

# EQUIPPING GRANDPARENTS

Helping Your Church Reach and  
Disciple the Next Generation

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## PREFACE

*Equipping Grandparents* was written by family ministry experts to encourage church leaders to think about a demographic that has been overlooked and under-resourced in most churches: grandparents.

*Take a moment and consider two questions.* First, when was the last time your church addressed grandparenting from the pulpit or in a classroom? Second, what resources do you provide grandparents in your church to help them reach and disciple future generations? If your church is like most, individuals are left to figure out how to grandparent without the support of church leaders. The silence of most churches combined with the powerful messages grandparents hear from culture may have contributed to role confusion and minimized a grandparent's influence. Imagine the impact if millions of Christian grandparents were given a biblical vision for their place and purpose in the family.

Research reveals grandparents have a large influence on the faith of children, second only to parents. In addition, grandparents have been given a God-ordained role in the Bible. Deuteronomy 4:9 instructs us to teach these things “to your children and your children’s children.” This book will help church leaders equip grandparents to use their influence to pass faith on to future generations.

*It is important for you to know what kind of book this is.* Some books provide biblical insight. Others provide practical guidance. While there will be some biblical instruction, the majority of this book fits in the latter category. It is more of a “how-to” book than a “what” book. Once ministry leaders catch a vision for the biblical role of grandparents, the next question often asked is, “What resources are available to help me encourage grandparents to intentionally invest in the spiritual life of grandchildren?” That is why we created this resource.

**Larry Fowler** has written two chapters that address why a grandparent ministry is important and how to start one at your church. Larry served with Awana for three decades and uses this valuable experience to help you customize something that will work for your church. **I (Josh Mulvihill)** will introduce you to the biblical role of grandparenting and the competing messages of culture. I have served as a pastor in family ministry roles for nearly twenty years and did my PhD research on the biblical role of grandparents.

**Wayne Rice** provides a practical chapter about creating an intergenerational climate at your church. Wayne's advice is not theoretical. Wayne served in the trenches as a pastor and helped his church create the DNA he talks about in chapter 4.

**John Coulombe** and **Joanne Lundberg** have written chapters describing how they began grandparent ministries in their churches and provide ideas that may be transferable to your church. John is a pastor and Joanne has served in church-based children and family ministry for decades. They have pioneered grandparenting ministry models for the local church to build upon.

If you are a grandparent and want to know how to cast a vision to your pastor, then the article by **Sherry Schumann** may be helpful for you. Sherry serves as the prayer coordinator for the Christian Grandparenting Network. **Cavin Harper** has been training grandparents for almost two decades and encourages pastors to expand their vision for ministry to include grandparents.

**Lynda Freeman** has compiled a list of books that help grandparents effectively invest in their grandchildren. I have compiled a list of resources grandparents can use to disciple grandchildren. These lists are not meant to be exhaustive, but they provide a good starting point.

Together, these ten chapters offer a quick how-to manual and helpful resources to assist you and your church in reaching and discipling the youngest generation.

—Josh Mulvihill

# 1

## Why Grandparenting Matters

LARRY FOWLER

I eagerly shared my newfound vision to start a grandparent ministry with a pastor and he responded by stating, “I’m not sure we need a grandparenting ministry. We already have an active senior adults group.” It wasn’t the first time I’d heard this response, and I knew this pastor needed help understanding who grandparents are (grandparents are not synonymous with senior saints), what Scripture has to say about the role of grandparents, and the incredible opportunity to launch an army of potential disciplers upon our youngest generations.

Maybe you’re wondering the same thing as that pastor, *Why should my church start a grandparenting ministry?* Is grandparenting really that complicated? Does it



really need an emphasis? This chapter will answer these questions.

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### **The Objectives of a Grandparenting Ministry**

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We have two phrases that describe our desired outcome. The first is for you to become an *Intentional Christian Grandparent*.

That phrase describes the transformation that we would like to see in you as an individual. Likely, if you are reading this book, you are already a grandparent. In fact, you are probably a *Christian* grandparent. Maybe it has never occurred to you to be *intentional* in passing on your faith heritage. Our desire is that all grandparents would take the step into intentionality. It may be a simple step for some and difficult for others. Taking that step may be complicated by mixed-up relationships, hindered by barriers of all kinds, but its potential for good is too great to ignore.

A second phrase is *Grandparenting Matters*.

Yes, it *does* matter! Grandparenting Matters is our message to the local church and its leaders. The grandparent-grandchild relationship is worthy of attention and resources.

Few churches would overlook the parent-child relationship, and rightfully so. In the last couple of decades, much has been made of the scriptural mandate that *parents* are responsible for the spiritual upbringing of children, not the church. Parachurch ministries have sprung up because

of this truth. There have been countless resources created to assist parents and to equip the church to train parents. I believe church leaders understand that parenting matters! But so does grandparenting, and we want church leaders to see that as well.

### ———— **Six Reasons to Start a Grandparenting Ministry** ————

Here are six reasons for a local church to start a grandparenting ministry and a grandparent to become intentional about passing on faith to their grandchildren.

#### **1. Because of what Scripture says**

*Grandparents are to pass on a spiritual heritage to their grandchildren because it is biblical.*

You'll learn about the biblical role of grandparents in chapter 2 from my friend and colleague Dr. Josh Mulvihill, but let me get us started. Scripture has numerous themes concerning the role of grandparents. I summarize three of them with the 1/2/4 principle to describe our interactions across generations.

Here are three general responsibilities of grandparents:

#### *Watch one*

Grandparents are given specific instructions about what to do in Deuteronomy 4:9 (NIV): “Only be careful,

and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.”

“Watch *yourselves*.” We are to keep an eye on our generation! When we’re tempted to focus on the problems, attitudes, or immaturity of the younger generations, this verse reminds us to look in the mirror. We are not to suffer decline in our spiritual health or our spiritual fervor. The grandparent stage of life ought to be when we are *most* kind, *most* faith-filled, *most* loving, *most* Christ-like. It’s the time of life when we ought to be the quickest to forgive. Grandparents ought to be the least cranky, least cynical, least argumentative, and least impatient.

Is it any wonder that this command is first? After all, how we live our faith is a critically important factor in passing on our faith, isn’t it?

### *Teach two*

Deuteronomy 4:9 communicates a second theme regarding grandparenting responsibilities: We are to teach both our children and our grandchildren. God used this verse to rock my world and help me to see grandparenting differently.

“Teach them to your children *and* to their children after them.”

Notice that it doesn't say we are to teach our children and then they teach their children after them. Grandparenting is not a relay-race process where we run our faith-training leg, pass the baton, and then go sit down. We're not done when we pass the responsibility on. The *and* tells us so much. It means we have a two-generation responsibility for intentionally teaching faith. We can't say, "We tried to do our job, kids. Now we're done and it's up to you."

Make no mistake, it *is* up to them. Our adult children have the primary responsibility to spiritually train their children. The faith-training baton *has* been passed to them. That is made abundantly clear in many places in Scripture. But our responsibility doesn't stop; it merely changes. We are to teach our children *and* our grandchildren. The little word *and* is a very important word. With it in there, we can't go sit down and watch after we've run our generational leg of the race. We are to teach *two* generations.

Diane and I were living in the Chicago area when we began to study Deuteronomy 4:9 and realize these truths. God began to stir our hearts. We have two sets of grandkids; our daughter, Andrea, and her family live in Colorado, and our son, Ryan, was starting his family in Southern California.

I kept thinking, *I can't do this. I can't live hundreds of miles away from my grandkids and be obedient to*

*Scripture. I have to move. I have to do something different; I need to live close to them because I want to be obedient to this passage.* As a result, we left a position of influence in ministry, and Diane and I moved to California for the primary purpose of living close to grandkids in this stage of our lives. Andrea's kids were teenagers, and we had been very close relationally and geographically when they were younger, and Ryan was just starting his family, so California became our destination.

I understood that I needed to teach my children *and* my grandchildren if I was to carry out the intent of what Scripture had to say.

#### *Think four*

The third theme is illustrated in this verse: “He commanded our forefathers [generation one] to teach their children [generation two], so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born [generation three], and they in turn would tell their children [generation four]” (Psalm 78:5–6 NIV 1984).

Notice in this passage that there are two generations not yet born, so I must discipline myself to consider the *children* of the children not yet born. I have to be the right kind of grandfather to my grandchildren so they will be the same sort of intentional Christian grandparents to their grandchildren. We have to think four generations ahead.

## **2. Because of the incredible potential**

*Grandparents are second only to parents in their potential to influence children spiritually.*

Grandparent, you are *second* in potential influence! You have more time with grandchildren than a Sunday school teacher, and a deeper relationship as well. You will influence them over a longer period than teachers or coaches, and you have wisdom. You are ideally positioned for deep spiritual impact in the lives of precious grandchildren. Grandparents and church leaders often overlook the significant truth that grandparents have more potential influence than children's workers, youth pastors, and Christian teachers.

Grandparents are ideally positioned for discipling. Think about these desirable factors in the discipler-disciplee interaction: (1) a close personal relationship, (2) long-term involvement, (3) knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the disciple, and (4) a discipler who is wise. These four factors put grandparents into the sweet spot of disciple-making.

From a national viewpoint, grandparents have the potential for significant influence due to the large number of grandparents in America. Depending on the source, there are approximately seventy-five to eighty million grandparents in the United States. I've estimated there may be as many as thirty million Christian grandparents in America by applying the percentage of individuals who profess to

be a Christian as revealed by other surveys to the total number of grandparents.

The average grandparent has four to six grandchildren (depending on the source). That means that our “army” of thirty million grandparents has the potential to spiritually influence millions of children. We have incredible potential to impact. Let’s get busy and do it!

### **3. Because of the eagerness of grandparents to have an impact**

*Grandparents are eager to be spiritual influencers of their grandchildren; in fact, they are more eager than some parents.*

I have worked with a number of children’s pastors to help them assess the impact of their ministry. One of the distressing factors that nearly every one of them faces is the infrequency of church attendance of children. The average child in most churches attends fewer than two times a month. I’ve asked many children’s pastors to measure how many children under their care attend three times a month or more, and the numbers are staggering. In one large church with multiple services, it was fifty-two out of 1,263. In another, it was thirty-four out of 640, and in another, two out of 402 (yes, only two). In most, they had a child under their teaching for fifteen to eighteen hours *per year*. The average eight-year-old gets as much media time in two days as they get in church in one year.

Two groups defied the norm: the children of the workers themselves and a second group that was a surprise, children brought by grandparents. *Why would those children be much more regular in attendance?* I believe grandparents care more. I've noticed three reoccurring reasons:

1. Some of us didn't do so well in guiding our children spiritually as a parent, and grandchildren offer us a second chance. (My friend Tim Kimmel, author of *Extreme Grandparenting*, calls it the opportunity for a do-over, or a mulligan.)
2. Some are alarmed. Our adult children are not interested in Christianity, and we are afraid that our grandchildren won't follow Jesus. So we are committed to do everything we can, and that includes getting them to church each week.
3. Some of us care more because we are more aware that the end of life is closer and we want to make every moment count.

#### **4. Because of the cultural deceit**

*The messages of culture go unchallenged when it comes to the role of grandparenting.*

Our generation is bombarded with narcissistic messages to spend our retirement years enjoying life and



focusing on ourselves. Dr. Josh Mulvihill will explore the cultural messages in greater depth in the next chapter, but for now I'll point out that the messages are contrary to the Bible's perspective.

Psalm 71:18 (NIV) eloquently describes the purpose for our later years: "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come." That ought to be the prayer of our hearts and our greatest desire.

On one occasion I invited a grandfather (Jim) to attend our national conference on grandparenting, and after an awkward couple of seconds, he rejected my invitation and said, "A conference on grandparenting? I don't really think I need that. I've got that down." I wondered afterward, *By whose standard does Jim have grandparenting down?* If he was grandparenting according to the cultural standard that says "love your grandchildren, help take care of them, and play with them," then I'm confident his assessment was correct. But did he "have grandparenting down" according to God's standard revealed in the Bible? I didn't know.

Church leaders must challenge culture's messages about grandparenting and help grandparents listen to Scripture's messages instead. Church leaders, this is essential to discipling our youngest generations.

## **5. Because we can do better**

I've observed four types of Christian grandparents.

**The biblical grandparent.** These grandparents are far from perfect, but they understand the message of Scripture about their role in perpetuating faith to future generations. They are intentional; they seek to take advantage of every opportunity to influence spiritually. They play hard, love deeply, act crazy, and sacrifice often for their grandchildren. The biblical grandparent understands that these things are not the end, they are a means to an end so that they can develop a deep relationship with their grandsons and granddaughters that will impact them for eternity.

**The cultural grandparent.** Some Christian grandparents dearly love their grandchildren and show it by caring for them, doting on them, and spoiling them a little. They go to soccer games and school programs. They are amazing grandparents by cultural standards, but they have not thought about how they might have a spiritual influence. They have made the means the end, rather than keeping their focus on the greater purpose Scripture reveals.

**The blocked grandparent.** A grandma once stood to her feet as we were ending a teaching session and asked me, "But, Larry, what do I do? My son says I can either see my granddaughter or I can tell her about God. But I

cannot do both, because the first time I mention God to her, I will not be allowed to see her again.”

There are many grandparents who understand what Scripture says, but they can't act on it because of a barrier such as geographic distance, broken relationships, or divorce. Especially when adult children are indifferent to Christ, the barrier can seem insurmountable. Though some of the greatest heart pains of life come with these barriers, I have found that many grandparents are embarrassed to share their pain in a church setting. They feel alone and don't know what to do. They desperately need the encouragement and support that a church grandparenting ministry would bring.

**The unequipped grandparent.** Some grandparents have never explored the tools created to disciple children and grandchildren. They haven't thought of putting a children's Bible on the coffee table or learned how to address the cultural issues that grandchildren face. They don't know the apps for their phone that could be used to equip them for influence. The last two chapters in this book provide tools to equip you for the task of grandparenting.

We can do better. The *church* can do better. We can give the grandparent-grandchild relationship the attention it deserves. We can experience the joy of seeing grandparents in the cultural, blocked, or unequipped groups become biblical grandparents. As a result, thousands of

children will be more effectively disciplined, and we will see our faith perpetuated into future generations.

## **6. Because of the ministry vacuum**

God began stirring me with a vision for a grandparenting focus, and my first step was to search for churches in America that had such a ministry. I found five or six churches that had done a one-time conference or class, but nothing ongoing. Google didn't know of one. I asked my ministry friends; they had never heard of such a ministry. I began to hear of names—but only a handful—that were focused on the grandparent-grandchild relationship. After a number of months, I found *one* grandparent ministry out of *thousands* of churches in the United States. How could something with so much significance be overlooked by so many? That's the reason we launched the Legacy Coalition.

When we started our ministry in 2016, the lack of attention given by churches to the grandparenting role was only one piece of the problem. There was a lack of resources on Christian grandparenting. Dr. Mulvihill found only seven books and one DVD series had been written since the year 2000. Most of those books were self-published, revealing that publishers didn't believe there was an audience. In addition, there was only one organization focused entirely on Christian grandparenting, The Christian

Grandparenting Network, led by one of my heroes, Cavin Harper.

The landscape has changed since 2016 and God is at work. Churches are launching grandparenting ministries and grandparents are becoming intentional about their role. Organizations are forming, and tools are being created. There is still much work to be done, and we believe you will want to be a part. Consider doing three things:

Join the movement.

Commit to becoming an *Intentional Christian Grandparent*.

Recognize in your church that *Grandparenting Matters* and consider starting a grandparent ministry.

**Larry Fowler** is the founder of the Legacy Coalition. His vision for a national grandparenting ministry brought together a gifted team of family, children's, and youth ministry leaders to launch this movement of God. His more than forty years of ministry include experience as a youth pastor, and as part of the Awana staff as missionary, training staff, international director, and executive leadership. He has extensive international experience, training children's workers in forty-seven countries, and has authored five books on children's and family ministry. He is a regular main-stage speaker and workshop presenter at conferences. In 2012 he

was recognized for his lifetime of contribution to children's ministry in America by the International Network of Children's Ministry with their national Legacy Award. Larry and his wife, Diane, live in Riverside, California, and have two children and seven grandchildren.