



Through-Life discipleship – Following Christ through the ages and changes of life

Generations in Church

Many churches worry about their generational mix but at its best church is one of the few organised social spaces where generations gather and learn from each other. With the lengthening of life expectancy, we could expect to find perhaps five different generations in church together, but how can it be home for such a range of life experiences? This session aims to consider how the church can be a place where all the generations are 'one in Christ', united as the family of God yet attentive to the different needs, values and gifts both young and old bring.



Starter activity (15 min)

“People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents.” (Ann Morisy) Do you agree?

Think about the differences between the culture in which you grew up and the culture your parents did and see if you can fill in the table below.

Your formative experiences	Your parents formative experiences
Popular music during childhood:	
Popular fashion:	
New technology developed in childhood:	
Key world events experienced in childhood:	
Values towards work, family & wider society:	
Religious beliefs and values:	

If you have time compare your table with those around you.



To what extent do you think that you have been shaped by the times you grew up in?

We use the word 'generation' to describe a group of people in roughly the same time period with shared cultural experience.

For added input, please see the appendix in which we have provided an outline of different generational formative experiences.

The Generations Together (35 min)

The nativity narrative, particularly as told by Luke, draws at least three generations together in that significant moment of Jesus' birth.



Refresh your memory by reading quickly over Luke chapters 1 & 2 (it's quite long!!).

Discuss in the group:

1. Consider the place of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Simeon and Anna in the story, do you think that we reach an age when we no longer receive opportunities for God to bless us or use us?
2. Why do you think Mary went to visit Elizabeth? What could we learn from the relationship that they shared?
3. Consider the description of the baby leaping in Elizabeth's womb and the story of Jesus in the temple as a boy. How open are we to what young people can receive and also contribute to church?
4. Consider the births of John and Jesus and the ages of all the other key characters. What do you think the significance is of the place of the young and the old in the story of Jesus' birth?

More to think about...

Does the Bible suggest any direction for responsibility and relationship between generations?

It is important to remember the culture in which the New Testament was written was very different from ours today, but are there still principles regarding the generations we can learn from?

Ephesians 6 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²“Honour your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise— ³“so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” ⁴Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

1 Timothy 5 Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. [You may wish to read on to verse 16 for instruction on caring for widows]

Titus 2 ²Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. ³Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, ⁵to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. ⁶Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled.


James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress [NB this is a recurrent theme in the Old Testament, particularly Deuteronomy]

Generation to Generation (30 min)

The Church has a continuous responsibility to pass on the word and tradition to the next generation. Mark Griffiths interesting titled his book on the history of church Sunday school “One generation from extinction”. It may be that your church feels that title resonate as a tangible threat or perhaps your church has a growing young congregation, nevertheless the relationship between the generations could be something that requires greater work and understanding.

The EAUk report “God and the Generations” suggests a scheme of four models of generational succession to help our understanding.

“The Judges model” (Intergenerational stoppage)	No transition occurs between the generations. Examples of this may be seen in the period of the Judges where it was all too common place that “after that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:7-11).
“The Saul and David model” (Intergenerational schism)	A form of intergenerational antipathy that breaks the unity of God’s people. A biblical example could be the schism that which occurs between Saul and David; the jealousy of the older king towards his anointed heir turns quickly to paranoia and then to murderous intent (1 Kings 18-23).
“The Kings of Israel model” (Intergenerational stereotypy)	This is effectively repetition without renewal. Of course not all shifts from generation to generation need to be revolutionary but where a previous generation has been defective, those who follow without careful reassessment are at danger of ‘going through the motions’. Many Kings of Israel were accused of repeating the same errors of their fathers and Jesus criticised the religious leaders of his day for this ritualism.
“The Elijah and Elisha model” (Constructive intergenerational succession)	This paradigm effects continuity but is open to changes and development by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps some of the best Biblical examples are through intergenerational mentor relationships such as between Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha and Paul and Timothy.

 Discuss in the group:

Which of the above models do you feel your church most closely relates to?

How does that make you feel? What are the pros and cons of that model?

“God and the Generations” implies that the model most favoured in the Bible is that of the Elijah & Elisha model (constructive intergenerational succession). Do you agree? Why or why not?

Reflect



What would it mean to interpret Galatians 3:28 through the lens of age?

Can our churches be a place where young and old are ‘one in Christ’?

What do you think are the important elements that would create ‘constructive intergenerational succession’ in a church? *(Think about how you would respond to the different needs, gifts and insights of particular generations)*

Considering all the different elements covered in this session, take some time to consider as a group how your church could intentionally foster a healthy dynamic across the generations and start to plan some practical steps?

Prayer/Worship (10 min)

You may wish to all read out loud together **Psalm 145**.

¹ I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name for ever and ever.

² Every day I will praise you
and extol your name for ever and ever.

³ Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.

⁴ One generation commends your works to
another;
they tell of your mighty acts.

⁵ They speak of the glorious splendour of your
majesty—
and I will meditate on your wonderful
works. ^[b]

⁶ They tell of the power of your awesome
works—
and I will proclaim your great deeds.

⁷ They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

⁸ The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.

⁹ The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.

¹⁰ All your works praise you, LORD;
your faithful people extol you.

¹¹ They tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,

¹² so that all people may know of your mighty
acts

and the glorious splendour of your
kingdom.

¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all
generations.

The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does. ^[c]

¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper
time.

¹⁶ You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

¹⁷ The LORD is righteous in all his ways
and faithful in all he does.

¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

¹⁹ He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.

²⁰ The LORD watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.

²¹ My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD.
Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever.

You could then close in a time of prayer; the prayer below is offered as a suggestion.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that yesterday, today and forever you are the same and you never change. You are the God of history, there from before the world began and here with us today. Thank you that we stand on the shoulders of all the generations that have gone before us. We pray Lord that you would unite your church across the generations, that we may be one in Christ and that we may shine as a light for the world to see, an example of old and young in peace and harmony. May it be to the glory of your son Jesus Christ. Amen

You may want to finish with the Lord's Prayer.

If you want to do some more thinking about the relationships between generations, you may want to read the following at some point after the session.

Ann Morisy in her book: 'Borrowing from the Future: A Faith-based approach to intergenerational equity', discusses what it means for there to be justice between the generations in a time where there is the potential for great inequality. She writes "Baby boomers are poised to take more out of the system than they have put in". Baby boomers have been lucky enough to benefit from free healthcare, free education and in many cases freedom from financial worries protected by the welfare state and the housing market boom. One might agree with the former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan who suggested this generation "had never had it so good."

But behind the fortunate baby boomers, the younger generations are burdened with the fallout of an economic crisis and the taxation needed to fund pensions and welfare for a growing number of older people they will likely not benefit from themselves. The cries 'it's not fair' seem justified when the wealthy baby boomers are using their free bus pass and fuel allowance but the younger generation see little hope of saving enough for a mortgage. For too long we have 'borrowed from the future' and prioritised our present prosperity over sustainability and the future of generations to come.

Whilst there have always been issues of justice, Morisy explains this situation is unique in being an issue of intergenerational justice, where the advantage is firmly in the hands of one generation with the challenge to reprioritise the needs of those to come. She lays down the challenge: will you become a pivot generation?

There is a need for a deep generosity of spirit, one that will intentionally, willingly put others' interests ahead of one's own. This is not just about money and wealth but also about seeking to serve by means of volunteering, political campaigning and passing on the wisdom that only older people can bring. There is a need for both younger and older generations to resist the urge to blame one another but to forgive and seek to be compassionate in their approach to one another. All have the responsibility to steward their wealth responsibly but this is a particularly significant challenge for the fortunate Baby boomers. More than that, older generations are more influential in the political system and as such have a unique responsibility to campaign and seek change in the interests of people other than themselves. Rather than looking at the present, there is a need for politics to shift its gaze to the future and this can only happen if people make it happen.

Do you agree? Would you say the Baby boomers have been a lucky generation? Do you think you have a responsibility for supporting the futures of younger generations? What could you do?