



Why Churches Tend to Separate the Generations¹

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I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

1 Corinthians 1:10

"The easiest thing to do in the local church is to divide up the various ages and do separate ministry. It is not as messy [as cross-age ministry]. It takes more time, energy and effort to do intergenerational ministry." Research participant, in Brenda Snailum, *"Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry Within Existing Evangelical Church Congregations"*

House Churches of the First Century were places in which all generations were present. The generations remained integrated throughout much of Christian history until fairly recently. Several diverse factors have contributed to the age segregation that characterizes many Christian faith communities in

the twenty-first century. When believers today gather for worship, service, ministry or simply for fellowship, they tend to gather in age- or stage-segregated silos. The question this article addresses is, "Why?" That is, "Why has the body of Christ (at least in North America) embraced an age-segregated approach to community in the last several decades?"

Harkness² traces the decline of cross-generational Christian practices to the Protestant Reformation, particularly in its role in the development of modern public schooling. Prior to the Reformation only the elite were schooled; the masses were taught their fathers' trade and learned of life and faith through home, church and community. The Reformers' focus on *everyone* being able to read Scripture for themselves ultimately ushered in mandated schooling for all. Brian Hill³ also points out that universal age-segregated schooling as we know it began with the biblical reading focus of the Reformation. Harkness notes that "the development of the highly age-graded approach to educational activities within congregations arose out of this milieu, concurrent with the development of a widespread assumption of the schooling model as the appropriate one for Christian faith communities."⁴ Harkness does acknowledge, however, that other factors besides age-graded Sunday schools have contributed to the decline of intergenerationality in Christian faith

communities. Among those factors are modern and postmodern tendencies toward individualism and dependence on psychological, therapeutic or secular educational models rather than theological models.

Martinson and Shallue⁵ attribute the movement toward age segregation to shifting core values, fast-paced lifestyles and the high value of individualism. Vanderwell⁶ indicates that one factor has been the pressure to tailor Christian activities and practices to meet expectations of particular generational cohorts, for example, Boomers or Millennials. Kara Powell⁷ suggests that the trend toward age segregation among churches began in the 1940s and post-World War II when parachurch organizations such as Young Life, InterVarsity and Youth for Christ focused so successfully on teenagers and young adults⁸; because of the success of these specialized ministries aimed at a specific age group, church leaders came to believe that churches should adopt similar specialized ministry approaches, especially with youth.

This chapter explores the age-segregating influence of developmental concerns and rampant individualism as well as other factors, noting along the way how these factors have become barriers that tend to undermine intergenerational faith practices.

THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

As mentioned in chapter one, the move toward age segregation in society in general is one factor that has contributed to age segregation in American churches. Mary Pipher offers this insight regarding the issues surrounding this age-separating phenomenon:

“A great deal of America’s social sickness comes from age segregation. If ten fourteen-year-olds are grouped together, they will form a *Lord of the Flies* culture with its competitiveness and meanness. But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them all. For our own mental and societal health, we need to reconnect the age groups.”⁹

Hagestad and Uhlenberg argue that children/youth, working adults and older adults have been

systematically separated institutionally, socially and spatially. They call this age-based separation the “tripartition of the life course,” which “emerged as the state adopted rules using chronological age to require children’s school attendance, while excluding them from the workplace, and entitling older persons to pensions. Children and youth are channeled into daycare and schools where they spend most of the day with a narrow band of age peers. For adults, days are anchored in work settings that exclude the young and the old. And older people, who have limited access to school and work sites, are expected to live retired lives of leisure.”¹⁰

Throughout the ages Christians have tended to emulate—often unintentionally or unthinkingly—the culture around them, and as American culture has become more and more generationally fragmented over the last hundred years, churches have followed that same trend. Beyond this general trend to reflect the surrounding culture, churches have embraced other pieces of the cultural outlook that have ultimately contributed to the pervasive age segregation that characterizes American Christianity.

One such influence on the onset of age segregation in church life is the dominant cultural ideology of individualism (as noted above by Harkness as well as Martinson and Shallue), evidence of which is seen in worship wars between generations, but is also revealed in an individualistic soteriological stance that diminishes the communal aspect of salvation.

Another cultural influence since the mid-twentieth century is evident in church leaders’ recognition of the importance of cognitive developmental differences as well as differing life-stage needs,¹¹ prompting the use of age-graded curriculum and the formation of small groups based on age or stage. The enormous Boomer generation with its particular outlook and its members’ demands for doing things their way has enormously influenced decisions in faith communities. In their seminal work regarding generations, Strauss and Howe describe Boomers as a generation with very strong opinions regarding the inner life (spiritual) and outer life (moral, political) and with little care for the opinions of the other generations.¹²

DEVELOPMENTAL AND LIFE STAGE CONCERNS

Twentieth-century developmental theorists have outlined ways that children, teens, younger adults and older adults typically progress cognitively (Piaget¹³), psychosocially (Erikson¹⁴), morally (Kohlberg¹⁵ and Gilligan¹⁶) and in faith development (Fowler¹⁷), and life-span specialists such as Levinson¹⁸ have highlighted the differences among adults of various ages regarding the life issues they encounter and tasks that they must undertake. Informed and diligent ministry leaders have become more aware of the developmental differences from infants to octogenarians in the faith communities they oversee, and have desired to create learning, worship and service opportunities that meet a wide range of cognitive, psycho-social, spiritual and life-stage needs.

Piaget's work in cognitive development—the way persons of various ages think—revolutionized preschool and elementary education in public schools in the 1960s and 1970s, and eventually Sunday schools as well. Christian educators began to implement teaching-learning approaches that were more age appropriate for children, such as the use of the five senses, body movement, visual aids, active involvement—all excellent ideas. Eventually developmentalist concerns were applied to the worship hour, especially since churches at this time were moving toward the understanding of the worship gathering as a primary teaching service for adults, according to Glassford,¹⁹ and some faith communities began to offer “children's church” options in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁰

In children's church settings, sometimes an entire alternative worship service was offered, following the general format or liturgy of the adult worship service; in these cases, children's church was seen as a training ground for children to participate at their own developmental levels in the basic forms of adult worship. In other settings, children were released from the worship hour only during the sermon time, and children's songs, puppets and games were employed to make this time engaging and enjoyable—also in keeping with developmental concerns. With both types of children's church, it was simply deemed age inappropriate for children to sit through “boring”

hymns, prayers and/or sermons when they could be more actively involved in teaching and activities that accommodated shorter attention spans and more body movement. Thus, churches moving toward a more educational model of worship (and away from a spiritual model) viewed separating children from the adults during the worship service as a benefit for the children. The practice seemed to be based on a pedagogically sound rationale.

Strictly age-graded Sunday school classes in recent decades have been formulated around established cognitive (and, to some degree, social) developmental concerns of children.²¹ Youth ministry was (and is), in part, a response to the unique psychological/emotional/social needs of teens, such as differentiation issues, identity development and distinctive doubt/faith concerns. And with adults, ministry leaders have become keenly aware that single twentysomethings adjusting to the adult work world, coping with financial responsibility and navigating a sexually charged environment face vastly different concerns than Boomers who are adjusting to retirement, coping with health worries, and navigating a world in which they are marginalized and far less powerful than in their prime. A sensitive leadership deeply aware of the broad spectrum of these cognitive, social and life-stage needs would understandably perceive dividing by age or generational cohort as a sensible, even laudable, means of meeting those needs.

CHURCH-GROWTH STRATEGIES

Church growth experts have been offering “how to build a bigger church” advice for several decades. The unintended consequence of some of these recommendations has been the systematic separation of congregations into generational cohorts. For example, building on Donald McGavran's Homogeneous Units Principle (HUP),²² some church growth specialists in the 1970s and 1980s began to promote homogeneity (around ages or stages of life) at the small group level and even at the macrochurch level.²³ Though age- or stage-defined small groups can provide empathy and social comfort, ultimately they have had the effect of sorting faith communities by generation.^{24,25}

In church growth literature, numerical growth is

typically seen to be tied directly to attracting families with children. Offering an exciting, entertaining hour of children's church can be a big draw for those who are church shopping. One children's minister says he wants children to leave church thinking, "That was the funnest hour I had all week."²⁵ And if the children enjoy children's church (and if their parents do not need to tend to their children), more families will place membership. It is simply good church growth strategy. This strategy is also reinforced by the fact that some growing congregations may lack worship space for families to worship together. When determining whether to add another worship time or separate children and youth from adults, the fact that the latter corresponds more directly to some tenets of church growth theory resolves the problem.

In conference or seminar settings, when we ask participants why some churches do everything intergenerationally, a common response we both hear is, "Because they are too small for age-segmented grouping." Although this perception may be true, we believe that all churches regardless of size are more faithful to the scriptural theme of unity and are more likely to foster faith maturity when they intentionally integrate various generations for 50 to 80 percent of congregational activities.²⁶

INDIVIDUALISM

As churches have faced increasingly unpleasant generational conflict, one solution that seems to ameliorate the problem is to offer separate-but-equal opportunities. For example, in regard to the worship wars, churches might provide separate worship hours, encouraging each generation to shape its own worship hour to suit its tastes. Thus, the youth group can enjoy loud music, flashing lights and cool videos; the Millennials can pull into their intimate settings; Gen Xers can have their contemplative yet technologically savvy style; Boomers can choose old rock-style praise tunes using guitars and drums; the older generations can sing traditional hymns; and the children get to sing "Father Abraham" as often as they wish.²⁷ All in all, a very amenable solution—except it is a perfect recipe for generational isolation. This solution arises from an individualistic outlook that emphasizes personal needs, rather than communal needs. And "when the needs of the individual are preeminent, genera-

tional fragmentation is inevitable."²⁸ Surprisingly, it isn't always the youngest members of the community who most adamantly and vociferously claim their rights.²⁹

Soong-Chan Rah connects the dots regarding individualism, Western culture and religion. He states that "from the earliest stages of American history, individualism has been the defining attribute in understanding our nation's ethos. . . . The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual."³⁰ William Dinges critiques the excessive individualism that pervades religion in America, saying that evangelical churches in particular "emphasize *individual* spiritual empowerment," and are growing because of their attention to individual needs.³¹ And when individual needs are considered paramount, churches tend to offer special programs for children, teens, and young, middle, and older adults, so that these individual needs can be met more conveniently.

Hellerman frames this rampant individualism theologically. He makes a powerful (and controversial) point about evangelical Christianity's "fixation upon Jesus as personal Savior."³² This accusation may sound almost heretical to evangelicals, but Hellerman convincingly argues that this fixation has in essence "privatized" the Christian faith as an accommodation to "culture's unbiblical obsession with individual determinism and personal subjective experience."³³ Hellerman argues that this individualization of the gospel message has severely diminished the crucial importance of the faith *community* in the spiritual formation of believers:

Framing conversion to Christ in solely individualistic terms has left us with little social capital to draw on in our churches as we try to encourage our people to stay in community and grow together as brothers and sisters in Christ.³⁴

The excessive individualism of secular Western culture is fundamentally incompatible with the life of community as depicted in Scripture. The central events of the Old Testament—the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and the giving of the Law at Sinai—were community-creating events. Some

scholars argue that before these events, the Israelites, though acknowledging that they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, did not identify themselves as God's people. When he delivered, rescued and formed them through the law and in the desert, they truly became his people and he became their God.³⁵

In a similar fashion, Pentecost too was a community-creating event: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41); "the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:26). As Hellerman says,

In the New Testament era, a person was saved not solely to enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus. A person was saved to community. Our truncated evangelical conception of Jesus as personal Savior turns out to be an unfortunate distortion of radical American individualism, not a holistic reflection of biblical soteriology.³⁶

WHY INTERGENERATIONALITY

Given the power of the factors described in this chapter—the general societal acceptance of age segregation in American culture, diverse developmental and life-stage needs, recommendations of church growth experts, and entrenched individualism—why should church leaders even consider moving toward a more interage approach to Christian spiritual formation? The response to that question is to be found in the following article.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Excerpted from Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012). Used by permission.
- ² Allan G. Harkness, "Intergenerational Christian Education: An Imperative for Education in Local Churches (Part 2)," *Journal of Christian Effective Education* 42, no. 1 (1998): 37-50.
- ³ Brian Hill, "Is It Time We Deschooled Christianity?" *Journal of Christian Education* 63 (November 1978): 5-21.
- ⁴ Allan G. Harkness, "Intergenerational Christian

Education: An Imperative for Effective Education in Local Churches (Part 1)," *Journal of Christian Education* 41, no. 2 (1998): 7.

- ⁵ Roland Martinson and Diane Shallue, "Foundations for Cross-Generational Ministry," in *Across the Generations: Incorporating All Ages in Ministry: The Why and How*, ed. Vicky Goplin, Jeffrey Nelson, Mark Gardner and Eileen Zahn (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), pp. 4-10.
- ⁶ Howard Vanderwell, foreword to *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), pp. xiii-xvi.
- ⁷ Kara Powell, "Is the Era of Age Segregation Over?" *Leadership* 30 (Summer 2009): 43-48.
- ⁸ Mark Senter's book indicates that a number of earlier specialized youth organizations existed before World War II. Senter points to the advent of Robert Raikes's Sunday school (1780s), the Young Men's Christian Association (1851), Francis Clark's Society of Christian Endeavor (1881) and the United Christian Youth Movement (1933). In *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).
- ⁹ Mary Pipher, "The New Generation Gap," *USA Weekend*, March 19-21, 1999, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Gunhild O. Hagestad and Peter Uhlenberg, "The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism," *Journal of Social Issues* [serial online] 61 (June 2005): 346.
- ¹¹ For example, Carter and McGoldrick's life stages are: leaving home, the new couple, families with young children, families with adolescents, launching children, and families in later life. Elizabeth Carter and Monica McGoldrick, *The Changing Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family Therapy* (New York: Allyn & Bacon, 1989), p. 15. Life stages are sometimes called the family career or life phases. Because of the diverse forms of families, the typical life stages don't fit the majority of families now, but churches still often form classes or ministry opportunities around these typical stages.
- ¹² William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1991), pp. 299-316.
- ¹³ Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*,

trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

¹⁴Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1963).

¹⁵Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 2, *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

¹⁶Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁷James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981).

¹⁸Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1978).

¹⁹Darwin Glassford, "Fostering an Intergenerational Culture," in *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), pp. 71-93.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ted Ward says, "As a field of academic study, Christian education has gradually come to accept developmentalism at its theoretical base." Ted Ward, foreword to *Nurture That Is Christian: Developmental Perspectives in Christian Education*, ed. James Wilhoit and John Dettoni (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 7.

²²Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). McGavran was a missionary in India and the founder of Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Missions. McGavran derived his Homogeneous Units Principle (HUP) from his experiences in India. Homogeneous units are people who share the same language, culture, or economic or other characteristic that makes them a unique group from others (easily illustrated in the Indian caste system). McGavran's well-known statement is that people "like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers" (p. 198). McGavran taught that the missionary evangelist should identify with a specific homogeneous unit and contextualize the gospel in such a way that it communicates to them. As a result, congregations that desire to reach out must become sufficiently like their target homogeneous unit that this people group will not need to cross cultural boundaries to hear about Jesus, but rather will feel at

home in the church setting. Of course, recent church growth specialists have modified HUP for use beyond Indian culture.

²³For example, Donald A. McGavran with Win C. Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1973); Kennon Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988).

²⁴We are not denouncing all age- or stage-defined small group gatherings; indeed they can be spiritually enriching and powerful life journey tools. However, perennially forming small groups around ages or stages promotes generational fragmentation.

²⁵"A 1-2 Punch Church's Kids' Program Entertains As It Educates," *Daily Herald*, Arlington Heights, IL, July 21, 2006. Retrieved from <<http://business.highbeam.com/5444/article-1G1-148587528/12-punch-church-kids-program-entertains-educates>>.

²⁶In Christine Ross's research with fifteen leaders in intentionally intergenerational congregations, comments regarding how much of a congregation's ministry should be intergenerational varied from 50 to 80 percent. Unpublished data from her dissertation research. See Christine M. Ross, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Churches Committed to Intergenerational Ministry" (doctoral dissertation, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, 2006).

²⁷Generational music descriptions provided by Jen Edwards, instructor of worship ministries at John Brown University.

²⁸Darwin Glassford and Lynn Barger-Elliott, "Toward Intergenerational Ministry in a Post-Christian Era," *Christian Education Journal* (series 3) 8, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 366.

²⁹In Christine Ross's dissertation research, the only characteristic that all four churches agreed upon was that changing adult members' mindset was a problem for the implementation of intergenerational ministry. In each congregation, there were adults who didn't want to be around noisy children or didn't want to alter the worship service to honor requests of other generations. See Ross, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Churches."

³⁰Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove,

IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 29.

³¹William Dinges, "Faith, Hope, and (Excessive) Individualism," in *Handing on the Faith: The Church's Mission and Challenge*, ed. Robert P. Imbelli (New York: Crossroad, 2006), p. 36.

³²Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), p. 143.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 125-28.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 220.