

Exploring Intentional Intergenerational Environments

Where All Ages Draw Closer to God and Each Other

By Tammy Tolman

“If you want to go fast - go alone; If you want to go far - go together”

(African Proverb)

It was a simple Passover meal, in a home where all ages gathered to eat, drink, laugh, and be together—but mostly to remember. Over the past ten years, in our intergenerational faith community, an intentional environment has been created where there is genuine love and acceptance. After the simple meal, we huddled into a smaller space, comfortable to be close together. With forty candles ablaze we recounted the things Jesus said on the night he ate with his friends, 2000 years ago.

As all ages shared a truth of Jesus, there was a special silence when Sophie, one of our youngest, stood to read softly and seriously, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” before extinguishing one of the candles. Then one of our older participants stood to read her statement. She couldn’t help but do a little skip of pure joy as she said, “praise God,” and God’s love oozed from her. On we went until there was one candle left. All focused and centered on that candle as we remembered the thirty-nine lashes. We remembered, we prayed, we worshiped as we huddled together in a room 2000 years later.

As we concluded, I expected many would leave, considering the range of young families, older couples, teenagers, and empty nesters there on that eve of the Easter weekend. Surely once the formalities were over, it would be time for them to go—but no-one left. In fact, the talking was so loud at times I could hardly hear myself speak. All ages, laughing and telling

stories together—it wasn't men in one corner, women in another, and teens on their devices in another corner. It was real conversation, across all ages. An environment was created where all ages could collide. It was beautiful. It was a night to remember, an experience to anchor us all to each other and to Jesus.

Doing Life Together on a Sunday

But what does doing life together on a typical Sunday look like? Admittedly, it is a challenge to draw all generations together on a Sunday mornings in a 9:30-11:00 time slot.

This particular morning was a very wet morning; we expected that many would just stay at home. [To be honest, I would have been very tempted to do so—if I hadn't had obvious responsibilities—especially when the radio and TV were telling everyone to stay home.] But the room was full of people of all ages, and it was a wonderful time for all who joined in.

One mother I spoke with said she had really wanted to sit quietly in church today without her kids, but then admitted that she had really enjoyed the environment that was created which allowed her to spend time with God *and* her children.

Another mother with three under the age of 3 said, "Normally my husband is in the nursery with one of our children, I am in the 'cry room' with the other, but today we were able to REALLY be here, all in together. It was a nice change."

An older man said he "walked in, saw the tables set up and thought ... 'oh, no.'" But he had made the effort to come to me and say that he had really engaged in the morning and loved the opportunity. I was touched.

We had indeed met at tables this morning, and each person had received some playdough. An older woman shared how God showed her what intergenerational connection really looked like when I asked each person at the table to share their playdough and mold it all

together, experiencing how we are transformed by being together into something different than when we started. She described for me how she had molded the various playdough colors at the table in a way that each of the colors still showed, demonstrating that we can still be “all together but with our personalities intact.” It was a beautiful way to see the body of Christ.

All the members of a family were sitting at a table making their own things from play dough, but when they joined it all together, they made a scene that they couldn't have made individually. It was quite unique and intriguing.

These were the stories I got to hear in the time I stayed around to pick up. The morning was finished and I was spent. I had been talking about lifelong discipleship being much more than a program or a service, that it is rather about doing life together; but by then I had served for the day and was keen to go home and simply relax. I had ticked the morning's tasks off my list—and then someone asked us to lunch with two other families. My first thought was, “Do I have to go to lunch?” The second thought was, “If we do, we will just go for a little while. I am tired and I really don't want to put the effort into making new friends.” *I can talk about doing life with people in a morning orchestrated experience, but really, do I have to go to lunch with them?*

God never misses a moment to teach us and remind us about what life together is really about. As I had said that morning, “We only need to have eyes to see and be willing to open the eyes of our heart that we might see Jesus” (Eph 1:18).

So 3pm comes along and we are still deep in conversation, sharing life, passions, struggles, and shared frustrations. Two wonderful families with young children sharing about juggling life, ministry, and parenthood. My teenager was a part of the conversation and loved the heart connection with the young mums, kids playing in the rain in their undies, the men sharing the challenges of work and life, good food, and wonderful conversations all around the lunch table together. So, where did true community happen for me today? I want to say it was everywhere, both in the morning celebration and at lunch, because God was in them all and He never misses a moment. But for me, deep down where it matters most, it

happened around the lunch table, as we shared, listened and truly made friendships that I believe God put together that day for so much more than the moment. I am looking forward to what He is doing and will do through that time and thank God that I had the eyes to see and the open heart (even if I did go kicking and screaming on the inside) to see the God connections and to be willing to do life with others.

Many people ask me, in this busy life of today, how we could possibly do life together. It is just too counter-cultural. Family life is hectic. They can't even come to church once a week, let alone ask them to interact together across the ages. Many ask, "What does life together really look like?"

I wonder if we are simply asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking "Why?" or "How?" or "What?" perhaps we should ask "Why not?"

A Lifelong, Intentional, Relational, Holistic Environment

The following key words/phrases have given us language and a foundation to re-think and change the way we do church, with the sole desire to draw closer to God and to each other.

Those who are willing to walk this journey together are being transformed by the experience.

We are a "lifelong, intentional, relational, holistic environment where all generations do life together."

- **Lifelong:** We are never meant to stop learning. The best time to start is when we are born and the best time to stop is when we die. It is important to see discipleship as a lifelong learning journey for anyone at every age.

*"Life is a journey, not a destination."*¹— *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

¹ Often attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, though it is not an exact quote from Emerson. *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs*, compiled by Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred R. Shapiro. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 142.

- **Intentional:** We need to be focused with the end in mind, and to be intentional about making every moment matter, always leading toward the final goal. If we practice *intentionality* in all things, we might be surprised how often God can be a part of every aspect of life. If we are not intentional about drawing close to God and to others, there are so many things that will distract us from what is important. And of course, there is an enemy who is very intentional in distracting us all. (John 10:10)
- **Relational:** Deep, authentic relationships take love, acceptance, listening, and sharing over time—lots of time. Lack of time is often an excuse for not being able to have deep relationships. We have no less time today than in any other era. What is important is where we spend our time. Relationship with God and with each other are the only things that last beyond eternity. Surely the best way to use our time is in deep authentic relationships.
- **Holistic:** We need to reconsider the silos in our lives. In every aspect of life, our tendency is to segment, isolate, specialize. We were created for community with all parts of ourselves (physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, psychologically) as well as with other people.
- **Environments:** When we change our language from “programs” to “environments,” we start to re-think how to use time and resources to create spaces where faith formation can occur. What environments can we create which help people of all ages connect, worship, serve and grow together?
- **All generations:** Our story becomes more authentic and valid when we are intersecting with all generations, when we understand that we are part of much *bigger* story. This understanding comes about in two ways:
 - knowing we are a part of God’s story that has always been and always is.

– walking with those who are further down the track than we are and helping those on the track behind us.

- Do life together: Life is a journey with others, a joint passion, a story shared. Our faith and lives need to interconnect in the things we do every day.

Part five of this book offers a half dozen *lifelong, intentional, relational, holistic environments where all generations have opportunities to do life together*, specific environments where the generations collide. There is no right or wrong environment if we *intentionally* gather to be *relational* and *holistic* in places where there are opportunities for the *generations to do life together* their whole *life long*, with a core desire to draw closer to God.