

# Helping Congregants and Families Navigate Aging-Related Changes

*A Guide for Faith Leaders*

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# An Introduction to Meadowlark's Resources

For clergy members and other faith leaders

**W**e know you have a lot on your plate with so many people to minister to and practical matters to address. Different events and phases in life require different types of support, especially for seniors who have a variety of distinct concerns and their adult children who may need help navigating the new terrain of aging parents.

As specialists in senior living and care, we at Meadowlark want to support you in offering care and counsel to older adults and their grown children. We created this collection of articles to help you understand the aging process and to provide you with insight and resources that may be helpful as you support your older congregants.

## For Faith Leaders

- Special Considerations of Aging Congregants
- Talking with Aging Congregants
- Literature for Older Adults
- Community Resources for Older Adults
- Helping Congregants with Out-of-Area Parents
- Helping Seniors with Funeral Planning

The binder also includes helpful information on common concerns about aging for volunteers, congregants and family members. These were created in handout format, so you can easily share them with your community. Please find them enclosed as follows:

- Tips for Volunteering with the Elderly
- Navigating Later Years
- How to Support an Aging Relative or Friend
- How to Discuss Moving with an Aging Relative or Friend

We hope you and your community find these handouts helpful. If you have any questions or feedback, please feel free to contact us.



**Lonnie Baker**  
Chief Executive  
Officer, Meadowlark

Meadowlark is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to enhancing senior lifestyles through our person-centered approach. In addition to running Meadowlark Hills, a continuing care retirement community in Manhattan, we offer numerous home health and outpatient services and programs for residents of the greater Flint Hills area.



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# Special Considerations of Aging Congregants

**F**aith leaders play a significant role in many of life's rites of passage. As you shepherd your congregation through each phase of life, it can be helpful to understand some of the common concerns and issues older adults face in their later years. There's no one-size-fits-all of what aging looks like. Many older adults thrive in their later years. However, there are some prevailing themes to be aware of.

## Memory Considerations

One common change that comes with aging is memory loss. This can be unsettling for people to experience, so it's important to acknowledge

and understand. Some memory loss, like walking into a room and forgetting why you were headed there, is perfectly normal. However, some changes, like putting keys in the refrigerator, might point to a more serious issue.

There are many activities and lifestyle adjustments that can improve memory function. Diet, exercise, stimulation and connecting with others are all important aspects of maintaining healthy mental function. Research has shown that incorporating some of these changes earlier rather than later can help postpone the onset of more serious issues.

*"It's important for older adults to be a part of a community and a contributing member of that community."*

Kathleen Spearman, Social Worker, Meadowlark

*"Everyone is different in their aging process, but we are all going to experience changes in our memory. Our ability to recall, remember and focus are all going to decrease as we age. That's a normal thing. Where we want to pay special consideration is when those difficulties or changes are atypical or interfere with daily function."*

Michelle Haub, Speech Language Pathologist and Leader for Special Programs, Meadowlark

## Isolation and Depression

Many aspects of normal life — sickness, physical impairment, loss of friends and family, changing roles (like becoming or needing a caretaker), relocation — can change as adults age. Each of these changes may create a feeling of loss or grief, which can lead to isolation or withdrawal. A sense of disconnection only exacerbates these challenges and may lead to depression.

Older adults can benefit from connecting with others through volunteer outreach, either as recipients of outreach or by volunteering themselves.

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# Special Considerations of Aging Congregants

## Financial Considerations

Financial health is about much more than a bank account balance. And estate planning encompasses many aspects of a person's life. Being organized and aware of a variety of monetary, legal and health assets and documentation can provide peace of mind. It's important to be able to answer several questions: Where are your bank accounts? Whose name is on them? Do you have a will? Do you have life or long-term care insurance policies? Where are your copies of those policies? Do you have a power of attorney? Do you have a funeral plan?

*"We get very tied to our surroundings. A lot of people have lived in their homes for decades. It could be a home they built themselves or a family home that goes back generations. Or they could have lost a spouse and the physical home houses those memories of them together. Putting yourself in their shoes can help you understand why they might not want to leave."*

Bridget Larkin, Social Services Leader, Meadowlark

*"I help families navigate financial matters. 'Do you know what you own?' is a neutral question that sparks thinking about finances and putting affairs in order. That peace of mind is worth its weight in gold."*

Rita Harsch, Financial Counselor, Meadowlark

## Aging in Place

Many older adults want to stay at home for as long as possible. It's important to understand that "home" is much more than a physical space. It can carry a lot of meaning. There's also a sense of independence and autonomy that's linked to home. While some people welcome the new possibilities that come with moving to a retirement community, others prefer to age in place. For those who opt to stay at home, the most important factor is safety. There are many in-home services to support those who age in place.

## Resources for Aging Adults

You and your volunteers are an important support system for this population. Even the simplest interaction — a phone call or

handwritten note — can be incredibly meaningful and can help open the door to more conversations. As you reach out, keep these considerations in mind.

Meadowlark provides many programs and services for the greater Manhattan community in addition to Meadowlark residents. These include home health services, memory care and Parkinson's programs (both of which have components for caregivers and affected adults), fitness services, rehabilitation care, outpatient therapy and our Passport program.

Meadowlark also offers presentations on financial planning and other topics. If your church, synagogue or other faith community would like to offer an outreach to your congregants, please contact us.



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# Talking with Aging Congregants

As people age, many become less mobile. They may drive less or not get around as much. This can be isolating, possibly making even casual interactions very meaningful. As you talk with older adults in your faith community, here are some helpful tips.

## Be Open

Although many older adults have very vibrant and fulfilling later years, there are some common concerns you might encounter such as memory loss, depression and more. It's important to be open and neutral. If you're uncomfortable talking about a topic, they will sense that and may close off from a conversation.

It's normal to go into "fix it" mode, but this can leave older adults feeling like they don't have control over their situation. If they're struggling with

a particular issue, you can provide support while letting them steer the conversation. For example, ask if there's something on their mind they'd like to talk about, if they'd like to pray together or if there's something else you can do that would be comforting.

## Ask Questions

We all have different personalities and interests. Older adults are no exception. Let go of any stereotypes of senior citizens and get to know older adults as individuals.

Asking questions is a great way to connect. For older adults who may have issues with memory, asking about events further back in their past can be more useful than asking about recent events. For example, asking, "What did you do for a living?" might spark a more engaged conversation than, "Did you have a good morning?"

Follow up. Once you learn some things about the person, bring them up in future conversations to strengthen your connection.

Here are some questions and topics to get the ball rolling:

- Tell me about your family.
- What did you do for a living?
- What were some of your favorite sports / books / movies / bands?
- How did you enjoy spending your time?
- Where were you during major moments in history (the moon landing, John F. Kennedy assassination, Berlin Wall coming down)?
- What did you do with your spouse when you were dating?

*Continued*

*"The best advice I could give is to really be there to listen. Some of what they're experiencing is loneliness and depression. Having someone to talk to is a huge resource in itself. Hear them out and dig deep into what concerns they have."*

Kristen Martin, Care Transition Leader, Meadowlark



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## Talking with Aging Congregants



### Other Practical Tips

**Practice active listening.** We all want to be heard. During your conversation, ask follow-up questions or repeat back to them to make sure you heard correctly.

**Be patient.** Some older adults may speak or move more slowly. When you sit down for a visit, give them the time they need. Similarly, take your time. Match their pace, so the conversation doesn't feel rushed.

**Talk a little louder.** Many older adults experience some form of hearing loss. Often higher-pitched sounds are more difficult to hear. Try to speak loudly and in a lower register to make sure they can hear you properly. Otherwise, you might be having a one-sided conversation with yourself and not realize it.

**Use a gentle, caring tone.** When raising your voice to be heard, it can come across as shouting. Even if you're meeting for the first time, approach them as if you were a friend or one of their grown children.

*“Don’t make assumptions about what their interests might be. They might surprise you. Their interests might be wide and varied. Anything you would ask someone in their 20s, you can ask in their 80s. Older adults have had amazing experiences and are happy to tell you about those.”*

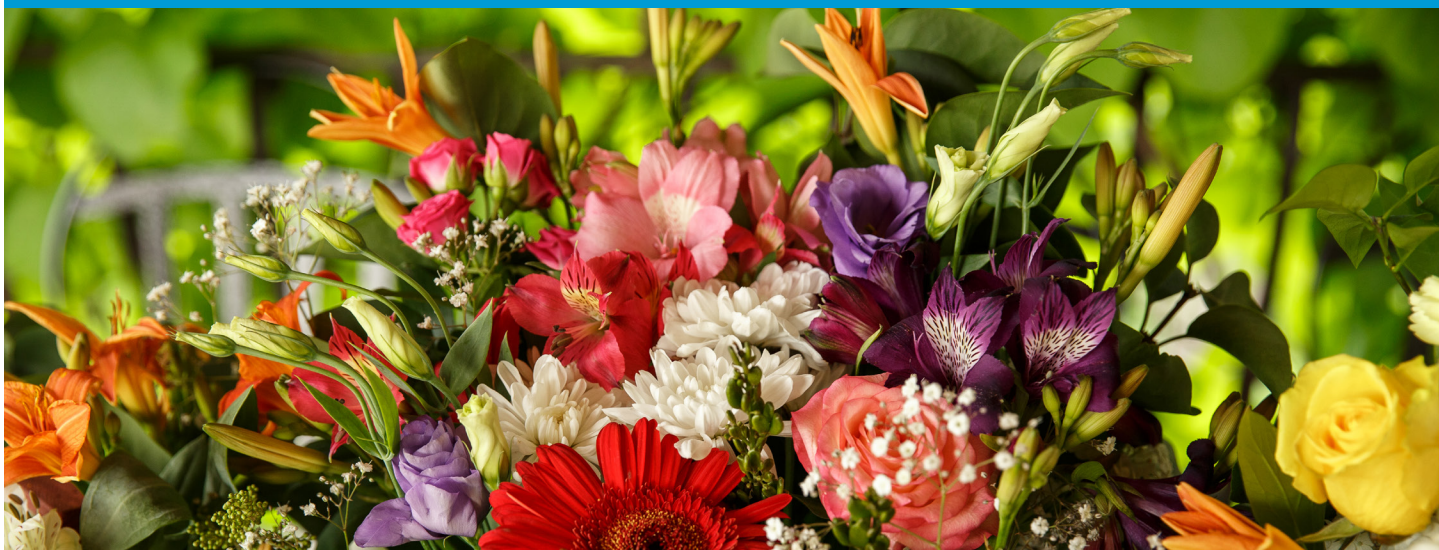
Becky Fitzgerald, Development  
Director, Meadowlark Foundation



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# Helping Seniors with Funeral Planning



**F**unerals are among the most important and meaningful services you plan. Not only do they honor your faith tradition, they can open doors to spiritual discussions with the dying as well as their friends and family. Each tradition is different and not everyone will be familiar with the particulars. You may need to educate people on nuances of various services, such as the difference between memorializing a person versus worshipping the divine, and make sure their wishes work within the parameters of your tradition. As you walk through the process of funeral planning, here are a few things to consider.

## Advance Planning

Not everyone will have the luxury of advance planning — and not every senior will want to prepare ahead of time. However, having the opportunity to discuss an older adult's wishes can help ensure the service reflects his or her personality. Advance planning can also provide additional comfort to the grieving, as they will know they're honoring the wishes of their loved one. It also takes the burden off them to make major decisions when they are dealing with grief.

Whether you think your older congregants will make time to plan ahead or not, simply inviting them to have those conversations can open

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*“Funerals are an important part of what we, as faith leaders, do. There’s so much that goes into them, energetically and logistically. I find them to be a meaningful time as a way to give care to family and residents on their journey.”*

Rev. Dr. Patty Brown-Barnett,  
Chaplain, Meadowlark



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# Helping Seniors with Funeral Planning

doors to more meaningful discussions — and might even plant a seed for future planning. At the very least, it will give you an opportunity to be an emotional and spiritual resource as they contemplate their final chapter.

## Planning After Death

If you didn't know the deceased personally, try to engage as much of the family as possible to hear their stories and details. Ask questions about what they will miss the most, funny/meaningful/memorable stories (stories are very important as we process grief), what they were like when they were younger, favorite songs/hobbies/places/sports. Ask for photos to help you visualize the person and his or her life. These little things are very meaningful.

*"A funeral service is devised for the mourners and it's not judgmental. It's supposed to be a time for healing. It's all about comforting, welcoming, inviting, celebrating this person's life and giving thanks to God. It's common for people to want to make up for lost time and lost words. Try to be flexible and listen for what people need."*

Rev. Dr. Patty Brown-Barnett,  
Chaplain, Meadowlark

## Additional Tips

- Keep a record of any preparatory discussions. Even if someone doesn't make a full funeral plan, you'll have some thoughts to help the family with planning down the line.
- Create a starting point with options for frequently used scripture and music. This is especially helpful for situations when you don't have much time to plan. Add personal details with input from the individual, family and friends to expand on your starting ideas. Then let the person or family make the final decision about which components to include. You can also serve as a guide to help ensure there's a good pace and balance of elements.
- Be sensitive to how guilt may shape a family's response. Family members may feel guilt as part of their grieving process. For example, if they didn't visit as often as they might have liked, they might feel compelled to overcompensate. Try to be reassuring and focus on honoring the deceased.



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# Community Resources for Older Adults

**A**s people age, they have various practical matters to navigate. You do not have to have all the answers, but it's helpful to know there are organizations devoted to helping seniors in a variety of areas from transportation to medical equipment. As you support your faith community — whether they are older adults or adult children dealing with aging parents — we hope this information will help you direct them to useful resources available in most places.

## Social Workers

Both clinical and non-clinical social workers can provide support to older adults. Clinical social workers can provide mental health therapy, while non-clinical social workers can talk through transitions and provide guidance on options such as home health services, assisted living and long-term care.

## Mental Health Services

Many communities offer behavioral health services for seniors in individual or group settings. In addition to clinical social workers, therapists and counselors can help older adults address feelings of loss, depression, anger and more that can arise as we age. Medicare can even help cover mental health therapy services for qualifying patients.

*“Never hesitate to give us a call. We’ve got such great resources at Meadowlark and we’re always happy to help the community if we can.”*

Kristen Martin, Care Transition Leader, Meadowlark

## Area Agency on Aging

Most communities or regions have an Agency on Aging that's a reliable one-stop-shop for local resources for older adults. These agencies may provide services directly, refer people to outside organizations or help educate people on various topics related to aging. The Manhattan area is served by the North Central-Flint Hills Agency on Aging.

## Senior Centers

Like area agencies on aging, local senior centers can provide a variety of services for older adults. Each location is different, but services may include:

- Meal and nutrition programs
- Health and wellness programs
- Recreational activities
- Art and education programs

The Manhattan area is served by the Riley County Senior Center.

## Legal Counsel

Making sure legal affairs are in order is incredibly important as we age. Attorneys will be key in preparing vital documents such as wills, healthcare directives, living wills and powers of attorney. Paralegals can also be helpful members of a legal team. They assist lawyers in creating various documents and provide other support during the estate planning process. Together, they can help guide planning before a health crisis or death, as well as navigate the legal terrain following a death.

## Financial Advisors

In addition to managing legal matters, having a solid financial plan is important, but this is about more than the balance in your retirement account. Financial advisors can help you understand and organize information regarding bank accounts, life insurance policies, variable payment life annuities, pensions, benefits like Kansas Medicaid and Veterans Affairs, and more.

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## Community Resources for Older Adults



### Volunteer Centers

Many older adults want to stay engaged and continue to make a positive impact in their communities. Volunteering can be a great way for them to pay it forward. Volunteer centers help match available opportunities with volunteers' interests and capabilities. The Manhattan area is served by the Flint Hills Volunteer Center. Meadowlark also has volunteer opportunities for older adults.

### Continuing Care Communities

At Meadowlark, we pride ourselves on supporting the entire community, not just our residential community. We offer a variety of outreach programs that are open to the public and strive to positively impact the lives of older adults and their caregivers in Kansas. In addition to providing a residential community with varying levels of care—independent living, assisted living, skilled nursing care and post-acute recovery—our services in the greater Manhattan community include:

- Home health and medication management
- Fitness programs
- Volunteer opportunities
- Support programs (memory issues, Parkinson's disease, caregivers)
- Rehabilitation
- Outpatient therapy
- Physician care

We are available to partner with local churches should you need supportive, educational programming and can also serve as a resource to answer questions and help people navigate some of the questions they face as they age.



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# Helping Congregants with Out-of-Area Parents

**M**any churches, temples and other faith communities have active members whose parents are aging. If these members live at a distance from their parents, they may need additional support as they navigate that new territory. We hope the following perspectives and resources will help you support them in navigating their own particular circumstances.

## Encourage Connection

Phone calls, handwritten letters, emails and video chats are great ways to stay in touch with aging parents. They can also provide an invaluable look into how the parents are doing.

During a phone call, it can be easy to ask questions like, “How are you?” and get a simple reply of, “I’m fine.” By taking questions a step further, family members can get a better sense of how their parents are doing without sounding overly intrusive. For example, “What have you been eating for breakfast these days?” or “What’s



your lunch routine?” This approach can provide insight on their day-to-day life as well as answer important questions like whether or not they’re getting enough to eat.

Being at a distance means many families don’t notice changes in a parent’s health or function until they’re able to visit in person. When families come together for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah

and other holidays, many adults worry about changes they see from the previous year. When families can’t visit as often as they’d like, asking for support from friends and family members who live nearer is helpful. This broader community can be the eyes and ears by visiting in person and sharing their impressions to help families at a distance stay up to date.

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*“The best thing is not to come on full blast. Bring up sensitive subjects like moving when opportunities arise. You can incorporate questions naturally and lead the conversation to a point where you can ask a tough question gently. And talk about it more than once if you can. Each time, you’ll find you get more information.”*

Doug Fiser, Sales Specialist, Meadowlark



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# Helping Congregants with Out-of-Area Parents

## Cultivate Compassion

When connecting with others, what we say is as important as how we say it. It's normal to want to help, but family members can go into "fix it" mode, sometimes coming across as critical or controlling. Self-monitoring to prevent harsher statements and tones, especially on hot-button issues, can help keep them from creeping in.

Moving is a great example. Parents may opt to stay at home for as long as possible. This can be a highly emotional decision and often families may try to convince parents to move. Instead of forcing the issue, ease into exploring the topic. A hypothetical approach can make the conversation go more smoothly and provide more detailed information:

- If you wanted to downsize, what would be most important to you in a new home?
- What features would you like to have? A basement? A yard?
- What services would you like? Lawn care? Home maintenance? Laundry service?
- Would you prefer a townhouse, single-family home or a retirement community?
- What are your friends doing? What do they like/dislike?

It's also important for family members to be aware of their own feelings. When adult children live at a distance from their parents, they can feel guilty for not being able to help more readily. Guilt can be an incredibly

*"A huge challenge is making sure older adults have the appropriate services. We can talk with families and prospective residents. If they're thinking about making a move, we want to make sure they have access to care and provide reassurance."*

Kristen Martin, Care Transition Leader,  
Meadowlark

powerful motivator, but it's not always helpful. It may push family members to do what will make them feel better, rather than what's in the best interest of the person they're trying to help. Being honest about one's own feelings can help ease tensions and frustration.

## Research Resources

Many communities offer various resources and services for older adults — everything from meal delivery to art programs. Families can research local organizations like the area agency for aging (a helpful one-stop-shop

for senior services available in many communities), home health providers, senior centers, meal and nutrition programs, transportation services and continuing care retirement communities.

Other great areas to research include\*:

- Social workers
- Mental health services
- Legal counsel
- Financial advisors
- Volunteer centers

\* For more information on these, consult our *Community Resources for Older Adults* handout.

If possible, we recommend conducting research on various services before an issue arises. It's much easier logistically and emotionally to gather information and develop a plan than to be reactive and forced into a last-minute decision during an emergency. Conducting research early, even without telling parents, provides some breathing room to evaluate options. It can also help direct questions and conversations.

When researching living communities, ask about housing options, levels of care, amenities, access for family members and other important factors to help gauge comfort and quality of life. Looking into post-acute recovery facilities can also be enlightening. These temporary housing options provide a safe place for older adults to help with rehabilitation following a fall or surgery.



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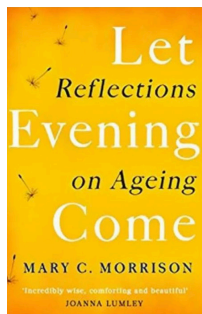


# Literature for Older Adults

As we age, many people ask life's "big" questions more often. "How can I find meaning in my later years?" "What is dying like?" "What kind of legacy am I leaving?"

These questions are normal and natural. They can be challenging, but also incredibly rewarding to explore. Older adults may come to you, as a faith leader, for answers to some of these questions. While you can be an invaluable sounding board and guide, you don't have to know everything. In fact, many experts have already delved into these topics, creating a wealth of resources. Pointing older adults and even family members to these resources can help aid their reflection.

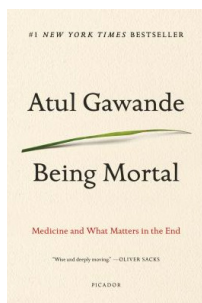
Here are some books and tools you might recommend:



## **Let Evening Come: Reflections on Ageing**

By Mary C. Morrison

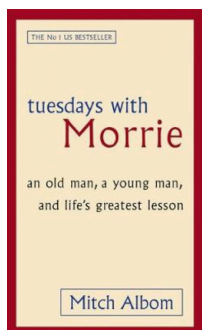
The author wrote this when she was 87 in an effort to explore the changes that come with age and the shift in life's focus. The title was inspired by the Jane Kenyon poem "Let Evening Come" (another wonderful resource). Morrison embraces the beauty of aging without shying away from its more difficult aspects.



## **Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End**

By Atul Gawande

This book explores the physical process of aging and death, providing a safe space for people to explore and better understand what is often considered a morbidly taboo topic. Told from a medical perspective, it provides a lot of insight. It can also help family members as they contemplate end-of-life options like hospice and palliative care.



## **Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson**

By Mitch Albom

In this former bestseller, Albom reconnects with an old college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who is nearing the end of his life. Once again, Albom becomes the student as he meets with Morrie on Tuesday afternoons to discuss some of life's big questions.

*"You never know where you're going to find a story. I like stories because they give you a way to remember a concept. Many stories are multi-faceted, so you can choose what to emphasize, to focus and build around."*

Rev. Dr. Patty Brown-Barnett, Chaplain,  
Meadowlark

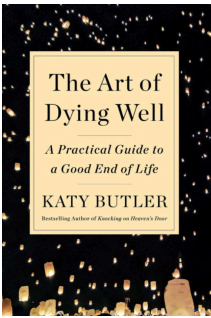
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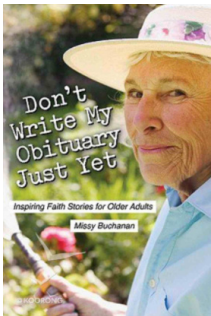
## Literature for Older Adults



### **The Art of Dying Well: A Practical Guide to a Good End of Life**

By Katy Butler

Drawing from true stories, the author explores how to navigate changes that come in later years. She addresses topics like aging in place and how to talk openly with a healthcare provider. Butler also wrote *Knocking on Heaven's Door: The Path to a Better Way of Death*.



### **Don't Write My Obituary Just Yet: Inspiring Faith Stories for Older Adults**

By Missy Buchanan

By relaying conversations with older adults, Buchanan addresses some of the limitations that come with age while uncovering the richness to be found during this period in life. Buchanan has written numerous pieces about aging, including: *Voices of Aging*, *Joy Boosters: 120 Ways to Encourage Older Adults*, *Living with Purpose in a Worn-Out Body* and *Talking with God in Old Age: Meditations and Psalms*.

### **Other Resources**

Stories in general can provide a wealth of insight and opportunities for connection. They can come from anywhere including personal experience and the news.

Rev. Dr. Patty Brown-Barnett, chaplain at Meadowlark, said she finds inspiration in creative places to connect with older adults and explore certain themes.

As you speak with congregants who are approaching their later years or adults managing their parents' later years, these books and stories can provide an opportunity for connection and reflection. Depending on the circumstance, you might want to point them to additional resources on how to plan a funeral, living funerals, advanced directives and dying well.



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# Navigating Later Years

## Information for Older Adults

**W**e know there's no one-size-fits-all of what aging looks like. Many older adults thrive in their later years. However, there are some common concerns and issues you may be facing. As specialists in senior care, we want to help you navigate this phase of life. We hope the following insights and resources will be helpful for you. And, if you have any questions or there's anything we can do to help, please don't hesitate to reach out.

### Safety

As we age, our physical function changes. Things like hearing and vision loss, decreased strength and even balance issues can make navigating daily life more challenging. Sometimes it may feel like other people want to take control over how you live. It's important to have your voice heard while making sure you're in a safe environment. There are many professionals who can support you.

Occupational therapists can do home assessments to help identify ways to make your environment safer. Adjustments like adding grab bars in showers or clearing potential trip hazards can make a big difference.

Additional services like home health and medication management can provide assistance to enhance the health of older adults. Home health

*"Never hesitate to give us a call. We've got such great resources at Meadowlark and we're always happy to help the community if we can."*

Kristen Martin, Care Transition Leader,  
Meadowlark

aides and other professionals can visit your home and help with tasks like bathing, or simply provide companionship.

### Memory

It's perfectly normal for our ability to remember to change as we get older. We have all walked into a room and forgotten why we were there! But more complex issues, or issues that come on suddenly, can point to a problem. Sometimes people delay going to the doctor because they're afraid of what they might hear. Memory impairment does not always mean dementia. Common medical conditions like urinary tract infections and dehydration can affect

our cognitive function. And, they can easily be treated!

If you are experiencing an acute issue with memory, talk to your doctor. There may be helpful resources you didn't know about. For example, research has shown that certain changes like diet, movement and various creative activities can enhance quality of life. Also, Meadowlark offers a Memory Program designed specifically for people dealing with cognitive changes, as well as their caregivers.

### Loneliness

One of the most common issues older adults face is loneliness. We know you come from a tough generation that may not always feel comfortable asking for help. But an abundance of resources are available to help you work through feelings of isolation, grief, depression and loneliness. If individual or group talk therapy isn't your style, social workers can help you think through transitions and provide support.

Volunteering can also be a great way to feel more engaged. Many older adults find giving back — even in little ways — can help them feel more connected and give them a greater sense of purpose.

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# Navigating Later Years

*“Have conversations with your family and friends. If you had a significant decline in your health and couldn’t take care of yourself, think through what you would want that to look like. Would you like to have care in your home? Would you want to move? What type of facility would you want to go to? Talk to your family about what your wishes would be. That can be really helpful for everyone involved.”*

Bridget Larkin, Social Services Leader, Meadowlark

## Planning

Many people save for their retirement for years, but don’t focus on estate planning beyond that. While it can be difficult to talk about setting up an advanced healthcare directive or planning for a funeral, getting these essentials in place can provide a lot of peace of mind for you and your family. You can rest easy knowing that you’ve set up a framework so your wishes will be honored should something happen to you. And your family will not have the added stress of guessing what your wishes are while managing an emergency. There are many specialists who can help guide you through creating a durable power of attorney, living will and other documents to secure your wishes and take that burden off your shoulders. If you haven’t already done some in-depth estate planning, we encourage you to talk with a lawyer or financial advisor to get those pieces in place.

## Helpful Resources

From home health services to area agencies on aging, there are many resources available to provide support and information for older adults like you. Here are some great places to start:

### Area Agency on Aging

This one-stop shop offers many resources and services. The Manhattan area is served by the North Central-Flint Hills Agency on Aging.

### Senior Centers

Devoted to older adults, these centers may offer activities, meal programs and more. The Manhattan area is served by the Riley County Senior Center.

### Volunteer Centers

Whether you’d like to have a volunteer visit you or you’re interested in volunteering yourself, there are many opportunities to connect. The Manhattan area is served by the Flint Hills Volunteer Center. Meadowlark also has volunteer opportunities for older adults.

## Continuing Care Communities

These residential communities can provide a number of services. At Meadowlark, we offer Memory and Parkinson’s programs, as well as home health and medication management, fitness programs, volunteer opportunities, rehabilitation, outpatient therapy and physician care. Our Passport Program also lets community members access our on-campus amenities, regardless of whether they live at Meadowlark or not.

## Financial Advisors and Legal Counselors

These professionals can help you get estate issues in order.

## Mental Health Support

There are many social workers, therapists and groups who can help you talk through issues and emotions you might be facing.



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2121 Meadowlark Rd, Manhattan, KS | 785.537.4610 | For more resources, visit: [meadowlark.org](https://meadowlark.org)



# Tips for Volunteering with the Elderly

## A Handout for Volunteers

**T**hank you for volunteering with older adults! As specialists in senior care, we know your time and attention are incredibly meaningful to them. Even the simplest outreach can brighten their day and help them feel connected, engaged and cared for.

You also play a vital role as a link between these older adults and your faith community. Sometimes as people age, they don't have the same mobility. Difficulties driving, physically maneuvering, or even hearing might cause them to stop attending services. But matters of faith are still extremely important. The time you spend with them will help them stay connected to their faith.

We think you'll find volunteering with older adults to be incredibly rewarding and hope the following tips will help you make the most of your experience ministering to them.

### Set the Scene

When you do a home visit, you might find the environment can make it hard to connect. The TV might be turned up or the room might be dark, which can interfere with your ability to communicate easily with one another. Ask if it's OK for you to adjust some settings so you can hear and see each other better during your visit. Don't just make changes. Check in first, so the person you're visiting has a sense of control. If you notice someone isn't wearing their hearing aids or glasses like they normally do, offer to help find them so you can communicate better.

### Talk and Listen Appropriately

Many older adults experience hearing loss, especially for tones in higher registers. Try to speak more loudly than you usually would and in a lower tone to make sure you can be heard. Also try to speak more slowly and articulate your words to help them understand you better.

*"Sometimes older people feel like they don't have a voice. Encourage them and give them permission to speak up for themselves."*

Becky Fitzgerald, Development Director, Meadowlark Foundation

Similarly, make sure you are hearing and understanding correctly by practicing active listening. Repeat back what you heard and ask, "Is that right?" or follow up with short, simple questions to make sure you're understanding them correctly.

*Continued*

*"Although people have a tendency to speak to older adults like they're children, they're still adults — just older with different needs. Meet them where they are by speaking more slowly or loudly and make sure they're understanding you."*

Kathleen Spearman, Social Worker, Meadowlark



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## Tips for Volunteering with the Elderly

*“Be open to what you could learn from the person that you’re visiting with. I had a very deep conversation recently that challenged me to explore how I could grow, learn and empathize more with other people’s experiences. We all have lots to learn and that knowledge comes in various ways. It just might be an older person who inspires you.”*

Becky Fitzgerald, Development Director, Meadowlark Foundation

### Be Patient and Open

We all lead busy lives and often have calendars full of appointments, errands and chores. But your interaction might be the only connection an older adult has in a given day. Don’t rush it. Take your time.

Some adults may have heavy subjects like the loss of a spouse on their minds. If they want to talk about their feelings, try to stay open, even if it’s difficult for you. You might feel pressure to say or do the “right” thing without knowing what that is. Simple questions like “Would you like to pray together?” or “Is there anything you might find comforting at this time?” can allow them to direct the conversation and take the pressure off of you.

Chances are by being more present in these ways, you’ll find you get more out of the visit, too.

### Be Aware of the Surroundings

Take a moment to take everything in. Open with an observation or question beyond “How are you?” to get the conversation going. “You sound really chipper today” or “What have you been doing to keep busy?” will open more doors than “yes” or “no” questions.

You can also take note of their surroundings:

- Are they eating properly?
- Is their home overly cluttered?
- Are they struggling with trip hazards?
- What support systems do they have in place?

As a regular visitor, you are also likely the eyes and ears of your church. Privacy is important and you don’t want to share personal information if it would violate their privacy. However, it’s important to make sure they are safe. If you notice changes or think someone could use additional support, you can point them to services that would improve their quality of life.

### Direct to Further Resources

You do not need to solve every problem you see. But you can help educate people about available resources, including religious support from your faith leader.

Again, checking in can help them feel in control. For example:

- You seem upset about this topic. Would you like me to ask the chaplain to reach out to you?
- I noticed you haven’t been finishing your meals lately. Would you like me to help you find a meal delivery program to help get you some better tasting food?

Sudden changes can indicate they’re having trouble. You might be one of the first to spot any areas of concern and rally more support.

Lastly, approach everything with a bit of grace. You may not know the full story of what an older adult is dealing with. Be open and empathetic. Your connection will mean the world.

