

Intentional Intergenerationality – More Than Bringing Generations Together –

by Chris Barnett

More than a fad, the renewed interest in intergenerational ministry is underpinned by a growing body of research that affirms intergenerational connections as key to sustainable, long-term faith formation and discipleship. However, even when churches embrace the language of "intergenerational," they can still miss the mark with regard to genuinely transformative intergenerational practice. A more nuanced understanding of intergenerational, alongside a more intentional approach to implementation by church leadership, is required in order for faith communities – and the communities they serve – to more fully enjoy the blessing of an intergenerational approach to ministry.

Dave Csinos and Ivy Beckwith assert that there is "...growing consensus that intergenerational relationships and communities are crucial for the well-being of children (and adults!)"¹. David Goodwin's research suggests that adult engagement with children and provision of meaningful opportunities for children to be involved in worship with adults "...will assist children to grow in their faith, their love of God, and their connection to the church and its faith practices"². Many other authors, thinkers and researchers, including but not limited to in David Kinnaman in *You Lost Me*³, Kara Powell in *Sticky Faith*⁴, John Roberto in *Generations Together*⁵ and Christian Smith in *Soul Searching*⁶ are highlighting the importance of intergenerational connections in the maintenance and sustenance of discipleship. Beyond the North American context, movements like *Here2Stay*⁷ in Australia and *Faithfull Generation*⁸ in the UK are also identifying – and responding to – similar conclusions.

One commonly highlighted description of intergenerational ministry, from James White, is "Two or more different age groups...together learning, growing, living in faith through in-common experiences, parallel learning, contributive occasions, and interactive sharing"⁹. Whilst a concise summary of these terms can be found in the *Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation* article by John Roberto¹⁰, it is even simpler to note that to a large extent this definition involves different generations intentionally engaging in shared activity together. More particularly, it highlights the fact that it requires only two generations

¹ David M. Csinos and Ivy Beckwith, *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), p.142

² David Goodwin, *Lost in Transition – or Not?* (North Richmond: Kidsreach, 2013), p.23

³ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church...and Re-thinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011)

⁴ Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday ideas to build lasting faith in your kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011)

⁵ John Roberto, Kathie Amidei and Jim Merhaut, *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating and Serving Faithfully* (Naugatuck: Lifelong Faith Associates, 2014)

⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

⁷ *Here to Stay* <http://here2stay.org.au/>, accessed 07/29/17

⁸ *Faithfull Generation* <http://faithfullgeneration.com/>, accessed 07/29/17

⁹ James W. White, *Intergenerational Religious Education: Models, Theories and Prescription for Interage Life and Learning in the Faith Community* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988), p.18

¹⁰ John Roberto, "Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation" *Lifelong Faith* (Fall/Winter 2007) pp.4,5. http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/best_practices_in_intergenerational_faith_formation.pdf, accessed on 07/29/17

to be present for there to be the potential for intentional intergenerational engagement. Thus, irrespective of how many years are assigned to a particular generation (typically 15-20 years¹¹), even in congregations without representation from the younger generations, there is still the opportunity to embrace - and benefit from - an intentionally intergenerational approach to ministry.

Whilst momentum towards greater intergenerationality with-in churches is being generated by those primarily concerned with younger generations, as pointed out by Holly Allen and Christine Ross in *Intergenerational Christian Formation*¹² the initial impetus regarding the importance of intergenerationality from a secular perspective arose from the field of gerontology - that is, from an identification of the benefits for older generations of deeper engagement with younger generations. As outlined persuasively by Allen and Ross, there is both a strong biblical, theological, sociological and formational foundation and solid support from developmental, social learning, ecological systems, socio-cultural, situative-sociocultural and gerontological theory¹³ for asserting that an intentionally intergenerational environment is more likely to encourage and sustain lifelong discipleship for all ages. Intergenerationality is not just about (and of benefit to) children, it is about (and of benefit to) people of all ages.

In discussion around intergenerational ministry, there can often be confusion (and unhelpful conflation) around the terms multi-generational, cross-generational and inter-generational. If the risk of becoming mired in linguistic pedantry can be avoided, greater clarity and precision around these terms can be beneficial in deepening an understanding of genuinely intergenerational ministry. In order to explore the distinctions between cross-, multi- and inter-, many have found the analogy with cross-, multi- and inter-cultural useful. By way of example, the Uniting Church in Australia has intentionally moved from describing itself as a multi-cultural church¹⁴, to understanding itself as a cross-cultural church to, in the case of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania at least, aspiring to be an inter-cultural church – with this trajectory driven by those most invested in the Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (that is, non-Anglo) communities of the Uniting Church. What, then, might be the difference between multi-. cross- and inter- and what are the implications for intergenerational ministry?

A useful resource for exploring the distinctions between between multi-. cross- and inter- is the *Defining Multicultural, Cross-cultural, and Intercultural*¹⁵ paper from the United Church

¹¹ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002) p.199

¹² Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012) p.134

¹³ Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*

¹⁴ *We are a Multi-cultural Church*, Uniting Church in Australia, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/mcm/resources/assembly-resolutions-and-statements/item/1688-we-are-a-multicultural-church>, accessed on-line 07/29/17

¹⁵ *Defining Multicultural, Cross-cultural, and Intercultural*, United Church of Canada, [Defining Multicultural, Cross-cultural, and Intercultural - ResearchGate](#), accessed on-line 29/07/1017

of Canada. Drawing from this resource, and applying the same language to the intergenerational space, it could be said that in the multi-generational environment there is tolerance, living alongside, superficial and polite interaction, in the cross-generational environment there is some sharing, listening and learning but little individual or collective transformation and in the inter-generational environment there is comprehensive mutuality, equality and reciprocity that makes individual or collective transformation more likely. In essence, the trajectory from multi- to inter- involves a greater depth of relationship, a change in the nature of the relationship and an increasing openness to being changed through relationship with “other”.

When so much of the discussion and debate in churches around intergenerational ministry is about our *doing*, this framing in relational terms usefully points to a more fundamental aspect of intergenerationality as being about our *being*. Beyond the pragmatic and programmatic, the transition to a genuinely intergenerational paradigm involves a profound change in our attitudes, behaviours and openness towards those who are different (in this case, chronologically) to ourselves. Whilst relationships marked by mutuality, equality and reciprocity might seem self-evident to those of us who claim to be followers of the Jesus Way, there is more to this than meets the eye. What does it really mean for a 5 year old to be in this kind of a relationship with a 45 year old or a 74 year old with a 17 year old? What are the implications for our structures, the way decisions are made, how leadership is understood and exercised? There is a politically subversive dimension to truly intergenerational ministry that has the potential to substantially disrupt the ways in which power is distributed and exercised in the life of the church. Intergenerationality is not just about what we do, it is more fundamentally about who we are.

Just as clarity around the terms multi-, cross- and inter- can be useful for churches, so too can clarification around the difference between a primarily generationally configured community and a primarily intergenerationally configured community. In essence, a generationally configured community is one in which the default position is age based cohorts which, sometimes, join with other generations for specific activities together. For communities primarily configured in this way, the challenge is to create opportunities for the different generations to engage well together. An intergenerationally configured community is one in which the default position is all ages together and, sometimes, things are done separately in age-based cohorts. For communities primarily configured in this way, the challenge is to deepen intergenerational connections. An initial task for churches is to ascertain whether they are primarily generationally or intergenerationally configured (noting that that in each configuration it is important to have a blend of age-based and multi-age experiences), as this will determine the foundational starting point for their journey toward greater intergenerationality. Irrespective of the starting point, though, the challenge in either case is the implementation of an intentional strategy for developing and strengthening intergenerational engagement.

As described by Alan Harkness, “Intentional intergenerational strategies...encourage interpersonal interactions across generational boundaries...sense of mutuality and respect is encouraged between participants”¹⁶. For a faith community to be truly intergenerational,

¹⁶ Alan G. Harkness, “Intergenerational and Homogeneous –Age Education: Mutually Exclusive Strategies for Faith Communities? *Religious Education* 95 (2000) p.52.

these strategies need to address far more than worship. As can be inferred from the work of John Roberto et al in *Generations Together*¹⁷, such strategies need to encompass the whole life of a church – its caring, praying, learning, celebrating and serving together. If it is accepted that being intergenerational is also about who we are and how we are – our values, our beliefs, our attitudes, our posture in relation to the different generations - as well as what we do, then intentional intergenerational strategies also need to address the embedding of such an approach into the culture of a church – for example through inclusion in the church values, church philosophy of ministry or whatever is appropriate for the specific church context.

Simply having multiple generations in the same space does not make the experience intergenerational. To be truly intergenerational requires the generations to be genuinely interacting and engaging together. Intergenerational ministry requires specific action from those in leadership. It requires modelling and deliberate cultivation of the values, attitudes and behaviours that enhance intergenerational engagement. It requires leadership that is intentional in developing its understanding and practise of intergenerational ministry. Intergenerationality is not something that just happens, it requires intentionality – especially on the part of leaders.

Whilst intergenerationality encompasses much more than the gathered worship life of a congregation, nevertheless it seems to be the area that most churches interested in intergenerational ministry initially want focus on. Though this might not be the best strategy – sometimes it will be preferable to strengthen intergenerational capacity in other areas first – there is also the argument that this is the prime formational space in the life of the congregation, and is thus the most important place for genuine intergenerationality to be modelled and expressed. At this point it is worth noting that intentionally intergenerational worship is different from “children’s”, “family” or even “contemporary” worship in that, by definition, it deliberately fosters engagement by people from at least two different generations (remembering that it is possible for worship to be genuinely intergenerational without younger generations being present).

Returning to the language of multi-, cross- and inter- , as articulated by E. Waldron Barnett, multi-generational worship could be described as worship where at least two generations are present and addressed in parallel, cross-generational worship as worship where there is a deliberate intersection of two or more generations and intergenerational worship as worship where there is intentional facilitating, hosting and celebrating of the shared life and connections of all and any generations together.¹⁸

¹⁷ Roberto, Amedei and Merhaut. *Generations Together*

¹⁸ E. Waldron Barnett, ‘Gathering or Dividing’ *Youth Vision Quarterly* 15 (2017) pp.9,10, accessed online 07/29/2017 <http://www.churchesofchrist.org.au/getmedia/eb6bbdc6-801b-4ab9-9e2e-833b907fc9/YVQ-ISSUE15-Web.pdf?ext=.pdf>

In addition, a question that often emerges when consideration is being given to intergenerational worship is “How is intergenerational worship different to multi-age worship?” The “multi-age” dimension of the question is perhaps best addressed by recalling the foundational elements of multi-age worship – including the importance of being multi-sensory, multi-intelligence and multi-ability aware. The “intergenerational” aspect of the question is perhaps best addressed by recalling that key to intergenerational ministry is the values, the beliefs, the attitudes and posture in relation to the different generations and that intergenerational worship includes the deliberate fostering of opportunities for interaction across generational boundaries that are marked by mutuality, respect and reciprocity. In this context, the multi-age component could be said to relate to the actual content of worship and the intergenerational component to the way the worship is led.

Leadership is the crucial dimension in intergenerational worship (and, indeed, intergenerational ministry) that is often overlooked. There is leadership required at a church governance level in setting and affirming an intergenerational framework for ministry. There is leadership required at a congregational level in implementing and encouraging accountability around congregational practice. There is leadership required by those leading the components of any individual worship service in modelling, curating, facilitating and celebrating intergenerational values and practices. In terms of these practices there are many excellent resources available. Drawing on material provided by Beth Barnett in *Party on Together*¹⁹, Lucy Moore in *All-Age Worship*²⁰ and Mary Jo Zwar in her *Planning Intergenerational Worship* article²¹, some practical tips for preparing and leading intergenerational worship include...

- Including fun, excitement and surprise
- Ensuring explanations, invitations and directions are clear
- Using language that is hospitable, invitational and inclusive
- Providing opportunities for interaction of small intergenerational groups
- Integrating content, engaging emotions, using story and utilising repetition
- Giving a high priority to multi-sensory, multi-intelligence and multi-ability opportunities
- Involving a number of different people — representing a range of generations — in leadership
- Making sure invitations to engage are inclusive of all present and respectful of different abilities

Rather than seeing “intergenerational” worship as taking us into completely new and unfamiliar (and, for some, scary) territory, in fact it is an opportunity to build on our existing

¹⁹ Beth Barnett, *Party on Together: Multi-Age Worship Resources and Bible Studies* (Melbourne: Scripture Union Victoria, 2010)

²⁰ Lucy Moore, *All-Age Worship* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2010)

²¹ Mary Jo Zwar, “Planning Intergenerational Worship”

<http://sa.uca.org.au/documents/childrenandfamily/resources/all-age-worship/Planning-Intergenerational-Worship.pdf>, accessed on-line 29/07/17

experience in the area of multi-age engagement. The challenge is not to come up with something completely new and novel, rather it is to add an intentionally intergenerational flavour to an existing foundation. The joy – and potential – of intergenerational worship is to see people of all ages engaging worshipping, learning and growing in faith together.

Intergenerational ministry is far more than simply bringing different generations into the same space at the same time. Intergenerational ministry is of benefit to people of all ages, not just children. Intergenerational ministry is about who we are, not just what we do. Intergenerational ministry requires intentionality on the part of leadership, it doesn't just happen. For intergenerational ministry to be genuinely transformative it needs to be more fully understood, more deeply embraced, more genuinely modelled, more intentionally facilitated and more strategically embedded into the culture of faith communities. For this to become the reality, leadership that embodies and encourages intergenerationality is vital. The radical risk of intergenerational ministry is that when relationships marked by mutuality, equality and reciprocity are genuinely lived out, existing power structures will be disrupted and new ways of being formed. Even more exciting than an intentionally intergenerational environment being more likely to encourage and sustain lifelong discipleship for individuals of any generation is the potential for intergenerational ministry to totally transform the entire Church.

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