

Ten Ways

TO BLESS AND BE BLESSED BY OLDER CHURCH MEMBERS



As many people have observed, aging is not for the faint of heart. In a culture obsessed with youth, older adults often feel sidelined and ignored by both society and church. As a part of aging, disability and illness can make life challenging. Questions about legacy and significance arise. Here are ten ways your congregation can actively love, support, include, and receive blessings from older members of the body of Christ.

1 CONTINUALLY AFFIRM EACH PERSON'S BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

We are beloved children of God, whose only comfort in life and in death is found in belonging to Jesus. Interactions with and between older church members are opportunities to affirm that they belong to Jesus and belong within the body of Christ. We do this in multiple ways, such as celebrating milestones, inviting testimonies, and consistently using language of deep respect, love, and gratitude for older members.

2 INTENTIONALLY INCLUDE OLDER MEMBERS IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Many older members have invested heavily in and served the church over the years. Think of creative ways to honor those contributions. Thank people for the specific ways in which they have blessed the community by sharing their spiritual gifts and talents. Consult regularly with older adults who have wisdom and experience in specific ministry areas.

3 REMOVE ANY BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

What changes can your congregation make to facilitate the participation of older members in church community activities? Think about making accommodations for persons with hearing challenges, adding seating that better meets older members' needs, offering rides, scheduling events when older members are most able to participate, and more. To help you identify barriers and ways of making accommodations, CRC Disability Concerns offers a helpful Accessibility Audit (bit.ly/accessibilityaudit).

4 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO WORSHIP FROM HOME

Some older members struggle to attend worship in person. Think of ways to bring the blessings of communal worship to people who are no longer able to attend. Provide recordings of worship services, serve communion at home, assign a deacon or elder to call regularly, and ask for prayer requests. One congregation's Sunday school children prepare a worship service to lead in the homes of persons who can no longer attend, accompanied by a pastor or elder.

5 SUPPORT OLDER ADULTS IN FACING CHANGE AND LOSS

As bodies change, as abilities diminish, and as the losses of friends and family members increase for older adults, there are opportunities to reflect on the reality, challenges, and presence of God in the church community. As you talk together about the challenges of loss, you may together discover the opportunities of a different stage: learning to be interdependent. Make space for lament, anger, and reflection with regard to God's presence. Bless each other by listening well and sharing deeply.

6 CREATE SPACE FOR RECONCILIATION AND HEALING

During the “third third” of life (after age 60), people often reflect on their past—on relationships they had, on decisions they made, and on resolved or unresolved conflicts. Old wounds that have never properly healed can resurface with devastating power. Older adults may need to seek reconciliation with support. Those in ministry and on pastoral care teams can be intentional about making space for healing among church members and between friends and family.

7 RESEARCH AND MAKE USE OF AVAILABLE SUPPORTS

Research local church and community support services that are available to assist older members with their physical and mental health and well-being. Contact the people in charge of these services for advice and help, and, as a congregation, consider supplementing such services if financial capacity is limited, rides are needed, or meal preparation might be helpful.

8 BE ALERT TO SPIRITUAL MALFORMATION

Every community is vulnerable to sin, and sometimes communities of older adults can become places where complaining and gossip take root. This can happen especially when they feel that they can no longer make significant contributions or are treated by others as mainly noncontributors. We who walk with them and are part of them can be alert to and minister to such situations and provide opportunities for positive interactions.

9 HELP WITH END-OF-LIFE PREPARATIONS

Blessing older members includes participating with them in making significant decisions about their life and end-of-life situations. “Nothing about me without me”—a statement that originates from disabilities-rights movements—reminds us to include older adults as much as possible in decisions about how and where they live, taking into account and helping them to express their fears and hopes around death. Talk about death openly and sensitively. Conversations might include these questions: “What do you hope to leave behind?” “When you think about your death, how do you feel—and why?” “Where and how have you experienced God present in your end of life?”

10 CARE FOR THE CAREGIVERS

Providing care is a privilege that comes with significant challenges. Caregivers may feel guilt because there’s always more that can be done, and many problems are not easily solved. Conflicts may arise among loved ones. Congregations can minister to caregivers by supporting them in prayer, talking with them about their challenges, helping family members listen to one another, and providing caregivers with time away to rest and rejuvenate. See one example of how siblings can work well together in caring for an aging parent at bit.ly/siblingcovenant.

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Faith Formation Ministries encourages and equips local Christian Reformed ministry leaders in their calling to shape intentional, lifelong faith in their context. For more on faith formation for older members, see our Intergenerational Church toolkit at crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits.

