The Benefits of Intergenerality[1]

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"When generations collide, the ensuing conflict reminds everyone, Church is not just about me. Who knew that church could be the cure to narcissism?" Chad Hall, *"All in the Family Is Now Grey's Anatomy"*

This article supports the basic premise that intergenerational faith experiences uniquely nurture spiritual growth and development in both adults and children. We must clarify here that we are not recommending that *all* activities of a faith community be conducted with all ages present. There are powerful, valid and important reasons to gather by age or stage or interest; spiritual growth and development can and indeed does happen when teens gather separately, when the seniors meet for mutual support and care, and when the preschoolers join together and learn. We are rather proposing that frequent and regular cross-generational opportunities for worship, learning, outreach, service and fellowship offer distinctive spiritual benefits and blessings.

When Christine asked her research interviewees why they believed intergenerational faith formation was a valid church ministry model, the most common response was that it is scriptural. Intergenerationality enables the whole church to benefit from each individual's God-given gifts and enables believers to fully live out being the body of Christ and the family of faith. Among the many benefits for both adults and children are a sense of belonging, support for troubled families, better use of resources, character growth and sharing each other's spiritual journeys. Additionally, this article will highlight special benefits for particular age cohorts—children, teens, emerging adults, young adults, middle adults and older adults.

BELONGING

"Belongingness" is the third in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[2] After physiological needs and safety needs are met, human beings seek—and need—places to belong. Sandage, Aubrey and Ohland identify five aspects that characterize healthy community.[3] The

first one—belongingness—is particularly important in the realm of spiritual care and formation. Healthy belongingness offers support for people in difficult situations, release from shame through forgiving grace and opportunity for authenticity. Intergenerational faith communities provide experiences that foster this deep sense of belonging in children, teens and adults; all feel welcome and received.

Children especially need to feel a deep sense of belonging, and they know if they are welcome or not. One of Lawrence Richards's five processes for guiding the spiritual development of children is that they must feel like they *belong* in the faith community.[4] Ivy Beckwith agrees:

> This belonging needs to be demonstrated through the policies and practices of the community. Forming relationships with children is the responsibility of all members of the community, not just those who work with them in educational programs.[5]

In her chapter on intergenerational ministry, coauthored with her mother (Carol Rask), Karen Rask Behling describes several poignant intergenerational memories (sharing stories, celebrating advent, delivering meals to the elderly, worship) from her childhood and youth.[6] Rask concludes the chapter saying, "It was significant to be known. I knew I belonged in that community of believers; I knew that my life mattered to others."[7] To be received by a multigenerational body of believers is to belong at a deeply satisfying level.

SUPPORT FOR TROUBLED FAMILIES

All faith communities have families who are facing severe difficulties. How does bringing the generations together uniquely benefit these families? Sharon Koh, senior associate pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church–Los Angeles in Rosemead, California, says:

> When our church is intentional about cross-generational interactions, it expands the concept of family beyond the nuclear family alone. . . . Because of this new concept of family, many inadequacies in the nuclear family can be made up for, in Christ's name.[8]

David Fraze with Fuller Youth Institute notes that youth ministry in general has done a pretty good job with young people who come from "strong, intact and engaged" families, but the real question is how to nurture students whose families are scattered, unsupportive and disengaged.[9] His answer is to implement intergenerational strategies, that is, "practices designed to create opportunities for spiritual growth across generational lines."[10] These strategies call the community of faith to offer hope not only to youth, but also single parents, divorced persons and others who have been hurt by family relationships, "by providing a family in which healing and acceptance are found."[11]

Pentecostal Tabernacle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, began in 1927, but attendance was down in the 1980s to only forty—mostly older—people. Senior pastor Brian Greene says that at that point the church began to focus on its multicultural neighborhood, and now there are over three hundred attendees, half under the age of thirty. Though the church wanted to welcome this influx of young people, the older generations at first did not know how. By way of background, Greene notes that "only 0.5 out of every ten African-American children will be raised in a home with both parents, compared with four out of every ten Caucasian children."[12] According to Greene, Pentecostal Tabernacle has now become a fathering church—a parenting church. "Many in our church have not been properly parented. But now, by being in our church, they don't have just one mother. They have eight or ten. That's a fruit of being a cross-generational church."[13]

BETTER USE OF RESOURCES

Chad Hall decries the trend toward churches that appeal to or draw only a narrow age range. He has ministered in churches that are primarily young and others that are predominantly older. "While many established churches struggle to attract and retain young adult members, newer churches are attracting nothing but."[14] Hall offers several reasons to avoid age segregation in faith communities, one of which is the uneven distribution of resources: "Both young and old

have resources to share. Generational homogenization results in an overabundance of one type of resources in certain congregations. Many older generation churches have plenty of money and facilities, but lack the energy and fresh vision young congregations have aplenty."[15] A growing Gen Xer church in Covina, California, struggles with one aspect of this imbalance: "Raising sufficient money to pay for the ministries, let alone a new building, is a special challenge facing a congregation of young Xers."[16] One minister at this church notes that many in their twenties and thirties are in debt and give only five or ten dollars a week. On the other hand, this minister says that a great strength of this church is that the leaders as well as the members are always asking, "How can we be fresh? How can we do things differently? How can we adapt our approach?"[17]

While thirty- and fortysomething leaders of younger churches may have a plethora of fresh ideas and plenty of energy, they lack the experience and deep spiritual resources of more seasoned leaders who have navigated repeatedly the multifarious, often troubled waters of a rapidly growing faith community. Young leaders sometimes flame out in the absence of older, wiser heads who can hold the course and traverse tricky terrain. Intergenerational faith communities bring together the young, fresh thinkers with the older, wiser veterans, creating an integrated profusion of resources.

CHARACTER GROWTH

Mike Breaux, teaching pastor at Heartland Community Church in Illinois, says that when he moved from youth ministry to senior ministry he "envisioned a church with young and old and in-between learning from one another, *deferring,* serving, praying, working, worshiping together—one heart, one mind, one church (Acts 4:32)."[18] Breaux says that:

> While each generation maintains its uniqueness and offers different strengths, the heartbeat of God is for one church. So many forces drive generations apart, but moderns and postmoderns can coexist. It requires *humility, mutual submission,* and respect for different strengths and passions. Those

virtues don't happen easily. They emerge as we teach them and model them.[19]

Chad Hall also believes that bringing all the generations together yields unique opportunities for character growth. He has experienced the particular type of conflict that intergenerational churches encounter, and says that negotiating contradictory generational priorities can breed godliness.

Churches who value their young and their old will have to deal with clashing perspectives, which may slow things down, make decisions harder to come by, force compromise on difficult matters, and automatically elevate the value of relationship over that of task.

But when generations collide, the ensuing conflict reminds everyone, Church is not just about me. Who knew that church could be the cure to narcissism?[20]

UNIQUE BENEFIT BY AGE AND STAGE

Children. Over a period of years, Lance Armstrong, a Christian educator in Australia, asked participants in his workshops what led them to faith.[21] Their answers included evangelistic rallies, life crises, family influence, significant persons, church camp and Sunday school. Armstrong notes that family influence always received the most votes, but that other relationships (e.g., a significant person or people at church camp) always came in next. Armstrong further notes that what appears to be most important in people's growth to faith "is a loving, caring, close relationship with other Christians."[22] Given this truth, Armstrong concludes that "in the nurturing process of our children, we must allow them to develop deep personal relationships with as many of the people of God as possible."[23]

Ivy Beckwith, longtime children's minister, agrees. She says that children need frequent, regular, ongoing opportunities to interact with people of faith "who struggle, who trust God, who make mistakes and are forgiven, who work for mercy and justice, who model kingdom values."[24] Beckwith says children will remember the stories and lives of people they have known in their faith communities more than Bible facts they may have learned.

Not long ago Holly reconnected with Paul, who as a middle schooler was part of a small cross-age VBS teaching team that she led in the 1980s. They chatted and caught up. Toward the end of the conversation, Paul said he had never forgotten the story she told about lying to her teacher when she was in the sixth grade, and how God had used that experience to enlighten her and teach her the importance of trust. He said her story had prompted him to ask God to use every experience of his life to teach him. Holly was surprised (and chagrined) that he remembered this particular incident. God uses unlikely tools, and by regularly interacting with adults of all ages, children will be nurtured in their faith journeys, even in unlikely ways.

Teens. Kara Powell with the Fuller Youth Institute led a recent study, the College Transition Project, that gathered data from five hundred youth group graduates regarding their faith journeys. The ultimate purpose of the study was to determine what elements of youth ministry were significantly related to higher faith maturity in teens transitioning to college.[25] One important finding of the study was that "high school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity."[26] Several youth ministry leaders in recent years have argued that teens benefit spiritually from nonparental mentors as well as from parents.[27] Jason Lanker's recent work on natural mentoring and teens offers strong support for the importance of intergenerational opportunities for teens because these opportunities yield multiple prospects for natural adult-teen mentorships to form.[28] An interesting finding for our purposes is that, at the time of the research, participants in Lanker's study had known their mentors for an average of 6.7 years. (Other studies have shown the average time to be as much as 10 years.[29]) Since the average age of participants in Lanker's study was 18.2 years, these participants were, on average, 11 years old when they met their mentors. In today's highly segregated church environments, the benefits of the mentoring process are not available to teens unless they have had opportunities to come to know those who are further ahead of them on the journey. No better setting for those opportunities exists than in intergenerational small groups, mission trips, service projects, musical or dramatic productions, age-integrated Sunday schools, and worship.

Emerging adults. Joiner, Bomar and Smith acknowledge in their book, *The Slow Fade,* that eighteen-to twenty-five-year-olds who were active, fervent Christians during their childhood and teen years often become disconnected from their communities of faith during their young adult years.[30] The authors say these older teens fade out after high school [the "finish line"] and then fade back later, and "for a few years we just assume they are transforming into mature adults."[31] These authors castigate churches that are passively waiting for these young adults to return after they mature, marry and have children. Precisely because these are the critical years when emerging adults are choosing careers and a spouse, churches should move the "finish line" to early or mid-twenties rather than high school graduation. Of course, the question is, how? The suggestion Joiner, Bomar and Smith offer is that emerging adults need other, older adults to come alongside them to listen to their stories, validate their search for identity and join them "as they journey toward God and adulthood."[32]

The teens in Christian Smith's 2005 national study reported that their parents were the primary influence on their spiritual lives.[33] Smith has continued to follow these teens as they have entered what is now being called "emerging adulthood." Smith found that for these twentysomethings, parents are still the primary influence, but also as with teens, it is not only parents who matter in forming the religion of emerging adults.[34] Nonparental adults in their lives are also important—those in their faith communities who have reached out to them and built meaningful personal relationships with them.

> The empirical evidence tells us that it does in fact matter for emerging adult religious outcomes whether or not [the participants] have had non-parental adults in their religious congregation to whom they could turn for help and support. It matters whether or not [they] have belonged to con- gregations offering youth groups that they

actually liked and wanted to be part of. It matters whether or not [they] have participated in adult-taught religious education classes, such as Sunday school. Adult engagement with, role modeling for, and formation of youth simply matters a great deal for how they turn out after they leave the teenage years.[35]

Joseph Hellerman, who was a singles' minister for fifteen years, says emerging adults are asking profound life questions during these years: "What am I going to do with my life? Who am I going to spend my life with? And where am I going to live?"[36] They are also seeking community and are looking for ways to pour their lives into the hurting people of the world. Perhaps more than at any other time period in their lives, they need input, feedback, insight and wisdom from those who are further ahead on the journey. Intentionally intergenerational communities of faith can provide especially well for those entering the adult world.

Adults. Allan Harkness, a Christian educator and dean of Asia Graduate School of Theology in Singapore, has been writing about intergenera- tional issues since 1996.[37] In one of his articles Harkness states that intergenerational Christian experiences "enhance personal faith development."[38] Interestingly, Harkness's main point here is that *adult* faith development will be enhanced when adults are allowed to participate with children in intergenerational activities:

> [Intergenerational Christian experience] provides a setting in which adults can be both challenged by, and assisted to reflect upon, the childlike attitude of discipleship which Jesus urged on this follow-ers. This is done by working through issues with younger people who are demonstrating the ability to learn new, or adapt old, concepts as a natural part of their search for reality and meaning.[39]

Basically Harkness's argument is that children (and younger adults) often question givens and traditions that older adults may have accepted uncritically. The young are perhaps more willing to consider alternate ways of seeing things. Harkness does indicate that intergenerational

experiences will also contribute to the faith maturity of the younger participants, but his focus in this article is on the importance of intergenerational experiences for adult faith development.

Young adults. As emerging adults settle into career paths, they often feel ill prepared to navigate the politics of the workplace, the responsibility for their financial futures, the weight of adult decisions. In strong intergenerational faith communities, there are others to whom a young adult can turn for encouragement, advice, insight or for simply a listening ear— someone who has perspective on career choices, ethical dilemmas or financial difficulties.

In addition to learning to carry their own weight, many men and women of Generation X (the cohort now in their thirties and forties) are currently buried in the arduous tasks of rearing young children. Married couples with small children are typically at a very stressful time in their lives as they learn to juggle their spouse's needs, their children's needs, work responsibilities and personal needs. This season of life can be exhausting; perhaps moms and dads should not be attempting to juggle all these responsibilities without the love and support from those who have faced these same struggles and survived.

In his discussion of first-century mores, Hellerman describes a world of "extended family societies" where parenting was not such a lonely enterprise.[40] Hellerman indicates that intergenerational faith communities can emulate this "extended family society" so that young parents will not feel such isolation in the crucial tasks of parenting.

For his recent book, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow analyzed data collected from dozens of studies conducted both recently and over the past decades to assess how young adults are doing spiritually.[41] Wuthnow found that "young adults are currently less involved at houses of worship than young adults were a generation ago."[42] Furthermore, Wuthnow found that *all* Americans (both young adults and older adults) have fewer social relationships than their parents and grand- parents did. He cites Putnam (of *Bowling Alone* fame) as saying

that communities are breaking down. Wuthnow's conclusion is that young adulthood lacks the institutional support it needs and deserves.

Middle adults. Common issues among forty- and fiftysomethings include grappling with the needs of aging parents, coping with unexpected career changes, accepting the loss or compromise of youthful dreams, and coming to terms with middle age.[43] According to Robert Kegan, many adults do not regularly participate in a genuine relational community that could support them as they face these important developmental issues.[44] Intergenerational faith communities can provide a plethora of people who have successfully negotiated some of these crises and could offer love and empathetic support to those coming along behind them. Middle adults may also be parenting adolescents, which can be stressful and demanding; parents in this season of life sometimes feel overwhelmed and overburdened. DeVries notes that "our culture has put an incredible emotional weight on the shoulders of the nuclear family, a weight [he believes] God never intended for families to bear alone."[45] DeVries recommends that parents need the "rich support of the extended Christian family of the church."[46] Hellerman agrees, saying that "there are some tremendously practical and relational benefits to having more than one adult male and one adult female participating in the family unit."[47]

Many Christian families have at least one child who spends a period of time wandering from their childhood beliefs. These wanderings may range from a few months of doubt, to a dabbling in Eastern religions, to complete rebellion with forays into drugs, promiscuity and/or atheism. During these difficult times, parents desperately need a loving community to hold up their hands. "The faith community provides a perspective on staying true to our children, no matter how wayward they become."[48] And as parents enter their late forties and fifties, they begin to experience the "empty nest." The energies that these adults have been pouring into parenting can now be harnessed toward other forms of generativity (Erik Erikson's term for pouring the self into rising generations[49]); and if these middle adults are involved actively in intergenerational communities, both younger and older generations are readily available for their ministrations—the older population that is beginning to need help, younger adults swamped with parenting tasks, emerging adults navigating a new world, as well as teens and children.

Older adults. Mary Pipher said in 1999 that "the old often save the young and the young save the old,"[50] but this mutual blessing is not possible if the young and old are never together. Older adults have much to offer the younger generations. "Like all people, they want to be needed and loved and often seek out opportunities to be in service to others."[51] However, older adults are often so marginalized in our society that they have little opportunity to bless those coming behind them. Pervasive segregation of the elderly has yielded negative stereotyping and discrimination against the older population, which is known as ageism. They can be perceived as inflexible, depressing, less competent, passive and senile.[52] Grefe notes that "intergenerational . . . groups, in which members have equal status, work together toward common goals, and meet over an extended period of time can reduce stereotypes toward the elderly."[53] Faith communities that intentionally and regularly draw older, middle and younger generations together provide opportunities for younger members to know the older and to move away from the negative perception that pervades American society toward seniors. These opportunities open the way for the older to pour their accumulated wisdom and insight into those coming along behind them, which, according to Gentzler, is a deep desire among those who are older.[54]

The older generations also need the younger particularly because of the many losses associated with older adulthood: loss of significant loved ones, independence, purpose, external jobs, and time to accomplish dreams and goals.[55] These losses are deep and abiding; the presence of the young and hopeful can be a salve, can provide new purpose for moving out of mourning and grief, and can refocus attention toward "the incredible calculus of old age—that as more is taken, there is more love for what remains."[56]

CONCLUSION

The Search Institute, which has been conducting global research on spiritual development for fifty years, notes

that one fundamental aspect of spiritual development is *interconnecting,* that is, "linking oneself to narratives, communities, mentors, beliefs, traditions, and/or practices that remain significant over time."[57] The best way for the most people to link to the narratives, communities, mentors, traditions and practices of their faith communities is to participate actively in intentionally age-integrated experiences with others in those faith communities. Truly intergenerational communities welcome children, emerging adults, recovering addicts, single adults, widows, single parents, teens whose parents are not around, the elderly, those in crisis, empty nesters and struggling parents of young children into a safe but challenging place to be formed into the image of Christ.

ENDNOTES

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