

# Talking with Aging Congregants

**A**s 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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### 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