



## A Publication of the Presbytery of West Virginia

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#### More information:

<https://www.doinggoodtogether.org/bhf/visit-older-adults>

<https://salmonhealth.com/blog/things-visiting-elders/>

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/participating-activities-you-enjoy-you-age>

## March or Meander?

I would like to publicly apologize. I know it is not very fashionable, but I must do it. After all, wisdom sometimes comes later than we wish!

Over the years, I have gone with children, youth, and adults into retirement homes, nursing homes, and older adult communities with little or no preparation. Generally, we just called to say we were coming and marched through with various gifts, musical numbers, flowers, carols, and cards.

Within an hour or two, we were gone, having laid waste to the peace and orderliness of the community. Seldom did we stop to listen or slow down enough to hear, to learn, and to wonder at the amazing gifts to be found in those halls and homes. We should apologize for our self-centeredness and, frankly, our fear that somehow old age would rub off on us with its call to courage and needful change. I am so sorry we marched through when we should have meandered.

Over the last several years, I have spent many of my days with my mother and father in one of our wonderful Presbyterian Homes. I have seen many

generous volunteers love and care for the residents with grace and respect, but I have also seen countless groups parade in and out, giving what they have but never really honoring the residents with an opportunity for real community. I have come to enjoy this community, to cherish its stories, and to be comfortable with walking a little slower and listening a bit longer so that the wisdom and laughter of generations of experience can become a part of my heart and soul. It is a treasure I am so glad to have discovered. With a little effort, it is available to all.

Here are some suggestions for those who prepare to enter these communities:

» Before you race over to a retirement home with a group, visit the community and talk to the



staff about the group you plan to bring and what they might do or help with when they come. Staff members can give you great direction on how to interact with residents and what kinds of programs or activities are well received. They can assist with the timing of your visit so that most residents are available and alert. They can also guide you as to what kinds of gifts are helpful and which are not, and can alert you to food restrictions and allergies.

- » After you have decided what your group will do, ask several residents if they are willing to talk to group members before or after the program or activity. Note any special interests and experiences that might be a good match for individuals in your group. Ask if you can take photos now and later.
- » Follow up with staff by confirming your plans, your group's size, the timing of your visit, parking needs, and any equipment you might bring or need.
- » Talk to your group about what to expect, and show them photos of the facility and residents they might meet.
- » Have group members take part in activities that give them an idea of what it feels like to be older. Wearing gardening gloves while they try to eat or write can help them understand how it feels to lose dexterity. Ask group members what other activities arthritis might make difficult or impossible.
- » Explain that when some people get older they have trouble remembering words and things that happened recently. Try playing a game like "Taboo" that challenges people to search for words as they try to express what they mean. Or ask your group to pick a topic to talk about like fishing, soccer, fast food, or Christmas. Have them write down five key words they would normally use to tell about these experiences. Then challenge the group to make a 30-second statement about their chosen activity without using any of those five words. Then talk about how it felt to have to search for words, and how frustrating it would be to have to do that all the time.
- » Talk about the people your group might meet and the things that have happened in their lives, such as the wars that occurred, the Great Depression, the invention of TV, and the first space missions. Formulate questions that might serve as conversation starters.
- » Talk about older adults your group already knows and make the connection with the other older adults you will soon meet. Talk about how important it is for those people to know they are remembered. Older members in your congregation might help your group practice by sharing their life stories.
- » Plan plenty of time to talk with residents and plenty of time to debrief after your visit.

Pray before your group goes and after you come home. God will be with you through it all and will guide you into amazing and life-affirming places as you serve and are served during this activity.

At your debriefing, discuss what group members heard and saw. Ask them to name one person they were excited to meet, one thing that surprised them, and one thing from this experience that they would pray about. Ask what they discovered about themselves, what they would do differently next time — and where they saw God.

Building multi-generational relationships is a significant need for our congregations. What used to be a natural part of our faith community is now something we need to carefully plan.



So many of our church families do not live in the same area as their extended families, and therefore lack the contact with other generations that can give depth and fullness to their lives and faith.

Consider "adopt a grandparent" programs in your congregation, pairing children and youths with older members. Good and consistent contact with our older generations can be an amazing and gifted part of our lives. Take courage and take the plunge, slow your march, and meander through the treasures of these mature generations.