

Intergenerational Ministry

"Perhaps our youth are abandoning church as young adults because it was never theirs to begin with."

*(JASON SANTOS,
INTERGENERATE)*

WHAT CAN INTERGENERATIONAL MINISTRY BRING TO OUR CHURCHES?

(From John Roberto's chapter in Intergenerate)

PROMOTES CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Christian commitment is formed and strengthened as individuals learn the way of the faith community and how to live as Christians today. This process helps people identify with their faith community, leading to fuller participation across all age groups.

BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

Strengthening and creating new relationships among people of all ages promotes a community where generational differences can be transcended rather than reinforced. It affirms each person's value in the total community, values, nurtures, and employs the gifts of every individual, and creates a welcoming and safe environment.

FOSTERS LEARNING AND GROWTH

Addressing the social and developmental needs of various age groups, this approach engages people of all ages in diverse activities that cater to different faith styles and religious experiences. It fosters mutual teaching and learning, encourages faith growth and practice across generations, and creates intentional opportunities for young and old to meet together. By supporting families with a surrounding community of faith, it equips individuals to live their faith in daily life and engages them in service to others, both locally and globally.

EMPOWERED AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Led by congregational leaders who embrace a collaborative, team-based, and empowering style of leadership, this approach is facilitated by teams who work together in designing and conducting programming.

How do we get to Intergenerational Ministry?

There is no easy “run with it” plan that works for every church. Like every ministry approach, you need to figure out how to make it work in your context. You know your church and your community better than anyone else!

Dr. Cory Seibel does suggest a ‘recipe’ and notes six key ingredients that churches looking to expand their intergenerational ministry should consider as we COHERE:

1. *Connecting: Crossing Intergenerational Lines*

In Western societies, contact with people of other generations is often quite limited. However, more contact across generational lines implies a greater degree of solidarity within the church. The body of Christ should seek to build bridges across generations, helping people to cross these lines and foster a stronger, more unified community.

Question for Reflection: How can your church actively build bridges across generational lines to promote greater solidarity and unity within your congregation?

Suggested Practice: Consider implementing intergenerational mentorship programs where older and younger members are paired to share experiences, wisdom, and support, thereby creating opportunities for meaningful interaction and relationship-building.

2. *Organizing: Creating Opportunity Structures*

Ministry structures significantly impact intergenerational dynamics within the church. In recent decades, the priorities guiding many churches' structural choices have often assumed the necessity of separating generations, thereby limiting opportunities for connections. This has led to the belief that friendships should be exclusively within one's own generation. To become intergenerationally sticky, churches should employ structures that provide opportunities for fostering relationships across generational lines.

Question for Reflection: How can you adapt your church's ministry structures to foster more meaningful intergenerational relationships and break down the barriers that have traditionally separated different age groups?

Suggested Practice: Consider redesigning church events and programs to include mixed-age groups, such as intergenerational small groups, collaborative service projects, or community meals, to encourage interactions and build relationships across different age groups.

3. *Harmonizing: Sharing Core Convictions*

Churchgoers of different generations often don't see eye to eye on many things. While generational theory highlights these differences, our shared identity in Christ means we have more in common than is often acknowledged. Intergenerationally sticky churches help Christians of all ages recognize commonly held values and beliefs and create opportunities to foster understanding between different generations.

Question for Reflection: How can your church create opportunities for different generations to recognize their shared values and beliefs, and foster greater understanding among them?

Suggested Practice: Consider organizing regular intergenerational discussion forums where participants can openly share their core convictions and explore how these shared values can bridge generational gaps.

4. *Empathizing: Transforming Limited Perceptions*

All relationships have an affective dimension, which can be positive, negative, or neutral, and this dimension impacts the level of cohesion between different generations in a church. Perceptions and evaluations of one another are often influenced by simplistic and erroneous age-based stereotypes. To enhance intergenerational relationships, we should encourage the development of empathy—understanding and sharing the feelings of others. Practices like storytelling can be powerful tools in helping people of different generations connect and empathize with one another.

Question for Reflection: How can your church incorporate practices like storytelling to foster empathy and improve cohesion between different generations?

Suggested Practice: Consider implementing a monthly storytelling event where members of different generations share personal experiences or stories that highlight their values and emotions, fostering greater understanding and connection.

5. *Recognizing: Acknowledging Mutual Responsibilities*

Developing a shared understanding of norms and responsibilities among family members is essential, but these norms can change over time. In Western societies, such changes have led to a loss of common understanding between older and younger generations, resulting in weakened ties and disorientation. Scripture offers valuable insights into cross-generational responsibilities. Intergenerationally sticky churches help people of all ages engage with Scripture to uncover a guiding vision for mutual responsibilities.

Question for Reflection: How can your church use Scripture to help different generations develop a shared understanding of responsibilities and strengthen intergenerational cohesion?

Suggested Practice: Consider organizing regular intergenerational study groups where participants can explore relevant Scripture passages together and discuss their implications for responsibilities and relationships.

6. *Exchanging: Honoring Diverse Gifts*

Intergenerational cohesion is affected by how family members exchange services such as gifts, shelter, advice, and money. These exchanges influence perceptions of reciprocity and fairness among generations. The New Testament envisions the church as a body where all members, empowered by the Holy Spirit, contribute their gifts for the common good. However, power struggles can arise when older generations do not make room for younger members to use their gifts. The Holy Spirit desires contributions from all ages to enrich the community.

Question for Reflection: How can your church address power dynamics and create opportunities for all generations to contribute their gifts for the common good?

Suggested Practice: Organize an intergenerational collaborative project, such as a community service initiative or a church renovation effort, where members of different ages work together, and all ages are given the opportunity to speak into the project. This can help bridge gaps, leverage diverse skills, and strengthen relationships across generations.