



This is for all of us

The power of intergenerational ministry

In the first of a new series on intergenerational ministry, Darren Philip explores what it is and why it matters.

In the wilderness of Moab, adults, elders and children gather to enter into a covenant with God (Deuteronomy 29:10-12). Faced with a military invasion, the children and adults of Judah come together to pray (2 Chronicles 20:13). In Jerusalem, adults and children join together in praise so loud it is heard for miles around (Nehemiah 12:43). In the Temple, elderly prophets are transformed by a newborn baby (Luke 2:27-38). In houses, all generations come together to share fellowship and food (Acts 2:46-47). A young adult from Asia Minor becomes a trusted assistant to an older missionary (1 Timothy 4:12).

Throughout the Biblical narrative, the life of God's people has involved a mix of generations – infants, children, young people, adults, older adults – sharing in the practices of faith together. For many of us today, however, our experience of being part of a faith community is very different, with many parts of church life segregated by age: separate activities for children and young people, groups targeted at older people, and so on.

Over the last decade or so, many congregations have begun to realise that we are missing out on many riches by not sharing more of our faith journey with others of a different generation to our own and are trying to bring generations back together. There has been a renewed interest in being 'intergenerational', but what does that mean? Is it just about including children and families? Is it a mission strategy to help church growth? What if my church community is really small or really big? Is 'intergenerational' just the latest church buzzword?

A widely used definition by Christine M Ross describes intergenerational ministry as occurring when a congregation **'intentionally brings 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'**. It is helpful to explore what can be learned from each part of that definition:

'Intentionally'

Being intergenerational is intentional: it means more than different generations happening to be in the same space at the same time (that might be called a 'multigenerational' approach). As the prefix 'inter-' implies, there is deliberate interaction and engagement between different generations, so that relationships form and grow. Only through this interconnectedness can relationships move beyond the superficial, moving those of different generations from being acquaintances to 'place-sharers' who invest in one another's life and faith journeys. Intergenerational churches are active rather than passive, inviting the participation of everyone regardless of age.

'Brings the generations together'

The word 'generations' is sometimes used to refer to the era in which someone is born (Baby boomer, Generation X, Millennial, etc.) and at other times to refer to an age group (child, young person, adult, etc.). In both cases, a 'generation' is broadly recognised to be a group of people defined by age who grew up with the same cultural reference points, for example in music, politics, technology or global events. Any intentional interaction across these population groups is intergenerational.

“ It may be tempting for a church to think it cannot be intergenerational because they do not have any children in their number at the present time, but almost all churches already have multiple generations present.”

Someone born in the 1980s sharing faith with someone born in the 1950s is an intergenerational experience, crossing the cultural reference frames of two different generations. Being intergenerational certainly means ensuring that the very youngest and the very oldest can participate, but it is also about everyone in between as well – this is for all of us! Moreover, whatever age groups a congregation starts out with, adopting an intentionally intergenerational approach creates the right environment to welcome and include new worshippers of any age.

'In mutual service, sharing or learning'

A phrase often attributed to Albert Camus captures the mutuality that is at the heart of being an intergenerational community: 'Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.' Being intergenerational requires that there is no hierarchy based on age, recognising that there are times when an older generation can learn from a younger generation, just as there are times when a younger generation can learn from an older generation.

“ An intergenerational church removes the distinction between teachers and learners, recognising that, as disciples, we are all both.”

By forging bonds across any perceived generational divide, we nurture relationships in our church communities that recognise that each has something to give to and receive from the other.

In one congregation, the minister decided to stop the 'children's address' because at that time there were no children regularly attending. It caused an uproar! For some, it was the one part of the service that really connected with them. Joyce Bellous and David Csinos' 'Spiritual Styles' [WEB](#) help us understand that we each connect with God in different pathways. After some conversation, it was found that these members related well to the 'Symbol' style that tended to be adopted in the children's address. Rather than engage a particular age group, the minister learned that this part of the congregation's worship engaged people of all ages who preferred that spiritual style. (Equally, there will be many children who do not engage with that style, despite the content having been targeted to their age group.) Using the spiritual style markers (Word, Emotion, Symbol, Action) in Roots resources to ensure that all styles are represented in church life is a simple way to create an environment of mutuality.

‘Within the core activities of the church’

Churches are often busy places, and can be rightly reluctant to consider adding anything new to an already packed schedule. Here's the good news:

“ Being intergenerational is not a club, event or activity; it's not another thing to try and squeeze into the diary. ”

Intergenerationality happens within the core activities of the church – it's about who we are as a community, about how we do the things we are already doing. It is about how we enable interaction across generations in our worship, our prayer, our learning, our decision-making, our mission and outreach, our service to the community and much more. The weekly resources produced by Roots integrate intergenerational approaches into the existing life of the church, renewing and reinvigorating it rather than overburdening it with additional commitments. (See [WEB](#) to hear how one congregation uses these resources to help a group of mixed ages plan and lead worship.

“ Being intergenerational is an ethos that runs to the very core of who we are as the body of Christ, where every part is essential to the other. ”

Being intergenerational is something that the whole church community lives out, both within its own life and in how it reaches out beyond itself. Far from being a model, theory or policy statement, intergenerationality is not conceptual: it is real and it happens through interaction and relationship doing the ordinary things of church life together. It is also something that concerns more than an hour on a Sunday morning. How are different generations enabled to share in their life of faith throughout the week? Roots' Thrive is a simple resource that can be used by people of any generation to explore everyday faith, and can help foster intergenerational connections beyond the Sunday congregation.

Being intergenerational is about rediscovering the DNA of what it is to be the Church, fostering relationship and engagement between individuals regardless of any perceived barrier of age. It is inclusive and welcoming of all, uses language that is easy for everyone to understand and recognises that God works through people of all generations. (For a simple guide on putting some of these intergenerational principles into practice, check out Intergenerational Steps [WEB](#) from the Anglican Dioceses, Baptist Churches, Scripture Union and Presbyterian Churches of New Zealand.) Churches of any size, age demographic or denominational tradition can adopt an intergenerational approach to church life, and those who do are finding their faith enlivened and renewed. This really is for all of us!



To explore more about the theology of intergenerational church community, read **Being an Intergenerational Church: Practices to Bring the Generations Back Together** by Suzi Farrant and Darren Philip (Saint Andrew Press, 2023).

[Listen to more from Darren Philip on the Roots for Churches podcast, <https://rootsforchurches.podbean.com>](#)

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¹ Christine M Ross, 'A Qualitative Study Exploring Churches Committed to Intergenerational Ministry', Saint Louis University, 2006. (Original text: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Story_of_the_Other_Wise_Man)