

Intergenerational church



Imagine a church community where the generations participate together in all the dimensions of being church; in worship, in making a difference, in fun. A church where all contribute; a place of learning and listening, playing and praying, and sharing together God's love and activity in the world...



DIOCESE of OXFORD

A Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world



What do we mean by *intergenerational church*?

An intergenerational church enables *everyone* to contribute to and participate in the worship and activity of God — all ages, abilities and stages of faith. Who we are as a worshipping and missional community informs what we do and how we do it. It is about the choices we make to try to include everyone, make all aspects of church life accessible to every person, and

pay attention to those who have particular additional needs. We acknowledge the challenges but embrace the opportunities when we say every person has a part to play.

Churches have times when separation by age is necessary, important and valued, but this should not be their default setting.

Why does it matter?

In recent history church practice has generally followed two parallel tracks. There has been an emphasis on intellectual teaching (track one) which has mainly taken place in age

segregated groupings (track two). This segregation, plus the emphasis on telling people rather than sharing faith and spirituality, has led to approaches that are aimed at children

and young people rather than working with them, and has often not sufficiently engaged with their spirituality and lived experience.

For all ages, expressing spirituality is often beyond words. There are ways of knowing beyond intellectual knowledge – symbolism, music, art, silence, space, sacrament, story. We might have lost confidence or even forgotten how these can help the spirituality and faith of the community and its individuals, yet church is where these expressions of spirituality can thrive!

Faith formation and spiritual nurture need the variety of experience each person brings to enrich God's story in the lives of all. People learn best by copying and imitating. Children can learn by seeing what it looks like when adults pray, sing, interact and share their experiences of being a Christian. Adults can learn by the questions children ask and the playful spirituality they bring. Each needs the experience of the other. We should not be afraid to be honest with each other – even when the honest response is that we don't know the answers to some questions.

The Bible and intergenerational church

Intergenerational approaches are arguably a rediscovery of what is modelled in much of the biblical narrative. Throughout the Old Testament there were occasions when all of God's people came together to celebrate, worship, pray, lament, heal, hear scripture and story, but there is also emphasis on the everyday living of faith (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:6–9).

In his example and teaching Jesus challenged the status quo regarding the vulnerable, including children, even choosing a child as both a sign of God's kingdom and a clue to its meaning. In the Epistles, Paul repeatedly refers to the newly formed Church as 'the body of

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.
Deuteronomy 6:6–9

Christ' where every part needs every other part, even though it may look different and have a different function. This is no less true today.



There are barriers to participating in church life which are not always about age and stage of faith, for example there are adults who struggle with the literacy skills required for full participation in a church

service. The generous openness of intergenerational communities is welcoming and actively seeks ways to enable those with additional needs, their families and carers to worship and find support.

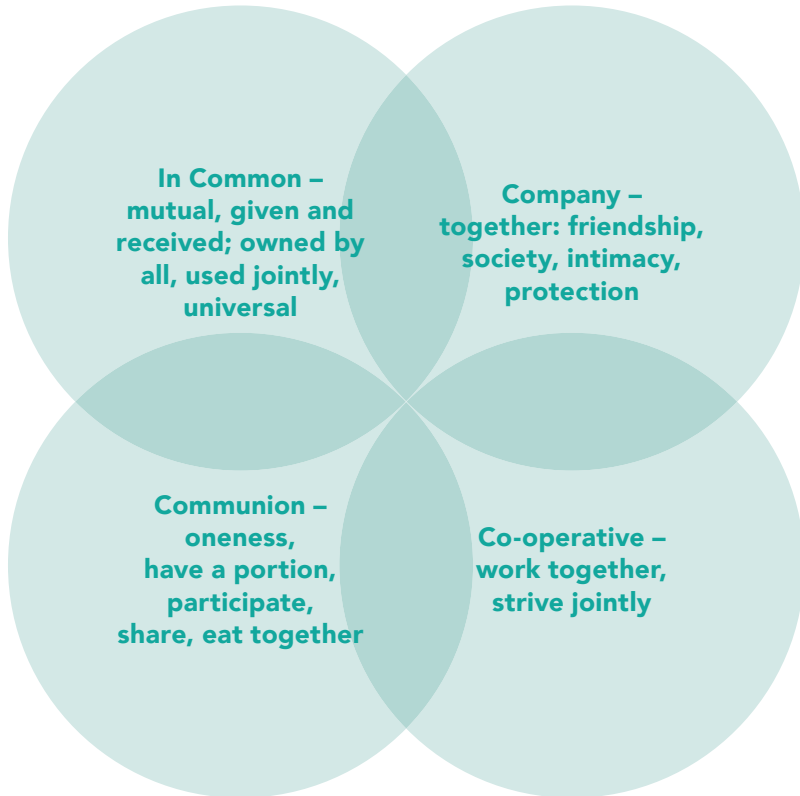
Creating the framework of an intergenerational community

Every church community and context is different, so there is not a 'one size fits all' approach. Each church, parish or benefice must discern God's call for that particular community. That said, to become more intergenerational we must recognise that in the kingdom of heaven there is equality and equity

(beyond age and stage of faith) and wrestle and experiment with what 'Your kingdom come' means and could look like when lived in each church community.

The framework for an intergenerational community takes shape from the principles and values that underpin it.

The principles: how we approach our life together



The values

Community – relational, inclusive (age, gender, culture, ability), mutual, reciprocal, humble

Engagement – together, playful (but serious), reflective, creative, accessible

Discipleship – inductive, deliberate, lived, missional, spiritual

Leadership – collaborative, participatory, enabling, diverse, listening, learning

Being the change – intentional, discerning, courageous, experimental, generous

Case history: St Marks, Milton Keynes

'We take every opportunity we can to celebrate, to toast marshmallows, and to involve ourselves in each other's lives!'

St Marks in Milton Keynes have developed what they call a 'village approach to church,' taking their inspiration from the African proverb 'It takes a whole village to raise a child'. Drawing from Acts chapter 2, they are serious about the whole community learning together, they are intentional about discipleship (it is the recognition of how much

learning happens together that inspired their village approach), and they practise joy, games and silliness as a means of creating community.

When asked 'what you are noticing and learning?' they shared the importance of creating trust and allowing time for it. They are clear that growing intergenerationally involves relinquishing a lot of control, which means that every week remains a learning curve.

Useful questions to ask

How could we get to know each other better across the generations?
How do we together encounter more of God, each other and ourselves?

Making a start

Being intergenerational is about much more than the church service (and this may not be the best place to start). When you think about developing intergenerational approaches it may be tempting to think that everything must change, but that would be overwhelming and unwelcome. What if it began with a space where adults, children and young people can come together to share food, play games, tell and listen to stories – simply get to know each other better?

Sharing experience is important. Ask each other questions like these and listen deeply to each other:

- *What's God saying to you in the Bible today?*
- *Who is on your mind today?*
- *Where have you been able to live your faith this week?*
- *Where have you seen God at work this week?*
- *Can you tell a story of when you have experienced a fruit of the Spirit this week?*

Which all brings us back to...

The purpose of this journey is that every person grows deeper in their faith, spirituality and lived life

as followers of Jesus. Taking this journey recognises that all ages need all ages in the cultivating, nurturing and growing process.

Further reading

See *Disciples Together* for more on putting children, young people and families at the centre of church life: oxford.anglican.org/disciples-together

Prayer

Heavenly Father,
You created each of us in your own image.
Every single human. Made in your image.
Thank you.
Help us to see each other as you see each of us.
Help us grow together as disciples of Jesus.
Make us more curious and playful in our community life, worship and mission.

Give each of us grace and humility.
Give us courage to try new things and learn from our experiments, especially as we seek to get to know each other better.
May we be increasingly open to your Spirit at work in each of us, in our communities and in the world.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen

Intergenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry, Ed. Holly Catterton Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* by Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross and the website intergenerate.com.au were valuable resources for researching this topic.

Photographs: Steven Buckley