

MY MEMORY OF OLDER ADULT MINISTRY IN PC(USA)

by Dr. Miriam Dunson

[Editor's NOTE: Miriam Dunson, along with Rev. Dr. Marvin Simmers, has been a key leader in Older Adult Ministry in PC(USA) since the early 1990's. She graciously shares her memories of that journey with us.]

When the General Assemblies of the two Presbyterian Churches (North and South) made the decision to re-unite in 1983, it took some time before the union became a reality and the new church headquarters were in place in Louisville, Kentucky. During the time of transition to the new church headquarters, the decision was made to include in the new location and structure of the Presbyterian Church USA in Louisville, an Office on Older Adult Ministry. In May of 1990, it was with great excitement that I was called to serve in that office.

Upon my arrival in Louisville, I heard of and met representatives from a large group of older adults who had a commitment to ministry *with, for and by* older adults, and I learned that this group had been involved in a project funded by Presbyterian Women to focus on older adult ministry in our congregations. In the early 80's, these older adults had been trained in how to begin and maintain Older Adult Ministry in congregations and they were excited about becoming an integral part in the activities of the new Office on Older Adult Ministry in the new church structure, and therefore continuing to be involved in that ministry.

Their story, when I learned more about it, involved a group of approximately 40 people (singles and couples) and one person or a couple would be invited by a local church to live and work in the church who invited them for two years during which time they would begin, support and lead the church in focusing on the skills, needs and commitments of older adults and to maintain Older Adult Ministry in that congregation. Their major focus would be on ministry with, for and especially by older adults. The congregation would provide only housing, and all other expenses were to be covered by the PW fund. Also, the plan indicated that after two years when the Older Adult Ministry program in that church was fully developed and had become of a major concern of the church, they would then move on to another church.

As I understand it, the program lasted for two rounds, or about four years before the funding ran out. The result was that there were 40 older adults, trained and experienced in Older Adult Ministry, and what were they to do now? What they did was to form an organization, elected officers, and sought to continue their ministry without funding which was, of course, very difficult.

The next thing that happened to this group was the inclusion of an Office on Older Adult Ministry in the new headquarters in Louisville. I suspect those older adults had something to do with that action! In May 1990, I had a few years earlier received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Columbia Seminary focused on older adult ministry, and much to my surprise, excitement and, I must admit, trepidation, I was called to fill the position of Associate for Older Adult Ministry on the new staff.

When I arrived on the scene and learned of this organization, with great excitement I met with the leaders of the group, and actions were taken to continue that well-trained and experienced organization of older adults as part of the ministry of the new office. It made sense to connect that organization to the national offices so the group re-organized and we chose a new name. The new name of the organization became the Presbyterian Older Adult Ministry Network or POAMN. We also decided that the organization would publish a quarterly newsletter to share ideas for programs with local churches.



**Prof. Marvin Simmers and Dr. Miriam Dunson
(2013 POAMN Conference)**

This happened in the fall of 1990, and since then this organization has held annual national conferences at locations all over the nation, sponsored by POAMN – 26 years of focus on training, celebrating and expanding the vision that older adults in the church have skills to be utilized, faith to be shared, and the wisdom never to let the focus on ministry with older adults die.

At the end of 2003, because of financial difficulties, many of us who served in Louisville were down-sized out or were retired. Although the Office stayed open for a couple of years after that, the focus was on fund raising, rather than active ministry with older adults. After those two years, the Office on Older Adult Ministry was closed down.

However, this was not the end of POAMN. The members of POAMN were committed to seeing the work of POAMN continue, and so it did. Since 2003, without being closely attached to or financially supported by an Office on Older Adult Ministry in Louisville, and with little or no support from the national headquarters, POAMN has continued to hold its conferences all over the nation. POAMN experienced surprisingly large responses at most of the events, in part because they were known for choosing outstanding speakers and workshop leaders.

During the early days of the Office in Louisville, the General Assembly passed a resolution to name the first week in May each year on the church calendar as Older Adult Week. In preparation for that week, and in order to help churches celebrate this special occasion, POAMN publishes a Planning Guide for Older Adult Week every year with ideas for programs, worship services, and activities for all ages. POAMN also still publishes a national newsletter, POAMN Network News (*PNN*) five times each year with information from other churches as to programs and celebrations.

Next steps for the future of POAMN include joining with an international conference in Chicago in 2017, and continuing with both national and regional conferences after that in order to continue this important ministry.

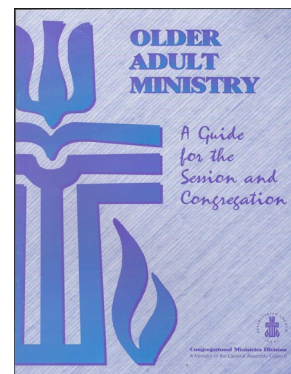
God has certainly had a hand in seeing that this organization was born, was strengthened, and even now continues its ministry after 26 years of conferences, publications, and strong committed leadership. All involved are committed to seeking to fill the need for ministry *with, for* and especially *by* older adults.

One of the deepest joys of my life was the opportunity to work with the leaders and members of POAMN for 13 years in Louisville. We published materials every year for use in churches, retreats and conferences. These publications included:

- **Older Adult Ministry: A Guide for the Session and Congregations**
compiled. by J. Simpson, edited by K. Richter, revised and edited. by M. Dunson
- **Older Adult Ministry: A Guide for the Presbytery Committee**
revised and edited by Miriam. Dunson

The office staff traveled constantly to individual churches, presbyteries, seminaries, and colleges, seeking to raise the awareness of the skills and needs of older adults in our churches. In spite of having no Office on Older Adult Ministry in Louisville, the ministry goes on, carried out by the officers and members of POAMN throughout the nation. They are committed, excited and enthusiastic, and determined to continue this effort into the future.

Thanks be to God!



**OAM Guide
for Session & Congregation**

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