

Intergenerational Ministry Beyond the Rhetoric

April 4, 2011

“I knew we were starting to get somewhere when my six-year-old son was rattling off who he wanted at his birthday party. There were as many adults as kids on that list.”

A pastor recently shared this with me (Brad) as we talked about the emerging conversation surrounding intergenerational (sometimes called cross-generational, or multi-generational) ministry. At the Fuller Youth Institute we’ve been active promoters of this conversation, including hosting post-doctoral fellow Dr. David Frazee to study and write on intergenerational ministry a couple of summers ago.¹

As many churches are finding though, simple proximity doesn’t equal relationships. Being in the same room does open the *possibility* for relationship, but it’s not the whole answer to the problem of the adult-kid divide many of us experience in our congregations. Intergenerational²) youth ministry ends up being a great new catch phrase that in practice tends to be really vague to most churches.

We at FYI often hear questions like, “How do I get started?” and “How do I get the rest of the congregation involved in this?” from leaders who want to establish more cross-generational relationships but are unsure (and maybe a little uneasy) about how to get there. Amid the emerging strategies and experiments, researcher and Denver Seminary faculty member Brenda Snailum wondered: Are there common factors that contribute to churches’ success or failure that can inform the ways leaders structure their approach to intergenerational ministry?

In a recent research project, Brenda asked four intergenerational ministry thought leaders to offer their expert advice in an anonymous panel discussion on factors they consider most critical when initiating intergenerational ministry in existing congregations.³ The result is a valuable list of insights that might help you better connect the kids you love to the rest of the church community.

Begin Where You Are

Start by assessing the current conditions.

The leadership needs to prayerfully and honestly assess current ministry practices and motives, including examining how deeply age-stratified ministry is valued among the leadership and members of the congregation and how open the church will be to change.

Begin with existing structures.

Intergenerational ministry is context-specific and should be customized to fit a particular church's history, culture, location, staff, and vision – *it is not "one size fits all."* Churches that have been successful started with what they were already doing well in one of the ministries of the church, then asked, "Since this is already good (or even great), what would it take to move to the next level and use this to become intergenerational?" Identify key influencers in the congregation who already have an intergenerational mindset and enlist their help.

Establish Intergenerational Community as a Core Value

Intergenerational is not something churches *do*—it's something they *become*. The findings emphasize that becoming intergenerational is nothing short of a paradigm shift, and the whole church must value intergenerational relationships and community at a core philosophical level. This shift requires that all of the leaders of the church (not just the youth leader) buy into the value of intergenerational ministry and commit to changing the culture of the church over the long haul.

Intergenerational is a way of life. Making such a shift requires overcoming the individualistic mindset that is so strong in our culture and developing a community mentality in which all generations and ministry departments are valued and involved with each other in significant ways throughout the church body. Cross-generational valuing must become an integral part of the congregation's collective story. As one panelist shared, "The vision of the church needs to include assimilating our children and youth into the church today, not someday."

Keep Intergenerational Values in Balance with Age-Specific Ministry

Establishing intergenerational community does not mean eradicating age-specific ministries. As important as it is to embrace intergenerational values at a core level, it's also important to keep that in balance with age-specific ministry. We need to realize that exclusively age-specific ministry may be "working" to varying degrees, but has not proven sustainable for ongoing transmission of faith among young adults who have grown up exclusively in youth ministries. At the same time, all ages still need their own space to grow and develop at their own pace. Everyone needs to be part of a web of relationships that includes their peers AND members of other generations.

Leadership Must Be Fully Vested

Successfully transitioning to an intergenerational paradigm lives (or dies) with the leadership. In order to make such a culture shift, the senior leadership team must get on board with the vision early and all the way, and actively take the reins in leading the congregation through the transition. A youth pastor wanting to create intergenerational community must cast vision for the value of intergenerational relationships in all directions across age groups, starting with senior leadership.

Be Intentional and Strategic

Do not try to reinvent everything at once—start small and avoid big sweeping program changes, particularly before there is adequate ownership of the vision on the part of all stakeholders. Celebrate little wins. Tell stories of success to encourage the congregation and build momentum. A positive comment from a student about an older adult, or vice versa, is a win! An adult learning a kid's name and saying hi to them in the hall is a win!

Build in accountability and support structures

Ministry leaders should pass everything through an "intergenerational filter" and regularly ask themselves how their plans can be made in such a way as to keep the church moving toward being an authentic intergenerational community.

Experiment with Intergenerational Ministry Practices

The main congregational worship service is one key area of opportunity to implement intergenerational strategies, as long as the services are designed to include all generations. Intentionally involve teenagers and younger kids in corporate worship, and plan worship gatherings with every age in mind. Start small—maybe once each quarter the entire congregation worships together and experiments with creative approaches. Or restructure the first or last “X” number of minutes in the service to include all ages before splitting out into age-level ministries.

However, multigenerational worship services alone may not be effective in building authentic community without providing other settings to develop and maintain meaningful relationships between generations.⁴

Consider ways to build relationships between all combinations of children, teenagers, singles, parents, empty-nesters and senior adults. Try integrating intergenerational relational opportunities in small groups, Sunday school, Bible studies, outreach events, mission trips, and special programs.

Cautions and Hindrances

Only a method, not a value.

The area of greatest caution raised by all of the panelists deals with the failure to fully embrace an intergenerational paradigm at the core philosophical level. Too many times churches try to *do* intergenerational rather than *become* intergenerational. So often churches fail to keep momentum going and as a result, “intergenerational” is only a temporary emphasis or strategy, rather than a culture shift.

Uncommitted leaders.

One of the reasons that churches find it difficult to become intergenerational communities is because there is not enough buy-in from senior leadership. This makes it nearly impossible to make significant gains in the congregational climate. It may be particularly hard for a youth pastor to lead the charge, especially for young 20-somethings fresh in ministry. Cast vision “up” and try to cultivate a heart for it

among the senior leaders. Youth pastors in this situation should respectfully attempt to share books, articles and stories offering glimpses into intergenerational community in an effort to inform and inspire the senior leadership rather than leading unproductive kamikaze missions.

Generations lack understanding of each other.

Another common error is that churches often set up ministry opportunities that force youth and adults together without adequately preparing and equipping them for the experience. For instance, an intergenerational mission trip requires a lot of framing for the adults to understand that the goals and expected outcomes are going to be different when kids are involved. The same applies to trying to incorporate kids and adults into small groups together.

The congregation lacks understanding of biblical emphasis on intergenerational community.

Often members of the congregation are not aware of the strong biblical foundations of intergenerational ministry. But without a clear Biblical ecclesiology that drives older generations to invest in younger generations, intergenerational ministry will stall out.

Self-centeredness is the enemy.

Self-centeredness and age discrimination manifests itself in individuals within the church and can become a dominant force at work in generational cohorts and the culture at large. This deep-seated selfishness is a formidable foe that can potentially derail the best intergenerational ministry efforts. True intergenerational community is built on genuine love for every generation beyond a consumerist “What’s in it for me?” mindset.

It just seems too hard.

One of the common complaints from youth ministry leaders desiring to implement intergenerational ministry ideas is that it seems like it will require a tremendous amount of additional time and effort, and youth leaders often feel as though they are overworked already. At FYI, we often encourage leaders to start by looking at

everything they are currently doing in ministry and pinpointing where intergenerational connections already exist, as well as where more connections could be made with a little tweaking.

In other words, don't start by immediately adding new programs. In fact, some leaders have found that they can de-program various aspects of ministry in ways that open up space for kids to engage adults and/or younger kids in established venues. For instance, one church decided this year during Lent to consolidate all of their mid-week programs into one big community gathering. They share a meal, worship together, then discuss content, pray, or serve together in small intergenerational groups. Small, even short-term programming changes can often pay big dividends for churches and ministries.

Action Points

- If you were to place your ministry on a continuum between intergenerational engagement and age-stratified relationships, where would you fall? What about your church as a whole?
- What would you add or subtract from the list of approaches above? What seems most doable as a first step in your context?
- When you read through the list of cautions and hindrances above, which seem particularly poignant for your context? What can you do to guard against these hindrances?
- With a team or other ministry leader, determine a next action step for your ministry based on what you've discovered in this quick assessment.

This article was adapted from *Promoting Intergenerational Youth Ministry Within Existing Evangelical Church Congregations: What Have We Learned?* by Brenda Snailum, Fall 2010 for Talbot Theological Seminary.

1. To read David's work, check out the [Intergenerational Ministry](#) page on our site. [↵]
2. *Intergenerational* is generally understood as members of two or more different generations having some degree of mutual, influential relationship developed through cooperative interaction to achieve common goals, as opposed to multigenerational settings where several generations are in proximity with each other, but not necessarily engaged in meaningful relationships. (Villar, F. 2007. Intergenerational or multigenerational? A question of nuance. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 5(1), 115-117. [↵])
3. The four experts who participated in this study represent almost 60 years combined expertise in intergenerational ministry. They represent a diversity of perspectives, professional experiences, geographic locations, and genders. Most all of them hold doctoral degrees in their field and have published books and research articles dealing with intergenerational ministry. The panelists were anonymous in order to facilitate an open forum for them to express their views and critique the responses of others who have equivalent expertise but different experiences and perspectives. Each of the experts anonymously submitted their ideas or proposals on a given issue and then the facilitator synthesized all responses into one document that highlighted the commonalities and areas of disagreement. That document was then redistributed to all participants for a second round of review and critique. [↵]
4. See *The Perceived Efficacy of Multigenerational Worship Services for Establishing Intergenerational Relationships Among Adolescents* (2010) by Brenda Snailum. [↵]