



# INTERGENERATIONAL CHURCH: PASSING FAD OR IMPORTANT FOUNDATION?

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**GARETH CRISPIN CHALLENGES US TO THINK ABOUT INTERGENERATIONAL CHURCH: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT MIGHT HELP US EMBRACE IT.**

Sometimes it's audible, isn't it? The collective sigh of relief when the Minister says: 'And now the youth and children leave for their groups'. Ministers can get on with the 'real business in hand', parents can relax and youth and children (Y&C) can go to age specific groups which cater for their specific needs, making teaching fun and accessible.

In an age when many churches have no Y&C in them at all, their mere presence in the wider church community is to be celebrated, but are we missing out on the blessings that might come from closer interaction between people of different generations?

Interaction lies at the heart of intergenerational church (IG) which has received growing attention in the last few years. IG is not simply multi-generational, with people of different generations in the same location, even in the same all age service (as in figure 1). No, IG is specifically all about actual, meaningful interaction between people of different generations (as in figure 2).

As well as interaction, mutuality is central to IG. Y&C are full members of the church and so are not to be patronised or ignored. They are to interact with others as equals with something to contribute. Their different perspective may provide the catalyst for others to remember the awe that God should inspire or the sheer joy of understanding the Father's

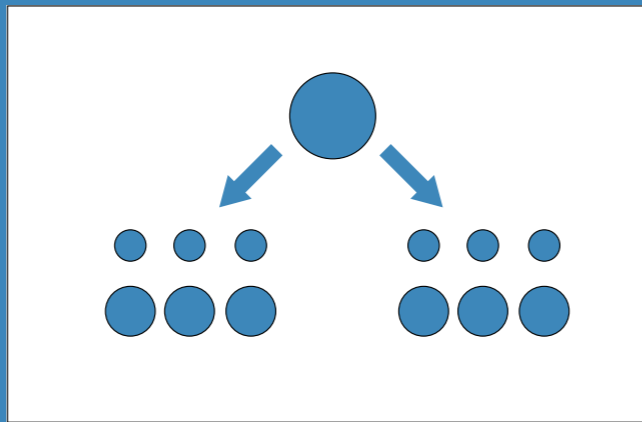


Figure 1.

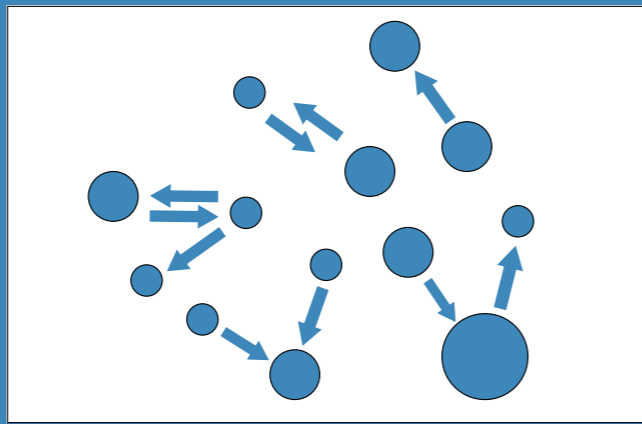


Figure 2.

love for us, or the simple trust that Jesus invites us to place in him. Equally, they may ask difficult questions that others have long since buried as they have 'matured' in faith.

This doesn't commit us to a church that then ignores or patronises older generations, a risk in our contemporary society with its idolatry of the new. Instead, true mutuality recognises that older generations bring continuity and wisdom, knowledge of the story of our faith and a witness to God's grace in their lives over many years.

Equally, IG doesn't commit us to a subjectivist church, focussed only on the views and experiences of people, without biblical authority and teaching. Mutuality doesn't imply whatever anyone says is to be accepted and left uncontested. However, it does mean church leaders fostering new ways of discipleship, including them developing new skills of pastoral oversight to gently shepherd God's people as they interact on a mutual footing.

Of course, you can't find a proof text that says: 'thou shalt never segregate along age lines', but examples of the community of faith being taught together (e.g. Deuteronomy 6, Exodus 16:9-10 and 35:1-4; Ezra 8:1-6; Ephesians 6:1-3 - in the last passage Paul assumes children are present at the reading of his letter to the church) should at least give us pause for thought, and Ephesians chapter 4 should give us even more to ponder. Paul reminds the Ephesian church that as Christians they are all bound together to the one body through the one Lord (Ephesians 4:4-5). In this context he implores them to bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2), which is difficult if interaction is non-existent!

The unity of the church of which Paul speaks is derived from the one God (Ephesians 4:6), reminding us that as well as diversity, there is a fundamental unity in the Trinity, God's family into which we are brought when we are adopted as sons and daughters. Adoption in Christ means old and young are brothers and sisters in Christ; maybe viewing others in the church more like this may help in our intergenerational relationships (for more on this angle see Chap Clark, Adoptive Youth Ministry).

Of course, the other Pauline passage that comes to mind is 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 with the picture of the church as a

body. In this passage members of the church are represented as members of a body, where no one part is unimportant. Let's pull three points out from this passage that speak into the question of IG. Firstly, verses 12-14 show us that God has made us one - we are interdependent. Secondly, verses 15-19 help us to see that different people bring different perspectives and that is good! Lastly, verses 21-27 remind us that we cannot say we don't need others.

So, in the church we are in interdependent relationship with those of other ages, younger and older, those people bring things that we cannot think that we don't need, (and let's admit that we sometimes do!) those that are not like us. We are all, to a lesser or greater extent, narcissistic, but 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 forcefully says: 'Brothers and sisters, this should not be.'

If I may switch metaphors for a moment. Let's consider the symphony orchestra and the bassoon. Now, as many of you may know, there is a pecking order in an orchestra (or at least some would like us to think so!). The strings are seen as the most important section, the mainstay of the orchestra. Within that the violins are seen (or is that see themselves!) as superior - if you don't believe me just ask a violinist to tell you a joke about a viola player! Even within that you have the first violins and second violins and then at the top, the crème de la crème is the leader of the first violins who is literally called the Concertmaster (I know! I know!). Not so different from many of our churches, right?

Now let's consider a different instrument: the bassoon. Bassoons are funny instruments (I really like them though that's possibly because my son plays one). They sound like a drunk duck with a cold. In Paul's terms they are members that are treated with less honour. But of course, without bassoons (and oboes, and the percussion etc. etc.) the orchestra ceases to be the orchestra. Hear me right here, we're not talking about all these instruments being in the same building but in different rooms (sounds familiar?) - but in the same room. The sound you get when you hear a symphony orchestra in full flight is quite stunning. If you want a vision for developing an IG church, then maybe this is it. We are (because of God's work in us) and should be (because it still takes practise) a symphonic church, creating a sound that can only come from engaging all.



## WHY NOW?

But why are we talking about this now? Why not 50 years ago? Well, of course, people have always talked about it, but it has come increasingly onto the agenda in the last couple of decades for a variety of reasons.

It is likely that part of the catalyst for change has come from the feeling that the segmented models of Y&C ministry and mission, that developed since the late nineteenth century, have not turned the tide of falling numbers. Those models, developed in the context of modern industrial societies with a focus on management and efficiency, reflected the wider segmentation within society as seen within the establishment of the state schooling system.

The last few decades have seen some questioning of these foundational ideals of the previous century, including seeking after new forms of community and a sense of the importance of informal relationships over the previous focus on hiring in expert professionals to run polished segmented programmes. IG writers have also pointed to research which suggests:

- that the best way to retain youth in the church is to integrate them more from the word go (see Sharon Ketchem Galgay 'Solving the retention problem through integration: A communal Vision for Youth Ministry', Journal of Youth Ministry, 11(1)),
- that social learning theory (from Vygotsky) indicates that people learn best in social settings and alongside people who are ahead of them in developmental terms (Holly

Allen and Christina Ross, 'Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship', 2012).

## WHY IS IT HARD TO DO?

OK, so we know what IG is, have some indication of why it might be a good idea and we have a vision for it, but why isn't everyone doing it? Over the last few years, I looked at three Church of England churches to see what helped and what hindered the development of IG. I found that there was good evidence to suggest that many of the reasons why churches might not embrace IG are to do either with theology or the leader of the church. Let's consider theology first.

## THE IMPACT OF THEOLOGY

It is of course too simplistic to say that if someone believes X they will do Y, we know it does not work like that. However, it is easy to see how some theologies are commensurate with certain practices or expressions of faith and so provide more fertile ground for those practices or expressions than other theologies might.

In my research, I began to see how some of the theology associated with charismatic churches laid foundations that were more positively pre-disposed to IG than more conservative theologies. But before we get into that, we need to pause to consider the risk of instrumentalising theology. It might sound obvious but it needs saying: don't believe something because of what it will give you; believe on the merits of the belief itself. I am all for IG, but equally I am not a charismatic (I come from a more conservative stable) and I

don't intend to embrace charismatic theology merely because it might help me implement an IG church. That said, it is useful to understand why some practices might be easier to implement in some places than others. Understanding how the land lies is important for considering what you might then do next (but should not pre-determine that next step).

So, with that caveat out of the way, what might it be about charismatic theology that provides a good foundation for IG practices? The first thing of note is the experiential nature of theology and practice (Ben Pugh, *Bold Faith: A Closer Look at Five Key Ideas of Charismatic Christianity*, 2017, p.xvii); charismatic evangelical theology in Britain is 'dynamic, seen through the lens of experience,' (Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter*, 2008, p.16) with an emphasis on encounter rather than knowledge.

Corresponding with this emphasis on experiential encounters with the Holy Spirit is the second theological commitment of interest to us; that is, charismatic evangelical theology in Britain views the Bible as 'a collection of stories intended to lead a person to God and to be transformed as a result, rather than a database of dogma to be mined.' (Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter*, 2008, p.189) Thus, the Bible becomes a place of 'encounter with the divine author.' (Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter*, 2008, p.190).

The third theological commitment in charismatic theology is a social doctrine of the Trinity. Social Trinitarianism focuses less on the hierarchy of the members of the Trinity and their substance and more on the equality of the members and their relationships. Whilst Moltmann does not identify himself as Charismatic or Pentecostal, there are significant overlaps in their theological outlook; including at this point where the doctrines of the Trinity and Holy Spirit are more about relationship rather than substance (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, 1981, p.19); and it is a relationship that includes the impact of the freedom of the Spirit in creation that causes change within the Trinity itself, as the Spirit brings experience of creation back to the Godhead.

Whilst we don't have space here to explore all the different nuances of these theological emphases or the way in which they connect to IG, it is nevertheless easy to see the way in which these convictions might provide fertile ground for IG. As explored above, IG is about mutuality between people of different ages and it is about participation of those different ages in the life of the church. Taken together, the theological convictions above provide a backdrop that is at least sympathetic to the needs of IG. The experiential nature of the church, the focus on 'experience' over 'head knowledge' and a focus on a relational vision of God is far more likely to allow space for meaningful participation of younger people (with their relative lack of knowledge and their experiential approach to learning) than the opposite convictions.

## THE IMPACT OF THE LEADER

My research suggested that the second important element to consider when reflecting on why IG might be hard to

implement and practice - is the leader. Church of England churches have specific leadership structures, but what I discovered cuts across most church governance structures. When we talk of 'the leader' in this area, it is both their theology of leadership and them as a leader (including their background and personality) that seems to matter.

Firstly, in terms of their theology of leadership as with the wider theology, I found that those with more conservative understandings of leadership, tended to see themselves as the authoritative shepherd who leads the sheep through teaching. Charismatic evangelicals tended to hold together both a desire to teach authoritatively, but also to foster a more horizontal church culture as well, co-pilgrims leading from the middle, rather than the front.

In terms of building IG practices, it is not hard to see how more conservative theologies of leadership do not automatically lend themselves to allowing the less hierarchical forms of leadership needed to cultivate the mutuality, participation and bi-directional teaching implied in and required by IG. It isn't merely about theology however. Secondly, the leader themselves provides another set of reasons why certain leaders and churches seem to take more easily to the waters of IG than others. What is seemingly important about the leader is their background, their personality.

The background of a leader seems to have received scant attention in leadership books but it seemed so very influential in the churches I looked at. When I asked one vicar for the top 5 ways in which youth and children come to know who Jesus is and to become more like him, he did not pick the home or the wider church as examples. When I asked why, he replied that those places 'had not been his experience.' Let that sit with you for a minute ... I did not ask what his experience was, I asked him what he thought was best or what worked - he replied to me with his experience. He had not experienced the power and place of the biological-legal family or the wider church and so he did not see it as important now!

Another vicar seemed to be a natural to IG. He did not know the literature, nor the language that IG thinkers use but he was doing what they advocated. Why? When asked about his background he replied that he learned most about ministry through his early immersion in youth summer camps and the alternative worship scene (remember alt:worship?). These formative experiences were ones that were highly interactive and participative, experiential - they shared a lot of the same priorities as IG. And here is the kicker. One of the vicars told me that they are told at 'vicar factory' that it will only be a matter of a few years before their church began to look like them. Want to know why your church looks like it does? And why IG might be easy or hard? You could do worse than delving into the formative years of your minister.

What about personality? The links here were a little more tenuous and personality is far more slippery and contested as an idea, but I mention it here as it does at least make sense of some possible reasons why some church leaders might be more inclined towards IG than others.



We don't have space here to engage in a discussion around the strengths and weaknesses of the Myers-Briggs personality types. Even if you feel it does not have empirical backing (which I think it does have) it could, at a minimum, be seen as something that captures accumulated wisdom of people over time.

Myers-Briggs is based on Jungian theory which posits that people have psychological preferences in how they interact with the world. As preferences, these do not determine how people engage with the outside world, they mean only that different people will tend, and be inclined, towards certain postures to the world because that is their preference.

There are three main preferences in Jungian theory. First is the inclination to be extraverted (gaining psychological energy from the outside world of people) or introverted (drawing energy from the internal world of the self). Second is the tendency for perceiving the world through the senses or through intuition. Lastly is the preference for making judgements through thinking or feeling. Because Jung suggested people prefer to use the perceiving or judging processes in the outer, social and inner, private world, most tools that use Jungian theory include a fourth preference choice of judging or perceiving. This allows individuals to consider which processes they prefer to use in the outer and which they prefer to use in the inner world (for a helpful introduction, see Leslie Francis, *Faith and psychology: Personality, religion and the individual*, 2005).

In short, the personality type that appears (from both the literature and my own empirical research) to provide the closest match to core values of IG is ENFP (So someone with a preference for Extroversion, Intuition, Feeling and Perceiving). The summary given to this type by Briggs is:

Warmly enthusiastic and imaginative. See life as full of possibilities. Make connections between events and information very quickly, and confidently proceed based on the patterns they see. Want a lot of affirmation from others, and readily give appreciation and support. Spontaneous and flexible, often rely on their ability to improvise and their verbal fluency (*Introduction to type®: A guide to understanding your results on the Myers-Briggs type indicator®, 2000*).

## CONCLUSION

IG isn't an all or nothing kind of thing. You can introduce elements of IG into the practices of your church and maintain some age-segmentation too (that can even be done in a way that connects the two).

I've tried to set out some reasons why embracing IG to some level might be a good idea but also why it might be hard to do. If you want to think about the possibility of living in a more IG fashion in your church community, it might be worth taking your time and thinking corporately about what IG is, studying some of the passages above, dwelling on the vision of a symphonic church and considering what barriers there might be to IG in your specific context (I won't have captured them all!). Addressing barriers is not easy and will take a while and will need some good open conversations so don't rush it and do it prayerfully. There are some questions and further reading

listed below to help you if you would like to take things further. Whether IG eventually passes as a fad or is taken on by churches as an important foundation for mission and ministry in the twenty first century, only time will tell. But with all the fresh thinking coming out from IG writers, it is certainly something worth thinking about!

## QUESTIONS

- What examples can you think of that have demonstrated the importance of intergenerational relationships in your community of faith?
- What do you make of the idea of a symphonic church?
- Meditate on the idea of old and young being brothers and sisters in Christ?
- In what ways do you think your church might find joy in IG?
- What are the major obstacles in your context to intergenerational formation?
- What might be done to overcome obstacles?

## FURTHER READING

- Mounstephen, P. & Martin, K., *Body Beautiful? Recapturing a Vision for All-age Church* (Cambridge, Grove Booklets, 2004).
- Gardner, Jason, *Mend the Gap - Can the church reconnect the Generations* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008). In his book, Jason Gardner has several useful ideas to try out. One that is particularly helpful is setting up Intergenerational Working Group. A body made up of a person from each generation in the church to discuss options and ideas for bringing the generations together. Why not consider setting up one such group in your church?
- Allen, Holly Catterton and Ross, Christine Lawton, *Intergenerational Christian Formation - Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Illinois: IVP, 2012).

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