

WHEN SENIORS SKIP CHURCH

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One Sunday morning, a pair of good Samaritans found my 87-year-old dad lying beside the highway. His walker lay collapsed beside him and he was struggling to get it upright again. He had walked three miles from home, suffered a busted lip, a skinned knee, and a rather large gash to his left arm. Dad had been trying to make it to church, which was another nine miles away. At his insistence, the Samaritans didn't take him to the emergency room. After all, he wanted to go to church. Soon after he arrived, a church member promptly called *me*.

"Why would you let your dad try to walk to church?!" The woman on the other end of the call was incensed. "You need to take him to the emergency room right now."

That would have been difficult to accomplish, as I lived 156 miles away. I had taken Dad's keys several weeks before this event, never dreaming he would attempt to *walk* to church. One of Dad's Sunday School classmates, Barbara, had volunteered to take him to services when she was available, but she'd been out of town for several weeks.

Although my dad had served as a deacon and taught Sunday School for years, no one noticed when he quietly backed away from church ministry. No one noticed when his church attendance dropped to once a month. No one called or came by. So, I decided to reach out to the church's senior pastoral team and give them a brief update on my folks. I explained that both were now struggling with dementia, and that my brother was moving in to care for them. The pastor on the other end sounded a bit relieved, and ended the conversation with the usual, "Let us know if you need anything." My mother was placed on a list of shut ins. She received a card each week signed, "the Mercy Team." She quickly discarded it, telling me she had never met anyone named Mercy.

The card was appreciated, but it was no substitute for a human being. The lackluster response from my folks' church drew contempt from my brother and a feeling of being discarded from my dad. Many seniors can empathize. Even David feared isolation when he prayed, *"Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent"* (Psalm 71:9). It is the heart cry of many seniors today. It was the very thing Barbara fought against each time she showed up to take my dad to church. **She remembered him and love moved her to act.**

When Seniors Come to the Church

A church full of Seniors used to be viewed as a dying church. But what if they were a direct result of a growing aging population? By 2060, more than 94 million Americans will be 65 and older, according to **U.S. Census Bureau projections**[1]. It should be little surprise then, if the number of seniors in your church increases. A **third of U.S. congregations are now senior citizens**[2], according to the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study. When this growing body of grey-haired folks fills your pews, they will not be empty handed. **Seniors bring far more than their own needs when they come to church.** Attend any prayer meeting and you are likely to see it populated mostly by Seniors. Look at a church's finances and you will learn that adults over 65 contribute about 40 percent of all donations, so says the **Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA)**[3].

Then there are the church grandmas, of whom I am a proud member. As a little girl I remember the one old lady in our church who handed out candy each Sunday. *(I thought my parents had no idea, I later learned they were in on it.)* I vowed to follow in her footsteps when I grew "old." One day while waiting

for services to begin, I heard a harried, anxious mom tell her husband, “Oh no! we forgot fruit snacks! What are we gonna do?” I reached in my purse and pulled out two small packets, reached over my shoulder with them in hand. The sweetest little fingers reached for them. “Thank you!” Mom whispered.

We have another church grandma who my daughter nicknamed, “the baby whisperer” because she had a gift for taking crying babies in her arms at church and within minutes, they would become as “calm and quieted” as a weaned child (Psalm 131:2). When she took my crying granddaughter in her arms one Sunday, the baby wasn’t the only recipient of calm. My sleep-deprived daughter told me, **“Miss Angela saw me, and she helped. I was so grateful.”**

Some seniors are called to ministry by what initially looked like a mistake. In college, an older couple responded to an ad our campus ministry posted about an upcoming retreat. They signed up and showed up, never realizing none of us were over 23. We begged them to stay and thus began a relationship with the Greens that would endure a lifetime where more than one generation benefited. I can still remember calling Mrs. Green to tell her that Jim and I were engaged. “Oh! My prayers have been answered,” she said.

Even folks with dementia can contribute to the Body in the most unexpected ways. One such woman I know was Marcy. Imagine my shock when her 89-year-old neighbor, Renee, told me about her own recent conversion.

“It’s Marcy’s fault,” Renee explained. “Every day for months, she would come over and tell me how Jesus loved me and died for me. Marcy kept forgetting she had told me about Jesus the day before, and the day before that. You get the picture. After the umpteenth time hearing about it, I realized it must be true. God loved me and died to save my soul! I don’t think anyone but Marcy could help me understand.”

How Should We Then Live?

While seniors still have the highest church attendance, many today are opting *out*. According to **Gallup**[4], in the year 2000, about 60 percent of Americans over the age of 65 attended church weekly. By 2020, that figure had **dropped to 45 percent**[5]. Could it be they didn’t have a ride? Maybe no one noticed when they quietly disappeared. **How much poorer my life would have been without a Mrs. Green, a Marcy, a Barbara or an Angela.** The Apostle Paul acknowledged the value of seniors when he writes to Timothy, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure dwells in you as well” (2 Timothy 1:5). Hundreds of generations have since benefited from the faithfulness of these two women. It is an honor to return their kindness.

My dad is now with the Lord and no longer needs a walker or a ride to church. He has a front row seat before the God of all creation. May we always remember to emulate his desire to be in God’s presence, however difficult the journey may be.

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SOURCES:

1. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf
2. https://research.lifeway.com/2021/11/01/americas-pastors-and-churchgoers-are-getting-older/
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