler, Jr., *Age of Opportunity*, Kindle, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Dave Ferguson and Warren Bird, *Hero Maker: Five Essential Practices for Leaders to Multiply Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 104.

creative work of the Spirit of God is required.<sup>20</sup> Peter preached the inaugural sermon for the newly created church in Acts 2. He quoted the prophecy in Joel declaring that God would pour out God's Spirit on the young and the old alike. In context, Joel is speaking of revival that was coming as the people turned toward God. We can expect that this is still God's process of creating the church. Young and the old alike are to be moved by the Spirit of God.

An attempt at prescribing an exhaustive list of ways that older congregants can join the future ministry of their revitalizing church is a futile exercise. No list can express the creativity of God nor the uniqueness of context in which revitalizing churches are found. There are certainly tried and true ways of being about God's mission but listing those often serve to draw a box and thwart our more creative thinking and inspiration. Tim Shapiro invites us to consider being a divergent church. In his review of several real-life innovative church expressions, Shapiro suggests five broad areas of practice in which we find mission and meaning as a church. "Practices are communal, have intrinsic value, hold standards of excellence, are self-perpetuating, and contribute to the common good."<sup>21</sup> The emphasis is on work that is meaningful within the community.

There are two Spirit inspired sources for defining the unique ministry work of older adults in revitalizing congregations. They are of equal significance. One is the gifts and graces of the older adults. What are their skills? What are their passions? What do they love to do? How do they love to be together? How do they experience Christ in a way that can be shared with others? The second source of defining the ministry work is

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<sup>20</sup> Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* (Athens, TN: ReClaimed Church Publishing, 2021), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Shapiro and Kara Faris, *Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 22 & 132.

the community. What are their needs? Where and how do they already gather? How can you meet them there? Through prayerful observation God can reveal those intersections between the congregation and the community.

A more in-depth look at sourcing the community for innovative mission ideas and inspiration is found in *Blank Slate*. The authors speak of reimagining mission and ministry from a “human-centered design.”<sup>22</sup> This leads to mission that engages older congregants with a renewed sense of purpose and value. These divergent missions will contribute to the good of the whole revitalizing effort.

## **Part Two - Ministry Received**

### **Taking the Keys from Mom and Dad**

Timothy was a young protégé of the Apostle Paul. Paul instructed Timothy in the faith as a leader in the church and encouraged him to be an example to other believers even though he was young.<sup>23</sup> In a balancing act, Paul also commanded Timothy to treat the older congregants with respect, even when correcting their doctrine.

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and young women as sisters, with absolute purity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lia McIntosh, Jasmine Rose Smothers and Rodney Thomas Smothers. *Blank Slate: Write Your Own Rules for a 22nd Century Church Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 89.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV)

<sup>24</sup> 1 Timothy 5:1 (NIV)



Young revitalization leaders are tasked with exercising authority with exceptional care and compassion toward our elders. Seeing the older congregants as their own father or mothers is an appropriate analogy.

As a child grows to be an independent adult, the parents are still there to give advice and opinions, but the adult child is not obligated to follow. At some point roles reverse and the adult child is giving advice to the aging parents. At times, an adult child may need to insist the parents act according to their younger wisdom. For example, it is often difficult to determine when an older parent may need to stop driving. No one is excited to give up the freedom of coming and going as they please with their own vehicle. However, the adult child may see more clearly the dangers of failing sight, slower reflexes, or mental confusion in their parent. Knowing when to insist on the way of the adult child at the protest of the adult parent is difficult. Navigating these conversations is even more difficult. Still, for the health and safety of all, these decisions and conversations are necessary. A wise adult child will approach the topic with great respect and compassion for their aging parent, even if they must be firm in what action must be taken.

Revitalization leaders can be seen as attempting to get, not just the car keys, but the whole key ring from their aging parents. The keys to the building, to the finances, to the staff, and eventually every aspect of church life. The transition to hand over authority is necessary to the church remaining in vital ministry to new generations. But we must recognize, according to this model that considers more fully the role and treatment of older congregants in revitalization, this does not happen in a moment but as a process.

At my previous appointment in a similar setting of revitalization, I inadvertently grabbed a key without respect and compassion for the older congregant. I was looking in the basement for a space to keep some ministry items. I found a storage cabinet full of pens and pencils, colored paper, string and glue. I assumed this was a space that had not been touched for decades since all the members were beyond retirement age. So, I proceeded to clear out the cabinet and place my things there. It was three weeks later when Joan, an older congregant, came to me asking what happened to everything in that cabinet. What I did not know is that a six-year-old great-granddaughter of another older congregant would come to the church once every few months. Joan would make a Sunday School just for her and get some craft items out of that cabinet to make a lesson for the little girl. I felt terrible and apologized. Joan was understanding, and we made sure she once again had space and supplies for this ministry that I did not even know was occurring.

It is incumbent upon the younger congregants to be aware of every action and its consequences to older congregants. Any change can have repercussions, and we must explore what those repercussions might be before we grab a key or clear out a cabinet. I have learned to ask many questions of many people before making changes. Two or three weeks spent inquiring about the cabinet of supplies would have been well worth saving Joan the embarrassment and inconvenience of not having her supplies when she needed it, as well as, saving a relationship with Joan that assures her that I care about her ministry and mission. Some may not have the patience for this, but a revitalization that attends to the missional care of older congregants requires a pace of change that shows respect and compassion.

A full chapter (three) has been devoted to optimizing minimal change. We can highlight here that minimal change that makes optimal impact is a form of Mission Received for our older congregants. We are showing respect and compassion, as Paul instructed young Timothy, when we make effort to not only minimize change, but also present it at a pace that our older congregants can digest. What this requires on the part of those leading revitalization is planning far ahead. In my example, I am certain I did not need that storage cabinet immediately. I was preparing the space for an event that was at least two months away. With that kind of lead time, I could have done due diligence before removing all the items from the cabinet. Planning far ahead to set a compassionate pace of change is especially needed for big items.

There is a recurring question at First UMC that I have delayed from evolving into a full-on conversation for seven years. That is the push to take the pews out of the sanctuary and replace them with chairs. I truly believe that if Christ is present and growing the faith and participation in a congregation, the pews are not going to stop it. However, there are compelling reasons to consider doing what would be a drastic change for our older congregants. The added flexibility of space usage, the increased seating capacity, and the more modern feel that chairs offer are all reasons to move forward with the idea. As I write, we are gathering teams to look at five-year plans for facilities, and I am certain this will once again be a consideration.

In an ideal world, we would preserve the look of the current sanctuary and build a separate space designed for modern worship. In fact, if this were an option, we would have left the kneeling rail and choir loft intact. However, this is not currently an option. As the pastor leading revitalization, I do not yet know if the time for this change is now. I

do not yet know if this is the year that we must take the keys in this aspect of our relationship with our spiritual moms and dads and swap out the pews. What I do know is that when the time comes for that conversation, it will be filled with grace, love, and compassion for our older congregants. To put our moms and dads through that layer of change to their beloved sanctuary, I had better have a solid reason why this move is necessary at this moment for reaching new people for Christ.

### **It Begins with Friendship**

Ministry received by older congregants is often defined by giving transportation, providing food, and making hospital, nursing home and in-home visits. However, any organization can do these actions. These are not uniquely Christian. There is one ministry, however, that only the revitalized church can offer, that is, true Christian friendship. Christian friendship is defined by Hauerwas and Yordy by three attributes. Christ-centered friendships help each other develop as Christians, strengthen the church, and allow for friendship with God.<sup>25</sup> Far beyond giving older people activities to keep them busy or simply providing practical social services, the church can meet a deeper need with a deeper connection. A church amid revitalization is perfectly positioned to provide this type of meaningful friendship. New believers are exploring faith. Older congregants are well-suited to engage new believers on a level that is meaningful and beneficial for both parties. In acknowledging the loss of friendship and separation between the young

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<sup>25</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Laura Yordy, “Captured in Time: Friendship and Aging,” in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador, and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Kindle, 2194.

and old in our society, Hauerwas and Yordy note that “the most important obligation the elderly have toward the young is not to just remember but to be our memory.”<sup>26</sup> Younger believers can connect with the complex faith of the older congregants and help them continue to grow in their faith in Christ. This foundation of friendship makes the partnership uniquely Christian. From this place we can offer the more practical social service ministries that are specific to older adults. Through these practical social service ministries new believers can put into action their deepening faith.

### **Instant Mission**

In revitalization the hope is that new believers will come to know Christ. We are then to teach them to follow the commands of Christ.<sup>27</sup> The beauty in revitalization is that the mission received by older congregants through our care and compassion is also a mission given to new believers. Jesus stated this twofold mission concerning the care of his own mother. From the cross, Jesus told his disciple, John, to take Mary as his own mother and to care for her. Mary, in turn, was to consider John a son.<sup>28</sup> Mission was given and mission was received in the recognition and acceptance of that relationship. This responsibility to care for older congregants as our mothers and fathers is not a burden, but it is an opportunity to live out the Gospel. Jesus further instructs us in Matthew 25 to feed and clothe those in need, and to visit the sick and imprisoned, and welcome the stranger.<sup>29</sup> In our older congregants we have an instant mission field in which to walk with the

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<sup>26</sup> Hauerwas, “Captured in Time,” Kindle, 2156.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 28:16-20 (NIV)

<sup>28</sup> John 19:25-27 (NIV)

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV)

commission of Christ. Our older congregants offer a service to us by allowing us to grow in compassion and to put that ministry into action in our relationship with them.

I wrote previously of Bryan. He is 56 and for all practical purposes homebound from a lifelong battle with DiGeorge Syndrome. Bryan cannot mow the grass, fix the doorframe, or pull up old carpet, but his family needs it done. There are men at our church that want to help. This is an example of instant mission. We could go to Mozambique for a mission trip, but we do not have to find mission opportunities. Our older and homebound congregants are an instant opportunity to be in mission. They have needs that younger new believers can meet. Additionally, many revitalization efforts begin with inviting people outside the church to belong before they get to the place of believing. Belonging can come through shared mission such as a group effort to mow Bryan's lawn. Bryan then becomes a part of the revitalization effort providing opportunities for new people to belong and grow toward believing, even as the believers live out their faith in mission.

### **Helping with Transitions**

As noted, change must occur for revitalization and the need for optimizing minimal change has been addressed in chapter three. This is part of treating our older congregants with respect for their needs for constancy in their church and faith. Another part of treating them well is to provide help in transitioning through the changes. Though we seek to minimize changes we must still have a heart of grace as we expect older congregants to accept the changes considered necessary for revitalization. Rather than

appealing only to the logic and reason this change is necessary, we must offer grace and tend to the emotional and spiritual turmoil these changes may bring. These must be handled with an intentional process of transition. A willingness to take the time for transition is required to rightly treat our older congregants.

We should be willing to devote time and resources to helping with this transition. It is an act of care and compassion toward those at risk of being marginalized by the revitalization process. With proper attention, the process of transition invites older congregants into the risk-taking mission a church revitalization requires. Matt Miofsky, in *Let Go*, helps turn the fear innate with change into an excitement of being a part of God doing something new and amazing.<sup>30</sup> The resistance to the change can be turned into a spiritual renewal knowing that in the final years of one's life, they can be a part of something that will last for generations.

Working through transitions must be a part of any revitalization plan. Miofsky states, "Change management is the art of ushering in intentional change (or dealing with unintentional change) by tending to the transitions that must happen in and with the very people who are experiencing those changes."<sup>31</sup> The usual avenues of personal relationships, congregational care, and prayer are the starting point of what is needed to assist with transitioning through these changes. But this issue is worth our time and resources. A support group, Bible study, counselor, or social worker could be useful resources to provide the care needed. In this chapter you will hear of Bob, an advocate for the older congregants. He was one of them but could also see the need for change. He

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<sup>30</sup> Matt Miofsky, *Let It Go* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), xix.

<sup>31</sup> Miofsky, *Let It Go*, x.

listened to them, comforted them, and, when helpful, asked *me*, the church revitalization pastor, to change. When I listened, everyone transitioned better.

### **Let Their Voices Be Heard**

Nothing demonstrates care for another more than sitting and listening to their stories. Karl Vaters advises young pastors assigned to lead older churches to spend much more time listening than talking. His recommendation of spending at least three hours in purposeful listen-based conversations for every hour spent in sermon preparation and delivery in the first two years<sup>32</sup> seems a bit over the top, however, his point is well taken. Vaters notes that the treasures of “experience, faith, and wisdom ... can be buried beneath years, even decades of neglect, pain, and betrayal.”<sup>33</sup> Vaters continues with a mandate to outlove the older congregants. He recognizes that those older congregants who seem most difficult are most often reacting from a place of hurt. Listening and building genuine relationships help to heal the hurt. I would add that the time we spend talking should be more asking questions than making statements.

### **Give Them a Champion**

Older congregants need to know that those leading church revitalization are not their enemy. They need to know that we are on their side. This is difficult to accomplish

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Vaters, “5 Essential Lessons for Young Pastors Leading Older Churches,” February 26, 2021, <https://karlvaters.com/young-pastors-older-churches>.

<sup>33</sup> Vaters, “5 Essential Lessons.”



when revitalization leaders are often having to make decisions that are contrary to what the older congregants may want. I believe the older congregants need a champion. This is someone who understands their view because they share their view. Ideally this is one who is already an influential leader among the older congregants. They may not have a title, but they are the one everyone looks to for their reaction to any situation so that they might follow suit. What makes this person a champion, however, is that they also understand and embrace the need for revitalization. They can be the voice of the older congregants while endorsing the revitalization efforts to the greatest extent that is possible. Thom Rainer calls these influencers allies who the congregation looks to for both “formal and informal authority.”<sup>34</sup>

I have called my previous church in St. Louis City a new church start. Still, care was given to the fifteen congregants of the closing church who gave us their building to start something new. As we launched the new church, remodeled the space, changed the signage and created a new worship service, we maintained a traditional service for the existing older congregants. It was led by Bob Stevens, a wonderful lay minister who was in his 80s. For the first year of the new church start Bob planned and preached an early traditional worship service. Most importantly for me, he was the mediator between me and the closed church congregants.

Bob knew the new work that I was leading was good and necessary. We had been in ministry together before sharing in weekly prayer, so he knew my heart was for the good, as well. Bob took heat for me. When the older congregants had a grievance, he listened and helped them cope. He kept most of that from me, thankfully. But when there

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<sup>34</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 96.

was something that I could do to help the situation, he told me, and I listened. Bob was their champion. Within a year the closed congregation dropped from fifteen to ten people and Bob retired, again. The traditional service ceased. But Bob helped each one find a new church to attend.

At First UMC one of those voices is Sam. He helps me see the perspective of the older congregants and offers wisdom concerning what I can do to meet their needs and make this transition just a little bit easier for them. Likewise, Sam relays my perspective to the older congregants. Sam is an elder and respected voice in the congregation, so some things simply go better when they hear it from him and he agrees this is the direction we need to go. Sam is not only a voice the congregation trusts, but a voice that I trust. I know that he will speak wisdom even when it goes against his personal preference or when it goes against what direction I may be heading. Those leading revitalization efforts would do well to look for these champions and form relationships of faith and respect.

### **Provide Elder-Specific Care**

Older congregants require specific pastoral care. A beautiful song by Sara Groves highlights one particularly unique need. The opening lines of “What Do I Know?” say,

I have a friend who just turned eighty-eight  
and she just shared with me that she's afraid of dying.  
I sit here years from her experience and try to bring her comfort...  
But what do I know? What do I know?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Sara Groves, “What Do I Know,” © 1999 Sara Groves Music.

Older congregants are most keenly aware of their mortality. Death is months or years away, not decades. Revitalization requires addressing this reality. Remember, even with all the remodeling and band-driven worship, revitalization is a spiritual endeavor. We still need to preach sermons on our assurance of being in God's presence after our passing. Revitalization pastors need to make sure their funeral planning and leading skills are on point so that as congregants pass those that remain have a sense of comfort. At First UMC one congregant has a folder on file at her request of her closest contacts and funeral wishes. Another congregant has asked if his body can remain in the church sanctuary overnight from visitation to funeral. These accommodations matter.

Other specific older congregant care includes offering ways to help widow(ers)s deal with the loss of their spouse after sixty years. How to handle the change from owning your own home to living with your children or moving into assisted living. We need to provide social opportunities aimed at the older congregants. Kay was in her late 70s when she began a women's group of card players in our church parlor at First UMC. Notice the revitalization pastor did not start the card circle. The septuagenarian did. It was her idea. All I had to do was say, "Yes!"

Richard Gentzler contends that older congregants could be in their best stage of life. Freedom and prolonged health can make this a time of their greatest contributions "to life, faith, society, and the world."<sup>36</sup> In *An Age of Opportunity*, he suggests four areas the church can meet the needs of older congregants and their families: congregational caregiver support group, adult day care, elder-abuse awareness and response, and United Methodist SAGE Ministry (Senior Advocate, Gifted and Empowered).<sup>37</sup> These areas

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<sup>36</sup> Gentzler, Jr., *An Age of Opportunity*, Kindle, 1690.

<sup>37</sup> Gentzler, Jr., *An Age of Opportunity*, Kindle, 1527.

would likely be overlooked in a new church start or in a revitalization that does not recognize the needs of the existing congregants. However, a revitalization that can both reach new people and provide meaningful ministry to existing older adults will be stronger. Note, that the SAGE ministry is led by older adults who are ministering to other older adults. Older congregants gifted in organization, leadership, teaching, and relationship building continue in ministry to a segment of society that they understand best, their own peers.

### **Benefits of Religious Involvement**

In a 2004 study, Harold Koenig and Douglas Lawson reported that the overall health and well-being of older adults is improved by religious involvement. Greater physical health, less depression, better coping skills for stress, more support networks, and concern for others all improved with religious involvement.<sup>38</sup>

Yes, churches can be in ministry with older adults in ways that benefit their physical health even more directly. If there is a young music therapist looking for clients you can set up a class for older adults in your church. Be prepared with connections at the Alzheimer's Association and local nursing homes.

### **Accessibility**

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<sup>38</sup> Harold G. Koenig, MD and Douglas M. Lawson, PhD. *Faith in the Future: Healthcare, Aging, and the Role of Religion* (Templeton Foundation Press, 2003), 10-11.

In revitalization efforts a modernization of the building is often required. It is important to keep everything accessible for older adults. This may include holding meetings on the ground floor or installing a lift. Upgrading lighting can aid the sight dimmed by age. Beyond the facilities we must consider the size of font, the volume of speakers, meeting times and Bible study topics.<sup>39</sup> Everything the church does should be considered through the lens of caring for the older congregant. The difficulty comes when looking through the older congregant's eyes directly conflicts with looking through the eyes of the newcomer who is the aspiration of a church revitalization. Every decision does not have to accommodate the older congregant, but a recognizable effort must be made to consider the needs of the older adult when possible. It is a rare case that accessibility for the older adult is detrimental to the engagement of a newcomer.

## **Today**

In our conversation of revitalization, we have discussed the past and the future often pitting them against each other. First UMC has developed a unifying mantra to “honor the past and embrace the future.” It has helped us restore stained glass windows and remodel the altar area demonstrating our ability to both look back and forward in one swipe. With all these endeavors it would be easy to lose sight of today. Root and Bertrand remind us that the “golden past” and the “perfect future” are “real,” but we do not live in either.<sup>40</sup> Today we have older congregants grieving the loss of their glory days even while

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<sup>39</sup> Gentzler, Jr. *An Age of Opportunity*, Kindle, 1030.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2023), 1.

the altar is remodeled, and the stained glass is renewed. Today we have older congregants grieving the loss of their prayer rails and red altar carpet though the changes are designed to make room for more people. Today we need to provide care for our older congregants for even the most well planned and packaged revitalization efforts come with pain.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

### Hearing Two Alarms

For church leaders, a statistical alarm has sounded. Since 2008, the average percentage of senior participants (65 and older) in congregations has risen 5%, according to the 2020 Faith Community Today (FACT) study.<sup>1</sup> This aging trend mirrors a similar one in the U.S. population, however, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2019 American Community Survey, 17% of Americans are 65 and older. In the FACT study, 33% of U.S. congregations are senior citizens. In short, churchgoers are twice as likely to be 65 and older.<sup>2</sup>

For church revitalization experts this rightly sounds the alarm for getting younger people into the church. However, we must not overlook the other alarm sounding that 33% of our congregants are the older and longtime faithful congregants. They risk being left out of the church revitalization picture if only one alarm is heard. We must remember that the church houses that still exist have been upheld by the faithfulness of the older existing congregants. Rather than viewing these congregants as the problem, let us view them as the ones who have been sustaining ministry while hoping for reinforcements to arrive. Mark Hallock highlights this perspective:

[They] have helped to hold this declining church together for years both financially and through their committed leadership. When families began

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Thumma, “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview” (Hartford, CT: Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2021), 17. Accessed February 19, 2024, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Earls, “Average U.S. Pastor and Churchgoer Grow Older,” (Lifeway Research, Nov 1, 2021), Lifeway.com, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/11/01/americas-pastors-and-churchgoers-are-getting-older/>.

to leave the church in order to attend other, more healthy congregations, these faithful men and women hung in there. They have been faithful to this church when few others were.<sup>3</sup>

The need for revitalization is clear, but so, too, is the need to ascribe value to our older congregants, to optimize minimal change for their spiritual well-being, and to create ministry that engages all people.

### **Steadying the Pendulum**

When seeking a theologically healthy balance between addressing the role and treatment of older congregants and reaching new younger believers during church revitalization, the pendulum is likely to swing to each extreme before it settles in the balanced middle. This thesis is an attempt to draw the pendulum to a more balanced place as many current church revitalizations discount the value of existing older congregants to focus only on new young families. This pendulum swing toward the new younger crowd was an overcorrection in response to the prior swing that had been toward the existing congregants for far too long. Each overcorrection falls short of the intergenerational nature of Christ's mission for the church. Over emphasis on the existing congregants and the old way of doing things leads to stagnancy. Over emphasis on new believers and innovation leads to callousness.

The prior extreme swing of the pendulum toward older congregants still exists as some believe that church growth comes by first loving the people in the church. Through this nurturing they believe the growth and development of the existing church members

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Hallock, *Leading Church Revitalization: The Posture, Priorities, Practices, and Perseverance Needed for the Long Haul* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2022), 58.



will lead to new people being invited into the church.<sup>4</sup> I support the nurturing of older existing church members, but I do not adhere to the notion that this must come first rather than simultaneously with reaching new people. Nor do I concur that existing church members can be loved into making their church grow. We must be focused on reaching people as well as keeping people. It is this balance that is needed. We cannot neglect either the new or the existing congregants to create a healthy revitalized church.

### **Time Is on Our Side**

The reality is that somewhere between 65% and 90% of churches need some sort of revitalization.<sup>5</sup> This decline of U.S. churches occurred over generations. It will take generations to reverse course. Take the next best step. Do not let a sense of false urgency railroad the existing older congregants. It is urgent that we begin the process, but we cannot rush the process lest we lose a unique treasure, our older congregants. They are of high value and with us for just a short season longer. They are a fleeting treasure. Let us take the next ten to twenty years helping them complete their faith journeys with honor as we reach new people for Christ. Let us grant the older congregants the opportunity to leave the legacy of a 21st century revitalization of the U.S church.

### **Look Inside**

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<sup>4</sup> Adam McLane, “3 Lies of Church Growth Experts,” *Adammclane.com*, July 10, 2008, <https://adammclane.com/2008/07/3-lies-of-church-growth-experts/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Rainer, *The Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2021), 17.

Shortly before my appointment to First UMC was announced, my then 10-year-old son asked if we were changing churches. He was not very excited about this possibility because he said, "I like our big church in the city and there aren't any big churches like that around our house, except for that one across from the library." With a glimmer in my eye, I asked, "Do you think you would like that church across from the library?" He answered, "Maybe. I'd have to look inside first." First UMC is that church across from the library. My son may have been talking about the physical building, in part, but his heart was also wondering, "Will I be welcome? Will I find friends there? Will I sense God in that place?"

People considering becoming part of a revitalization effort have the same uncertainty. When they look inside what will they find? We must provide for them a place that is revitalized in appearance and usefulness, but also in the spirit of Christ. Prior to my time at First UMC, when starting a new church in an existing church building, I received a great piece of advice from a fellow church planter: Don't spend so much time on the building that you forget about the people. Revitalization is a work from the inside out. We must help new people discover that they are welcome, that they will find friends here, and that God is in this place. You may be encouraged to know that, after a few weeks of looking inside, my son wholeheartedly approved of First UMC.

### **Toxic People**

This paper acknowledges but does not address the very real problem of older congregants who are toxic and actively sabotage revitalization efforts. This paper addresses most older church members whose heart is good, and motives are as pure as they understand them. Truly toxic church members are rare, though it only takes one to create an enormous obstacle to revitalization.<sup>6</sup> At First UMC, a potentially toxic person made her negative views known to me and the whole congregation concerning an outreach we were considering to the unhoused. When I approached her to discuss her opposition, she admitted that, at the age of 83, she did not have another fight left in her. That was to my relief and of great advantage for our congregation. My story at First UMC may have turned out quite differently had she the strength to fight revitalization.

More training and research are needed for church revitalizers and their congregations in dealing with a toxic member. Sometimes the presence of one or more influential toxic congregants means the church cannot be revitalized. There may be too much resistance when the mission of Christ is not primary in the hearts of at least a few who are influential enough to halt success. Sometimes the timing is just not right. The resistance will fade over time either by declining health or death. Perhaps there will be a time when the resistance has faded, but there will not be enough viable congregants to revitalize. Often in these cases it is too late, and a new church start is the only option.

Pastors heading into toxic situations need training, backing from their superiors, and a segment of the congregation who has their back with a focus on the mission of Jesus Christ. This problem is not reserved for older existing congregants and is not unique to revitalization. In my seventh year at First UMC, some newer members who

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<sup>6</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Anatomy of a Revived Church: Seven Findings about How Congregations Avoided Death* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 74.

were part of the revitalization elevated their toxicity to the point of alarm. Their gossip and lies fractured relationships, sought to undermine my credibility, and sabotaged the momentum of revitalization. I confronted the toxic members. They left the church rather than work on the problem and proceeded to make calls, to post on social media and to have private meetings to stir a revolt against me. Their effort failed only because of the backing of my superiors, the overwhelming support of my congregation and our unrelenting focus on the mission of Jesus Christ. Toxic people can be overcome but only if these pieces are in place.

### **Older Congregants in Ministry**

A significant amount of literature focuses on training the church how to be in ministry *to* older adults. More work should be done in how to train older adults to be *in* ministry. How do we help older congregants see the opportunities that surround them? In what areas are they best suited to be in ministry? Engaging our elders in ministry that meets their life stage is key to revitalization for both the new believers and the older congregants.

### **Two or Three Tier Pastoral Transitions**

Further research would be beneficial in the series of leadership types needed for a complete church revitalization. Stepping into leadership of a church at its lowest moment and making the turn requires a quite different skill set than leading a church at its height

and all the phases in between the two. Bill Henard suggests that churches sometimes fail because the current pastor does not match the current state of the church.<sup>7</sup> Jim Collins in *Good to Great* makes a convincing argument of the need for a Level 5 leader to take an organization to its highest potential success. He speaks of the executive capabilities required that are lacking in the lower levels of leadership.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps there is a progression of leadership required for revitalization, a series of specialists for the different phases of revitalization. I suggest that rather than needing Level 5, as though the other leaders were less skilled, the church needs the leader who can match the current state of the church and take the church one step further. Even Collins, while noting that the principles from *Good to Great* are applicable to the social services sector, acknowledges there are differences in needs especially with the Level 5 Executive and Legislative function required.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that one pastor could embody each of these specialties, reinventing himself or herself at each stage, but it is more likely that several pastors are needed to make the full climb to revitalization.

Several pastors may be needed due to the differing skills required at each phase but also due to the amount of time required for a complete revitalization. An experienced but relatively young 40-year-old pastor may start a revitalization that takes 20 years to bring to fruition. By this time the pastor is 60 and a new younger pastor may be needed to continue the effort. Perhaps the growth of the church would allow for multiple pastors who could specializing in various generations both inside and outside the congregation.

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* (Athens, TN: ReClaimed Church Publishing, 2021), 139.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, 2011), 12.

This would allow a continued dual emphasis on young and old, the new and existing people.

I suggest that a two- or three-tier approach in pastoral leadership could be beneficial in taking the steps toward revitalization. First, is a pastor who can make hard necessary changes and bear the brunt of the resistance. Second, is a pastor who can bring healing and make the spiritual turn toward hope and outreach. Third, is a pastor who knows how to sustain growth in a healthy church putting systems in place for a larger church experience. Without intention, I am experiencing some of these two- or three tier approaches at First UMC.

The pastor before me made some significant changes that were needed to steer the church toward revitalization. In three years, he led a reorganization of the administrative leadership that streamlined decision-making and freed more people for ministry. He cleaned up a messy system of tracking finances by reducing the number of checking accounts connected to the church from over a dozen to two and outsourced our bookkeeping to regain accurate and timely bill paying and records. He added video screens in the sanctuary for projecting words in modern worship and remodeled several rooms for children's ministry. The pastor initiated a relatively costly outreach to children in the form of a weeklong children's camp that elevated First UMC's visibility and made a real impact in our community. This helped the congregation increase their outward focus in a significant way. He had plans for a million-dollar remodel of the sanctuary to modernize, create more space, and make the building more usable, but this is where the church balked. A divisive 40/60 vote struck down the building plans. The pastor paid a price for these changes. He made some enemies, experienced frustration, and was moved

on to another pastoral appointment. Yet First UMC benefits from these bold moves today. They were essential steps to lay the groundwork for revitalization.

I see myself as the second-tier pastor at First UMC. I came in and brought healing from the divisive vote on the sanctuary rebuilding project. I brought focus to the mission of Jesus Christ. While the previous pastor did not see an increase in attendance during his tenure, attendance has grown by 67% during my time, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have since brought bookkeeping back in house in an organized manner and opened one additional checking account for ease of use with our Food Pantry. Still, it was the previous pastor's difficult work that gave us the opportunity to reset our financial systems. We continue to operate efficiently on the administrative restructuring led by this pastor, and we continue to remodel and update our space. The pandemic deleted the children's outreach, so we are re-visioning that aspect of community outreach. As a second-tier pastor I can bring healthy relationship and further missional focus to the congregation. I can empower healthy leaders to step up in worship, create new ministries, and lead small groups.

There is a tremendous amount of potential at First UMC. I am unsure if I am the pastor to take the church to tier three in revitalization. I am doing all I can to learn the moves a larger church pastor must make in staffing, finances, building and location, and vision setting. The atmosphere is spiritually healthy, and the community is ready for outreach. At every level of growth there is a tendency to become satisfied, after all, we have grown tremendously, and we are enjoying vital worship and ministry. Edging near 200 in weekend worship attendance is a great accomplishment, but if there are people in

our community who do not have a home church to connect with God through Jesus Christ, our work is not done.

This paper is an important model to be followed particularly by the initial pastor in revitalization. The first pastor in the door needs to send a clear message that the older existing congregants are valued as much as the younger new believers. The reality is that a revitalization that is unrushed will see many of these older congregants pass away during the time of initial change. Seven years into First UMC, the number of deaths is equal to half of the original congregation. I still tread carefully, but I can make bolder moves than I could initially because these bolder moves carry a lesser risk of leaving behind the older existing congregants. There are fewer of them, true, but importantly, most of those remaining now affirm the steps of revitalization. The remaining original older congregants have seen that well-paced necessary changes have brought new life back to their beloved church. Many have grown to love the new congregants and new ministries so that the resistance to change has lessened. Now perhaps a bolder and more quickly moving vision can be pursued.

Rowan Greer believes that early Christians viewed age as both a “gift and a burden. The gift is one of wisdom and virtue; the burden, physical and mental debility, but also vices peculiar to the elderly.”<sup>10</sup> This truth stands the test of time and needs to be embraced by every tier of pastoral leadership. It will always be important to value older congregants. It will always be wise to discern what changes are necessary and execute

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<sup>10</sup> Rowan A. Greer, “Special Gift and Special Burden: Views of Old Age in the Early Church,” in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador, and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Kindle, 287.



those changes with good planning and at a good pace. It will always be an integral part of revitalization to engage older congregants in ministry.

### **Task of the Older Adult**

The task of the older adult is to reciprocate this model of revitalization. They are to value new young believers, be open to mission-driven change, and engage in ministry that augments the work of revitalization. These tasks are at the core of our faith and of our human development. Richard Gentzler refers to the research of social psychologist Erik Erikson to remind us that older adults want to give something back to succeeding generations. Their desire is toward “generativity” rather than “stagnation.”<sup>11</sup> If we will approach older congregants with an invitation to participate in a work of God that will last for generations to come, their human and spiritual inclination will be to say, “Yes.”

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<sup>11</sup> Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *An Age of Opportunity: Intentional Ministry by, with, and for Older Adults* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2018), Kindle, 1696.

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## Biography

Letisha “Tish” Green was born in Festus, Missouri, far enough from St. Louis to enjoy some country living yet close enough to enjoy the fine arts and dining offered in the city. Upon graduating with a Bachelor of Music Education from Southeast Missouri State University, Tish spent a year as a missionary performing musical theater for kids in the US, Canada and Latvia. She then taught elementary and junior high music in the DeSoto, Missouri, Public School District for four years. She left teaching to enter full-time music ministry and helped start several churches of differing denominations. Tish began the clergy track in the United Methodist Church under the mentorship of Rev. Ann Rathert and Rev. Dianne Cochran. She served as an associate pastor at Zion United Methodist Church in Lemay, Missouri, started a new church called The Connection United Methodist Church in south St. Louis City, and is currently lead pastor of First United Methodist Church of Festus/Crystal City in Missouri. Tish earned her Master of Divinity at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri in 2016 and her Doctor of Ministry at Duke Divinity School in 2024. Tish was ordained an Elder in the United Methodist Church in 2018. She is married to James and has a son, Levi.