

# A C R O S S T H E *Generations*

IDEAS FOR REACHING OUT TO SENIORS IN YOUR COMMUNITY



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Seniors with the limitations and losses that come with aging often experience a life very different than our own. For some, that life can be very lonely, filled with the regrets and heartache of broken relationships, or of friends and loved ones who have moved away. Others live on their own, mourning the loss of a spouse and the vibrant life they shared together. They are our neighbors, the older man we see walking his little dog occasionally, the woman struggling to haul her garbage can out to the curb.

As a family, you'd like to encourage seniors and share with them God's love, but it's often difficult to know how to start. *Can we really help? What will we do? What can we talk about?*

This booklet includes tips and ideas that can help your family become more confident and creative in your efforts to encourage older adults. You'll find conversation starters to help you build new friendships with older adults, as well as several ideas for creative follow-up visits. You'll also be encouraged to reach out to the seniors living near you in your community. Along the way, you'll recognize that ministering to older adults can be just as much a blessing to you as it is to them.

## TIPS FOR VISITING *Seniors*

**Pick the best time.** Mornings and early afternoons often work best. Call ahead to determine the best schedule. Also, try to make visits shorter and more frequent instead of longer ones that happen less often.

**Get close.** Sit down to talk at the same level, making eye-contact and showing the older person that you care what he or she is saying.

**Limit distractions.** Move away from blaring televisions and try to limit other sources of background noise. Remember what your own actions communicate. For example, frequently checking your phone sends the message that you'd rather be someplace else.

## TIPS FOR SERVING *Elderly* NEIGHBORS

**A watchful eye.** Identify unmet household needs. As part of chores, teach your kids to shovel a senior's driveway, rake leaves or haul garbage cans to the curb without being asked.

**Open doors.** Periodically invite your neighbor for a meal, a light dessert or a cup of coffee. Include your neighbor in little family events like barbecues, pumpkin carving or even just a walk down the street can be a welcome diversion.

**Can I help?** Offer to assist with tasks around the home and around town—from swapping out burnt out light bulbs to running errands and picking up a few groceries from the store.

**A nice surprise.** Give small gifts or goodies on holidays—or just during the week for no reason at all. Ask questions about their life and history—and take the time to listen!

**Let the little ones.** Let your neighbor enjoy your children or pets (in manageable doses), if they're willing. Invite your neighbor to come along to school performances or church functions.

**Be a light.** Share the name and love of Jesus in everyday conversations. As a family, pray regularly for your neighbor's salvation or spiritual growth. Do whatever you can to connect your neighbor to a church community.

# ACTIVITIES

## FOR THE *Family*

by Missy Buchanan

Visiting senior citizens can be a lot of fun. As a family or church, commit to ministering once a month to the seniors in your community. Here are some creative ideas to get your first year started.

○ **Windows on the world.** Help older adults feel like they're part of church and family events, even when they can't attend. Record or obtain video clips of performances, sporting events or special guests at church. Play these videos when you visit seniors, using a laptop or larger-sized tablet for easier viewing.

○ **Let's do lunch.** Make lunch an event, bringing something unique to share with elders and their friends. Lemonade or tea, a famous family dessert, a pot of hearty stew—be creative! Check with caregivers ahead of time for special dietary considerations.

○ **Spread the Word.** Bringing generations together to study Scripture is a powerful way to break down barriers between age groups. Younger participants will be blessed and inspired by older classmates who are still learning and growing, but who have gained the wisdom of long life. Older adults will enjoy the fresh thoughts of the younger generations.

○ **Around the table.** Rainy days are great days for crafts, games, and other low-key activities. Make picture frames, ornaments, book covers or gifts for family members. Bring a favorite board or party game. Kids can play musical instruments, read from favorite books, show their artwork.

○ **Enjoy the scenery.** If elder friends are able to leave their care facility, take your visit on the road by going to a park, garden or aquarium. Talk about the variety and diversity of all the things God has made.

○ **The need to read.** Schedule trips to the library to keep older adults stocked with books. Utilize the library's assets and accessibility options. You can even encourage avid readers to start a book club. Provide the organizational support needed to make it successful by creating discussion questions and flyers for meetings.

○ **You've got mail.** Nurture the interest of an older adult by subscribing to a publication that focuses on a favorite

hobby or pastime. From antique collecting to miniature trains, there's a publication for almost every interest.

○ **It's for the birds.** Aging can bring a new opportunity for quiet pursuit of our feathered friends. If an older adult lives in a good location, help him or her get started by providing binoculars and books on how to identify birds.

○ **When I went to . . .** Most older adults have experienced the joy of travel to places near or far. Help recreate those special memories by hosting a "travel festival" with the elders you know along with their friends. Encourage seniors to bring stories, photos and souvenirs from a favorite trip they've taken in the past.

○ **Computer buddies.** Many older adults are intimidated by fast-changing technology. Younger people can minister to seniors by showing them how to connect with family and friends by setting up email accounts, learning the basics of social networking or how to surf the Internet for different hobby interests.

○ **Plants, not flowers.** Terrariums, bonsai trees, potted plants and windowsill herb gardens are ways for older gardeners to continue this hobby long after they are able to maintain a larger outdoor garden. Small, raised gardening beds also offer a great opportunity to get back to nature.

○ **Pay it forward.** Think about skills that older adults might teach younger people. Does an older loved one crochet or knit? Does he play chess? Match a young person with an older adult who has a skill to pass along. Provide them with the supplies they need.

○ **Gone fishing.** For older adults who no longer have the physical stamina to unload a boat or haul the supplies necessary for a fishing trip, arrange a morning at a local lake or private pond. Ask family or interested church members to provide basic equipment and assistance.

○ **Going to prom.** Here's an idea for a youth group. Have kids host a "senior" prom at the church or retirement community. Many seniors will be delighted to put on dancing shoes and take a spin with a young adult. Make it festive with decorations and refreshments. Select music from the days when the older adults were young.

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*Writer and speaker Missy Buchanan finds daily inspiration in listening to the joys and concerns of older adults. Her latest book is *Voices Of Aging: Adult Children and Aging Parents Talk with God*. Visitation ideas on this page adapted from *Joy Boosters: 120 Ways to Encourage Older Adults*. © 2013 by Missy Buchanan. Used with permission of Upper Room Books.*

# CONVERSATION CARDS

Talking with senior citizens is like talking with friends that you've not gotten to know yet. Focus on general, big-picture topics that don't require remembering specific details. Pick a few of these questions at random to ask each other, allowing your conversation to flow naturally once you get started.

## OLDER GENERATION

## YOUNGER GENERATION

What were your school teachers like?  
Which subjects were your favorites?  
Did you participate in sports or music?

Which kinds of technology or new tools do you enjoy using?

Growing up, what was your neighborhood like? Did you have good friends nearby?  
What kind of kid were you?

What is your neighborhood like?  
Do you have good friends living nearby?

Did you ever get paid for chores as a kid?  
What did you do with the money?

What is your school like?  
What subjects do you enjoy studying?  
Do you have nice classmates?

Can you tell me about a time when you clearly recognized God's work in your life?

Do you get paid for chores?  
What things would you like to spend your money on?

What kinds of fads or clothing styles do you remember from your youth?

What kind of job do you want to have someday? Would you enjoy living in another state or country?

As a kid, what were your favorite foods to eat for dinner?  
Did your family have a garden?

What are your favorite foods?  
Do you like to help your parents cook?

OLDER GENERATION

YOUNGER GENERATION

What was the best vacation you ever took?  
What are some of your favorite  
holiday memories?

Did your parents ever tell you why  
they chose your name?  
What's your middle name?

Who did you look up to when you  
were younger? Who helped you learn  
something important about the world?

What do you like to do on the weekends?  
What kind of hobby would you  
like to pursue someday?

Do you remember any popular clothing  
styles from your younger years?

What have been some of your favorite  
activities to do with friends?

What was the best job that you've ever had?  
The worst? Did you ever lose a job  
that you enjoyed?

What are some of your favorite books?  
Can you recommend a good one?

If you could give one piece of advice  
to younger generations, what would it be?

Tell me about a time when a teacher  
or leader gave you a compliment.

What big events had the most impact  
on your life? Do you have any souvenirs  
from these events?

What is the best time you've had  
with your grandparents?

Of the people you've known, who  
has influenced your life the most?

Tell me about a time when a friend  
or someone else said something hurtful.  
How did you respond?



# Loving MY GRUMPY NEIGHBOR

Reflecting God's love to aging adults in our community

by Rachelle Wiggins

I first met Margaret at the community mailbox. She said she'd seen my kids playing outside, so we began talking. Margaret shared that she was a recent widow, and as she spoke I recognized unmistakable anger in her voice. She was angry about her husband's death. Angry at the cancer, at the doctors. She even seemed angry at her husband for not reporting his symptoms earlier.

Still, when we parted ways, I felt like I'd made a friend. A thorny, prickly friend, it seemed, but a friend nonetheless. Before we arrived in the neighborhood, we'd been praying for opportunities to share Christ's love. We'd prayed specifically for the people who would live on our street. So even when I first met Margaret, I felt God's love for her welling up in my heart.

Soon afterwards, the kids and I crossed the street and delivered a loaf of homemade bread. Margaret seemed grateful and invited us in. Sitting in her living room, Margaret told us more of her story while the grandfather clock ticked off the minutes.

Our relationship continued this way for awhile. We'd stop by Margaret's house, usually with a plate of cookies. Sometimes we'd see her walking her dog, Miffy, or checking the mail, and we'd stop to chat. Margaret told us about city ordinances that made her upset, various neighbors who frustrated her, why she refused to set foot in a church. Her negativity was often repellent, but I felt compelled to continue reaching out to her. Was there anyone else I could think of that more desperately needed God's love?

One day, as we were talking about a neighborhood musician, Margaret offered to loan me one of her CDs. It was the first time she had given me anything, and I felt honored. But life in a bustling household passes quickly, and before I blinked, two weeks had passed and the CD was still collecting dust on my counter.

There was a knock at my door. There, dressed in military fatigues, was a stout young woman with cropped hair and a stern face. I vaguely recognized her as Margaret's granddaughter who sometimes checked in on her.

"My grandmother needs her CD back!" she demanded.

"No problem, I'll get it," I responded.

The woman took the CD and marched away.

The next day I called Margaret. I apologized for not returning her CD right away, but Margaret interrupted with

a harsh tongue-lashing that instantly earned my day a PG-13 rating. Before I could recover, she hung up.

I was stunned by the whole situation. I'd had no idea she'd wanted the CD back right way. Two weeks had seemed like no time to me; to her it had felt like neglect and disrespect.

Time passed. We no longer chatted outside by the mailbox, or in Margaret's living room over dessert. The times I'd catch a glimpse of her, she would quickly turn and walk away.

Before long it was Christmas. I wondered if Margaret would be doing anything special. I knew her granddaughter was one of the only family connections not destroyed by anger and unforgiveness, and she was often away on assignment.

I decided to take a risk. On Christmas morning, our family bundled up and crunched across the snow-packed street to Margaret's front porch. Her mouth dropped open when she saw our family standing there with a plate of cinnamon rolls. We didn't stay long, but I saw tears in

Margaret's eyes when she said goodbye.

Not long after, Margaret was on *our* doorstep. As we talked, she admitted to needing help, explaining that certain chores were proving difficult these days, and that short-term memory loss was

giving her occasional confusion in her walks around the neighborhood. And so, over the next year, our family recommitted to our quirky relationship with Margaret. We helped, where we could, in the various tasks of life. Yard work, shopping trips, little jobs around the house. Through it all, Margaret was mostly still Margaret—anger and all. Still, I'm convinced she tasted God's love for her—through our family. When we moved to another state, I began praying a new prayer: That there would be a new family in the house on the corner of Flynn and England who could cultivate the seeds we were only able to sow and water.

## **WE HELPED, WHERE WE COULD, IN THE VARIOUS TASKS OF LIFE. YARD WORK, SHOPPING TRIPS, LITTLE JOBS AROUND THE HOUSE.**

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