

The gift of gray hairs

By [Diane Roth](#)

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It happened again. A young family visited our congregation recently. They are looking for a church. They liked the worship service. They liked the kneelers (this is sort of unusual for a Lutheran church; we have had kneelers since the 1960s); they liked the sermon. But as they looked around, they made the observation, "There are an awful lot of gray heads out there."

It's true. There's no way you can get around it. There are an awful lot of gray heads in our congregation. This is even more true in the summer when there are no Sunday School classes, and a fair number of our young families are sporadic in their attendance, for whatever reason. But, even in the fall, when the children and their families return, there are still an awful lot of gray heads in our congregation.

Back in the late 1950s and 1960s, when this church began, it was a much larger congregation than it is now. Back then, there were a thousand children in Sunday School (they say), and the congregation numbered about 3,000. The schools were overflowing as well; it was a young community with many families. The demographics of the community have changed since then, so, even with a steady (if smaller) stream of young families, the community, and the congregation skews older.

There's nothing we can do about it.

Well, there is one thing we can do: We can start seeing those gray heads as a gift, and as a strength.

It already happens, on occasion. There is a teenage young woman who sits at worship every Sunday with an older retired woman and her friends. The young woman is training as a singer: she sang "Pie Jesu" at our Good Friday Service. The older woman recently gave her a gift: a number of opera librettos.

After worship, one day, one of our young parents was in tears. I had announced the death of one of our older members that morning. I checked in with the young woman, concerned about why she was crying. "I'm sad about Pearl," she said. Pearl

used to sit near their family and interacted with her children nearly every Sunday.

I suspect that we stereotype older people as resistant to change, stuck in their ways, and old-fashioned. May I offer this counterpoint: Resistance to change can come at any age, if we're honest about it. Some of the most progressive, open-minded, interesting people I know are past retirement age. Some of them are WAY past retirement age. It's true, some of them are tired, and have less energy than they did when they were 25. (I know this because I have less energy than I did when I was 25.) But they are a gift and a resource that we need to value much more than we do.

Here are just a few ways that older adults can enrich our congregations:

1. Mature Faith and Life Experiences. Certainly, you can get old without getting wise. But the sheer volume of faith stories and life experiences of the older members of our congregations is staggering. One widower recently told me about how he and his wife used to make the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads, before they went to sleep every night. One woman told the story about getting fired from a store job once long ago, because she wouldn't follow around "certain types of people" to find out if they were stealing. Another man talked about his experiences as a pilot in World War II. "I thought I'd never live to be 21," he said. There are thousands of stories out there from our older members -- stories of what it was like to leave the small town and come to the city, stories of faith and doubt and hardship, stories of love and loss and life.

2. Fewer Sacred Cows. There's something about getting old, and facing death, that clarifies what is important, and what is not important. My mother puts the liberal bumper stickers on her car, and she doesn't care who knows it. Older members of our congregation are often the ones who are most open to (for example) women pastors. In our congregation, it is our older members who have been coming up with some of the most interesting ideas for outreach to our community.

3. They are Going to Die. I hesitated to add this one at first, for a couple of reasons. One, it's true, we are all going to die someday, although it seems like we do a pretty good job avoiding that reality, sometimes. But then we can't. And it's actually not a bad thing to be reminded of our mortality. It's not a bad thing to spend some time with people who have wrinkles, and whose physical limitations are

out there for all to see. If we're lucky, we're all going to have gray hairs someday. What are we going to be like when we get there? What will be important to us then?

A number of young adults train here every spring to go out and lead mission trips all summer. On the Sunday morning before they leave, they worship at our early service, which is mostly attended by the older members of our congregation. And it's a beautiful sight, seeing the 22-year-olds and the older congregation, all singing the liturgy together. And it's a beautiful sight, watching them after the service, as they listen and share with one another their plans, hopes and lives.

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