

CHRISTINE ROSS

Being An Intergenerational Congregation



*One generation shall commend Your works to another
and set forth Your mighty deeds. Psalm 145:4*

When a young Director of Christian Education (DCE) received a call to her second congregation, the congregation's leaders expressed concern that the present youth group philosophy created a separation between youth and adults. They hoped that the new DCE could close the gap between the younger and older generations within the church.

Soon after she began her ministry, the pastor of adult ministry asked if the youth could serve dinner at the annual birthday party for members 75 years and older. Her excitement was quickly quenched by the responses of the youth, such as "The adults ignore us until they want to use us"; "We aren't their slaves!" The DCE realized that bridging the generation gap and enabling the generations to work together as one body, united in Christ Jesus, was going to be more difficult than anticipated. The youth did not serve at that dinner, but the DCE began leading Bible studies and retreats on the topics of the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, and the unity of faith. She recruited council members, elders, and other adult congregational leaders to teach Sunday morning junior and senior high school Sunday school, to be involved in the confirmation program, to lead small group games and spiritual discussions on retreats, and to start a gym night for youth. As adults moved from being unknown to becoming friends, youth began to say "yes" when an adult friend asked them to join the choir, help out at the all church rummage sale, or to work together to create the best ever birthday party for senior adults.

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I was that DCE, and those ministry years introduced me to the term "intergenerational ministry." This perspective on ministry so intrigued me that I pursued the study of its merit as a congregational philosophy of ministry in my dissertation work at St. Louis University.

Research Synopsis

Since the content of this article stems mainly from my dissertation research,¹ a brief overview of the qualitative research methodology would be appropriate. As the focus of qualitative research is to obtain in-depth answers from a few sources regarding involvement in the phenomenon of interest (in contrast to quantitative research which typically entails a survey with specific questions aimed at a larger audience), the research focused upon four congregations that described themselves as intergenerational. These congregations are referred to by their location: Rocky Mountain, Southwest, Midwest, Canadian. The denominational affiliations were The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Canadian Lutheran, and Presbyterian. The churches ranged in size from a two-point parish of less than 100 members in each congregation served by one pastor to a 2,600 member congregation with 15 staff members. I spent two to four days at each congregation, interviewing a total of 15 people, observing worship services and intergenerational activities, and reading through bulletins and newsletters to determine each congregation's understanding and implementation of intergenerational ministry.

The research revealed 21 similar characteristics of intergenerational ministry. Many of these characteristics help define intergenerational ministry, describe why a congregation would implement intergenerational ministry, and provide ideas regarding how to implement intergenerational ministry in a congregation.



Intergenerational Ministry

"The church is probably the only place where the potential for four, five, even six generations to be together under the same roof exists. So, churches need to be intentional about making intergenerational communication and meaningful activity happen; rather than dividing us, to unify us."

Rocky Mountain church leader

Multigenerational,² transgenerational,³ and intergenerational are all terms used to describe a recent trend of deliberately considering the various generations within an organization. Using Church Growth terminology, one might say that the trend is moving away from focusing on homogeneous outreach to focusing upon the natural heterogeneous make-up of a congregation. Although each of the three words indicates an interest in many generations, the terms are not synonymous. Most congregations are multigenerational or transgenerational in that they have more than one generation

engaged in worship and ministry activities. Leaders of a congregation with a multi- or transgenerational philosophy may intentionally create ministries for children, for youth and for adults in order to meet the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of these different age groups. However, a congregation focused on *intergenerational ministry (IM)* will enable the various generations to communicate in meaningful ways, to interact on a regular basis, and to minister and serve together regularly. In a congregation based on an intergenerational philosophy, congregational leaders create opportunities for people of various generations to share their lives in regular and meaningful ways.

Proponents of IM are adamant that IM is a philosophy of ministry rather than a program.⁴ Programs are added to the existing activities of a congregation, while IM is the mindset of congregational leaders

as they implement church ministries. This mindset encourages leaders to ask, "How can we enable various age groups to interact within the Sunday school program, confirmation, worship, evangelism, service or fellowship activities?" Not one of the congregations which were researched had an IM committee or board, but all had the word "intergenerational" or the idea of bringing generations together in a mission or vision statement. Having IM in the church's mission and vision statements encouraged all church staff and committees to constantly consider how to implement IM within their respective ministry areas.

An example of this mindset of IM as a philosophy was seen in a Rocky Mountain church, a 2,600-member congregation with 15 staff members. One might think that a church with a Children's Minister, Junior High Minister, High School Minister, Director of Women's Ministry and Director of Men's Ministry would be a multi-generational rather than an intergenerational congregation. Yet, during weekly meetings, staff members discussed how to work together on various activities. Thus, mission trips planned by the High School Minister included an invitation to all church members to attend. The Director of Women's Ministry invited junior and senior high school girls to the Women's Advent Dinner. The Director of Men's Ministry created mentoring partnerships involving junior high youth and men of all ages. The leaders planned quarterly fellowship events for all ages, such as a barbeque dinner and square dance, with each leader encouraging people within one's ministry focus to attend. This intentionality of considering various generations within each ministry demonstrates this definition of IM:

Intergenerational ministry occurs when a congregation intentionally combines 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 (Ross, 2006).

Why Consider Intergenerational Ministry?

"I really think it's better to have people of different ages working together; it brings more experience and different views."

Intergenerational Ministry is biblical. The term "generations" itself is often used in Scripture, but more importantly, Scripture reveals God's desire that people of one generation would tell of His works to the next generation, and that people of every generation would unite to share the Good News of Jesus Christ (Psalm 145:4; Isaiah 51:7-8; Joel 1:3 and 2:16-17; Ephesians 3:21). Other biblical themes that point toward IM include "the family of God," "the body of Christ," and "the community of believers" (Romans 8:14-17; Romans 12:4-6). We know that Jesus welcomed children and told adults to learn child-like faith from them (Matthew 18:1-6). Paul shared his concern for all generations when he instructed Timothy to care for both older and younger men and women (1 Timothy 5:1-3), taught how children or grandchildren of widows must care for their parents and grandparents (1 Timothy 5:4); and explained the role of older women in the training of younger women (Titus 2:3-5). Paul and Timothy also provided a positive example of inter-generational mentoring which also is seen in the lives of Samuel and Eli, Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth.

Even the Lutheran baptismal liturgy highlights the importance of inter-generational relationships. After a baptism, the congregation responds, "We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as a fellow member of the body of Christ, a child of the same heavenly Father, to work with us in His kingdom."⁵ Here, members of intergenerational congregations are encouraged to consider that an infant is our "fellow member ... working with us." God has given children the gift of making people smile and of being able to teach others about a child-like faith. IM leaders within the congregations which were researched believed that IM provided an opportunity for their members to both better understand and live out these biblical themes.

Intergenerational Ministry supports family ministry and includes the whole “faith family.” Over the past two decades family ministry has become an important component of youth ministry. Youth leaders came to understand that our society had changed. No longer were home, school, church and neighborhoods working together to support the faith development of young people. Instead, the church had become the place where children and youth were brought to learn what often was not taught or modeled elsewhere. Urie Bronfenbrenner, best known for working to formulate the government-sponsored Head Start program, was one of many psychologists who pointed out that children’s healthy development occurs best when the various systems in a child’s life are similar. If the teachings of home and church are similar, children will more likely live out those teachings. Thus, youth leaders set out to include, rather than separate, families in church activities and to teach parents how to “train up a child in the way he should go...” (Proverbs 22:6). In the process, youth leaders of the research congregations came to understand that families are better supported when surrounded by the “family of faith.”

It also was recognized that parents need to communicate and learn from other Christian adults who have raised faithful Christian children. The importance of children and youth having Christian role models outside their families became more clear. That family ministry can isolate youth whose parents don’t attend church, as well as single adults, or adults who do not have children in the home was another concern. On the other hand, an IM mindset brings the whole “faith-family” together to be part of a community. IM provides an opportunity for families to learn, serve and grow together, and in the process connects these families to other congregational members.



Intergenerational Ministry helps support the emotional needs of church members. The psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson is well known among persons working in educational or care professions. Erikson's theory highlights activities that each age group needs to promote emotional health. Children need interaction with adults who can be trusted role models as well as with adults who will both teach children about the faith and live out their faith among children. As teenagers disengage from parents in preparation for adulthood, they need non-familial role models to show them the variety of ways that Christian adults live out their faith. Young adults need older mentors, older Christian friends who will walk with them as they move into adulthood and whose enthusiasm for life can be shared as they begin mentoring younger persons. Middle adults need to teach, and older adults need to share life experiences with younger generations. As IM leaders work to bring the various age groups together to work, learn, play and serve within the activities of the church, opportunities for role models and for sharing expand. A unique way in which one of the research congregations supported emotional needs was through the implementation of both a preschool and an adult day-care. Common activities brought joy to the older adults and helped children to be comfortable around older adults. They also provided young children with opportunities to learn music or games that they might not otherwise know. Although the original goal was building healthy relationships between the youngest and oldest generations, leaders discovered that elementary youth through adults could also volunteer in the preschool or adult day-care, resulting in even more intergenerational relationships being built than originally intended.

Intergenerational Ministry helps bridge the "generation gap." Bronfenbrenner asserted that a society in which the generations do not relate to one another will experience social discord and eventually its demise. He also wrote that parents need to be supported in raising children, and that

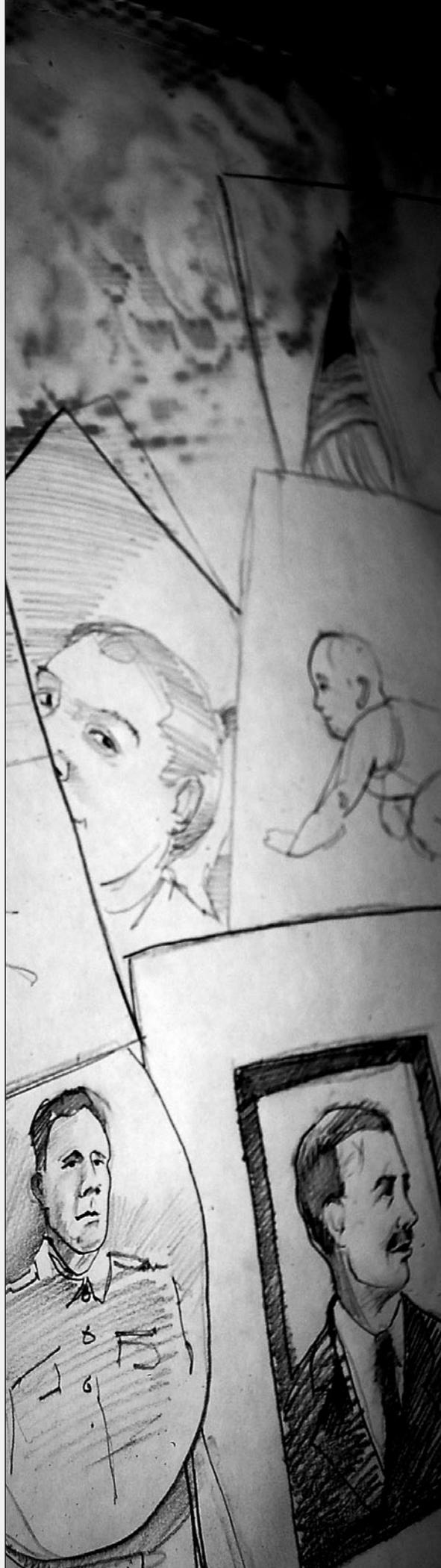
children and youth need opportunities to serve the community.⁶

An IM mission trip to teach Vacation Bible School in Alaska provided an activity that supported parents, gave youth an opportunity to serve, and helped bridge the generation gap. This specific trip included a family of five, a grandmother and her grandson, two older adult couples, two single women and seven high school youth.

The quote that follows the preceding heading reflects the thoughts of a formerly skeptical teenager after she attended the week-long trip. Other comments about this trip indicated that participants believed that adults brought needed structure and wisdom to the trip while youth provided innovative ideas and infused adults with much needed energy.

Intergenerational Ministry helps bring understanding and unity within a congregation. Two of the research congregations became involved in Intergenerational Ministry through reading Strauss and Howe's *Generations*.⁷ The ministry leaders "saw" the characteristics of the various generations in their own church members. They began to teach their congregation members about generational characteristics in order to help members understand what people of each generation need from church, the unique gifts each generation brings to the church, and why the different generations may not always agree on the needs of the church. They helped people to understand why they felt the way they did about church and to see that other people may have different feelings and needs. Leaders of two congregations felt that members became more accepting of each others' strengths and weaknesses and were more willing to alter some of their preferences in order to better meet the needs of the whole community. They felt that IM helped create unity within their congregations, promoting a we/us rather than an us/them mentality.

IM also can serve as an outreach tool. IM provides a ministry focus for church members to rally around. This clarity of the church's mission generated excitement in members and enabled them to more readily invite friends



to church. All of the research congregations experienced an increase of membership, especially new families.

Strategies for Implementing IM

“The education piece is huge. Mostly, I keep reminding people to accept one another. I feel like I write the same thing over and over, but if you don’t, they won’t remember.” Southwest church leader

The research showed that there must be a key leader in a congregation who values intergenerational relationships and desires to see IM flourish within the congregation. Leaders must patiently and continually teach the biblical and sociological basis of IM. Intergenerational Ministry leaders taught and slowly integrated IM into their congregations from four to ten years before congregational leaders (i.e. elders, council) decided to make IM a mission or value of the church. Usually the head pastor is the IM leader. If he is not the IM leader, he must express his support of IM and the leader’s work in sermons and meetings.

Congregational members must be taught about the importance of the generations living as the body of Christ through sermons, committee meetings, leadership training events, newsletter and bulletin articles, voters’ meetings, one-on-one conversations with people, and through the church leadership modeling an IM mindset to people. This modeling could include church leaders interacting with different age groups on Sunday mornings or at various church events, calling or hiring staff members of various generations who are interested in IM, modeling positive intergenerational relationships, or intentionally creating intergenerational committees. When ministry leaders began to implement IM into their respective ministries, such integration provided additional opportunities for teaching and learning.

Leaders must consider the best ways to implement IM. This will greatly depend on the specific needs and activities of a congregation. However, ways that churches

in this research study began to implement IM include: incorporate children's messages into the worship services; create usher, greeter, or visitation teams made up of various aged persons; encourage children and youth to participate in church music programs; create a confirmation mentor program in which an adult family member or a church member attends all confirmation events with a youth; bring older youth and more adults to work in the Sunday school program so that children make relationships with several older church members rather than just one teacher; begin an intergenerational Sunday school program; provide church fellowship events that all ages will enjoy doing together (i.e. baseball teams, fishing, riding on trains, square dancing); sponsor intergenerational outreach or service activities. As members engage in intergenerational activities, they understand more of the benefits of IM which in turn will make it more likely that IM will become part of the church vision. As this process moves along, congregations may find themselves building new facilities to better facilitate IM, such as the creation of preschool and adult day-care facilities, or adding to the fellowship hall so that all ages can gather at one time. One congregation even expanded its sanctuary in order to add rocking chairs for mothers with young children and a carpeted place for infants to crawl on during worship.

Challenges

"You may lose people who can't make the adjustment. But for everyone that leaves you get three more. Why? Because most people understand the innate wisdom of the generations relating to each other."

Rocky Mountain church leader

Research leaders felt that changing adult mindsets was a challenge. Intergenerational Ministry means children and youth are both seen and heard. Adults must allow the goal of enabling younger generations to be a full part of church life to overcome their desire for a tranquil environment. Adults need to be enabled to enjoy the rich life of living out faith within the full community



of believers through continual teaching and encouragement of the benefits of doing so.

The lack of resources makes implementing IM challenging. Church leaders can find materials to teach people of various age groups, but few that help guide a leader to know how to create an intergenerational Sunday school, VBS or mission trip (see references for examples).^{8, 9} An IM congregation must be willing to try new ideas, learn from mistakes, and hold steadfast to the vision through success and failure.

Despite these challenges, IM leaders are excited about the benefits they have seen in their congregations: children, youth and adults involved in church; families ministering together and being ministered to; singles and older adults building healthy relationships with church members of various ages; the biblical themes of the body of Christ and family of God being not just taught, but lived out on a daily basis; the building of bridges among the generations.

One generation shall commend Your works to another and set forth Your mighty deeds. Psalm 145:4

References

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8 Faith Inkubators materials: Stepping Stones, Heart to Heart Confirmation and Generations in Faith Together Cross-Generational Ministry may be found at [www. faithink.com/Inkubators/gift.asp](http://www.faithink.com/Inkubators/gift.asp)

9 United Intergenerational Ministries Sunday School, VBS, Christmas program, Retreat materials found at www.familycrossfires.tripod.com



**One Church, Four Generations:
Understanding and Reaching
All Ages in Your Church.**

Gary L. McIntosh. Grand Rapids:
Baker Books, 2002.

Can a worshipping community be all things to all people? McIntosh deliberately tackles this question and methodically arrives at several solutions in *One Church* by defining the general characteristics of each of four generations and giving practical ideas for each. He defines a generation as having a common place in time, boundaries and characteristics. Readers who have been students of generational histories will find a general overview as well as practical ideas on how the church can be attractive to each of the generations.

Whether or not a church is attractive to the world is often a controversial issue. McIntosh's use of the idea of attractiveness narrows down what a generation identifies as an authentic expression of faith—the expression that influences others to follow Jesus Christ.

Generational category and subcategory information included in *One Church* are:

BUILDERS

- G. I. Generation - 1925
- Silent Generation 1926-1939
- War Babies 1940-1945

BOOMERS

- Leading Edge 1946-1954
- Trailing Edge 1955-1964

BUSTERS

- Bust 1965-1976
- Boomlet 1977-1983

BRIDGERS

- Generation Y 1984-1993
 - Millennials 1994-2002
-

McIntosh begins by identifying four issues:

- Churches tend to target one generation;
- When waves of generations collide, specific problems emerge;
- Historically, four generations exist together;
- New leadership communicates to a new generation. " ... Scripture records that it normally takes new leadership to communicate to new generations." (p. 21)

McIntosh desires to help churches be purposefully and skillfully involved in mission with people of all generations who are not followers of Jesus Christ. He writes about each generation in three ways. First, he generalizes the characteristics of the generation based on common histories. Second, he discusses what these characteristics mean to the church (or to church leadership). Finally, based on their characteristics, he specifically identifies practical ideas for being missionally effective with each generation.

One Church identifies its own weakness as a book in lacking extensive detail of the characteristics of each generation, but then identifies where these details can be found. Furthermore, since the book was published in 2002, many new technologies have already emerged and influenced all four generations (especially the Bridger generation). Finally, McIntosh writes about the influences of the postmodern culture in the chapters covering information on Bridgers, but neglects the postmodern culture's influence on all generations.

The final chapters attempt to give practical information on ministering intergenerationally. McIntosh chooses to write primarily about worship settings and solves the problem by using blended worship techniques that satisfy the likes of each generation. This reader believes he loses his focus on a mission of making disciples of all nations for the sake of attracting numbers.

For leaders trying to get a grip on how to come to an understanding of generations and the technologies that have influenced those generations, an excellent companion book to *One Church* is *The Millennial Matrix* by M. Rex Miller.

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