

# 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, the elderly 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](http://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. Elderly persons 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 the elderly can become places where complaining and gossip take root. This can happen especially when the elderly 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 elderly persons 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](http://bit.ly/siblingcovenant).

Disability Concerns strives to promote and foster relationships, communities, and societies where everybody belongs and everybody serves by assisting churches, agencies, institutions, and leadership within the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

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](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits).

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## TO ENCOURAGE FAITH FORMATION IN THE “THIRD THIRD” OF LIFE



The psalmist declares that the Lord’s people “bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green” (Ps. 92:14, ESV). What a beautiful biblical vision! “Old age” looks different today from the way it was in the psalmist’s day. At that time, few people reached the age of 60. Today, though, 60 is considered the beginning of the “third third” of life, a season when new opportunities await. Church communities are called to find fresh ways to celebrate and encourage the gifts and service of people in the third third of life—fresh ways to embody the Psalm 92 vision.

### 1 REFRAME RETIREMENT AS A NEW CALLING

Retirement is an opportunity to reexamine one’s callings and to explore fresh opportunities for kingdom service. Christian communities can encourage their older members to rediscover how the Lord is inviting them to serve through volunteer opportunities, cultivating new discipling relationships, or even embarking on a new career.

### 2 INVITE OLDER MEMBERS TO SHARE THEIR FAITH STORIES

The longer we live, the more ways we see the Lord’s faithfulness carry us through good times and hard times. Stories of God’s faithfulness bless people of all ages. Invite older members to participate in short interview-style conversations during a worship service, among small groups of teens, in catechism classes, and more. (For additional ideas, see the Faith Storytelling toolkit at [crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits).)

### 3 PROVIDE FAITH LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THIRD-THIRDERS

To follow Christ is to be a lifelong learner. One congregation introduces its seniors to new spiritual disciplines. In another, teens coach the older members in using social media. Yet another congregation offered an intergenerational astronomy course that was primarily attended by its older members, who loved interacting with the younger people who were present.

### 4 INCORPORATE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF FAITH

The four Building Blocks of Faith (“I belong to Jesus and his community”; “I know the biblical story and my place in it”; “I have hope”; “I am called and equipped to serve”) provide guidelines for assessing how our church community ministers to and with all generations. Church leaders can use this tool for strategic planning, and small groups find it useful for discussion. (For more on this topic, see the Building Blocks of Faith toolkit at [crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits).)

### 5 INVITE THIRD-THIRDERS TO SERVE AS “HOLY NOTICERS”

One youth pastor found her calling to ministry at age 15 when an 80-year-old woman told her, “I’ve noticed that children are drawn to you as if you were a magnet. I wonder what that means for you.” Children, teens, and young adults need “holy noticers” in their lives! Sometimes sharing a brief observation can help someone discern God’s calling.

## 6 CREATE FORUMS FOR THIRD-THIRDERS TO REFLECT ON THEIR CALLINGS

Lifelong faith formation is strengthened through reflection and conversation. Form small groups to discuss books like Walter Wright's *The Third Third of Life*. We need each other's wisdom, supplemented by conversation guides, in order to discern together how the Lord is inviting us to walk with him and bless others in the new seasons of our lives.

## 7 PLAN A SERMON SERIES ON BEING AN INTERGENERATIONAL CHURCH

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). Infants, children, teens, young adults, the middle-aged, healthy seniors, and seniors whose strength is diminishing are all distinct parts of the body and yet one in Christ. Consider planning a sermon series to explore this wondrous reality, creating rich opportunities for cross-generational conversations afterward.

## 8 INTENTIONALLY LINK THIRD-THIRDERS WITH OTHER GENERATIONS

Research has revealed that (a) the two loneliest generations are young adults and seniors, and (b) these two generations love being together. There are so many ways to link older folks with younger generations. Invite middle school students to interview senior members about their faith journey. Form reciprocal mentoring relationships between young adults and seniors. Provide opportunities for them to engage in service opportunities together.

## 9 INTENTIONALLY CULTIVATE A "WALKING PACE" FOR CHURCH LIFE

Life often rushes by at 80 miles per hour, but God walks with us at our walking pace. Third-thirders can help us all navigate life at God's pace. John Swinton writes, "God's time is gentle time. . . . When we slow down and pay attention to the slowness of God's time, we encounter one another differently. . . ." (*Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship*). Studies consistently tell us that folks of all ages have deep longings for richer relationships and meaningful conversations. Our "third-third" communities can lead the way as our congregations give them opportunities to do so.

## 10 HONOR THE THIRD THIRD IN WORSHIP SERVICES AND OTHER GATHERINGS

Invite older adults to offer prayers of blessing or words of encouragement at baptisms, weddings, professions of faith, and other significant moments in younger people's lives, such as graduations. Hold an annual celebration of milestones experienced by older members, such as a brief liturgical recognition of all who have retired in the past year or all who recently lost a spouse. Introduce a hymn by briefly noting the significance it has in the life of an older member.

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 in the third third of life, see our Intergenerational Church toolkit at [crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits).

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## ***Worshipping with older folks***

***Syd Hielema, Faith Formation Ministries***

Faith formation: “Christ being formed in us” (Gal. 4.19b).

Three stages: vigorous old age, declining old age, and the transition time between the two.

“Belonging” as a central value for all ages with a unique expression at every stage: a value that integrates the beautiful polarity expressed in I Cor. 12: one body, many parts.

Key question: what practices support the value of belonging to a worshipping community for older folks?

<b><i>Descriptor of life for older folks</i></b>	<b><i>Potential unintended negative consequences</i></b>	<b><i>Practices that have capacity to enhance belonging</i></b>
Shift from fulltime employment to other kingdom callings	Perceiving this as a shift from “work” to “play”	Preaching and worship leading that continually celebrate lifelong faith formation
Shift from power brokers to wise elders	Bitterness and resentment about the ways the next generation is “messaging up”	A worship ethos filled with respect for every age group, expressed in intentional inclusivity.
Shift from being needed to feeling unneeded	Depression, discouragement, anger	Examples: wise ways to incorporate faith storytelling within corporate worship; include IGEN practices within the liturgy.
The realities of dying and death loom larger	Ignore or downplay these realities.	Worship holds capacity to build a platform for difficult but necessary conversations and to lament well.
Shift from parenting to grandparenting and great grandparenting – shift in faith nurture responsibilities	Confusion concerning these faith formation responsibilities, especially when ones’ children don’t walk with the Lord.	Provide resources that equip folks to worship with their grandchildren.
Simplistic stereotypes about traditional vs. contemporary worship can undermine belonging	The uniquenesses of every worshiper are ignored.	Lead worship to facilitate “heart-to-heart” engagement between songs and persons.
Significant life milestones include retirement, deaths of loved ones, notable anniversaries	Profound life realities are not properly named and celebrated	Celebrate appropriate milestones in simple yet profound ongoing ways.
One person’s self-description of faith’s seasons: walking with Jesus as Savior, Lord, Teacher and Mystery.	Getting stuck along the way and then regressing.	Intentionally naming and honoring all four in corporate worship. “Mystery” invites practices shaped by an ethos of slow contemplation.