

ShALOM!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

Spring 2026 VOL. 46, NO. 2

The Intergenerational Church

THERE'S A CERTAIN “duh” quality to this topic: Isn't the church by definition intergenerational? Why do we need a special focus?

I grew up with little specific attention paid to my needs as a child in a worship service. Lots of times, as a missionary kid in the Rhodesias (now Zimbabwe and Zambia), I didn't even understand the language of the hymns and sermons. I learned to sit quietly and entertain myself with the little games and trinkets my mother kept handy. Who remembers “tricky dogs,” making boats out of paper (a simple form of origami), folding animals out of cloth handkerchiefs, playing tic-tac-toe or connect the dots with a sibling?

When I was away at boarding school, we dutifully walked to church every Sunday, dropping off the Dutch Reformed girls at their church, the Catholics at their church, and then finally the rest of us ended up at the interdenominational church. I don't remember any specific attention being paid to us in the worship service, although I remember a Christmas program we were part of one time because that's where I first learned the carol, “Good Christian Men, Rejoice.”

My current congregation has described itself as intergenerational for a long time, and we have always had good programs for children and youth—the traditional children's and youth Sunday school, children's church and choir, youth group, youth retreats, Vacation Bible School, Bible quizzing, child dedications and baptisms—along with programming for adults, like Grandmothers in Prayer, adult Sunday

school classes and small groups, adult choir, and so on. Now we are working much more intentionally at living up to our billing as an intergenerational church. We still have the age-specific programs (where adults participate as teachers and helpers with the children and youth), but we've become much more intentional about creating new opportunities for generational interaction.

For this edition, I am especially grateful for Christina Embree's assistance, not only in supplying the lead article laying out some basic foundations for intergenerational church, but also for suggesting other writers. The mission of her organization, ReFocus Ministry, is to “connect generations in meaningful relationships for lifelong discipleship” (see refocusingministry.org).

Perhaps one of the most well-known biblical examples of intergenerational discipleship was Paul with Timothy. Paul begins each of his two letters to Timothy by calling him his child, and notes that Timothy learned the faith from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5). There are other examples as well. In the Old Testament, Eli mentored Samuel, and Ruth stayed with her mother-in-law Naomi for the return to Bethlehem, and then Naomi “arranged” Ruth's meeting with Boaz. And we all remember that Jesus rebuked the disciples for wanting to shoo the children away. Let's be people who, in the words of the Psalmist (145:4), pass on the work of God from generation to generation in whatever creative ways we can.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

THIS ISSUE OF SHALOM!

The Intergenerational Community of Faith **2**

Let Everything That Hath Breath Praise the Lord **4**

Intergenerational Worship **5**

Setting the Table **6**

MIDNIGHT MUSINGS
Together We Are Whole **7**

Intergenerational Prayer as a Tool **8**

Why'd They Invite Grandma to the Youth Group? **9**

Compelling Worship as an Intergenerational Resource **10**

BOOK REVIEW
Imagining All Generations **12**

The Intergenerational Community of Faith

By Christina Embree

IN RECENT YEARS, the Church experienced a season of disruption that revealed something many of us had long sensed but not fully named: we do not simply attend church—we belong to one another. When gathering was limited, what people missed most was not a building or a program, but the relationships that form the heart of the community of faith. That season did not create this reality; it clarified it.

It became unmistakably clear that relationships and gathered community are essential to our spiritual formation. As Dr. Christine Pohl writes in *Living Into Community*, “Human beings were made for living in community and it is in community that we flourish and become most fully human.”¹ For

Christians, this is even more deeply true: we are formed as disciples in the presence of one another, where Christ promises to be among those gathered in his name (Matt. 18:20).

And yet, even as we returned to regular rhythms of gathering, many of the patterns that weaken deep community, especially across generations, remain firmly in place. If anything, the years since COVID-19 have only heightened the urgency of this conversation. The Church is navigating declining participation among some younger generations, increasing cultural fragmentation, and a growing reliance on outsourced discipleship. These realities press us to ask not only what kind of church we are, but how we are forming people—and with whom.

This article will explore the need we have for community, not just as human beings but as members of the body of Christ, and the essentiality of finding ways to connect generations in meaningful relationships that lead to lifelong discipleship.

Community in Christ

Community is something that we must work for. It doesn't just come into being because people are around each other. Why? Because barriers to community are swift to arise.² These barriers can be detrimental to the creation and maintenance of the type of community that sustain us both physically and spiritually. One such barrier that has grown in both society and the church is that of the “generational gap.” The generational gap is defined as “the perceived difference of opinions between one generation and another regarding beliefs, politics, or values.”³ This perceived difference has had a deep impact on how our society functions and the structures that have been put in place along generational lines.

Research has found that age is becoming more and more of a dividing line in our culture. Everything from architecture to technology can be delineated along age-specific lines. But this division in our community has not been good for us. Studies show that age homogeneity in social networks leads to isolation and loneliness and greatly inhibits so-

cialization in younger individuals and generativity in older individuals.⁴ And what is even more alarming is that these trends of generational divide and age segregation can be found in the church.⁵ The architecture of our buildings, with separate wings and rooms for specific ages; our services divided into traditional, contemporary, and coffee-shop culture; and even our age-specific Sunday school curriculum and Bible studies—these all perpetuate the barrier to community along generational lines. This is particularly worrisome for churches because our faith is primarily dependent on generational discipleship: the passing of the faith from one generation to another. If intergenerational interactions and community are limited because of the structures described above, how can “one generation commend (God's) works to another” (Psa. 145:4)?

This question has become one of increasing significance over the past decade, especially as the representation of rising generations has decreased within the American church.⁶ To that point, there has been increased attention given to the area of intergenerational ministry and the opportunity it offers to bridge the generational gap and re-establish a more connected faith community.

What is intergenerational ministry?

Sometimes it is easier to describe what something is by exploring what it is not. Many people associate this term with children's ministry or family ministry within the church. While those ministries may be partners in intergenerational ministry, the scope of these ministries is not broad enough. Intergenerational ministry encompasses the whole church, all generations, in a communal and corporate context.

Intergenerational ministry is more a characteristic of a church than it is a ministry area; true intergenerational ministry is a culture that strives to create environments that foster generational mentorship, intergenerational relationships, and multi-generational experiences that focus on welcome, belonging, and discipleship. As the term implies, intergenerational ministry is an intentional



Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation is a quarterly publication of the Brethren in Christ Church U.S. Its mission is to educate and stimulate Christ-like responses to the needs of society by providing biblical, theological, sociological, denominational and personal perspectives on a variety of contemporary issues.

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approach to ministry that both allows for and encourages interaction between multiple generations in such ways as corporate worship, relational mentorship, and lifelong community.

In order for a church to recognize the need for this generational connectivity within their faith community, the following question must be answered: What does each generation need from the church and what can each generation contribute to the church? Let's begin with the latter and then explore the former.

Generational theory, the grouping of individuals into particular social groups with a shared identity predicated on the year of their birth and life experiences, began in the early twentieth century and gained steam in the mid to late twentieth century as marketing firms began to explore how to best market to specific groups, coining nicknames for them in order to create a collective conscious.⁷

Currently, the most likely generations that would be found in a given faith community would be the Silent Generation (born 1924-1942), Baby Boomers (1943-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-2000), and Gen Z (2001-current). These five generations offer unique experiences in both spiritual and communal practices for the church (see attached chart). The older generations bring a wealth of faithful testimonies, historical worship practices, and community-sustaining disciplines. The middle generations offer a bridge between the past and present through experience with a vast array of communication tools from rotary phones to high-speed internet conferencing and the latest social media trends. The youngest generations offer the heartbeat of current culture and the application of spiritual truths in a dynamic cultural environment.

Likewise, each generation brings its unique needs to the church. The attached chart uses Erik Erikson's theory of psychoso-

cial stages to outline these needs in a church setting. The older generations need to be needed; the desire for generativity and legacy-leaving are uniquely found in these generations and to be left isolated from those to whom their legacy can be left (the younger generations) is stifling and leads to stagnation. The middle generations are those seek-

tures that support or, too often, fail to support that work.

Across many of our congregations, children's ministry leaders and youth pastors are serving faithfully, often with limited training, minimal resourcing, and little ongoing support. In some cases, they are volunteers navigating complex discipleship challenges without a clear theological framework or denominational guidance. In others, even paid leaders are left to seek training, curriculum, and ministry models from outside organizations.

While these external resources can be helpful, they are not always aligned with Brethren in Christ theology, values, or ecclesiology. Over time, this creates a quiet but significant drift and the formation of our children and youth ends up being shaped more by external voices than by our shared convictions. This is not simply a staffing issue. It is a generational discipleship issue.

For this reason, I believe it is both timely and necessary for the leadership of Brethren in Christ U.S. to consider a more intentional and sustained investment in Next Generation ministry across the denomination. Without this kind of investment, we will continue by necessity rather than intention to outsource the discipleship and ministry training of our youngest members. But with denominational leadership and funding, we have an opportunity to cultivate something far more aligned and life-giving: a generation formed within our theological tradition, connected across congregations, and deeply rooted in the life of the Church.

This is not about adding another program. It is about stewarding the future of the Church with clarity, conviction, and care. The need for intergenerational connection has never been more apparent, and the opportunity before us is significant. As congregations seek to embody this vision locally, may we also have the courage to support it collectively, investing in the relationships, structures, and leaders who will carry this work forward for generations to come.

Notes

¹Christine Pohl, *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain US* (Eerdmans, 2012), 3.

²Pohl, 4.

³M. Aggarwal, et al., "Generation Gap: An Emerg-

Generation	What They Bring	What They Need (Inspired by Erikson's Psychosocial Stages)
The Silent Generation (1924-1942)	Love of tradition Knowledge of church history Community history and experience	Ego Integrity A place to review life Validation of wisdom
Baby Boomers (1943-1964)	Rich work/volunteer ethic Tacit knowledge of church & community Experience (good mentors)	Integrity/Generativity A place to pass on their faith A way to leave a legacy
Generation X (1964-1980)	Bridge between generations Familiarity of old & new Problem-solving skills	Generativity A place to practice their faith A way to integrate spiritual, familial, and practical
Millennials (1981-1996)	Desire for mentorship High Value on Community and Mental Health Authentic Faith & Practice	Intimacy A place to belong A place to fill a role/to belong A place of relationships
Generation Z (Gen Z) (1997-2010-15) *	Technological Fortitude Global worldview Diverse population Justice orientation	Identity/Intimacy A place to discover identity A place to have purpose A place to learn about relationships
Alpha Generation (2010/15 - 2025) *	Family & Future focused Broadly inclusive Online worldview	Initiative/Industry A place to explore gift/talent A place to fail/grow A place to be actively involved
Beta Generation (2025- current)	Wonder & Awe AI technology present Raised by Millennial parents	Trust/Autonomy A place to be loved A place to experiment with independence

*There is a wide range of thought on when Gen Z "ended" and Alpha generation began

Generational delineations derived from <https://www.cnn.com/2013/11/06/us/baby-boomer-generation-fast-facts/index.html>

Erikson's stages derived from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>

ing intimacy in deeper relationships with others, such as mentorship and discipleship, but if those opportunities are found lacking, will retreat into a place of isolation. The youngest generations are looking for a place to be industrious and find identity; thus faith communities need to be intentional not just with providing safe and fun environments like Kid's Church and youth group but integral participatory environments that allow for identity and industry to be rooted in the church.

A call to faithful investment in the next generation

While much of this work must happen at the congregational level, it would be incomplete and ultimately unsustainable without intentional leadership and investment at the denominational level. If we truly believe that faith is passed from one generation to another, then we must take seriously the struc-

ing Issue of Society,” *International Journal of Engineering Technology Science and Research*. 4 (9): 973-983.

⁴G. Hagestad and P. Uhlenberg, “Should We Be Concerned About Age Segregation?: Some Theoretical and Empirical Exploration,” *Research on Aging* 28 (6): 638-653.

⁵C. Stonehouse and S. May, *Listening to Children on*

the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those who Teach and Nurture (Baker Books, 2010).

⁶ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, Oct. 17, 2019,

⁷John D. Hazlett, “Generational Theory and Collective Autobiography,” *American Literary History* 4, no. 1 (1992): 77-96, www.jstor.org/stable/489937.

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Let Everything That Has Breath Praise the Lord: Intergenerational Church Music Ministry

by Bryan Leaman

WE WERE A small church of misfits. With around twenty-five people, we had newborns through octogenarians, at least five different native languages, and a cultural spectrum as wide as the ocean I had crossed to move there. The worship leader had broken both arms in a bicycle accident, and suddenly I was leading worship solo in a language I had spent just six months learning. I needed help.

Shortly before this, a mother and her three teenage sons moved into my apartment building, which also housed the church gatherings. The family had recently immigrated and were getting settled in a new country. The mother, a longtime follower of Jesus, attended the church, but the boys showed little interest in coming. When not in school, they were at home playing online video games. I learned that the oldest, 18 years old, had played the drums in his country, but had found no opportunity in his new home. We dusted off an old drum set stuffed in a closet and began to jam together.

For weeks we jammed nearly every day, starting with a couple songs and slowly expanding our repertoire. The second son, 16, wanted to join. I taught him a few chords on a second-hand store guitar, and our band was up to three. The brothers now spent their afterschool hours playing instruments and watching YouTube tutorials to improve their skills. The third brother, 14, decided he wanted in, so the oldest brother set him up with the drum set and moved over to learn the bass. Over time, each young man started helping with music on Sundays, joined a small group in the church, and was baptized.

And we continued to jam. Bursting with creativity, skill, and pure enjoyment of music, they were bringing me new songs and styles to try. The middle brother eventually began to lead worship, and twelve years later continues to lead regularly in the church. The other two also serve the church through music, and the oldest helps lead the youth.

Intergenerational music ministry takes time and thoughtful effort, but it carries such potential for blessings: 1) It can instill a sense of place and purpose in younger people. The space and time given to develop musical gifts drew each of the three brothers, once reluctant, into a community of faith that would later shape their paths to being disciples of Jesus. 2) It enriches and broadens the worship life of the church. The unique voices, musical ideas and songs that the brothers brought went far beyond what I could offer alone as the official worship leader. 3) It blesses the future church. Wherever they go, those three young men have tools and experience to help any church in their music ministry.

Intergenerational music ministry can look different at every church. Do a musical audit of your congregation. What is already there? Are there high schoolers who play an instrument or sing in a choir? Have them sit in on worship practices with someone dedicated to guiding them. Schedule a variety show or an arts night to create a culture of music making. Maybe a guitar player on the worship team can offer a six to ten-week beginner guitar course. The finite timeframe makes committing easier, and there may be one or two people who want to continue in

earnest. Ask an experienced tech person to show a few interested youth some tech basics during a weeknight worship rehearsal.

Beyond focusing on leaders, intergenerational music ministry can build a culture of congregational participation in singing, which is a central part of most corporate worship services. Start teaching kids early how to participate in worship. Incorporate a song time in your toddler, pre-K, and elementary classes. Many curriculums have song videos in the lesson. Too often, these songs are attached to a lesson series and are discarded when the next series begins. Participation remains limited because right when children are growing familiar with a song, the class moves on.

Instead, develop your own songbook of five to ten age-appropriate songs for regular use in the younger classrooms. Recruit a few willing middle and high school kids (and adults too!) to lead these songs. This encourages participation, develops leadership skills in a safe atmosphere, and facilitates intergenerational interaction. If elementary ages and/or youth meet separately during worship services, schedule some Sundays when everyone worships together. A shared worship experience among generations contributes to the church's shared identity, and helps the congregation discover a shared worship language.

Admittedly, all of this takes more time and effort. It is easier to play a video than to prepare a songbook and schedule song leaders for toddlers. It is much easier to roll in Sunday morning with your trusted musicians than to create opportunities for younger mu-

sicians to plug in. It is easier for youth and elementary to have their separate spaces than to have everyone share a space together. But the time and effort are worth it.

Maybe one or two ideas resonate with you. Start with those and go from there. And please remember that efforts in ministry should not be measured in traditional suc-

cess/failure markers. Implementing some of these suggestions might mean the band is not quite as together, the mics occasionally squeal, or there is more commotion in the service. God is still worshiped in the midst of these things. And when we take the time to involve people at all age levels, such as our three teenage brothers, we offer them the

chance to see themselves as worshipers of God. The current and future Church will be richer for it.

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Intergenerational Worship

by Kara Kacmar

OUR CONGREGATION HAS the gift of being a smaller church. It's the type of church where you recognize everyone and can easily notice when someone new comes to visit. Like many churches that are similar in size, we have a large group of retired folks and less representation of middle and younger generations.

We have been learning the value of working to bridge generational gaps. I love seeing dear Ms. M come each week with a treat bag she has personally prepared for every child and youth. You can find her after church hunting down the kids who haven't yet picked up their bags. Our kids know that Ms. M loves them.

It is also encouraging to see so many adults in the rotation of youth leaders or snack providers for our youth and children. At Friday Night Hangout each week, it is not unusual for adults to equal the number of youth who show up. You might see a grandma cooking a full spread of taco fixings for the hungry youth while other adults are upstairs playing a board game or ping pong, or organizing a group game with the teens. During devotions time, there is a rotation of different adults coming to share from God's word and engage the youth in discussion. These same adults can also be found at the kids' sporting events and concerts at school. They're usually the biggest cheering section!

I have been privileged as worship pastor to discover a wide range of gifts in the different generations of our church family. We have many musically gifted youth and adults, so it has been fun to explore those gifts as a church. Since our core group of youth whose families attend our church all happen to be in band or orchestra, I found that arranging

songs for those young musicians has allowed all of the church to be blessed. Our youth absolutely love sharing their musical gifts. In fact, they enjoy it so much that they have invited friends from band or orchestra class to come to church just to play with them. I will often find that a last-minute trumpet or clarinet part needs to be written to include a new friend who also wants to be involved.

This enthusiasm has been such a blessing to the different generations of the church. Parents and friends of kids who don't normally worship with us have come to worship times to support their loved ones. Younger kids in the church have become excited for when they are old enough to play an instrument to worship God. The retired folks in the church are so blessed to hear these growing musicians sharing their gifts for God's glory.

We have also been experimenting with cross-generational ways of worshiping together through inviting different generations to read scripture, share a testimony, or do a special reading in our times of worship. Advent is a good season for incorporating some new practices that involve those who might not normally be up front on a Sunday morning. For Holy Week this year, I invited some of our children's ministry leaders to help the kids make noisemakers and banners for Palm Sunday. As our youth and adult worship team played "Hosanna" songs, the congregation was invited to wave palms while the children processed to the front of the church with their homemade noise makers. Our youth band also rehearsed so they could accompany our informal choir of adults who sing in four-part harmony.

While many in our church did not grow

up singing hymns and learning to read music, they still appreciate hearing those full harmonies as we sing together. On many Sundays we will have a worship band playing more contemporary worship songs, and then we invite our informal choir to lead the congregation in a hymn with full four-part harmony. This has been an effective way to celebrate the gifts in our church across generations.

Digging out our church's set of hand bells has been another way to cross the generational gap. As we taught our older children and younger youth how to play the bells, we invited the older generation with hand bell experience to play the more difficult sections as the young learners would start with just one bell. Now our youth are reading the bell music faster than our retired folks!

Some precious memories in my own life as a young person in the church revolve around moments when all ages were mixed up. Every year for Maundy Thursday, a treasured moment for many is the time of feet washing. Women and men are in separate rooms. We take time to share testimonies, sing songs, and wash one another's feet or hands. I will never forget how humbling it was as a child to have an older sister in the church who was suffering from arthritis get on her knees to wash my little feet. What a beautiful modeling of love and service from one generation to another!

As I have shared some practical examples of how we can embrace different generations as we worship together, I should also warn that this process can be messy and time-consuming. As we try new things, some experiments work better than others. There may be more wrong notes or awkward moments

than some of us might prefer, but I believe that the awkwardness and funny moments that come from inviting ALL to engage in worship make Jesus smile. In fact, those very moments are what break down barriers, build important memories, and help us to be the most authentic versions of who God has

created us to be. Let's work together to create safe spaces for all of God's people to worship the Lord through our life experiences, personalities, and gifts.

Kara Kacmar is worship pastor at the Fairview Brethren in Christ Church, Englewood, OH. She is

also a busy wife and mom of a teen and pre-teen, and is passionate about helping everyone worship God with authenticity.

Setting the Table: Making Room for the Littlest Ones in Our Sacred Spaces

By Stephanie Peterson

THERE ARE AN infinite number of obstacles that get in the way of making room for littles in our sacred spaces. Toddlers can be noisy, they can be messy, they can be a distraction. How can we make it so that all kids can feel comfortable in our sanctuaries, Bible studies and Sunday schools when they can be so . . . disruptive? How can we show parents and caregivers that we have thought of them and made a space for them when that space might not yet exist? How can we show toddlers and kids that our living God longs to connect with them if we are unaware of the different ways children learn and grow? I suggest something simple: try new things.

To make more meaningful places in our churches for connection between the youngest congregants and older believers and between little ones and their most loving God, we need to try new things in old spaces. To anyone feeling too cautious to do that, Jesus was clear when he corrected his disciples: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them" (Matt. 19:14). Jesus didn't include any requirements for the children to do so. And if Jesus said "let the little children come" while he was teaching, then while we are teaching, we are also to let them come.

Now, when I read this text I can definitely imagine myself as the disciples. There is no doubt that the children were causing a ruckus. I've worked with children long enough to know that they wiggle and giggle at the least appropriate times. I am also not suggesting that every space everywhere be open to every child at every time. There is nothing inherently wrong with age-specific spaces. However, there is something wrong

when we never try to stretch beyond those limits.

Romans 12:3-5 says, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

If Scripture is true, then the toddler crying through every service belongs to us just as much as they belong to their frazzled mother holding them. If Scripture is true, then the non-verbal autistic child who doesn't fit neatly into regular children's programming is as much ours as they are their parents'. If Scripture is true (which it is), then even our littlest Jesus followers have a role to play in our churches. Children have taught me more in church than any adult with an MDiv or PhD has. It's not over the top to say that when we aren't learning from children in the church, the Body of Christ is incomplete.

Buckle up: here comes the "How." The most important takeaway is that we as the church must speak up for the kids in our sacred spaces. Before we try new things we have to start the conversation.

Discipling their children may not come naturally for many parents, but something we do know is that children learn and process through play. My solution for creating spaces where both caregivers and kiddos can learn and play together is "setting the

table." What does it mean to set the table? When we have a meal, we set everything out, with a spot for everyone who will be eating. If you're having guests for dinner your table might look pretty. A pretty table with a seat for everyone and delicious food is inviting. It's why a home-cooked meal feels like someone saying "I love you."

In our churches the "table" is the sacred space where toddlers and other children can connect with Jesus. The table could be a nursery, sanctuary, classroom, small group, or even their parent's lap. There really is no wrong space. Setting the table looks different depending on where we are. We're not going to put the same things on a dining table as on a picnic blanket. Yet wherever we eat, we need utensils and table settings that help us to do so. If our "table" is the sacred space and "eating" is a child's meeting with Jesus, then the "utensils" that make that meeting possible can be toys, books, and other things that create a path to Jesus.

There are ways to be more intentional about the things we set out for children in our sacred spaces. Church nurseries are often where old toys go to die. How depressing! Parallel with the Brethren in Christ core value of "Living Simply," I do NOT advocate filling a space with more stuff but with the right stuff. Here are examples that I have seen create paths to Jesus for little ones and their families:

- A sensory cart tucked in the sanctuary with coloring materials, lacing cards, and fidget toys is a welcome sign to families with kids.
- Toy bread with cups and plates for communion pretend play, available in a

church nursery or set out during an actual time of communion, provides toddlers with the tools to process one of the cornerstone practices of our faith.

- A basket filled with toddler teething toys and soft books ready and waiting sends a message to the exasperated mother holding a fussy baby that we see her.
- Peg dolls and blocks set up for open-ended imaginary play, especially in church spaces, can result in children building a church of their own.

When our kids build a church out of blocks, or serve us communion with plastic bread and a toy cup, we get a window into how they spend time with Jesus. Through play we see how little fits so wonderfully into the diverse community of believers that we belong to.

These are not one-size-fits-all suggestions. They are invitations to start the conversation about how we make our spaces more accessible to the littlest among us. My hope is that the Brethren in Christ would grow in our en-

thusiasm for and practice of play in the church, that families with kids of all ages and abilities would feel at home in our sacred spaces, and that we would truly experience being one as the Body of Christ.

Stephanie Peterson is a pastor of children's discipleship for the Great Lakes Conference of Brethren in Christ US. She is creative director for the Growing Family Discipleship Initiative at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.

Together We Are Whole

By Zach Spidel

ON THE CAMPUS of the University of Dayton, as you walk toward the humanities building from the parking lot that serves it, you can find a statue of Jesus as a small boy (looking perhaps three or four years old) riding atop the shoulders of Joseph. His adoptive father has a firm grip on both of Jesus's dangling ankles. The boy is laughing, arms stretched out in delight toward some wonderful thing that has caught his eye. Joseph is looking down, as if checking his footing, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. A carpenter's hammer is fastened at Joseph's side and he wears a worker's smock. His are the duties and burdens of adulthood. Jesus wears a simple tunic, good for a child to run and play in.

I love this statue. Jesus was a child once, which is also to say, God Almighty played on this earth as little children play—with abandon and giddy joy, with ready tears and bright eyes. God was a child, and so halloved, for all time, childhood. And God, in Christ, grew from childhood, as we all must who are given the days, into adulthood. In time Jesus took up the responsibilities and burdens that define the middle years of our lives. In fact, he came eventually to carry all of us on his shoulders as Joseph had done for him.

Though he died before he entered into old age, he treated with kind regard those he met who had been bent by the wear of long years. One of Jesus's last acts, before he died, was to provide for the care of his then-aged mother by giving her to John. John lived long

enough to fulfill that special task. He also lived long enough to receive and write from that sort of far-sighted vision that comes to those who, though having seen many years, have held onto hope in God rather than succumbing to apathy or bitterness.

God has touched every stage of life and blessed each one with gifts that are meant for those walking in the others. We are, none of us, complete without each other. We each need to behold those aspects of Christ that become visible to us in persons from different stages of life's journey.

I know I am grateful for the Christ I see in my children every day. He, like they, is quick to tears in the face of encountered suffering and just as quick again, to delight in the face of life's true joys and special gifts. He is simple and direct like them, neither jaded nor weary nor dismissive but exquisitely present—alive to everything, ready for anything, welcoming to all.

I see him too in my aged friends. Miss Dolores, my 91-year-old neighbor, sits in a darkened house many hours each day, her eyes focused on what cannot be seen. She remembers heaven, having seen it once in a dream. She longs for the place and is not afraid to let go of earthly things. Her body is weak and broken, just as Jesus's body was on the cross. She endures it all, just as he did, victorious through long-suffering, just as he was.

I am in my middle years and have many things to do. I think all these things are important. Some of them probably are. But I'm



too much in a hurry and my eyes are too often looking down at the next problem, trying to find where my feet should go. I'm grateful, then, for those times when my children grab my chin and lift my face toward the sky and demand, in their tiny voices, "Look daddy! Look!" and show me a butterfly. I have cried at such times when I have looked—really looked—and been reminded by children of how vast and wondrously strange and terribly beautiful the world is and of how easy it is to forget. Thank God for my children.

Thank God too for my elders—whom life has slowed down and who know now other truths I have not yet properly learned, like the fleeting nature of these days and of how we best may spend them. I work, as we all must, to accomplish what I can, but no accomplishment—none—is worth more than a good soul. What would it profit me to gain the whole world and lose that? What if I gave my body for others and had all knowledge and could speak in all languages, but did not love? I'd be nothing but a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal . . . and my aged friends remind me of this.

Here is what matters, they say to me in different ways. Here, not in accomplishment but love—where love alone can grow, not in abstractions but among and between persons

whose names and faces I am blessed to know. May I not forget them in the drive to do more. Thank God for those closer to that goal who remind me to slow down and attend to what is nearest.

In my turn, I try to give what I can in these years to the ones ahead of me and those

behind. To each, as a man in my middle years, I owe the care I can give with my vigor. To the young I owe vigilant guidance. To the aged, I owe my ears and open mind. From both I gain much. To both I give what I can. Together, we are whole. Apart from each other there can only be loneliness and dimin-

ishment. May God help us see that we can only fully reflect and deeply enjoy his image together across the stages of our passing human life.

Zack Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

Intergenerational Prayer as a Tool for Connecting Generations

By Joy Brown

WOULD YOU AGREE that our country is experiencing a crisis of faith? When we survey our communities, our regions, and our nation as a whole, I believe we are seeing evidence that, at best, we are living in an era of confusion about who God is and, at worst, we are living in an era of abandonment of faith in Almighty God. Scripture makes it clear that, as believers, we are called to share the Good News of the Gospel (Acts 1:8) with those who have not yet heard. Scripture is also clear that we are to pass our faith from one generation to the next (Deut. 6:4-9, 2 Tim. 1:5, Psalm 78:1-8). When we do this, we are combatting spiritual darkness. Connection is key, yet our culture is growing increasingly disconnected. Where once it was common for multiple generations to thrive together, now we most often see compartmentalization by age and affinity. As the Church, one tool we can use to bridge the generational gap is intercessory prayer.

Our church, Amherst Community Church (ACC) in Massillon, OH, is primarily an aging congregation. We desire to invest in the next generation so that they can know the goodness of the Lord. However, our members often feel discouraged that opportunities to volunteer in youth and children's ministry revolve around activities that are physically beyond them, given their aging bodies. We were sensing a growing gap between the generations in our church, as older members felt disconnected from the activities offered for younger members, and younger members felt uncomfortable engaging in conversation with older members they didn't know well. Another challenge is that our children's ministry primarily takes place

during the week through various outreaches, while the rest of our congregation mostly gathers on Sunday mornings. There is often very little overlap between the two groups, leading to a growing gap between the generations.

Prayer is a natural (or rather supernatural) connector between people groups. When we pray for others, our hearts soften toward them and we become invested in the outcome of their lives. When speaking with senior members of our congregation, I would often hear comments alluding to the feeling that they were resigned to merely pray for young members of the congregation. This attitude revealed that they were unaware of the importance of their role as spiritual elders, and of their prayers in general, in the work of passing on faith from one generation to the next. We needed a way to breathe life into our church's prayer efforts and make the experience more meaningful than simply praying generically for the "young people" of the church.

Through resources from ReFocus Ministry (refocusministry.org), we learned of a prayer program called the "Pray for Me Campaign" (prayformecampaign.com). This has been a great resource and served as the launching point for our intercessory prayer initiative. The goal is to have each child under the umbrella of our ministries being prayed for by at least two adults in the congregation. In return, that child also prays for those two adults, linking them as "prayer partners."

As mentioned earlier, the adults and the children in the church do not naturally cross paths, so we needed to create a system to en-

able them to pray for one another. We decided to do this by creating bookmarks. With parental permission, each child has a bookmark created that includes their photo, birthday, age, grade, and then a list of their favorite activities or interests. We then host a kick-off Sunday where adults can sign up to pray for one to three children. This means the adult is committing to pray for the child(ren) at least once a week throughout the school year. When they have selected their child(ren), we record the adult's information and take a photo of that adult so that a similar bookmark can be made and given to the selected child(ren). Thankfully, every year we have been able to meet our goal of two adults for every child.

Logistically, I serve as the go-between sharing prayer requests between the groups. As prayer needs arise throughout the year, I communicate those needs in conjunction with weekly general prayer prompts. Additionally, I solicit prayer requests from the children at least two more times throughout the school year. I use a custom coloring page that says, "Thank you for being my prayer partner," at the top and has additional space for prayer concerns at the bottom. Sometimes parents help to fill in the prayer concerns, but the kids' coloring portion is always a big hit with the adult prayer partners! They love to see the artwork created just for them.

The range of prayer concerns can vary greatly from lighter requests like, "Pray that God will help me in school," or "Please pray that I will be nicer to my brother," to deeper and heavier requests such as, "Pray that my family will love each other," "Pray for me to make friends so I won't be lonely," and "Pray

for my grandpa who is dying.” Each time I read the list of prayer needs, my heart is deeply moved for these children who are experiencing real issues and concerns in their lives.

The first year we did the campaign, we quickly realized that the children needed an opportunity to pray for the adults in personal ways as well—in fact, they asked for more ways to pray for them! The children remembered filling out the prayer request page and were not content to simply pray generically by name for their prayer partner; they wanted to know specifics. This really touched my heart and was the first sign of how powerful this interaction would become. It was a poignant reminder that older generations can also be on the receiving end in God’s kingdom. The faith of a child is innocent, beautiful, and inspiring! We quickly adjusted our tools, and now we have the adults fill out their prayer concerns at the beginning of the year to include on the bookmarks given to the children. Sometimes adults keep things

general, like asking for prayer for good health. Other times they include the children in praying for very meaningful things in their lives.

There has been beautiful fruit from our experience with the Pray for Me campaigns. In addition to asking for specific prayer needs for their adult prayer partners, the children also have become more comfortable with prayer in general. When we began, many children had never prayed out loud for another person before. By the end of the first year, not only were they quick to volunteer to pray aloud, but their prayers were beautiful and heartfelt expressions of genuine love! Soon, the adult prayer partners sought more ways to interact with the children. Birthday gifts and Christmas cards were sent without prompting, and adults started asking for overlapping events between the weekday ministries and the Sunday morning congregation. As a result, we began planning picnics throughout the year for the prayer partners. The expression on the children’s faces when

they would see their adult prayer partner coming to sit with them was pure joy, evidence of the growing connection between them.

After running the prayer partner campaign for three years, I can honestly say it is one of the most genuine and authentic ways to bridge the gap between generations. The children and adults in our campaign went from being strangers to being friends. Loneliness and isolation were replaced with connection. Many prayer partners chose to stay connected to the same child(ren) all three years, and the resulting friendships are now truly beautiful. Prayer is powerful, and the experience of intentional prayer can be life-giving for a congregation seeking intergenerational connection. I encourage you to give it a try and see what God will do!

Joy Brown is pastor of worship and family life at Amherst Community Church, Massillon, OH. She also serves as a coach with ReFocus Ministry.

Why’d They Invite Grandma to the Youth Group?

By Ryan Cagno

THAT’S THE RESPONSE I imagined receiving from our youth kids the first night that Marion came tottering into the youth center. Rubber dodgeballs were whipping through the air, the boys playing Just Dance had descended into lewd gyrations, everything in sight was coated in a fine film of cheese puff dust. And here was Marion, 80 years young, looking right at home. (What was happening in that assisted living common room, anyway?)

Yet there were no scoffs, no side eyes, no snickers, unless you count the smears of eponymous candy stuck to the couch cushions. Perhaps it was the tub of warm chocolate chip cookies Marion bore in her shaking arthritic hands; perhaps it was her even warmer smile—calm and generous and more than tolerant of our uncontrolled chaos. Whatever it was, before very long every kid in the youth center had, without any prompting, lined up to take a cookie and wrap Marion in a hug.

From that day forward, Marion came

every Monday evening, cookies in hand and ready for her receiving line. She gave great hugs, did Marion—just long enough and tight enough for you to know you were loved, by God and by her. And those kids. . . They needed that, perhaps more than they realized, and certainly more than they were able to communicate.

Eventually Marion and a few other seasoned Jesus-followers began appearing at young adult Bible studies, not as teachers or gurus but as participants. She often described herself as a “lifelong learner,” and as she turned through the crinkling pages of her well-worn Bible and listened to the often-misguided conjectures of the young crowd, Marion, quite miraculously, assumed a posture of learning. She seemed delighted, challenged and only occasionally disturbed by their vacant ramblings and youthful candor. She waited a long time before offering her insights, and wasted no time in affirming theirs.

Marion spent the final nine years of her

life pouring out all she had for the sake of these young people, and when I took the platform to deliver her funeral sermon, I was not surprised to see many of them dotted among the crowd. We were her living legacy, and not because of any spectacular words or feats of love, but simply because of her humility and her hugs, her presence and her patience. And yes, her chocolate chip cookies. In those days we often struggled to recruit “youth leaders,” and not for lack of available candidates. Most often the adults in our church, when rejecting our invitations to be a part of youth events, cited intimidation or discomfort: “I don’t know what I would say to them. I don’t know anything about the fort nights and the tickety tocks. They don’t want me hanging around them, anyway.”

None of these objections had ever occurred to Marion. She didn’t own a smart phone, and was roughly five generations removed from modern teen culture. No matter; they didn’t need another person in their life talking to them about “tickety tock”—

the last thing any young person needs are an adult's flailing attempts at relevancy. What they needed—what they still need—are adults that will simply show up.

They need adults who don't imagine the task of investing in youth to be a niche role, but rather the responsibility of every person in the church. If Marion could do it—Marion who hadn't gotten around to using CDs yet, let alone Spotify, Marion who could've been hospitalized by one errant dodgeball—then anybody could do it. Anybody, and everybody, should do it.

There was no formula, no playbook, no magic apart from the whatever was in the cookies. She showed up, she smiled. No doubt she felt her share of nervousness, uncertainty; no doubt she had no idea what we

were talking about half the time. The point is, Marion wasn't a special case. Or, she shouldn't have been.

Woody Allen famously said, "Ninety percent of success in life is just showing up." When it comes with showing young people the love of Jesus, I would suggest that percentage is pushing toward one hundred. We need not let fear—fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of discomfort, fear of young people themselves—keep us from showing up, from intentionally placing ourselves in their spaces and submitting ourselves to their cultural particulars, dodgeballs, and cheese dust.

It's been five years since she passed and I'm still thinking about Marion. When I delve into the well of my experiences, searching for tangible expressions of the way of

Jesus, I often surface with memories of Marion. I can't recall any specific words, any nugget of wisdom that may have radically redirected the course of my life. But I remember how she made me feel and I remember the love. When I'm doubtful or discouraged or despairing of the influence I am or am not having on those in my own life, I remember Marion. And I pray that with her example and the Spirit's help I'll keep showing up.

Ryan Cagno is pastor of discipleship at Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and director of NextGen Ministries for the Atlantic Conference of Brethren in Christ US. He also serves as a network pastor for the Holy District in Allentown, PA.

Compelling Worship as an Intergenerational Resource

By Jennifer Lancaster

IN 2024, BRETHREN in Christ U.S. launched a new book on the core values, *Compelling Convictions*. The book offers us a way to engage with the core values that grounds our identity in Christ and helps shape our faith lives. Since the publication of the book, interest in continued resourcing on the core values prompted us to apply for a grant and assemble a team to create corporate worship resource materials reflecting the values. From the beginning of this new project, intentional effort and design was made so that this new resource would have the ability to resource an entire congregation: from its youngest to oldest members.

The new team began work in 2025 to generate resources by collating already-existing songs, prayers, and practices alongside creating new ones. Funds to create this resource came from the Calvin Institute of Worship. The institute funds grants to organizations to "encourage thoughtful work to promote renewed creativity, theological integrity, and relevance in worship services." The new resource aligns with each of these:

- Certainly, this project was creative. In narrowing our focus areas to the five primary categories of Prayer, Music, Word, Art, and Practices, the team imagined new ways that congregations could en-

gage the Brethren in Christ core values beyond a textbook. In the promotional video shown at the recent regional annual meetings, team member Bryan Leaman remarked that he is excited about this resource because "congregations will have sparks of creativity" to do more in their engagement with the core values as a community of faith.



- The resources included in *Compelling Worship* reflect a distinct Brethren in Christ identity and theology, thus contributing to the theological integrity of

the project. Presently, we lack a definitive emphasis on corporate, intergenerational worship experiences generated by the denomination. Developing this resource has helped fill the gap by providing a resource that can be used across the denomination that reflects our core values. This lack of denomination-specific resource material was recently noted in Lisa Weaver-Swartz's article, "A Giant Bag of Core Values," where she argues that the core values have the potential to foster strong(er) denominational identity, recommending that "the denomination might undertake the work of identifying and promoting—and perhaps even producing—resources that support its own theology and mission."¹ While our congregations are currently forced to rely on resources provided outside of the denomination, the materials generated through this project uniquely fit the needs of Brethren in Christ congregations and reflect our Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan tradition.

- As a corporate worship resource guide, the relevancy of this resource can be felt by ministry leaders and in church settings across the denomination. Pastors leading small congregations often feel limited by

time to creatively implement new content; this resource can serve as a launching point for them to try one new idea. Likewise, leaders in large congregations may desire to teach the core values across multiple ministry areas; they can use this resource as a tool to unify.

Within the grant framework, we identified three goals:

- *Strengthen intergenerational corporate worship practices.* In partnership with Christina Embree and ReFocus Ministry, the team learned ways to gather and present resources that can be either geared to include multiple generations or adapted for specific generation groups. In her introduction to the resource, Christina shares her hope that *Compelling Worship* can work to “integrate children, youth, adults, and elders into shared rhythms of spiritual formation.” An emphasis on not leaving any (age) group out of the corporate practice was a priority in this project.
- *Strengthen worship practices related to music, art, and Scripture.* One way we worked to strengthen practices related to music was by creating an original music album. A newly-formed group, Towel & Basin Worship Collective, has launched the album, *Compelling Worship*, on all streaming platforms.
- *Create materials that reflect our BIC theology.* By doing this we help shape our collective identity. The sermon outlines included in the resource refer back to *Compelling Convictions*, and many of the prayers are written by those authors.

During March and April 2026, a print copy of the workbook was distributed to all



Scan this QR code to access the digital copy.

congregations at regional annual meetings. Congregations can download a digital copy of the workbook in English and Spanish on our website as well as access exclusive online-only

content for each core value. As congregations become familiar with the content and begin exploring the different practices, we want to hear and see how the resource is being used. We’re excited to be able to create a resource that did not exist before! Congregations are invited to submit both feedback and suggestions for the future.

Jennifer Lancaster is program director for Thriving Congregations and coordinator for Brethren in Christ U.S.’s Project 250. She attends the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Note:

¹ Lisa Weaver Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values: Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 45, no. 2 (2022): 297.

Editor’s Notes

Renewals and contributions:

If you happen to be wondering why the year is half over and you haven’t received a renewal letter yet, wonder no more. Thanks to several generous special gifts in 2025, *Shalom!* is in a good financial position. If you’d still like to contribute to the future of *Shalom!*, you are certainly most welcome to do so, and we will greatly appreciate your generosity. You can make checks payable to Brethren in Christ U.S. and send them the editor (address on page 2). Or you can contribute online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/.

Upcoming topics:

- *Summer 2026:* “Christians and Government,” in light of the 250th anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence. Historically, the Brethren in Christ have embraced the view that while we live in and are citizens of an earthly kingdom, we are first of all citizens of God’s kingdom and its priorities take precedence. What does that mean for us in 2026?
- *Fall 2026:* “Practical Stories of Peacemaking”—when enemies have been reconciled, forgiveness has been offered, relationships healed, and justice and mercy have met.

If you have a story to tell or something else to say on topic, contact the editor (info on page 2).

continued from on page 12

idea or an area in which they are already involved. Cultivation, then, is the process of explaining the idea, of fostering interest, and implementation. In these changes, contextualizing is making intergenerational church life suited for each congregation. We can learn from each other, but not all churches can use the same redesign.

The foundation of intergenerational churches is not merely a new fad. It’s theol-

ogy. Editor Wilson McCoy in his introduction writes, “The central conviction of this book is that this generational vision needs to be recovered by the church today.” It is not new; it is grounded in the way both the Old and New Testaments speak to passing faith from generation to generation. This means we need to be with each other in mutual and authentic relationship. This takes time and opportunities—more time and more inten-

tionality than a once-in-a-while church-wide fellowship meal allows. We live our faith more fully when we live our faith together.

Lois Saylor is a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and an editorial advisor for *Shalom!*

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BOOK REVIEW: *Imagining All Generations*

By Lois Saylor

THERE IS AN awakening desire for the church to live out her faith more fully as all ages come together in mutual support, learning, gathering, and worshipping. This is not simply all age groups gathering in one space such as a congregational meal. Rather, intergenerational gathering means true interaction between the age groups where all learn from one another and share their lives with each other. Such learning and sharing goes in multiple directions and between each age group. Our culture separates the ages, intentionally creating ways to reach the needs, concerns, and interest of that age group, to meet their age limitations, their age abilities, and age experience. The intentions of age grouping are reasonable and even necessary at some basic points. But have we in the church gone too far and lost a primary way of all generations being in fellowship with each other?

In the book, *Imagining All Generations: A Renewed Vision of an Intergenerational Church*, edited by Wilson McCoy, we find nineteen chapters written by different authors and divided into four sections: Grounding, which looks at theology; Exploring, which looks at research from intergenerational churches; Connecting, which looks at sharing faith; and Gathering, which looks at worship. When we ask, “Why focus

on intergenerational church dynamics?” we find various answers from different chapters. Perhaps primarily intergenerational churches center relationships at the core of the church and create a sense of belonging for all ages since all ages benefit when learning from each other. The younger may learn from the older, and the older can learn from the simplicity of faith of the younger and about their struggles in the world they experience as culture changes. Learning from and sharing with each other creates a rich tapestry and shrinks the generation gaps as all learn to understand and appreciate each other. Studies show that intergenerational relationships help to pass on the faith stories that then facilitate the biblical call to lifelong discipleship.

Some intergenerational principles gleaned from the chapters by the various authors include mutuality, reciprocity, equality and participation. These principles value each life stage and change our understanding of adulthood, which is no longer treated as the goal and pinnacle of life. Childhood is not treated as simply a steppingstone to adulthood but rather as having a fullness of its own as do both adolescence and elderhood. Our “prime” years are not prime, but part of a fuller understanding that each phase is significant and can be appreciated for what

it brings to the others as we experience life together. We enter our faith life with a mutuality between the ages and expect reciprocal learning and sharing. Equality, then, manifests in respect and opportunity for all ages as we believe that all have something to offer and teach and learn. Mutuality, reciprocity, and equality lead to the participation of all ages in all areas of church life in appropriate and helpful ways.

Another underlying principle that emerges is gifting. As everyone is invited and expected to be part of church life, discovering the gifts of all becomes intentional and life giving. Each is welcomed to share in church life out of both their honed and developing talents and abilities.

The book also addresses how to be an intergenerational church. Some keys are intentionality, leadership, cultivation, and contextualization for the local congregation. A church can ask, “Where can we desegregate age groups?” The point is not to create another program, but to redesign current spaces, events, classes, and worship within or outside the church building. Redesigning takes intentionality. It also takes leadership, but this is not simply pastoral or staff leadership. Anyone can bring leadership to a new

continued on page 11