

Summary of Older Adult Awareness Survey

Jan L. McGilliard, June 2004

Objective (quoted from the survey)

The Older Adult Ministries Committee of the Mid-Atlantic Synod (PCUSA) is seeking to increase awareness of older adult needs among our more than 1,400 congregations. The information you gather will allow you, your presbytery, and us: 1) to recognize the vital outreach, mission, and ministry to the older adult community each of your congregations is presently engaged in; 2) to introduce some programming or outreach possibilities your congregation hasn't yet considered; 3) to assess our services and resources to older adults within our congregations throughout the Synod so that we might continually improve in our ministry partnership with each of you.

Note: the survey consisted of three parts.

Part I provided background information

Part II asked questions specifically about their congregation

Part III asked questions about the Presbyterian outreach to older adults as a whole

Part I: Background Information – Summary of Results
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Thirteen of 14 presbyteries participated in the survey with the highest number of churches participating: Coastal Carolina (21), Peaks (21), and New Hope (12); and James (10), Shenandoah (10), and Western North Carolina (11) registering about equally. Eastern VA (237), Coastal Carolina (205), Peaks (194), and New Hope (145) registered the highest numbers of individuals participating in the survey.

"How long have you been a baptized member?" - Half the respondents answered in the 50-70 year category, and some did not answer the question (perhaps because it was an ambiguous question). Four per cent indicated they are pastors.

Size of congregation: 40% of respondents reported they are in congregations of <200, and another 40% said they are in congregations of >400. Churches responding: 26% are churches of >300 members, but 48% are churches >300 membership.

37% of respondents indicated they are part of suburban churches, but their suburban churches were only 27% of all churches.

Churches are 33% rural, 40% urban, and 27% suburban.

Age of respondent: 24% responding are under 55 years of age, with the remainder spread evenly over the other age categories: 20% are 55-64; 26% are 65-74; 23% are 75-84; 7% are 85+. Two-thirds of respondents are female; one-third male.

Part II: Your Congregation

1. Older adults in our congregation need transportation help and other special assistance

Most respondents agree that older adults need help with transportation and other special assistance. Highest percentages are reported in urban presbyteries such as National Capital (81% Agree and Strongly Agree), Baltimore (76%), Western Carolina (76%), and New Castle (73%).

2. Our congregation is very involved in working to meet the special needs of older adults

Most respondents feel their congregations are very involved in working to meet the special needs of older adults. However, one quarter of respondents in New Castle Presbytery somewhat disagree with this statement, and 5-16% of other presbyteries somewhat disagree. Respondents in James and Salem agree most strongly.

3. Our church links older adults to community resources

Most respondents agree or somewhat agree with this statement, the next highest response category being "somewhat disagree." Particularly notable is that respondents in Salem and Shenandoah agree most strongly but still answer this question evenly across categories from strongly agree to disagree, indicating a wider variety of perceptions about how older adults are linked to community resources.

4. We participate in meals on wheels

Greatest participation in meals on wheels occurs in Baltimore, Eastern VA, and New Hope (68-81%). Lowest participation occurs in Charlotte, National Capital, and New Castle (16-24%). These are presbyteries with many urban churches. Churches are frequently used as nutrition sites for meals on wheels.

5. Our church provides visitation to homebound, hospitalized, & assisted living residents

Most respondents (70%) are in agreement on this question! One notable exception is Charlotte Presbytery, where 18% of the respondents disagree with this statement.

6. We have support groups for grief, dementia, and caregivers

About half of respondents agree and half disagree with this statement, with a significant number not responding to the question. Since the literature indicates great need for such support groups, this appears to be an area for improvement in our congregations.

7. We provide educational opportunities regarding late life decision making

Responses varied wildly on this question! Few respondents strongly agree or strongly disagree. This is another area of great need among older adults and their families. It is believed that making decisions about later life is best done in a supportive environment, among persons who are trusted and who care. This is an area for improvement in our congregations.

8. We provide mentoring opportunities and intergenerational activities

About one-third of respondents indicate their churches are involved in providing mentoring and intergenerational activities, though few strongly agree with this statement. James and Salem are highest for "strongly agree," and disagree less than other presbyteries. Between those who disagree and those who did not respond, it is likely that mentoring and intergenerational activities could be strengthened in our congregations.

9. There is a need for greater attention to the elderly and their families in our congregation.

Respondents agree there is a need for greater attention to the elderly and their families in their congregations. Baltimore and Eastern VA responded evenly across areas of agreement, demonstrating a variety of perceptions. Both presbyteries are densely populated. This is definitely an area for improvement.

10. Our congregation is very knowledgeable of and sensitive to older adult needs

Most respondents agree with this statement, though 10% somewhat disagree. Respondents in four presbyteries show a variety of perceptions, spreading their responses evenly from "agree" to "strongly agree." While respondents feel their congregations are knowledgeable of the needs of their older members, it is evident they feel this group needs greater attention (see question 9). Respondents demonstrate awareness of need, and this is a good thing.

11. The older adults in our congregation are very active as volunteers in the church

There is definite agreement with this statement! Older adults are very active as volunteers in the church! Amen!

12. We would be interested in attending a conference on Older Adult Ministry

Many did not respond to this question, but among those who did, Charlotte and National Capital show the most interest in attending a conference on older adult ministry. Otherwise, responses varied quite evenly across agree to disagree. Few strongly agreed or strongly disagreed.

Part III: The Presbyterian Church (USA) as a Whole

13. The church is not very sensitive to the needs of senior members

Slightly more than half of respondents disagree with this statement, and about one third agree with this statement to some degree. Many feel churches are sensitive to the needs of seniors, but there appears to be room for improvement.

14. There are many opportunities for health education in the church

Responses vary on this question from somewhat agree to disagree. Many did not respond. If health education is considered important (and it IS Biblical!), then there is room to improve. New Castle and Shenandoah demonstrate higher percentages of disagreement to this statement.

15. The church provides outstanding services to those in long-term care facilities

More people agree than disagree with this statement, but a high number did not answer. National Capital and Western NC are low in agreement and high in disagreement.

16. Churches in general provide facilities and services (bathrooms, ramps, etc.) that are well suited for older adults

Most respondents agree with this statement, though there is some disagreement in Baltimore, Charlotte, and Salem.

17. Churches are well mobilized in providing special assistance to senior citizens

Again, many did not answer this question, but respondents in Baltimore, New Castle, and Western NC indicate higher percentages of respondents disagree with this statement. James and Shenandoah show higher percentages of respondents agreeing with this statement.

18. Most churches offer help for older adults for medical visits, grocery shopping, etc.

Responses again vary on this question from agree to disagree. Baltimore and James report higher percentages of disagreement. Many did not respond to this question.

19. In most churches family members who care for aging parents often feel isolated and overwhelmed

Most respondents agree with this statement, though many did not respond. There is a sense that caregivers often feel isolated and overwhelmed. This is an area for improvement.

20. There is as much outreach offered to older adults as to children and youth.

About the same number responded "strongly agree" as responded "strongly disagree." Otherwise, responses are evenly distributed from agree to disagree. Perceptions vary widely on this statement. Baltimore and New Castle disagree more than the others.

21. There is a need for greater attention to the elderly in our congregations

Most agree with this statement, which is congruent with question #9.

22. An adequate number of Christians spend time in advocacy for older church members

Responses vary widely on this question, and many did not respond. A high of 76% of Charlotte respondents indicate agreement on this statement.

23. Training opportunities in older adult ministry are needed

Most respondents agree with this statement, though a high of about 24% in Charlotte and James somewhat disagree with this statement. Again, many did not respond.

24. Most older adults in the church are very comfortable with their lives as they are

Most respondents agree with this statement, especially respondents in Charlotte, Salem, and Western NC. There is notable disagreement (24-30%) among respondents in Baltimore, James, and New Castle. A good number did not respond to this statement.

Summary Narrative:

Older adults are *actively* involved as volunteers in our congregations! Individuals of all (adult) ages responded to the survey, but 75% over age 55, 2/3 of whom are women.

There is consensus about two things:

- 1) There is awareness of and sensitivity to the special needs of older adults, and
- 2) There is a need for greater attention to the elderly and their families. Most (80%) feel their congregations are involved in providing visitation to homebound, hospitalized, and assisted-living residents, and many feel the church does a good job of connecting older adults with community resources.

Areas for improvement/consideration:

- Attention to the special needs of older adults
- Educational opportunities for end of life decision making and health education
- Support groups for grief, dementia, and caregivers
- Mentoring opportunities and intergenerational activities
- Knowledge of churches other than one's own – knowledge of national trends

Lessons learned from about the survey:

- Need a response category for "I don't know" responses
- Respondents feel more confident answering questions about their own congregations than about churches in general
- A longer time-line is needed for carrying out the survey (all who asked were granted ample time for administering and submitting the survey)
- Presbyterian Women are excellent facilitators for such a survey
- Many PW moderators never learned about the survey via the Synod-wide mailing to churches
- Many churches did not fill out the information sheet provided with the survey

Complete survey results are available at the OAM web site at www.civic.bev.net/oam.