Aging Together
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Strengthening Connections for Older Adults through Faith Communities:
Summary of Group Discussion (June 8, 2017)

1. What are the obstacles to social engagement in later life?

Health issues
- Hearing impairment
- Physical impairment
- Accessibility issues (lack of or hard to find elevator)
- Mental health/ Depression
- Cognitive decline
- Disability
- Loss of insight due to dementia

Transportation and Living
- Transportation issues (have to be available earlier, have delays in booking as opposed to just getting in a car and driving when you no longer have your own vehicle or ability to drive, DARTS can make you late and you have to book in advance, bus system at night not ideal)
- Stores not within walking distances
- Rural living
- Structure of communities now changed, culture is more secluded
- Physical environment not designed well for elderly
- Lack of economic incentive to construct senior housing
- City housing also not ideal -> bugs

Family and Friends
- Being widowed (being with one person for so long that talking to others is difficult, or the spouse that has passed away was the outgoing one that set up social engagements).
- Being a caregiver
- Loss of friends, peers and family
- Older people don't get together much
- Scaring off people because they aren't aware of our changing needs
- No more "open door policy" with respect to looking after each other
- Having less family in close proximity, not having family to look after us
- People not understanding our needs
- New culture of being independent
- Self sufficient and family sufficient rather than community dependent

Other
- Language barriers
-Cultural barriers
- Sometimes obstacles are perceived by others, not the individual
- Social stigma about being old
- Lack of knowledge about supports (both in the senior and in potential helpers)
- Finances
-Motivation is also an obstacle (having motivation to go out, use transportation etc.)

- Habits (if you don't have social connections to begin with, hard to start them)
- Inconsistency with health care providers
- Longevity leading to new obstacles
- Everything is over regulated (ex. Record checks to volunteer)
- Weather
- Technical support
- Big box stores means seniors aren't known by local businesses, and are harder to identify

2. How does social isolation show up in your faith community?
Transportation and Location
- Not having accessible entrance to accommodate everyone. Old churches have lots of stairs.
- Churches no longer provide transportation to those in need due to insurance
- If you are in long term care homes
- People have trouble going to church in winter (walking or driving is difficult)

Health
- When older adults get ill or have health issues, people visit often, but then visits dwindle to the point where new churchgoers don't know you.
- Silently, having a hearing impairment

Social Support
- Older folks get forgotten, because people who knew that person have passed as well.
- Have busy lives ourselves and it is hard to take care of others on top of that
- Cliques within the church
- Death of close friend or spouse can lead to isolation
- Not doing good job connecting youth groups with older adults for engagement
- No one follows up if you stop going to church
- In large congregations, it is more challenging to notice individuals who no longer come but in smaller congregations, people notice more.

Other
- Inability to use email or technology can be isolating
- When older adults stop coming due to lack of interest
- Churches shutting down events

- No more holiday meals at church kitchens due to insurance issues
-Gossip, hearing about someone's health issues or personal issues such as a divorce
- Indicators such as external appearance, change in behaviour
- Can't contribute, not knowing how to contribute, not be given opportunities to give back
- Just because you have grey hair, you are treated differently (vocabulary used to talk to you is different)
- Difficult to have to start over (if moved recently, or lost a spouse, or recovering a long time)
- Social stigma to aging nowadays, so we lie and say we are younger, but in the 1950s, we used to say we were older because older people garnered respect.

3. Who in your faith community reaches out and finds these people?
- Grace Lutheran Church sends out newsletters every week to keep people connected
- Unitarian church has funds to help those who are less fortunate (ex. Local funeral, join an activity)
- People such as volunteers or pastors being flexible about the program to include seniors in socialization time.
- Should be anyone in the congregation who sees issue to bring it to leader (like the pastor) and pastor should be flexible to fix the issue. Some people who bring up concerns are designated to be on the lookout.
-Young people are very present and help seniors with mobility issues.
-Most people are training to be welcoming in congregations
- Designated friendship group made of older adults that meet once a week.
- One of the church members volunteers to deliver flowers to individuals at a church.
- Meals on wheels volunteers, Red Cross
- Book mobile in rural areas
- Leaders and volunteers
- Visiting professional healthcare workers report to their supervisors who contact doctors and nurses
- "Call Out" committee that calls twice per year
- Also members of groups (e.g. Coffee club)
- Attendance monitor check each week to see that their people are there at church. Each monitor has about 15 people that they need to check on each Sunday.
- Officer from Salvation Army follows up with people as well
- Caring committee works by postal code and groups people in a similar area to be in touch with each other
- Pastoral visitor (10 hours per week)
- Ministry team made of 3 people, one in charge of family and one in charge of seniors
- Seniors club
- New members fill out a survey that talks about what seniors are good at and then ask them to have a part in committees, gardening etc.
- Identify those seniors who help and encourage them to continue and to find out who they are helping
- Creating buddy system for seniors or in general
- None of us know who is struggling in our communities

4. How do faith communities successfully overcome social isolation in older members?

Programs
- Church programs that draw people in and a warm atmosphere to keep them coming.
- Offering volunteer opportunities to help, provides meaning/purpose for older adult
- Giving people jobs to do
- Offering programs to partake in
- Provided services like the good food box, delivering it to houses which is very personal and knowing people's names
-Mentor- Church grandmothers
- Advertising activities and educational events.
- Music programs and movie nights
- Food is a connector
- Time-appropriate events
- Dinner at Church every 3 or 4 months
- Birthday club every month
- Create more opportunities
- Knitting groups, storytelling groups, community building exercises
- Secret pen-pal exchange
- After-service lunch for seniors
- Grandmothers for Africa: Grandmothers raising grandchildren with Stephen Lewis Foundation
- Utilizing elderly people in church/faith community without burning them out
- Having a seniors coordinator and wellness centers
- One church has an open house policy on Friday afternoons for people of all faiths or to reach those that are not in a faith community
- Angela's place- unwed moms gave ideas for seniors to volunteer at Angela's
- To overcome physical discomforts, remove some pews and replace with comfortable armchairs
 - Once a month Seniors Sunday, provide transportation, and hold small group discussion afterwards with snacks

Transportation
- Transportation network, informal carpooling
- Taxi chit: the church pays and gives people tickets to come to church and people in the same area and taxi carpool
- Get cheaper bus fare

Intermingling between groups
- More mixing of different groups to get to know each other
- Get to know people who sit around you so you notice when they don't come to service
- Intergenerational activities
- Being welcoming and encouraging
- Sharing vulnerability among and between members of church
- Have lots of small groups

- Build social capital
- Having a sense of community within the church
- You need to overcome resistance amongst members
- Find ways to help integrate new members
- Building trust with senior to overcome privacy concerns and fear of accepting help
-The Pastoral Care Committee proposed a Hospitality House system to know the members of your House by grouping people in houses
- Rotate people who have to work together to pull off an event by grouping them in "Hospitality Houses", this gets them cooperating together and therefore knowing each other, collaborating, etc. Allows everyone to participate
- Pastor or leaders should also go to informal groups such as knitting groups to get more pastoral information than ever as they talk about who is in need and ill.

Check in person
- There should be a number or contact person to call and talk to in faith communities
- Someone to call people who have missed service a couple of times to check in
- Needs to be a group within the church that is responsible for isolation
- Parish nursing (Catholic)
- If a member is put into LTC or nursing home, volunteers need to visit them from the church
- Going to them when they can't get there, get out and be present in the community

Other
-Tell isolated seniors that they are important in the things that they do.
- Personalized invitations
- Giving greeting cards and holiday cards with names on it.
-Giving food (keeping it in a church freezer and is just available for people to take)
- Awareness
- Non hierarchical planning
- Advocating, communicating
- Getting referrals from hospitals who let us know that one of our members is in the hospital
- Need to take responsibility and address isolation as an issue
- Mailing systems, find places to advertise
- Using community network (supermarket, doctor, dentist)
- Make sure when new minister comes in that there is continuity and knowledge of who needs help in the faith community
- Education to shift priorities and focus
- Build connections between faith groups so we can call them up to connect seniors to their own faith.
- Accepting some people don't want social activities
- Seniors still needs to have choices and be allowed to be heard about their choices
- Each person should be valued for their life and who they are now.
-Disclosing information about dementia led to more supports offered to both husband and wife and a more enjoyable time at church. People offered to help keep an eye on the husband with dementia giving the wife some time for herself.

-The faith leader is likely the first to learn confidentially about the diagnosis associated with memory problems.
- Some training in how to support a person or couples in this transition toward disclosure would be helpful.

Responses from Evaluation Forms :

Do you have any suggestions for specific topics for another workshop to help faith communities support seniors?

- Sharing of activities in various churches.
- A drop-in storefront to share community resources
- Community fair to gather people from all cultures and different populations to come together for all to benefit, build and grow.
- Develop a "hotline" for various communities to report concerns about any community member who might be marginalized
- What about people who are not active in faith communities?
- How do you identify and draw out isolated seniors from outside of faith communities?
- What do you do if you learn of an isolated senior and they don't belong to a faith community?
- A chance to understand our role alongside caregivers and other family
- Investigate intergenerational activities further – it was discussed a lot in small group discussion
- Intergenerational possibilities
- Discuss rural seniors
- Discuss the aspect of mental health
- How do we engage seniors who are very set in their ways

PostScript:

Most of the participants at this workshop seemed to be comfortable using the terms "church" to describe their "faith community" "minister" and "Pastor" to describe their faith leaders. These terms may not be applicable in the future with participants from Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist and Muslim communities.

Alternate words to describe places of worship and spiritual congregation: Gurdwara, Mosque, Pagoda, Shul, Synagogue, Temple

We are certain that the "non-church" communities of faith will relate more to their own words and structures and will best be able to describe them when they become participants in this project