



Introduction to Third Thirty Lesson Plans

Transcript - Chris Pomfret

Growing older, and the associated challenges, is something that unites the *entire* human race, irrespective of race, creed, geography or religion. And while there are plenty of people to sell us life insurance or health insurance or offer financial planning, there's little on-hand help to address a wealth of other issues that we need to pay attention to as we age. In a nutshell, the Third Thirty is a series of discussion topics that explore the challenges of aging, in the third part of our lives, (nominally ages 60-90), and entices us to consider how aging wisely, smartly, sensibly, gracefully and spiritually, might look for each of us. Churches often want to start something along these lines for older adults but don't know quite what to do or where to start.

It can be a bit overwhelming to try to conjure up new material and there seems to be so many topics to cover. So, POAMN developed a set of lesson plans covering many aspects of aging so that Churches would have a resource to start their own program. A series of lesson plans were developed that, experience shows, anyone can lead or moderate. In fact, the most surprising aspect of launching this course several years ago within the Presbytery of the Miami Valley (Ohio), is that when a group of participants are gathered around a table in a convivial setting (and that means food/refreshment on hand!) to discuss one of the Third Thirty topics, the conversation is vibrant and continuous.

We've found that, perhaps surprisingly, people *want* to talk about the experiences they've encountered in dealing with their parents' aging, or share their concerns pertaining to their own lives. Moreover, this can and should be an intergenerational activity. Many people in their 40's and 50's are concerned about how to embrace their parent's aging or to start preparing for their own. Or, as I witnessed first-hand, one lady in her Third Thirty brought her 2 young teenage grandchildren to a Third Thirty session after worship one Sunday and, on their way home afterwards, the 2 boys announced, "Grandma, we don't want you to go in the attic to get down the Christmas decorations; we're going to do it for you so that you don't fall off the ladder or put your foot through the ceiling". It was heartwarming that these 2 young boys "got it"; they saw the challenges of growing older even though there was a 50+ years of age difference.

So, what do we cover in the Third Thirty? Well, as mentioned earlier, it's **not** the typical topics of wills, health and wealth, but other topics that *invisibly* surround us. For instance, have you thought about where to live as you move through your Third Thirty? The typical quick default is to say "I'm going to age in place" but is that a well thought out plan or just a heartfelt desire? It might be the right answer for some but, for others, it would be an error.

In a Third Thirty discussion setting, congregants share their own situations and perspectives and, by so doing, it helps them to make arguments that their spouses and their fellow church members hear and contemplate. A lot of open conversation occurs, leading to an exploration of the pros and cons of the thorny subject. Another topic to talk about is how to get rid of our "stuff" so that we can downsize; talking about it has motivated many to go home and make a start on what might otherwise be an overwhelming task; hearing that everyone has the same issue of too much stuff helps people to realize or be reminded that they are not alone and those that have embarked on this task can share their successes to help others get started.

Another topic is the importance of staying fit, so as to maintain muscle mass and balance. And there's end-of-life wishes to figure out and the discussion thereof with spouse, family and loved ones. Another very difficult and emerging challenge, given the increased life expectancy of boomers, is to face the reality that we might have to stop driving before we want to. Coming to terms with this, long before the day arrives, helps the individual and his or her loved ones to be at peace with the prospect and to have a Plan B in place to mitigate the loss of independence.

Gracefully *accepting* help from others and willingly *asking* for help to accomplish things that we once could do for ourselves can be a challenge for some but, once we're aware of our knee-jerk reaction to refuse help, we can adjust our thinking to accept the help, whether we need it or not. Being conscious of and using our spirituality is another important realization that typically generates an impactful discussion. There's also sessions on the mental planning and preparing for retirement; churches can do a lot to help members who are approaching that milestone of life. Somewhat connected with that is thinking about what God wants to do with the rest of our lives and being aware of the legacy that we might want to leave behind. There's a session on Spirituality in our Third Thirty and encourages people to find their spirituality and use it to handle the challenges facing them, especially in hard times.

These are all crucial issues that the Third Thirty addresses in a self-help, mutual-reinforcement type of manner rather than lecturing or telling people what they should or should not do. The Third Thirty merely encourages and motivates participants to be aware of the challenges and to “do something” while they have their mental and physical capacities. Many of us are unaware of these challenges that face us, or we fall into the trap of continually postponing the dreaded day of dealing with them. Again, my experience over the past decade is that people really want to address these issues but they need help to grapple with them and hear the alternatives. The Third Thirty is thus an opportunity for Churches to help their members to help themselves by providing the opportunity for discussion.

I think we all know that people aren’t going to raise the topic of aging while having a nice meal with friends or family, but when the church offers a convivial, non-threatening or judging environment, the doors of conversation open and people are actually keen to air their concerns or share their experiences. Experience shows that once the Third Thirty discussions are initiated at your Church, they can take their own course and style depending on the specific wants and needs of the participants.

The Third Thirty material is freely available to all churches and needs no specific expertise to moderate. It’s intergenerational, especially where multiple generations of one family worship at the church and, if not, maybe there’s an opportunity to invite the non-worshipping parents or children to the sessions.

Finally, it’s serving your Church’s wider community in ways that can be profound; imagine the aging church member who offers up the car keys to their children (and it’s really happened) thus avoiding a difficult conversation that’s been brewing but more importantly, possibly avoiding driving “one day too many” and the associated tragic consequences.

Your church community will be strengthened both within the older adults group and across generations by having these conversations together in a faith context that builds confidence and support, and motivates people to take actions that best meet their unique situation.

For the free resource, go to www.poamn.org and find the lesson plans under resources.