

## **An Intergenerational Mission for God's Church**

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Some church leaders doubt a multi-generational, diverse congregation can grow and adapt to a constantly changing culture. The tensions between the generations feels too overwhelming for some leaders. When leaders get frustrated and try to implement change too fast, self-sabotage occurs, fracturing churches. Not many ministers enjoy navigating the tension of a group stretched between fear of changing too quickly and frustration for moving too slowly. Yet, most ministers serve in an established congregation with this reality. Unless a person plants a new, zero-history, narrowly targeted church, his or her reality resides in serving an age-diverse congregation. The goal of this article is to encourage pastors and leaders to do the necessary work to build an intergenerational church.

Churches with one dominant generation are at risk, no matter which generation claims that role. Without intergenerational relationships, churches will become inward focused and ineffective. Intergenerational churches welcome all age groups as they participate in the life of the church. While many churches are multigenerational and seemingly care for all generations, in reality the generations function more like cars passing each other on a highway, near each other, but rarely with meaningful contact. This lack of significant relationships between the generations must be addressed if churches intend to thrive from one generation to the next. Intergenerational

ministry is the dynamic relationship between two or more generations. Most congregations are multigenerational in that they have more than one generation engaged in worship and ministry activities. However, intergenerational congregations will empower the various generations to communicate in meaningful ways, interact on a regular basis, and serve together regularly.

Scripture prescribes an intergenerational approach, which views the multiple generations of the family of God as interdependent and necessary for discipleship. Psalm 71:18 says, "So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come" (ESV). Likewise, Psalm 145:4 declares, "One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts" (ESV). The relationships between Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth, and Paul and Timothy also provide examples of deep intergenerational relationships. In 1 Timothy 5:1-3, Paul shares his concern for all generations when he instructs Timothy to care for both younger and older men and women. He also taught how families of widows must care for their parents and grandparents in 1 Timothy 5:4, and Paul explained the role of older women training younger women in Titus 2:3-5. Throughout the Bible, each generation is called to build on the foundation passed on from the previous one.

In the local church context, this means that each generation needs each other in order to produce a healthy church and continue in Jesus' mission.

### **Why Churches Tend to Separate Generationally**

Intergenerational relationships should distinguish the church from other institutions. The concept of dividing people into various segments based on their birth years is a very modern contrivance, adopted, in part, from an age-targeted marketing strategy used to gain attention from specific age groups. This does not mean that churches should suddenly do away with age-specific ministries like children's ministries, youth ministries, life stage groups, or senior adult ministries. All ministries need to be reevaluated and revamped where necessary to make intergenerational relationships a priority.

Several factors have contributed to segregating the ages in churches. Intergenerational ministry experts such as Allan G. Harkness, Holly Catterton Allen, and Christine Lawton Ross trace the beginning of the trend to the Protestant Reformation, especially in its role in the development of schooling. The Reformers desired that everyone have the capacity to read Scripture for themselves, which ultimately ushered in age-based Christian education. Another factor, as Howard Vanderwell recognizes, has been the pressure to tailor Christian activities to meet needs of aging generations. Mark Chaves sees age as a challenge today because church leaders and attendees are living longer. Chaves states, "The average churchgoing adult in the United States is now 50 years old."<sup>1</sup> Kara Powell suggests that the trend toward age segregation began in the 1940s when parachurch ministries such as Young Life, InterVarsity, and Youth

for Christ focused on teenagers and young adults and showed great success.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the success of these specialized, age-specific ministries convinced church leaders that they should adopt similar ministry approaches, especially with youth and children.

### **Clarifying Intentional Intergenerational Ministry**

In order to clarify what intergenerational ministry means, one must contrast three other ministry models with it: age-specific ministry, homogeneous ministry, and family ministry. The temptation exists in an article like this to discredit age-specific ministry entirely. However, not all characteristics of age-specific ministries prove negative. Healthy churches utilize children and youth ministries to support the family's primary spiritual role. Strong churches usually have senior adult ministries that keep seniors active and connected. Some churches, however, segregate different ages into isolated groups for the comfort of their members. Age-specific ministries that segregate different ages into isolated groups do the most harm to the faith formation in children and youth. Often these ministries do not want to hear or see children or youth in the adult worship services.

Intergenerational ministry also represents a departure from popular homogeneous church growth principles. A homogeneous group might intentionally exclude certain ages from its mission in order to accelerate growth within a specific target range. An intergenerational church not only includes all ages, but it seeks to encourage each age to be the Church. Intergenerational ministry goes beyond mere programs to a form of being that helps Christians define themselves and live together as a body of believers. Michelle Anthony describes the intergenerational church as a family of

families:

We all know the adage that it takes a village to raise a child. And when I look at many of the children that our churches are losing, I can't help but wonder if we have lost out village-ness. ... Today's family ministry needs a mission that says the entire faith community will feel the responsibility of raising a spiritually transformed generation of children.<sup>3</sup>

Intergenerational ministry serves as the broader lens through which family ministry is expressed. Intergenerational and homogenous-age group ministry strategies in churches should be considered complementary, but with an intergenerational philosophy taking primacy over the age-segregated approach. Intergenerational ministry functions as a way of being, not as a program.

### **Intentional Practices of Intergenerational Churches**

A multifaceted, intentional intergenerational approach to ministry takes years to develop. Older, diverse congregations usually cannot change in a short period without damage to their unity. Intergenerational ministry can strongly influence the unity of a church, but it takes time to develop. Therefore, churches should make a conscious, protracted effort to encourage intergenerational ministry through various formats. Established churches change slowly, so much so that some changes are barely noticeable. Eventually, however, they reach their destinations. Patient leaders fare well in these established churches when working toward the goal of being an intergenerational church.

Spiritual maturity results in intergenerational congregations. Self-sabotage occurs when leaders implement methods with an

immature group, triggering reactions in others, and posturing leaders in a defensive position. Traditional congregations must passionately communicate the concept that sacrifice always goes with spiritual maturity. They focus on ways to honor their heritage and evolve to reach the people in their communities. When churches have a zero-history, they can begin with a purely evangelistic mission. This differs from established churches that must weigh the Great Commission against other critical issues involving discipleship, ministry, and maintaining unity. Incremental change usually has the greatest impact in established churches. Change management includes physical and emotional changes. Leaders must manage both aspects to lead the people in their congregations effectively.

Engaging all ages involves a multidisciplinary approach that changes the essence of what drives every decision in the church. An intergenerational church must ground itself with three characteristics. First, it is intentional. Although it is critical to embrace intergenerational ministry as a way of being, it cannot stop there. Church leaders must take intentional action to encourage relationships.

Second, a shared mission between all generations in a church proves foundational for any practice to strengthen the church. When agreement and passion about the mission of Jesus come together, a foundation exists to implement the intergenerational practices. By engaging only one or two generations in decisions regarding the Church's mission, churches place themselves at risk.

Finally, churches need to embrace five faith practices for the development of an intergenerational congregation: (1) Partnering with Parents, (2) Strategic Mentoring, (3) Blended Services, (4) Faith-

Building Stories, and (5) Serving Opportunities. Many churches try one or more of these practices to encourage the generations. However, few churches intentionally do all of them together with a shared mission.

### Partnering with Parents

Research shows parents as one of—if not the—biggest influences on their child’s faith. After his national telephone survey of 3,290 teens and their parents and 250 in-depth interviews, Christian Smith concluded,

Most teenagers and their parents may not realize it, but a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggest that the most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.<sup>4</sup>

Reggie Joiner, family ministry expert, states, “No one has more potential to influence your child than you [the parent].”<sup>5</sup>

Intergenerational churches equip parents to be the spiritual leaders in the home. The intergenerational church and parents partner together by celebrating spiritual milestones. Milestones prove important for any person maturing in his or her faith. Each milestone requires the child, youth, or adult to learn key spiritual truths as he or she matures in the faith. Spiritual milestones can also include steps that follow life transitions like baby dedication, faith commitment, commitment to sexual purity, high school graduation, college graduation, or marriage.

### Strategic Mentoring

Although parents are important to a child’s spiritual formation, every child needs another adult voice to influence his or her

life and faith. Intergenerational churches provide fertile grounds for mentoring. Ross Parsley encourages church leaders to embrace mentoring: “We need mentors, fathers, mothers, older brothers and sisters who will teach the next generation that they are accepted and loved even in the midst of conflict, correction, and challenge.”<sup>6</sup>

Strategic mentoring can happen both formally and informally. Intergenerational churches encourage personal relationships and intentionally create environments where generations can learn from each other. Churches can structurally support this practice by introducing new groups to their church. Churches may consider affinity groups instead of age-based small groups. These groups are designed around a mutual interest or hobby and can become a place for older adults to engage younger people. All generations, especially the younger generations, need strong examples of faith to develop into mature believers. Young people need adults in their lives who are modeling an attractive spiritual maturity.

Intergenerational churches promote reverse mentoring, as well. Intergenerational leaders challenge older people to look beyond themselves. Older people need the younger people in their lives. The goal of all mentoring aims for valuable relationships that promote spiritual health. Although age does not promise wisdom or youth guarantee innovation, strategic mentoring fuels maturity for all ages.

### Blended Services

Blended worship services combine both old and new elements into a new kind of service. Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof studied several congregations, learning how they confronted generational tensions. In their book, *Bridging Divided Worlds*, they explain three categories of congregations.<sup>7</sup> The inherited-tradition congregation seeks to

conserve what it has inherited from its denomination, congregational experience, and its ethnic heritage. The blended congregation consciously appeals to all the generations engaged in worship. It values traditional practices, but it adapts them with sensitivity to contemporary culture. The generation-specific congregation addresses the cultural characteristics and needs of a particular generation. Carroll and Roof indicate that while all three inherently possess unique advantages and disadvantages, the blended congregation has the greatest potential for success in becoming genuinely intergenerational.

Three significant benefits to embracing a blended service exist. First, it allows the church to demonstrate its unity. When a church reaches only one or two age groups, the church is no longer being what the church was supposed to be—a family with all ages worshipping together. Different groups using the same facility is not the same thing. Blending the services allows the different age groups to unify and be the church.

Second, a blended service promotes biblical substance over style. Music preferences serve as a consistent barrier in multigenerational churches. At the beginning of my research<sup>8</sup>, I suspected that music was the single greatest determinant of a congregation's generational unity. However, misguided worship practices based on faulty generational assumptions can dangerously accentuate rather than relieve the pervasive generational tensions. The results of my research proved that blended music is not as important as I originally assumed. No music style exists that successfully determines the likelihood of achieving an intergenerational church. If music were the secret ingredient, leaders could use it to manipulate the people in their congregations. Not all contemporary music

is trendy. Neither is all older music spiritual. Instead, every church's service should see their worship service through the eyes of those who need to connect with the church. Inclusiveness of all ages in ministry holds greater importance than the singing or hearing of music. Intergenerational ministry serves the potential in every person, regardless of age, in the body of Christ.

Finally, blended services cultivate a culture of diversity. Intergenerational worship is a way of seeing each other, the purpose of the church, and the needs of the people in the congregation. Leaders must look at their services from the perspective of purpose rather than preference. Rather than asking how most people *like* a particular practice, leaders must learn to explore how choosing a practice will most faithfully fulfill the purpose of the congregation. Intergenerational churches communicate their values through their service structures. Blended services promote unity, substance over style, and diversity.

### Faith-building Stories

For different generations to worship, learn, and grow together, the telling of faith-building stories must occur. Faith-building stories include the telling of Bible stories and personal testimonies. Psalm 71:18 declares, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come" (NIV).

Declaring God's story is arguably the most important faith practice. What does it mean to declare God's power to the next generation? God does not reveal the gospel to people in the form of a painting or a precise definition, but as a story. Some churches neglect Bible stories and rarely share personal testimonies. Sometimes the emphasis on saving time during the worship

service prevents the telling of Bible stories. Jeff Barker states, “For the sake of saving time in the worship hour, we are tempted to tell *about* Bible stories without actually *telling* them.”<sup>9</sup> Barker suggests other possible reasons churches neglect to tell stories: overemphasis on music, too prideful to hear testimonies, satisfied with fictional stories, laziness, afraid of those who would abuse the activity, and including too many random scriptures without telling stories.

Leaders and parents have a responsibility to tell of God’s work in their lives. People need to hear that their pastors and ministers lead from a place of authenticity and experience. Fictional stories are good if they build faith in God. Only human beings have the capacity to empathize with the feelings of other individuals. Faith-building stories give people perspective. By practicing storytelling, leaders, parents, and churches declare God’s power to the next generation.

### Serving Opportunities

Intergenerational churches will intentionally plan opportunities that involve children, youth, adults, and seniors serving together. When multiple generations serve together, age differences are minimized. Christine Ross says,

Intergenerational ministry occurs when a congregation intentionally combines the generations together in mutual serving, sharing, or learning within the core activities of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community.<sup>10</sup>

Intentional intergenerational ministry will seek out help from all generations for planning worship services, participating in the service, or serving the congregation in some way.

Although churches should not involve people, especially young people, just for the sake of keeping them busy, a remarkable correlation exists between one’s involvement at church and his or her faith. Churches should implement Graeme Codrington and Sue Grant-Marshall’s simple motto: “It needs to be ministry *with* and *by* young people, not *to* or *for* young people.”<sup>11</sup> Kids and youth ministries should give careful consideration when ministering to these age groups by providing them opportunity for involvement.

### Conclusion

No better place exists for people of all ages to learn the Christian faith than the intergenerational church. The best way to pass the faith from generation to generation is to partner with parents, nurture a culture of mentoring, promote blended services, share faith-building stories, and facilitate serving opportunities where all generations can participate. Churches frequently address one or more of these practices, but rarely do they practice all of them. Intergenerational churches must intentionally engage in all five faith practices to accomplish one goal: “One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts” (Ps. 145:4). For intergenerational churches to thrive, generations must dwell together, know each other, and experience life in the body of Christ. This requires wise church leaders who will remind the church often of the strengths, benefits, and joys of being intergenerational.

Leaving a legacy of faith is not about doing something magnificent. It is about doing the ordinary things with integrity and consistency. Intergenerational ministry is not just another discipleship program. It is not just placating multiple generations with different music styles, allowing children to sit in the adult service for a few minutes, or

letting the preschool class present a song during corporate worship. Intergenerational ministry goes beyond mere programs to a form of being that helps Christians define themselves and live together as a body of believers. Even when leaders do not see immediate results, they can trust God with the harvest. The popular culture seeks immediate gratification, but within the church immediate results rarely occur. A deficient comprehension of the importance of an intergenerational approach weakens a church's perspective and its witness as the faithful seek to engage the unsaved community.

A Pentecostal church, by nature, is diverse. No mission statement or strategic plan has meaning if it excludes someone for whom God intends to reconcile through faith in Christ. This mission of gathering a soul harvest includes every age, gender, and ethnicity. The mission reaches, disciples, and sends all people. Joel prophesied about a day when God's Spirit would come upon all people:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your old men will dream dreams, your

young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28-29, NIV)

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter explained that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the initial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:14-21).

The Spirit's endowment at Pentecost authenticates Jesus' mission to include all people, regardless of their unique distinctions, in His redemptive salvation plan. God is building a diverse family and has a purpose for each person, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. When leaders devote themselves to God's purposes, they can rest in the promise of the Holy Spirit to empower their witness and strengthen their churches. Difficulty exists in uniting a multigenerational, diverse congregation around God's purposes; however, this reflects God's desire for His Church. With God's help, all things are possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), Kindle e-book, location 1451.

<sup>2</sup> Kara Powell, "Is the Era of Age Segregation Over?" *Leadership* 30 (Summer 2009): 43-48.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Anthony, *Dreaming of More for the Next Generation: Lifetime Faith Ignited by Family Ministry* (Littleton, CO: David C. Cook, 2012), Kindle e-book, location 45.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Reggie Joiner and Carey Nieuwhof, *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity: Connect Your Family to a Wider Community* (Littleton, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ross Parsley, *Messy Church: A Multigenerational Mission for God's Family* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2012), Kindle e-book, location 1632.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 104-108.

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<sup>8</sup> For my D.Min. project, “Intergenerational Ministry Practices Discovered at Central Assembly of God in Springfield, Missouri,” (D.Min. diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Barker, “The Power of Telling a Story,” in *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), 101.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Ross, “Being an Intergenerational Congregation,” *Issues Journal* (Fall 2007): 27.

<sup>11</sup> Graeme Codrington and Sue Grant-Marshall, *Mind the Gap!* (London: Penguin Group, 2004), 251.



