

Seniors Serving Seniors

AG missionaries find a fruitful calling in retirement communities

BY JOCELYN GREEN



Terry Watkins (right) baptizes a new Christian in the retirement community's swimming pool.

With such a large proportion of the nation heading into the retirement years, Alvin Worthley believes senior communities need pastoral care providers.

Chaplaincy has long been a formalized ministry in hospitals, the military and in prisons. Now, Assemblies of God chaplains are stationed in another growing field: retirement communities.

Alvin Worthley, director of AG Chaplaincy Ministries, says a ministry to seniors had been on his mind since studying reports from the 2000 U.S. Census, which showed 35 million people in the country aged 65 and older. The census also counted 79.6 million baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), which was slightly under a quarter of the population at that time. With such a large proportion of the nation heading into the retirement years, Worthley believes senior communities need pastoral care providers.

"The population of some of these communities requires a church, and it cannot be totally

sectarian," Worthley says. "The same kind of a concept that works in prisons — working with all faiths — will work with seniors. Chaplains are a natural choice because they know how to work with all denominations."

In 2002, such a vision for ministering to seniors caught on with AG missionaries Terry and Nita Watkins.

After working in Alaskan missions for years, the couple moved into a gated 55-plus community in Tucson, Ariz., with the purpose of ministering to non-Christian seniors.

"This is about reaching souls in their eleventh hour!" says Terry, 67. "Many are old, lonely, sickly and disabled, and many carry a lot of 'baggage' from hurts and abuse. There are many others in fair to good health, active and fun loving."

The Watkinses became the first AG chaplains to formally hold a ministry in a retirement community. They began their ministry with a Bible study and a Sunday service. Now an average of 65 people attend worship services, and about 25 come to Bible study.

"We minister to people, many in their 70s to mid-90s, who have never attended church," says Nita, 66. "Our ministry serves people who can't go elsewhere."

In the past four years, 50 people in the community have made a salvation decision under Terry and Nita's care. They also have a ministry for caregivers, called Hand in Hand, and visit hospitals and rehab centers on a regular basis.

In 2005 Sally Michaud, an AG correctional chaplain since 1993, began serving the pastoral

needs of senior residents at Teresa Village, an Air Force retirement community located in Fort Walton Beach, Fla. Her husband, Fred, is an Air Force retiree, qualifying them to live in the village. She conducts a weekly Bible study, a Sunday worship service, memorial services and baptisms, and strives to meet as many of the pastoral needs as possible.

Michaud says she first saw the need for ongoing pastoral care for senior citizens when she visited her mother at an assisted care living facility where she lived during the last five years of her life.

"I had no idea it would lead me to where I am today," says Michaud, 70. "God has opened many doors to ministry."

Though fibromyalgia slows her down a bit these days, Michaud still continues in ministry. "A calling is to the end of your life,"

she says, "and I was called to do this."

The Watkinses share the same philosophy. "God called me, and He hasn't uncalled me," says Nita.

Worthley, 66, echoes the sentiment: "The call of God is not a call to retirement; it's a call to serve."

Michaud says there is a sense of urgency in ministry to the aged by the aging.

"When we start hitting 65, we can tell our earthly bodies aren't going to function forever," she says. Plus, she says, there is the potential problem of becoming burned out if an emotional attachment forms.

"If I allow myself to become too close to the seniors I serve, as each one dies, it will be as if I am grieving the death of my own mother and my father over and over again," she says.

The keys to a successful ministry to seniors, Nita believes, are relationships and prayer.

“We can build all kinds of relationships, and they can love us, but unless the Holy Spirit deals with their heart and turns them to Jesus, they are not changed,” she says. “First prayer, then relationship. Build confidence so they listen to you and you can point them to the Lord.”

Another 6,000 people in the United States turn 65 every day. By 2030, an estimated 75 million seniors will live in the United States.

Worthley calls the ministry to seniors a significant part of fulfilling the Great Commission. And, from a chaplain’s point of view, such a ministry is not just about evangelism, because many seniors themselves have been faithfully serving the Lord for decades in their respective churches.

“It’s a pastoral role to those who have been part of a church all their lives, but now they’re living elsewhere,” Worthley says. “These senior communities have much stronger relationship bonds than in their former neighborhoods. These people eat together, recreate together, form groups for discussion, for travel; they love being together.

“They don’t necessarily like religious titles such as Lutheran, Baptist or Assemblies of God; they come together as neighbors, friends and people who live in close community. This is a huge segment of society, and it’s a people group that has to be reached.” **e**

JOCELYN GREEN is a frequent news contributor who lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

Former Nurse Returns to Hospital as Chaplain

After spending more than 25 years as a certified nurse and anesthesiologist, Judy Myrick sensed the Lord prompting her to take service to others in a different direction.

At first, Myrick resisted the call to ministry, believing that the Lord really didn’t want to enlist a 55-year-old woman. But she says she kept receiving impressions that she needed to study to obtain ministerial credentials.

“God told me that He knew how old I was,” Myrick says. “After all, did He not put me in my mother’s womb? I didn’t wait for Him to say, ‘And I know you’re a woman.’”

Myrick became an ordained minister in 2002 and is now a chaplain in a hospital where she had previously administered anesthesia. She also pastors Friendly Assembly of God in Gerald, Mo.

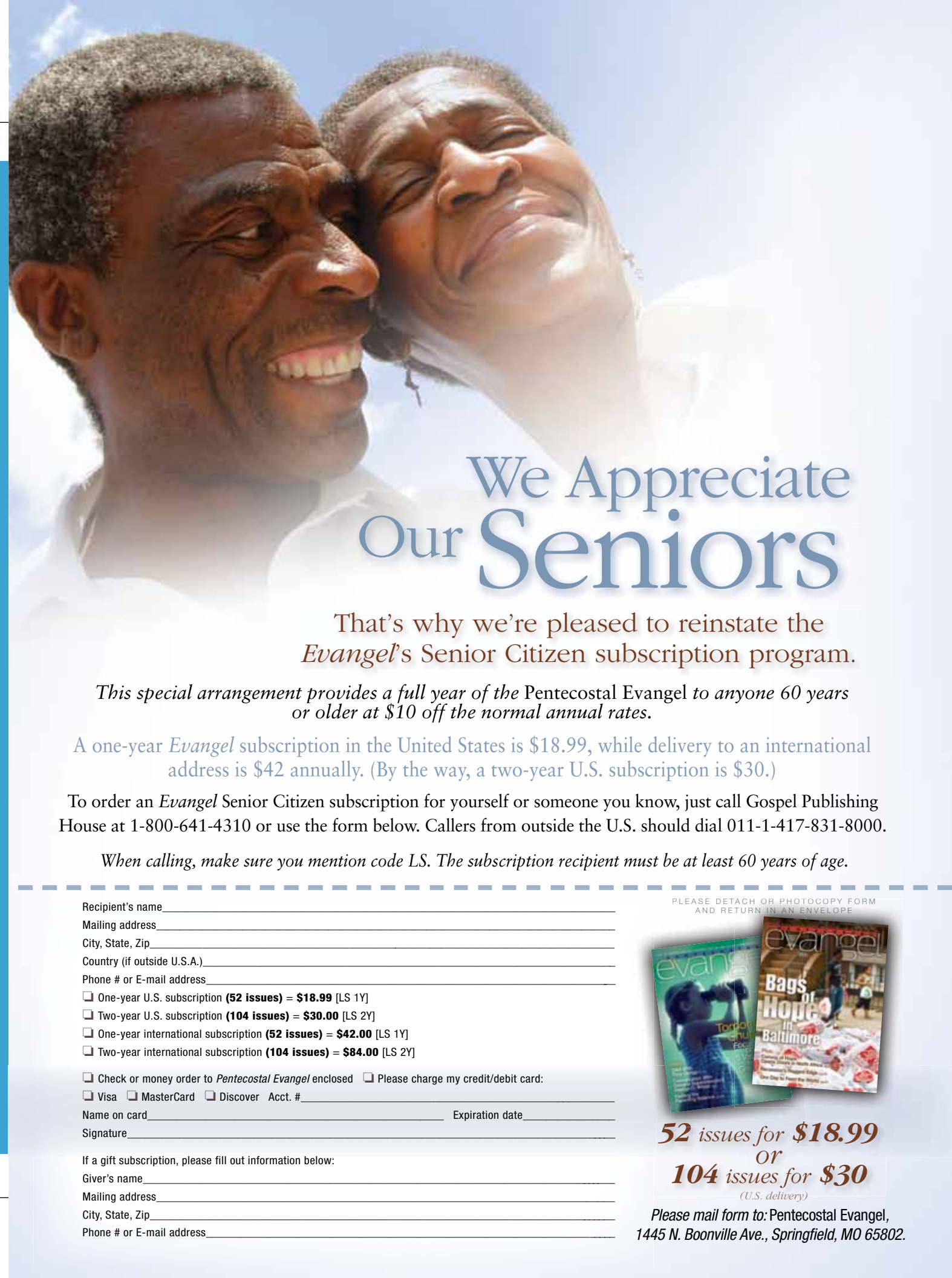
As a chaplain, Myrick’s duties include counseling hospital staff, emergency visitation and ministry to the dying.

“I know God loves them more than I do, and I love them a lot,” she says. “So He’s going to be speaking into their life and wooing them and trying to get people to turn to Him all the time — even right up to their death.”

Myrick, now 68, plans to continue as a hospital chaplain and pastor, plus continue to pursue missionary work as much as possible.

“If that’s the way I spend the rest of my life — preaching and ministering to people who are sick, and sharing the Word where people have never heard the Word — I couldn’t ask to be more blessed than that.”

— Kelly Bevill



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