

Why Being Together is Important

Rachel Roche continues her series outlining her Masters research on Intergenerational faith community.



Maybe you are in children’s ministry and are told to stick to just your area? Maybe you feel like the all-in, intergen, whole church family thing is too hard? Maybe you don’t understand why everyone doesn’t see things your way? We all are at different stages, places, phases, and spaces. Interestingly this is just like the church community.... different stages, places, phases, and spaces, yet called by the same God to be a unified body. God knows we are better together.

So let’s unpack why being together is so important.

We have a biblical mandate to love others as Christ loved us (1 John 3:16–18). The scope of an all-embracing love is set out by Volf.¹ He views the theological foundations and importance of welcome and inclusion through the metaphor of embrace. The church community is intended to be a place and people who embrace and welcome the *other*—the stranger, the vulnerable, the enemy. “We who have been embraced by the outstretched arms of the crucified God open our arms even for the enemies—to make space in ourselves for them and invite them in—so that together we may rejoice in the eternal embrace of the triune God.”² When the church community gathers together, it is a time for remembrance and God’s embrace of us, and we become God’s agents and must embrace and invite others—even those who are different to us. When we break bread together, this symbolises that we share the body of the Lord and “the multi-membered body of the church.”³ All—male, female, child, adult, any ethnicity— are to be embraced and loved.

Humans desire “warm, close, and communicative interaction with others.”⁴ Interaction is seen to be beneficial to faith formation, transmission, and maturity. Motivated by church decline, a study was conducted of over 250 growing American congregations who are engaging ten-to twenty-nine-year-olds.⁵ It was found, “specifically, churches with close intergenerational relationships show higher faith maturity and vibrancy.”⁶ Another study over conducted over thirty-five years amongst more than 350 families supported intergenerationality.⁷ It determined key factors in how religion is, or is not, passed down from one generation to the next. One key findings was religious groups such as Mormons, Jews, and Evangelicals have high rates of faith transmission. The passing on of faith is suggested to be enhanced in intergenerational communities. Many congregations provide intentional programmes for segregated age groups, although very few focuses on generation integration. Multigenerational relationships, either biological or kin-like relationships, are becoming increasingly important for well-being and support.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*.

² Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 131.

³ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 130.

⁴ Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*, 98.

⁵ Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young*.

⁶ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 173.

⁷ Vern L. Bengtson, with Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith*.

Māori scholarship echoes the importance of intergenerational connection and belonging to a community. Although there are varying degrees of Māori tikanga adoption, there is a NZ-wide revival of reclaiming tikanga through restorative practices such as meeting together, passing down cultural practices, and finding identity.⁸ Matenga suggests for a sense of belonging to exist, group members need to be “socialised well into the group” as this is “crucial to the health and wellbeing of any group.”⁹ Sharing stories and memories with a focus on connection to knowing who, what, where and why we exist are vital to wellbeing. Congregations are groups where intergenerational connections can and should occur.

Finally, the value of intergenerational Christian experiences is exemplified in Allen’s research. She concludes that bringing the generations together benefits young and old alike and “when children and adults worship, pray, learn and serve together their spiritual lives are enriched.”¹⁰ Allen refers to learning theorist Vygotsky, who states that humans develop in social settings. People learn to be members of a community by participation, and interaction with more experienced members. When children, adults, and teens interact collectively as an intergenerational group, there are opportunities to learn from each other, and it is best to learn from someone who is further along in the journey. Intergenerational experiences and traditions are opportunities for *all* ages to learn and participate.

Being together as an all age faith community is beneficial in so many ways such as enjoyment of activities, children talking about God more, adults learning content and insights, and congregations having a stronger sense of unity.¹¹ Being intergenerational should be a way of *being* rather than something churches *do*. This involves swapping our segregated silos for a community way of being. “Both children and adults learn best about God’s love by being loved by God’s people, about being a child of God by belonging in a family, about worship by worshipping with all God’s people, about ministry by serving in partnership with others.”¹² Being part of a Christ centred family 24/7, not just on Sunday mornings grows our faith formation.

Being together is good for our well being, our faith formation, and faith transmission. Being together in all age groups grows us in to being the communities of faith that God wants us to be.

Take some time to ponder your context. Chat to a friend or colleague.

- In what ways could you go from including gestures of inclusion, to an inclusive posture and way of being?
- When are some week day opportunities that can be reframed and envisioned to be inclusive of all ages?
- How could you foster intergenerational relationships?

⁸ Moko Mead, *Tikanga Māori*, 353–57.

⁹ Matenga, *Mutuality of Belonging*, 53.

¹⁰ Holly Catterton Allen, *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, 281.

¹¹ Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 227–239, 156–174.

¹² Garland, *Family Ministry*, 128.