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## Inter-generational Youth Ministry and the Solution to Volunteers

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## **Inter-generational Youth Ministry and the Solution to Volunteers**

OK, this may sound like an oxymoron (inter-generational youth ministry) but think about...what can be normal than other generations being a part of ministry to young people/teenagers/students/adolescents/whatever? I'm not trying to get back to 'back in the day' days, nor am I trying to sound culturally relevant, even though anyone who knows anything about youth ministry would know that being culturally relevant is a youth ministry mantra. So let's sound culturally relevant while suggesting some 'back in the day' common sense.

### **Come to Terms**

Intergenerational ministry is connecting various generations in meaningful ministry opportunities that have intentionally been created. Jesus Himself demonstrated (Matthew 18:1-6) a coming together of the generations, with each generation learning from the other, as well as a harsh penalty for those who take advantage of a younger generation.

Many churches tend to segregate the generations, from teenagers to children. Now I would be the first proponent to that kind of ministry segregation. It should be done and done well. But within those segregated groups, other generations need to be integrated into leadership and participants. On the flip side, there needs to be ministry that includes a coming together of the generations. "Are we connecting our kids to nurturing relationships that will last them after they complete their teenage years, or are we simply exploiting them as public relations tools to make our ministries appear successful?" I submit that unless we are making intentional, focused efforts at connecting kids with mature Christian adults in the church (not just their youth leaders), we are more like the vultures preying on kids at rock concerts and less like the spiritual leaders praying that their children's lives would be founded upon eternal things."<sup>1</sup> So somewhere along the way, some purposeful merging of the generations needs to take place, usually in some main church gathering or service. When it comes to 'big church,' leadership needs to strive towards having parts of the service, from time to time, 'speak' to their younger generations. Something that is said or done or performed or sung needs to catch the attention of the younger, more scrutinizing audience, no matter how minimal it may be. Something needs to resonate with this younger generation, something that they recognize. If you attempt this, there may be a 'rub' with some folks. So be prepared.

### **Focus on Your Family**

Inter-generational youth ministry means including as much family as possible. I don't mean necessarily doing stuff where the entire family is welcome. I know there have been some good 'college tries' here but frankly, sometimes young people need their space as well as their place to simply be teenagers. But I am saying that having parental and grandparental types who are best described as matriarchal and patriarchal in their demeanor, would go far in effectual ministry among young people. Their involvement can be regular or seasonal. But whatever the involvement, it is needed and should be wanted.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn, Richard R. and Senter III, Mark H., Reaching a Generation for Christ (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), p. 485.

## Real Age

Now let's be honest, in most church youth ministries, age and maturity are not always top on the priority list of desirable characteristics. It can sometimes be described more of 'young and dumb.' This needs to change. It does not have to be one or the other. It really should be a combination of the two. Youth ministries need the age, maturity, experience, wisdom and resources of an older generation. Youth ministries paradoxically need the youthfulness, enthusiasm, energy, technical savvy and entrepreneurial spirit of a younger generational leader.

Age is relative and age is unavoidable. Some people are old because they think in old ways. Their age of mentality has caught up with their chronological age. If you begin to think old (or in old ways), then you are old, no matter what chronological age you are.<sup>2</sup> What does this age-less person look like? Things progress, ideas are exchanged, decisions are made, decisions are changed, initiative is encouraged, visions come to fruition...everything is keep on track and on Message because of age-less thinking. He or she is in your church or ministry. There aren't many of them but when you have them, you wish you had a dozen more like 'em.

## Making It Easy for Adults

OK, you're probably looking for the 'handle' to make this an easy step towards inter-generational volunteer leadership. That's what I'd be looking for. This is where I'd be using my highlighter. To make it easier for other generations to be involved in youth ministry, you have to make it easy for them. In even more simple words, you need to create ministry situations that make it easy for older generations to interact and minister to the young generation. Let's face it. Teenagers can be a bit intimidating. Thanks to the Internet, they are the most intelligent and most impatient generation ever (it takes Google .08 seconds to find 85,800,000 sites for MTV...really?...it takes that long?!). So who wouldn't be intimidated?

Let me give you an example of 'easy.' Many ministries are now putting their money where their, uh, I mean, investing in youth ministry via the development and construction of youth rooms and youth centers. Kind of like a community center with a spiritual dynamic integrated into the program. Sometimes these facilities are in the current church building, or a separate building on the property, or a free standing structure off the property. But a youth center is a way of making it easy for other generations to be involved. Why? You just show up! "Oh yeah, stand over there and play a game with a teenager." In one youth center I was in, the entire youth center was designed for interaction. There were no snack machines or soda machines. You had to ask an adult for something to eat or drink. All the games were designed for interaction, in that you had to 'play' against someone, usually an adult. So what's hard about that? Stand there and play. Now that's easy. The kids come to you! Not so threatening. That is what has to be developed...ministry situations where the students have to come to you, to engage, to interact, to talk. Situations where it's adults that need to be sought out, where adults are in positions of leadership. I was in one church in Tipp City, Ohio (near Dayton) where the church invested in a youth center (The Avenue) on the church property. The attendance of teenagers in the area was overwhelming. I met a retired individual who became the 'go to' person for all the skaters that were coming. Retired guys tend to know how to fix things. They may not know skateboard linguistics (decks, ramps, rails, grind rails, etc.) but given a little time, they can figure it out. So this retiree got to know a bunch of middle school students who were all about skateboarding, and

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<sup>2</sup>For a fascinating read on the subject of aging, read "Real Age: Are You as Young As You Can Be" by [Michael F. Roizen, M.D.](#) and Elizabeth Anne Stephenson. You may be younger than you are OR sadly, you may be older than you really are. This book has nothing to do with your spirituality but everything to do with your physical health.

they loved this man, no matter what his age was. Who knows? Maybe he was a surrogate father or grandfather to a bunch of young teenage boys who needed him in that role.

### A Couple of Things to Think About

When making purposeful placement of older generations in youth ministry, there are some other factors to consider. First, you have to take in consideration a person's spiritual gifting(s), personal skills, and personality. Some would say that spiritual gifting trumps personal skills and personality. I would disagree. All three must fit succinctly. One may be more prominent than the other but not by much. This may be a bit subjective, as far as your own judgment here. Probably your best 'ally' is time...time to see how they are doing, the reaction of students, and the gaining of rapport (or lack of) with those students. Are they comfortable around students? Are students comfortable around them? A second factor would be permission to volunteer...specifically for parents. OK, another highlightable statement. Not all parents are automatically qualified to be involved with your youth ministry, simply because they have teenagers (or were once teenagers themselves☺). You know who I'm talking about. They're kind of like pseudo teenagers, either reliving their own adolescent years or they are living their adolescent years vicariously through their own teenagers. Here is a 'trick of the trade' in youth ministry. Have parents get permission from their own teenagers to work in their youth ministry. That's right, parents get permission. Either their teenagers won't mind, or there is no way during this lifetime that will happen, or involvement will be conditional. Those conditions will vary from a limited amount of time, to a trial basis. By the way, anyone involved among your students should be on a trial basis.

### Conclusion

To bring this full circle, inter-generational youth ministry is nothing new. But for some, it has been abandoned. It needs to be re-visited and it needs to be on purpose. An atmosphere of dependence and need on all the generations should be cultivated, with the right people doing the right things in the right places. What better place to foster community among the generations, than within a church family.

PERHAPS THE RATIONALE SHOULD GO UP FRONT, NOT AT END?

Everyone benefits.

Weaknesses can be strengthened by others.

Inexperience will give way to those who have experience.

Teachers will have students.

Students will be taught.

Spiritual maturity will trump immaturity.

Mentors will mentor.

Teenagers will be reconciled to God, when, for the longest time, they have been estranged from Him.

It makes plenty of sense.

## Identifying Inter-Generational Leaders

Many times when inter-generational youth ministry is considered, what we are really asking is, “where can I get some adults to run small groups, teach a particular class, etc?” Again, we need to make this as relatively easy as possible. Not everyone is cut out for teaching, though they can be trained. But the teaching/mentoring/discipleship role is typically a paramount need. Here is what Not to do. Don’t advertise. Putting a ‘Want Ad’ on your website or church bulletin is not the best of ideas. Instead, identify potential inter-generational volunteers. Pray for wisdom and discernment here and don’t go it alone. Lean on Holy Spirit guidance and spiritual ‘advisors.’ After that, now it’s time to let them know of the need and to give consideration to your leadership needs. Let me make some suggestions as to what kind of person to look for:

- easily gains rapport with teenagers
- pretty good ‘reader’ of personalities (among teenagers)
- sensitive to teenagers’ individual learning styles
- comfortable with their own age
- not easily agitated
- strive towards a leadership style of servanthood
- an ability to listen
- teenagers feel safe around them
- able to forecast potential problems
- recognize varying levels of spiritual development among teenagers
- open to partnerships with other inter-generational leaders
- not quick to judge
- spontaneity and a sense of humor are always a plus
- willingness to take directions as well as a confidence in making suggestions
- whether they are a parent or not, they need think like a parent
- their personal faith is growing and transparent

I know what you’re thinking...”in a perfect world...maybe.” This is an ambitious list. So will you get the entire package in every potential leader? Probably not. But you need to see a combination of these characteristics. For any deficiencies, spell out your expectations to volunteers. Most of the time, any misunderstanding of these ministry relationships, result from not knowing what your expectations are. So spell them out. The previous list of suggestions would make a pretty good list of expectations. This will go a long way in building a team of inter-generational leaders for your youth ministry.