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Intergenerational Christian Formation

SECOND EDITION



BRINGING THE WHOLE CHURCH TOGETHER
IN MINISTRY, COMMUNITY, AND WORSHIP



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CHAPTER 1

A Changing Paradigm

*The best way to be formed in Christ is to sit among the elders,
listen to their stories, break bread with them,
and drink from the same cup,
observing how these earlier generations of saints ran the race,
fought the fight, and survived in grace.*

JAMES FRAZIER

ALL THREE OF US ENTERED THE WORLD of professional ministry in the 1980s and 1990s, Cory as a director of youth and music in Virginia, Holly as a children’s minister in Texas, and Christine as a director of Christian education in Oregon. We each practiced our ministry callings within the largely accepted and essentially unquestioned paradigm of age-and-stage Christian education and formation.

Leading religious educators during those years were promoting ministry guidelines for Sunday school and children’s church that were formulated around established cognitive and social developmental concerns of children. Siloed youth ministry approaches were seen as focused responses to the unique psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of teens—such as differentiation issues and identity development. At the time, we three saw no reason to question an age-divided Christian education paradigm—after all, it was the kind of ministry for which we were trained.

Toward the end of the millennium, however, each of us independently began to ponder the prevalence of age separation, the dearth of cross-

generational opportunities for the children and youth in our care, and the increasing abandonment of the institutional church among young adults (see prologue). In the mid-90s and early 2000s, we began to have reservations about the age-and-stage paradigm we had previously accepted uncritically. We began experimenting in our own ministry contexts with fuller cross-generational expressions of ministry, and we invited others to explore with us as we moved into unfamiliar territory. As we did so, we began to glimpse the significance of bringing the generations together. And, over the past two decades, we've become convinced that intergenerational formation is one of the fullest expressions of the body of Christ for the church in our current place in history.

Though we are advocating a fuller embrace of intergenerationality, we are not suggesting that age-and-stage ministries should be abandoned. We believe that they are faithful expressions of Christian formation as well and can also be spiritually enriching. However, we believe that the pendulum has swung too far toward silo ministries,¹ and this swing has led to generational fragmentation and loss of cross-generational relationships that are spiritually beneficial for all of us—young, middle, and older. In short, we believe that churches can both cultivate an intergenerational culture while also deeply valuing the unique and important place of age-graded learning settings, the warm relational bonding fostered in youth groups, and wonderful blessings of fellowship with those in shared seasons of life. According to Brenda Snailum, “Everyone needs to be part of a ‘web’ or network of relationships that includes peers as well as members of other generations.”² We believe intergenerational Christian formation to be a *both/and* proposition—not *either/or*.³

¹“Silo ministries” is a catchphrase for ministry approaches that segment by age or stage (for example, children’s ministry, youth ministry, singles ministry, etc.). It references the image of the tall, free-standing grain silos on Midwestern farms, and thus a “silo mentality” would suggest a stand-alone, age-segregated outlook.

²Brenda Snailum, “Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry Within Existing Evangelical Church Congregations: What Have We Learned?” *Christian Education Journal* (series 3) 9, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 169. Dr. Snailum is professor of youth and family studies at Denver Seminary.

³Within the world of youth ministry scholarship, this position was first advanced by the influential South African practical theologian Malan Nel. While his work was published originally in Afrikaans in the mid-1990s, it did not become available in English until the publication of *Youth*

In this book, we will focus primarily on the rationale, importance, and blessings of intergenerational formation because *we believe that intergenerational Christian experiences especially and uniquely nurture spiritual growth and development across all ages*. We will offer a robust rationale for this premise by outlining biblical, theological, empirical, theoretical, and sociological support for our premise. And along the way, we will share stories of churches that are becoming more intentionally intergenerational in outlook and practice.

First we will offer several clarifying descriptions and definitions regarding specific terms from the larger intergenerational conversation. We hope this definitional work will support present and future dialogue about this flourishing field of study.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE TERM INTERGENERATIONAL?

Although the usage of “intergenerational” has seen many different forms, expressions, and definitions, two early intergenerationalists, James White and Allan Harkness, give us a starting place. In 1988, James White defined intergenerational religious experience as “two or more different age groups of people in a religious community together learning/growing/living in faith through in-common experiences, parallel learning, contributive-occasions, and interactive sharing.”⁴ And in 2000, Allan Harkness wrote that “intentional intergenerational strategies are those in which an integral part of the process of faith communities encourages interpersonal interactions across generational boundaries, and in which

Ministry: An Inclusive Congregational Approach (Clubview, South Africa: Design, 2000) in the year 2000. Many North American readers received their first introduction to Nel’s vision of youth ministry a year later through his chapter titled “An Inclusive Congregational Approach” in Mark Senter III, ed., *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). In 2018, Nel published a substantial update of his work titled *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2018). A PDF version of this book can be downloaded for free at <https://aosis.co.za/portfolio/youth-ministry-an-inclusive-missional-approach/>.

⁴James W. White, *Intergenerational Religious Education: Models, Theories, and Prescription for Intergenerational Life and Learning in the Faith Community* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), 18.

a sense of mutuality and equality is encouraged between participants.”⁵ Additionally, as we articulate our basic definition, we will also lean into Gambone’s descriptions of intentional intergenerational ministry⁶ and Roberto’s intergenerational faith formation.⁷

Thus, we believe that intergenerational Christian formation happens when a congregation intentionally brings the generations together in mutual serving, sharing, or learning within the core practices of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community.⁸

Becoming more intentionally intergenerational includes embracing an intergenerational outlook, promoting intergenerational ministry, and creating intergenerational experiences. An *intergenerational outlook* acknowledges that the gifts every generation brings to the spiritual formation of the other generations strengthen the whole church.⁹ A faith community that practices *intergenerational ministry* will use these gifts, creating frequent opportunities for various generations to communicate in meaningful ways, to interact on a regular basis, and to minister, worship, and serve together regularly.¹⁰ And *intergenerational experiences* are encounters in which multiple representatives of two or more generations are present and engaging in reciprocal and mutually beneficial activities.

Sometimes the word *multigenerational* is employed in churches who have a full range of ages among their congregants. This term, however, may not reflect intentional cross-age interaction and experiences. Multi-

⁵Allan G. Harkness, “Intergenerational and Homogeneous-Age Education: Mutually Exclusive Strategies for Faith Communities?” *Religious Education* 95 (2000): 52.

⁶James V. Gambone, *Together for Tomorrow: Building Community Through Intergenerational Dialogue* (Crystal Bay, MN: Elder Eye, 1997); James V. Gambone, *All Are Welcome: A Primer for Intentional Intergenerational Ministry and Dialogue* (Crystal Bay, MN: Elder Eye, 1998).

⁷John Roberto, “Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation,” *Lifelong Faith: The Theory and Practice of Lifelong Faith Formation* (Fall/Winter 2007): 5-16; see also Mariette Martineau, Joan Weber, and Lief Kehrwald, *Intergenerational Faith Formation: All Ages Learning Together* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third, 2008).

⁸This description is based around Christine’s definition of intergenerational ministry in “A Qualitative Study Exploring Churches Committed to Intergenerational Ministry” (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2006), 127.

⁹Jane Rogers Vann, foreword to *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), xiii-xvi.

¹⁰Christine Ross, “Being an Intergenerational Congregation,” *Issues* 41, no. 2 (2007): 24-32.

generational may simply mean that the church honors all generations and has programming for all generations. Multigenerational resources do not assume increased interaction between the generations but rather use generational theory to understand how to serve each generation within one congregation.¹¹ A church that describes itself as multigenerational will most likely provide ministries for children, youth, young adults, middle adults, and older adults while offering relatively few opportunities for cross-generational contact. “While many churches are *multigenerational* and seemingly healthy on the surface, in reality, the generations act like ships in the night that pass by one another but rarely have meaningful contact and interaction. This lack of significant communication and relations between generations must be addressed if churches are to thrive—not merely survive—now and in the future,” writes Peter Menconi, a long-term proponent of ministry that initiates intergenerational understanding and communication among church members.¹²

Cross-generational is another term that is also often used in this growing conversation. In general usage, particularly in the business world, the term *cross-generational* is often employed to address how Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials are navigating the workforce. For example, a recent business article differentiates traditional mentoring from cross-generational mentoring, saying that the goal of cross-generational mentoring is *mutual* learning and growth: “Cross-generational mentoring allows both participants to act as the mentor and the mentee simultaneously. They both need to learn from each other for the dynamic to work.”¹³ This usage of cross-generational—that is, *mutual* growing and learning—is similar to our understanding of intergenerational, so in this text we will use *cross-generational* and *intergenerational* interchangeably.¹⁴

¹¹Gil Rendle’s *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002) is an example of such a resource (9).

¹²Peter Menconi, *The Intergenerational Church: Understanding Congregations from WWII to www.com* (Littleton, CO: Mt. Sage, 2010), 13.

¹³“Cross-Generational Mentoring for Your Organization,” June 21, 2019, www.insala.com/blog/what-are-the-benefits-of-cross-generational-mentoring.

¹⁴*Cross-generational* is sometimes used in Christian education circles to refer to passing on the faith from one generation to another, with the inference that this progression is from older

Over the past two decades, the intergenerational conversation has grown substantially, and there are terms and phrases that have surfaced and have gained popularity in the ensuing dialogue. Two words in particular are critical in the discussion of our book. The words are interconnected, yet each offers a nuanced perspective on intergenerational experiences.

The word *mutual* has appeared several times in our discussion thus far, and the word *mutuality* is already embedded into the conversation about intergenerational ministry around the globe. Mutuality is characterized by collaboration and equality and carries the idea of interdependence. Another word frequently employed in intergenerational dialogue is *reciprocity*. Reciprocity implies that there is balanced give and take, that is, a sense that what we have to offer each other is of similar weight or importance. Thus, when congregations bring the whole church together for worship, service, learning, or fellowship, seeking ways to increase the levels of mutuality and reciprocity across the generations will be an integral part of that process.¹⁵

WHAT IS MEANT BY CHRISTIAN FORMATION?

We use *Christian formation* to refer to the process of Christians being formed, transformed, and conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:18 indicate that the Spirit is the instrument of change: “we . . . are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Other passages indicate that the person also has a role in this transformation. Romans 12:2

generations to younger generations. Though this is an easily understood inference, it isn't a necessary inference. In other words, when Psalm 145:4 says that “one generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts,” we recognize that not only can parents commend God's works to their children, so the children can also commend God's works to their parents. Cross-generational influence need not flow only from older to younger.

Also, in their introductory chapter in *InterGenerate*, Holly Allen and Chris Barnett moved away from the term *cross-generational*. However, in this new edition of *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, we have chosen to embrace the term and to use it essentially synonymously with *intergenerational* (Holly Allen, ed., *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches Through Intergenerational Ministry* [Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018]).

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of *mutuality* and *reciprocity*, see chapter five on the theological underpinnings of intergenerationality.

says, “do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Beyond this personal agency, Paul indicates that being formed into the image of Christ is also a process in which other believers are involved: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19). Among other implications of this verse, we want to emphasize that Paul recognizes that his influence with these believers—his prayer for and presence with them—will in some way affect the forming of Christ in them. Therefore, we believe that while Christians are in the process of being formed, conformed, and transformed into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit, they are actively involved in that process both personally and, significantly for this book, *communally*. We build closely on Ephesians 4:11-16:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.* (emphasis ours)

Some definitions or descriptions of Christian spiritual formation embrace the importance of a believing community to that process. For example, James Wilhoit defines Christian spiritual formation as “the intentional *communal* process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶ And the late Julie Gorman, most well-known for her book *Community*

¹⁶James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23, emphasis ours.

That Is Christian,¹⁷ affirms strongly that “Christian community plays a powerful role in formation.”¹⁸

In this book, we are focusing particularly on the *intergenerational* nature of the Christian community. We believe that the Spirit of God is at work formatively—through the community’s worship, through the teaching, through modeling and mentoring relationships, and through spiritually empowered and gifted roles—in special and unique ways when believers across the life span are present and participating *together*.

OUR PREMISE

It is our premise that intergenerational Christian experiences especially and uniquely nurture spiritual growth and development across all ages.

Intergenerationality creates opportunities for adults, youth, and children to build relationships across the age spectrum, to share each other’s spiritual journeys, and to learn from and encourage those ahead of us on the journey as well as those coming along behind. According to research shared in our earlier edition, these opportunities contribute to the spiritual growth and development of everyone participating. And this new edition offers further substantive empirical support for our basic premise (see chapter nine), updating the Powell and Barna findings, sharing a recent Canadian study, and unpacking the findings of thirty-seven doctoral theses on intergenerational ministry that have been completed in the last decade.

And in the meantime, thousands of Christian faith communities across North America and around the globe are seeking to become more intergenerational in outlook and practice.

TWO CONGREGATIONS THAT ARE BECOMING MORE INTENTIONALLY INTERGENERATIONAL

In recent years, we three have had exciting opportunities to visit and worship with congregations that are becoming more intentionally

¹⁷Julie Gorman, *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002).

¹⁸Julie Gorman, “Christian Formation,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*, ed. Michael Anthony (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 135.

intergenerational in outlook and practice. In preparation for this second edition of *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, we interviewed ministry leaders in six congregations that are engaging intergenerationality in effective ways. We asked these leaders questions from a prepared interview protocol including:

- how/why this congregation began this journey
- what role this minister had played in initiating the process
- challenges they have encountered
- benefits/blessings they perceive for the generations and for the congregation as a whole (see full interview protocol in Appendix A).

We will share two of these intergenerational narratives here, the story of a large Canadian church, called Canadian Research Congregation (CRC), and a small Australian church, called Australian Research Church (ARC). The other four congregational stories represent small, medium, and larger churches in Oregon, California, and Tennessee, and we will share their stories elsewhere in the book. The congregations are Baptist, Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, and a general community church. All six have been transitioning toward intergenerationality, some tentatively and more slowly, others more robustly, over the last several years.

CANADIAN RESEARCH CONGREGATION¹⁹

Canadian Research Church (CRC) was formed in the early 1900s and currently serves around 850 regular attendees at three different locations in its city. Although predominately White, thirty countries are represented among the congregants.

In the early 2000s, this congregation began holding three worship services, each service using a different worship style, which, over time,

¹⁹Canadian Research Church is Cory Seibel's congregation. Cory was interviewed, and this description was written prior to his joining Holly and Christine as the third writer. The story of his congregation's move into intergenerationality was one of several factors that contributed to Cory's inclusion as an author.

tended to sort the congregation into three generations. Around this same time, the leaders began to sense the limitations of their small groups, which were generationally configured. Though these leaders had not encountered the literature around intergenerationality, they began to realize they wanted to be a congregation for all generations, with all generations present and together.

After the leadership restructured worship and reorganized the small groups, they brought a new pastor on staff. This new GenX minister, Cory, had been interested in intergenerational relationships since his youth when he had observed the worship wars between the Boomers and older generations in his home congregation. Cory arrived at CRC having researched intergenerational ministry in his master's program and having studied several theories from which he drew to guide the congregation toward a more intentionally intergenerational way of being.

Following a sermon preached at all three campuses of CRC, women at two of the campuses approached Cory expressing a desire to be part of an intergenerational food ministry. He was able to connect these Boomer and Gen X women and encourage them to brainstorm together. As a result, The Love Kitchen—in which all ages of women and girls come together once a month to cook meals, build relationships, and minister to one another—was born. The group prepares about seventy-five meals each meeting, which are then frozen and eventually given to people in need. Participants describe The Love Kitchen as a fun, contagious community that finds joy in being together and in living for others—together. As other people in the congregation saw the benefits of this intergenerational ministry, many wanted to become part of it or became more open to other means of intergenerational relationship building.

When Cory heard the children's and youth staff asking questions about how to support faith growth, he recognized their openness to more all-age approaches to their ministry, and he began teaching and resourcing his colleagues toward intergenerationality. Along the way, Cory engaged other ministry staff in conversations around creating an intergenerational culture, introduced intergenerational concepts to the congregation

in general, extended invitations to join various “experiments” in intergenerational life, and shared stories from those experiences.²⁰

Cory concluded the interview saying that CRC has made great strides in strengthening relationships between people of different generations and toward empowering people from across the life course to make a meaningful contribution to the church’s life.

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH CONGREGATION

Australian Research Congregation (ARC) began as a mission plant with the express focus of “doing life together.” Twelve years later it is a faith community of about a hundred people with every generation represented.

The senior pastor, Chris, describes intergenerational ministry as doing life across all the ages together—learning, growing, and worshipping God. It is caring for each other and sharing this love with all who don’t know him yet. “It isn’t just a ministry, it is the way the church should be,” she says.

As ARC began its journey without a church building, congregants felt that God was birthing something new. They knew they wanted to do life together, but they were unsure exactly how, since none had experienced an intentionally intergenerational church before. The first two-and-a-half years felt like wandering in the wilderness—not quite knowing the way and feeling tempted to return to Egypt. In hindsight, Chris realized that they needed to be in the wilderness long enough to change their thinking. She says they also needed the time without a church building to fully realize *they* were the church—not the building.

As a church plant whose mission was intergenerational from the onset, ARC worked to create worship, education, and service opportunities that involved everyone together. Over time, their intergenerational practices began to take on a pattern—what they now call their “core rhythm.” Each month, the church focuses on a specific theme, with a different person leading each of the four Sundays in a month.

²⁰Cory’s processes here reflected his understanding of Everett Rogers’s “diffusion of innovations” approach to change. Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 2002). See further discussion of Rogers’s ideas in chapter seventeen on leadership.

- *First Sunday*: “Brekky Central.” Everyone meets for breakfast, shares stories from their weekly life groups, and prays for each other; then Chris introduces the month’s theme.
- *Second Sunday*: “Upward Worship” at 5:00 p.m. Everyone meets for worship followed by prayer, journaling, writing, painting, teaching, then dinner.
- *Third Sunday*: “Family Celebration.” In this morning’s gathering, there might be a prepared drama, music, or creative arts. There is teaching time to learn from God, and people share to learn from one another.
- *Fourth Sunday*: “Define Discipleship.” They begin this morning together; then they separate into children, youth, and adults (age twenty and up) for study time; and finally finish all together again.

Recent monthly themes have included: Love Is a Verb; Back Together Again (after Covid); the Lord’s Prayer; and Love Came Down (Christmas). Other gatherings during the week are intergenerational as well, such as their life groups that are currently studying Luke and a homework club for local children that all generations of ARC coordinate and staff.

ARC has had challenges in their intergenerational journey along the way. For example, hiring staff has been a challenge. ARC has two paid staff, and Chris says that “bringing on staff has not been easy. Finding people who don’t want to change it back to what they are more comfortable with is challenging.”

However, in general, the whole church is fully invested with the intergenerational DNA of ARC. Chris concluded the interview saying, “I feel blessed to have a group of leaders that are totally on board with being an intergenerational community and representing the people in this way. It is very important that they always feel we are all in this together and lead truly as a team. Sometimes they will go slower than I would like in making decisions but going at the right pace is key to making positive changes.”

CONCLUSION

These two colorful narratives paint an intriguing picture of what intentional intergenerational ministry can look like. As Cory and Chris indicate, bringing the generations together takes intentionality, creativity, an openness to the Spirit's work across the generations, willingness to win other ministry staff to the enterprise, readiness to engage the gifts of all whom God brings to the table, and committed persistence.

Becoming intentionally intergenerational takes strong leadership, time, commitment, patience, enthusiasm, education, and perseverance; nevertheless, churches from the full range of Christian faith traditions are moving toward more age-integrated ministry approaches. To aid in this journey, this book shares foundational biblical and theological support, fascinating congregational research, fresh intergenerational practices, and surprising developmental and theoretical rationales as well as practical support to equip, inform, and inspire ministry leaders for the journey ahead.

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