

FIRST PERSON: 7 things that will happen in your church with the death of the Baby Boomers

By Thom Rainer

It is strange to write about the death of the Baby Boomers because I am one of them. Indeed, this article was a reminder of my own mortality.

While the implications of the death of this generation go far beyond church life, we who lead and love churches should prepare for this unavoidable reality. Here are seven brief reminders of which we are reasonably certain from a simple demographic perspective.

1. Pastors will do more funerals. The Baby Boomer generation kids were primarily the children of the World War II veterans and their spouses. When the veterans returned from the battlefields, they came home with a sense of hope and optimism. That positive outlook led to a desire to bring children into this world. They created a population boom not seen before. Between 1946 and 1964, 76 million Baby Boomers were born. Now, the demographic reality is that those 76 million will die at a similar pace. Currently, 2.6 million Boomers are dying each year. That number will approach 4.0 million by 2037. In other words, there are presently over 7,000 Boomer funerals every day. In just 12 years, the number of funerals a day will be almost 11,000 (U. S. Census Bureau).

2. Attendance will decline. While this forecast is not inevitable for every congregation, it will be a reality for many churches. Baby Boomers are overall the most active church members. An astounding 71 percent attend church either weekly,

twice a month, once a month, or occasionally. To put it another way, only 28 percent of Baby Boomers say their church attendance is “seldom or never” (Pew Research). We are losing our most faithful attendees every day.

3. Attendance frequency will decline. Church Answers was at the forefront of demonstrating that a decline in attendance frequency was the single most significant factor for overall attendance decline. Sam Rainer and I began writing about it over a decade ago. Here is an article I wrote in 2013. Baby Boomers are not only the most committed generation to church attendance, they attend with the most significant frequency. Nearly 4 out of 10 (38 percent) Baby Boomers attend church once a week (Pew Research). No other generation is close to that level of frequency.

4. Giving will decline. Though the research is not always consistent in this area, overall, Baby Boomers account for about 40 percent of church giving (for example, 42 percent according to churchstewardshipnetwork.com). Again, this point is not inevitable for all congregations, but we do know that a good portion of church giving will die with the Baby Boomers.

5. Churches will miss out on the greatest transfer of wealth in history. Cumulatively, the Baby Boomers will leave a lot of money behind at their deaths. Much of it will go to their family members and other individual heirs. Another good portion of it will go to non-profit organizations other than churches. But local congregations are largely missing out on this wealth transfer for one simple reason: they are not asking their members to consider this legacy giving to their churches. In the meantime, colleges, universities, parachurch ministries, and other non-profits do not hesitate to ask your church members for legacy giving. How large is this wealth transfer? I have seen estimates range from \$53 trillion (Cerulli Associates, *New York Times*) to \$84 trillion (Kiplinger).

6. Innovation and change in churches will improve. Our team has conducted hundreds of church consultations. I did my first consultation in 1988. We have a plethora of anecdotal data and church member interviews where we see that Baby Boomers are often the most resistant to change. Indeed, in some of the churches, the Baby Boomer members decided to close the church rather than infringe upon their personal preferences (Church Answers Research). Many churches will likely have new opportunities to make needed changes for greater congregational health as the Baby Boomers fade from the scene.

7. Institutional loyalty will continue to wane at an accelerated pace. Baby Boomers have been the most institutionally loyal generation since the 1970s to today (sciencedirect.com). That is good if the institution is healthy. But institutional loyalty for loyalty's sake is not always good. It is incumbent on church leaders to demonstrate *why* the local church is a place that can make a difference in this world for the glory of God. As the Boomers die, so will their default commitment to the local church.

The Baby Boomer generation changed the culture, the economy, politics, and churches due to their unprecedented numerical presence. Now, the Baby Boomers are dying at a rate of over 7,000 a day, a rate that will continue to increase over the next several years.

Local churches will have many challenges as a result of the fading of the Baby Boomers. But, likewise, those same churches will have an abundance of opportunities. May God increase His power in those churches that are ready to make a difference in this changing world and culture.

This article first appeared at ChurchAnswers.com.