

To beckon Baby Boomers, adopt multifaceted approaches ministry

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WACO—Age means more than the number of birthdays a person has celebrated. It's a mix of chronological, psychological, functional and social factors, creating a complicated environment for churches to minister to older adults, said Amy Hanson, a national expert on gerontology.

Amy Hanson, a national expert on gerontology, spoke at the Beckoning the Boomers conference at Baylor University.

Perceptions and lifestyles play a larger role in determining functional age than does chronological age at times, Hanson said. How mobile people are, how physically active they are, who they connect with and what they are concerned about typically influence how people live and, correspondingly, how congregations can minister to them.

Hanson breaks adults older than 50 into three groups—frail elderly, senior adults and new-old Baby Boomers.

The frail elderly are limited physically and are a growing population segment with significant physical needs.

Senior adults are older than 70 and deal with loss of loved ones, financial security, health and mobility. They desire relationships and purpose.

The new-old Boomers are between ages 50 and 70, live active lifestyles and do not want to be referred to as senior adults.

Divisions between lifestyles means effective church ministries for older adults will be multifaceted to meet the needs and desires of those they are trying to serve, Hanson said during the [Beckoning the Boomers conference](#) at Baylor University, cosponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Baylor School of Social Work, Collin Baptist Association and First Baptist Church in Allen.

"A one-size-fits-all approach to adults 50-plus probably has never worked but definitely will not work now," she said.

Congregations typically have been effective at ministering to the older two groups of adults, Hanson said. For frail elderly, churches have programs that deliver meals and provide transportation, and ministers regularly visit shut-ins. Churches also have developed effective efforts at reaching senior adults, usually focused on fellowship opportunities.

The newest group of older adults is proving challenging to churches, Hanson said. "They are approaching aging completely differently."

New-old Boomers seem reluctant to accept they are aging, Hanson said. Some start new careers. Some begin dating again. Some are raising grandchildren. They are tech savvy.

Their lifestyles may be different, but Hanson believes they have the same desires as their elders—relationships and purpose. Churches that help Boomers engage with others and in meaningful activities will minister well to the new-old Boomers.

Keith Lowry of Texas Baptists' Bible study/discipleship team said some churches are starting ministries specifically aimed at engaging aging Baby Boomers. Although it still falls under the supervision of a senior adult minister, it is entirely led by a "dream team" of Baby Boomers looking to engage their cohorts with the gospel. The result is a ministry with organic relationships among Boomers but with the distance needed from the

"senior adult" label Boomers despise.

"When Baby Boomers lead out in reaching out to other Baby Boomers, the ministry that results is natural," Lowry said. "They know what other Baby Boomers want and how to connect with them."

Jim Ellor, professor in the [Baylor School of Social Work](#), reminded conference participants people can continue to grow spiritually no matter their age. Older adults face change regularly, forcing them to consider various serious life issues.

If congregations have a plan for encouraging spiritual growth in a person's latter years, they can be there for older adults to help them interpret the changes they are undergoing, Ellor said. God continues calling people to serve throughout their lives and calls them to follow him, he said.

Evangelistic efforts particularly are effective among older adults, Hanson said. They are open to authentic relationships and spiritual matters. They face changes and are getting closer to the end of their lives. They ask large questions about the meaning of life and seek answers.

"There is no age qualifier on the gospel," she said. "There are all kinds of verses that say salvation is for everyone."