

Churches grapple with including older adults in current context

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Each Sunday, Larry Little and his wife, Mary, get ready for church. They dress casually, fill two tumblers with water, climb into their golf cart and drive two miles to The Grove, a grassy field next to their church.

There they find a parking place, turn off the engine and settle in for a live service in front of a Jumbotron and a stage.

The Littles, who live in a retirement community called The Villages, about an hour's drive northwest of Orlando, Fla., are among the lucky few.

Since mid-March, when state shutdowns forced houses of worship to cease in-person gatherings amid the coronavirus pandemic, Americans mostly have had to rely on online worship services.

But Live Oaks Community Church has been able to offer continuous outdoor services—one on Saturday and two on Sunday—with dozens, sometimes hundreds, arriving via their golf carts.

“The only negative is that you don't have much interaction with the rest of the congregation,” said Larry Little, 77. “Our golf carts are 6 feet apart and they don't want us outside the golf cart.”

Challenge to minister to seniors during lockdown

For many, if not most, older congregants living in less temperate climates or with no access to outdoor services, such options are a luxury.

Unable to find spiritual sustenance or the comforts of community, many are isolated and lonely. They may struggle with using the technology required for viewing online services or connecting virtually with family, friends and community members.

“It’s becoming more of a challenge to figure out how we minister to, and with, these older adults,” said Missy Buchanan, a writer and speaker from Rockwall with a focus on older adults.

Some congregations are making phone calls and writing letters to older members. Others have bought them tablets and are teaching the least technologically savvy how to connect to online platforms.

Now, as states begin loosening lockdown restrictions and churches contemplate how to reopen safely, clergy and other religious leaders face difficult decisions when it comes to their senior members.

Senior adults still at great risk

For older people, there’s a cruel reality to those renewed gatherings.

Mounting evidence suggests houses of worship probably are among the riskiest places for older people. Transmission is much more likely indoors where lots of people come into close contact and where droplets with viral particles might linger in the air for as long as eight minutes. Multiple coronavirus cases across the country have been linked to people attending

church and synagogue services or events.

Older Americans also are among the most likely to develop a severe case of COVID-19. Eight out of 10 coronavirus deaths reported in the United States have been among adults 65 years and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Many older people like the Littles may not see the insides of a church or synagogue for a very long time.

“When churches regather, older people may be the last to go back,” said Amy Hanson, an instructor in the gerontology department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha who has a consulting ministry to help churches engage older adults.

“Some will want to return. But it will be hard for those who do go back. There’ll be no handshaking and hugging—things older adults are missing. They won’t feel all they’re hoping to feel.”

Strong desire to gather for worship

Older Americans were nearly twice as likely as younger Americans to attend church, synagogue and mosque before the shutdowns. A recent Pew Research survey found that 61 percent of those born before 1945 (the so-called Silent Generation) attended religious services monthly or more, compared with 35 percent of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996).

In this in-between time, congregations should assess their older adult members, charting whether they live alone or have family nearby. Do they have hearing or vision impairments? Do they have access to chaplains at assisted living or nursing homes?

They would also do well to recognize that older Americans are not monolithic in their needs, said Buchanan, who writes devotionals for older

adults.

Buchanan has identified four basic groups of older adults: the “go-go’s,” those who are still very active and independent; the “slow-go’s,” those who may have some physical limitations; the “no-go’s,” those who are homebound; and the “not-gonna-make-me-go,” young Boomers who don’t attend religious services on a regular basis.

Many congregational ministries, Buchanan said, focus on only one or two of those groups.

Engaging older adults

Large churches, such as Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., can do a lot more. In the days after the shutdown, the 7,000-member church prepared meals for many isolated church members and made daily phone calls to those living alone.

Now the emphasis has shifted to finding ways to engage older adults and allow them to contribute to the life of the church.

“They’re not here to take up space,” said Peggy Fulghum, minister to older adults at Johnson Ferry. “We want to keep them serving. I try to create ministries for them to be active and serve and give back to the community.”

For example, after noticing that in-person high school graduations were canceled, Fulghum asked older members to write congratulatory cards to high school seniors, encouraging them on their journey to adulthood and sharing a bit of their wisdom.

The cards were mailed to the church and the church staff is now sending them to families with high school seniors.

The church has also started a Tuesday morning Zoom call for older

members where they can greet each other, sing a song and pray as a group. They hope it encourages groups of older adults to start their own Zoom gatherings. And the church is retooling its “GrandCamp” ministry to allow grandparents and children to interact through online projects.

Live Oaks Community Church in Florida recently announced it will resume indoor worship for up to 100 people with social distancing.

The Littles, however, have decided to continue worshipping outdoors—at least for the time being.

“We think the golf cart experience is unique and we enjoy it,” Larry Little said. “It’s completely open and there’s always a little breeze. You don’t feel that sense of isolation. Isolation is worse than the virus for old folks.”