

# Evolving Pastoral Care: A Congregants' Transportation Ministry

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*Safe mobility, including alternative transportation, is essential to continued engagement in civic, social, and community life, and to the human interactions necessary for health, well-being, and quality of life (Freund & Vine, 2010; Dickerson et al., 2007; Kerschner, 2003). Care on behalf of vulnerable older persons and their families is a signature concern for social workers. Given the aging demographic, needs are expected to grow. In response, a new ministry was developed by the congregation of a Southern California church to fulfill its pastoral care and spiritual growth mission, called the Senior Transportation Ministry (STM), which was designed to be “senior friendly.” The creation of the ministry included recruiting eligible drivers, making the ministry known to potential riders, and resolving liability issues. This study seeks to explore the structure, process, and best practices to date of the STM, which had been operational for approximately 12 months at the time of data collection.*

**T**HE UNITED STATES IS ON THE CUSP OF A BURGEONING OLDER ADULT population, driven by the historic baby boom generation and increasing ethnic diversity (Gassoumis, Wilber, Baker & Torres-Gil, 2010). Safe mobility is essential to continued engagement in civic, social, and community life, and to the human interactions necessary for health, well-being, and quality of life (Freund & Vine, 2010; Dickerson et al., 2007; Kerschner, 2003). Care on behalf of vulnerable older persons and their families is a signature concern for social workers. Dickerson and colleagues (2007) studied transportation among older adults using a framework of five key themes: screening and assessment, remediation and rehabilitation, vehicle design and modification, technological advancements, roadway

design, transition to non-driving, and alternative transportation to meet goals related to safety and maintaining mobility.

When driving safely is no longer possible for older adults, transportation options are required. The focus of this research is on a transportation alternative that evolved at a church when pastoral care volunteers responded to the need for mobility resources.

We expect older adults to make good decisions about when they should stop driving, but as a society we often fail to fully recognize the hardships that not being able to drive place on a person (Freeman, Gange, Munoz, & West, 2006; MacDonald & Hébert, 2010). As people age out of the ability to drive safely, and move from driver's seat to passenger seat, the automobile remains the mode of choice, accounting for approximately 90% of personal trips for the population that is age 65 and older (Freund & Vine, 2010). Freund and Vine reported on a study conducted by the Transportation Research Board that projected ridership on public transportation will decline with the aging population. They added that this counterintuitive finding reflects the reality that mass transit was never built for people reaching the advanced ages now common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many older adults instead rely on informal transportation support from friends and family, yet at the same time may feel concerned about being a burden to others and thus, limit their activities (Freeman et al., 2006).

Research findings show that "senior-friendly" transportation constitutes the following five attributes: availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, and affordability (Kerschner, 2003). Public transportation often scores poorly in these areas, even when developed specifically for the older population. In consumer-driven systems, people are creating community transportation by voluntarily sharing private resources and private capacity, blurring the distinction between private and community transportation (Freund & Vine, 2010). Little is known about the senior transportation ministry (STM) model and its ability to respond adequately to older adult transportation needs. This qualitative study explored the response of one congregation interested in meeting this need. Given that the STM is relatively early in its development, the focus was on the structure and process of the ministry support.

## **Background**

The mission of pastoral care and spiritual growth at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, is "to provide direct care to members of our community in need of pastoral care, train the whole congregation to offer and receive from one another, and encourage all of us to practice reasonable and holy self-care" (Rev. Z. Kennedy, personal communication, June 19, 2012). Inherent in this mission is maintaining awareness of the changing needs of the community. This large (4,000+) congregation

identified several trends calling it into service: 1) aging demographics, 2) changing healthcare systems, and 3) the economic recession. With these trends came the growing transportation needs of parishioners, such as:

- Persons who had experienced medical issues, requiring transport to and from medical services after release from the hospital;
- Persons no longer able to drive, but still vibrant and active, wanting to attend church;
- Persons with mobility challenges, in need of assistance to navigate the church campus.

The number of parishioners in these situations was not clear, yet given the demographics, the needs were expected to grow. In response, a new ministry was developed, called the Senior Transportation Ministry (STM). The creation of the ministry included recruiting eligible drivers, making the ministry known to potential riders, and resolving liability issues. Three randomly-selected riders imparted their perspectives on the STM, providing context on the value of a senior transportation ministry to congregants. This study seeks to explore the structure, process, and best practices to date of the STM, which had been operational for approximately 12 months at the time of data collection.

## Methods

We use a logic model to provide the framework for discussing the STM's resources, activities, outputs, and desired outcomes (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Given that the STM is relatively early in development, we focus on structure and process. Structure refers to the nature of the resources, including staff and volunteers, whereas process refers to what was done, who was involved, and how it was received. All focus group and interview data were de-identified for anonymity. The evaluation was approved by Azusa Pacific University's Institutional Review Board.

## Procedure

To inform the logic model, a focus group was conducted on the church campus—composed of volunteer coordinators and drivers—using semi-structured questions. Focus groups allow for multiple perspectives about a similar experience, particularly useful in evaluation research (Glesne, 2011). The hour-long interview was recorded and transcribed. Five recipients of the STM were randomly selected—from a pool of 20 riders—for a brief semi-structured telephone interview, with three consenting and capable of completing the interview ( $n=3$ ). These narratives share the personal implications of faith-based transportation services, looking at how the STM impacted the quality of life for vulnerable adults.

## **Analysis**

The focus group transcript was transferred into Microsoft Excel and independently reviewed by the three authors to determine themes and coded using the logic model framework of 1) resources, 2) activities, 3) who is served, and 4) outcomes. Three telephone interviews were completed by the lead author and manually documented as narratives, most applicable to the activities and outcomes sections of the logic model.

### **The STM Logic Model**

The STM logic model provides a map of the ministry's resources and activities (inputs), describes the target population, and identifies anticipated outcomes (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Using the logic model as a framework, key building blocks are described for development, replication, and evaluation of the STM.

#### **Program Resources: The Structure**

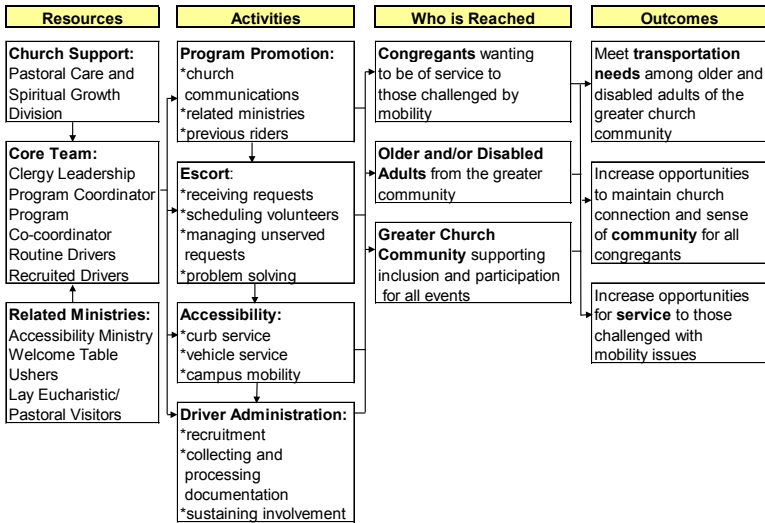
Volunteer members of the lay Eucharistic/pastoral visitors' ministry recognized the need to provide transportation services to seniors and created STM to fulfill this need. These volunteers visit parishioners at home and in hospitals, and other care facilities. They often uncover developing physical and social issues, such as changes in mobility and isolation from usual routines and support community. The program coordinator of the lay Eucharistic/pastoral visitors' ministry became the lead in establishing the STM. Other related services include an active accessibility ministry, which works closely with the welcome table and the large pool of ushers at the church itself.

The core team (see Figure 1, Resources, far left column) for the STM included oversight from clergy and their staff, one to two program coordinators, routine drivers—generally providing escort services to/from medical appointments and/or Sunday services—and those recruited to drive (pending necessary paperwork). The congregation literally and figuratively fueled the program.

#### **Program Activities: The Process**

The primary activity was escort transportation. This included managing incoming requests, matching drivers to fulfill requests, communicating when a match could not be made, and problem-solving when challenges arose. Much of this work relied on emails and the use of clergy support staff to manage incoming calls or requests referred specifically by clergy.

**Figure 1. Logic Model – All Saints Senior Transportation Ministry**



The program coordinator role was described as time-consuming, therefore requiring appropriate back-up support and time off. Technology was discussed in future planning to aid in the coordination of a greater number of mobility requests.

Less obvious were the accessibility activities provided. It was not enough to simply drop members off at their destinations. Multiple mobility issues often challenged parishioners and their safety. The STM had a commitment to assist those it escorted by way of 1) curb service, 2) vehicle service, and 3) campus mobility. Curb service involved dropping the person off as close to the entry as possible, whereas vehicle service involved parking the car for persons in need of curb service who were still driving their own cars and also retrieving their cars. Campus mobility included activities such as navigating wheelchairs and providing stand-by assistance.

Program promotion was largely managed by announcements at church services and notices in bulletins. These outreach activities were important to inform the older and disabled members that the STM could be of assistance. Common referral sources were from another rider, clergy, or one of the other related ministries. Driver administration involved the steps necessary to have a pool of drivers prepared and ready to serve. Once recruited, drivers needed to provide required documentation, consisting of 1) volunteer information form, 2) copy of driver's license, 3) proof of car insurance liability coverage worth \$100,000, 4) church liability release form, and 5) permission for Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) check. Sustaining the volunteer's involvement included assigning the volunteer

to a parishioner in need of services and/or communicating about future assignments. Overall, managing questions and problem-solving was needed to maintain driver interest and availability.

### **Program Participants: Who is Reached**

The STM served older and disabled adults from the community. There was no requirement to have attended the church before or to be a regular member of the congregation. It also served specific members of the larger congregation interested in serving as volunteer drivers who met the documentation requirements, including DMV clearance. STM allowed greater congregation participation because it supported the inclusion of and provided access to older and disabled adults wishing to attend church events.

### **Program Outcomes**

The primary STM outcome was to meet the transportation needs of older and disabled adults who requested such assistance. Additional outcomes were the impact on those who volunteered to drive these individuals. Drivers reported an increased connection and sense of community, as well as a sense of service to the person(s) with whom they provided the escort and/or mobility services.

## **Narratives from STM Riders**

### **Gwen**

Gwen was a rider who reported using the service for the previous three months, receiving a ride each week to and from the church. A woman in her early 60s, she is challenged with severe rheumatoid arthritis: “My knees hurt a lot, and getting in and out of the car is hard for me.” She lives alone and notes that although she can still drive, it is hard for her to manage these days. “I would get to church pretty stressed out, get bumped around a bit, and many times just end up in tears.” She feels she pushes herself to keep going, though, describing herself as having a “roadrunner mentality.”

When asked about the STM, she reported, “The STM is great, the people are really nice—they help me with the long walk to the church, too.” Minimizing her stress getting to church helps aid her ability to participate in church, plus she feels a sense of care from the church. “This service makes me happy, it relieves my stress, and I am so thankful to everyone involved.”

**Catherine**

Another church member, Catherine, explained she lives approximately 20 miles away, and there have been no STM drivers who cover her area of the county. She is in her late 70s and had a brain aneurysm over 15 years ago, resulting in occasional seizures that required her to give up her driver's license. She currently lives with her brother, and from time to time comes to church using a public transportation service designed for the disabled. Unfortunately, she has found this transportation unreliable. Once it left her stranded at church and she had to notify her son, from out of the area, to pick her up. She uses a walker at times, yet remains active by volunteering at a nearby hospital. She is grateful that the church is coordinating transportation and is hopeful that a match will be found from her area. "I would really appreciate and use the transportation," she states.

**Sandra**

The third interviewee, a woman in her late 60s, has been a member of the church for over 30 years and tells of transporting her son and his friends to church for many years. She stopped driving almost 10 years ago when she had a bad car accident totaling her car. In addition, she stopped working in the mental health field in which she had been employed when she herself was diagnosed with some psychological challenges. While she feels these issues are well managed, they decrease her ability to consistently manage time and prioritize her schedule. She did not replace the car, citing her reluctance to continue contributing to pollution and global warming concerns.

When asked about the STM, she shared her appreciation for the program. "Sometimes I have gotten an email checking in on me, which I think is sweet." She has had several rides from two different drivers over the past year. She feels the program could be even more successful with more drivers and perhaps an on-call service. She admits administration of an on-call service would be difficult, yet it would meet her needs. She explains she often does not know if she will be prepared for church on time and feel well enough to attend.

**Discussion**

One way to aid older and disabled adults without transportation options is to develop better public transportation programs specifically targeting older adults. Some posit that other strategies should be developed by families, organizations, and governments to improve the transportation options for older adults to ensure road safety and living independence for as long as safely desired (Freeman et al., 2006, Nasvadi & Wister, 2006). We put forth that faith-based organizations such as churches can also provide

transportation options, and indeed, clergy and lay leaders are called to tend to their parishioners. The Examination in the Book of Common Prayer says, "You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor" (1979, p. 531). Those persons in need of alternative transportation remain a part of one's flock of worshippers, and risk becoming isolated and hidden.

Previous lessons learned include developing a coordinated plan. There are various cadres of volunteers ready to provide transportation and many seniors and disabled residents in need of the service, but a common issue is that there is no central contact point where riders and volunteers can be connected (Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission, 2006). The three narratives we introduced gave a window into the fragmented system these fragile riders traverse. There was not a consistent approach that best met transportation needs, but, instead, a few options they weighed and then selected (Marx, Davis, Miftari, Salamone, & Weise, 2010). Even when public transportation was available, it was not always the best option.

The STM provides a "senior friendly" option for alternative transportation, providing an automobile trip with no financial cost to the rider. In addition to serving as an ideal match for riders, the volunteer drivers themselves remarked that the time spent together during transit built a sense of connection and overall community. One routine driver noted that "the relationship and sense of connection takes on primary significance, making the act of providing transportation secondary in comparison." Benefits appear to be bi-directional, as drivers derived meaning and a sense of service when providing transportation ministry duties (Kerschner & Rousseau, 2008). The riders also commented on the genuine sense of caring they experienced from their drivers, whether during a ride or later, from an email sent by the program coordinator to check in (Haltiwanger & Underwood, 2011).

An important consideration in coordinating transportation is the liability an organization may have by connecting an individual to a volunteer driver. The STM found that liability could be managed through meetings with the faith-based organization's insurance carrier. This will likely be a process, involving perhaps two or three months, as leadership must clarify the steps to take that will reduce direct liability to the organization. As reported in the STM activities section, the STM driver administration included a five-step documentation process for volunteers, designed to manage and reduce organizational liability. Having a structured system to carefully manage this process, including storage of the required documents, is fundamental for replication.

Reflecting on the status of the STM at 12 months, the focus group brainstormed some additional technology that would benefit their ministry. Efficiency was highly valued, especially by program coordinators, and the group felt additional empowerment could take place if there were match-



making options available online. While admittedly not all older adults are technology savvy, a master calendar—accessible by clergy and staff—could streamline the matching and connection process. The program coordinators felt that this type of ministerial service could be an excellent match for younger members and the growing Baby Boomer population who may want to contribute by volunteering more episodically, and not commit to a routine of time-consuming duties.

Regardless of the form the transportation ministry takes, the underlying elements and forces—resources, logistics, technology, and policy—will always be with us, as will the essential human need to move freely and at will in a finite world (Freund & Vine, 2010). ❖

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