

BREAKING DOWN THE AGE BARRIERS

How Churches are Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational

by Amy Hanson

Article Summary

Today's society often segments people by age and young and old have few opportunities to interact. However, some churches are discovering that intergenerational ministry is a rewarding, God-honoring work, and they are finding ways to encourage meaningful connections across generational lines.

Further Reading

[Churches Responding to the Age Wave: Top Innovations in Older Adult Ministry](#) by Amy Hanson

[Creating New Opportunities for Older Adults to Serve; 50+ Age Adults Reaching Outside the Walls of the Church](#) by Amy Hanson

On Sunday mornings, 15-year-old Caleb Fenn gets himself up and to church at **First Baptist West Monroe** in West Monroe, LA (<http://www.firstwest.cc>) by 7:15. While many teenagers would grumble about getting up so early, Caleb looks forward to the ministry that awaits him. Week after week he sacrifices his sleep because he helps teach the 8:00am Sunday school class for three year olds with an 81 year old man affectionately known as Mr. Charlie.

Charlie Bedgood has been teaching this class for over 15 years, and twelve years ago he actually had Caleb as one of his three year old students. Now as a helper to Mr. Charlie, Caleb and this older man enjoy a relationship that goes beyond the one hour they serve together on Sunday. Charlie calls Caleb regularly and celebrates his school achievements. The two of them exchange Christmas presents and enjoy a rich friendship with each other.

Not only does this teenager love Charlie, so do the three year olds. In a recent new members' class, one woman asked if the church would consider having a children's worship service at the 9:30 service, not just the 10:55. Dwight Munn, pastor with median adults (those age 40-54) at First Baptist West Monroe, asked her to elaborate and she expressed that her three-year-old daughter insists on attending the 8:00am Sunday school hour with Mr. Charlie. For this particular family, class with Mr. Charlie was non-negotiable.



Charlie Bedgood and Caleb Fenn.



Mr. Charlie with his three-year olds Sunday school class at First Baptist West Monroe.

Charlie has served in other areas of the church, including a time spent teaching middle school students, but according to Dwight, "Charlie has found his niche with the three-year-olds. He is serving in his sweet spot."

Charlie has taught these children about God's love and what it means to follow God's commands. He has helped each of the children learn to bring their offering envelopes to church and give a tithe to the Lord. His example of loving children is continuing on in the life of Caleb and other young people who help in the class. Mark Fenn, Caleb's dad and the senior adult pastor at West Monroe, says that he and his wife, Ann, have parents approach them and tell them how much their three-year-old son or daughter loves having their teenage son as their Sunday school teacher.

The melding of generations as described in this story used to be much more common. In fact, the concept of intergenerational ministry can be traced all the way back to the Old Testament. More than once God commanded his people to tell the future descendants what he had done ([Deuteronomy 11:19](#); [Joshua 4:21](#)). There was an assumption that this teaching should happen in the normal

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occurrences of daily life as young and old were often together.

Today society is much different. American culture tends to categorize or segregate people by age. Children spend large amounts of time at school with other kids. Young adults are often working with other young adults and older adults interact with others who are older. While there is a time and place for dividing people by age, leading churches

today are creating environments where age barriers are broken down. Pete Menconi, pastor of outreach and missions at **Greenwood Community Church** in Greenwood Village, Colorado (<http://www.greenwoodcc.com>), says that a healthy church is one in which all five generations are present and actively engaged with one another in the mission of the church.

A number of innovative churches are intentionally building multi-generational ministries into the fabric of their church culture. Some of the methods that are found to be effective include:

- *Creating natural ways for the generations to serve together.*
- *Honoring older adults by asking them to tell their stories.*
- *Educating the church body on the value of intergenerational ministry.*
- *Finding ways to make the worship service multi-generational.*
- *Encouraging affinity groups, rather than age groups, as a way for people to connect.*
- *Hosting strategic intergenerational events.*
- *Matching young people with older adults in mentoring relationships.*

Generations Serving Together

There are a variety of terms used today among Christian circles to describe the movement of God's people to become more outwardly focused. Some may refer to this as the "externally focused church" while others may resonate with the idea of a "missional church" or even certain strains of "the emerging church." Whatever the description, the general idea is that in order to *be the church*, people need to be serving outside the walls where they gather. Reggie McNeal¹, a leader in the missional movement, describes a missional church as "people of God that are called out and empowered to join him in his redemptive mission in the world."

One of the unplanned benefits that comes from having a missional or outwardly focused mindset is that age does not become the focus of the ministry, rather the concentration is working together to make a difference for Christ in the culture. The numerical age of those involved in community service simply does not matter.

The leadership of First Baptist West Monroe has a vision for transforming the community around the church with the love of Christ. It is a church wide vision that is seeking to involve every member of the church body. From the young to the old, every person at the church is faced with the question, "What are you doing that goes beyond the Sunday morning service that is going to make an impact in the community?"

One of First Baptist West Monroe's community ministries is serving those in prison. Currently there are teams of 20-25 people that go into the prisons to lead a chapel service and then proceed cell to cell for one-on-one visits with the inmates. There are adults serving on these ministry teams that range in age from 20 to 70. Dwight Munn says, "To accomplish the vision of community transformation, we don't have any choice but to unite the generations; it is the only way for the work to get done."

Mike Martin, Boomer Plus pastor at **Calvary Assembly Church** in Winter Park, FL (<http://www.calvaryorlando.org>) had a similar experience. As he sought out methods for

developing a ministry with Boomer age adults, the concept of rallying around a mission that served the community kept coming back to him. Following a model used by First United Methodist Church in Tulsa, OK (<http://www.fumctulsa.org>), Mike and his team asked themselves the question, “If Jesus was walking through your neighborhood, what he would do?” The team also surveyed a number of people as to what service opportunities were available in the community. What resulted was a list of 25 different ministry ideas ranging from projects like Habitat for Humanity to sending cards to the sick and homebound. The 50-plus ministry team called the ministry A.R.K. (Acts of Random Kindness) and hosted “Community Fest,” an evening where church members could come and be exposed to these 25 different ministries. Each ministry was given a room in the church and a facilitator was present to write down the names of those interested in serving and how the various people might be involved. Typically, a leader would arise out of the group to lead the ministry effort. Mike said, “We are attempting to validate an individual’s vocation, interests, and hobbies as ministry. The plumber that is willing to serve by fixing an older woman’s faucet is just as important as the pastor who gives the Sunday morning sermon.” As a result, 16 new ministries were started with over 60 people involved.

While A.R.K. was spearheaded through the Boomer Plus ministry, it has become an all-church emphasis. One reason for this is that the pastoral leadership conducted an internal survey



Multi-generational relationships are being built as a result of the A.R.K. ministry which allows 55-year-olds to work alongside teenagers.

and discovered 80% of the ministry was occurring inside the walls of the church, while only 15-20% was happening outside the church. The church has a goal of hosting a “Community Fest” every six months in order to involve more church members in ministry beyond the walls of the church.

Mike says that a great by-product of A.R.K. is the intergenerational connections. The people that get involved with a certain ministry do so because they have a passion for that particular work. He says, “In this ministry it is natural for a teenager to be working on a Habitat for Humanity house alongside a 55-year old. Multi-generational relationships are being built, now we want to find ways to encourage those relationships to go deeper.”

Sometimes the intergenerational connections that occur from serving together happen by accident, but other times these connections come from a firm commitment not to segregate by age.

Brad Jensen, the 38-year-old senior pastor of **Faith Evangelical Free Church** (<http://www.faithefc.org>) in Fort Collins, CO, does not apologize for building the church’s ministry around the core value of being age-integrated. He says, “Our leadership made a decision that we would not divide our congregation into segments.” Because of this value, all of their programs are looked at through the lens of how it might promote a multi-generational church family.

Evangelism Equipping is one ministry within the church that has been organized to have intergenerational interaction. Faith Evangelical uses D. James Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion (<http://www.eeinternational.org>) training method to equip people for personal evangelism. People are taught a transferable outline and then participants are sent out in teams of three for “on the job training.” They may go on to college campuses or door-to-door in their neighborhood and the participants have the opportunity to practice sharing the gospel by utilizing the method they’ve learned in the classroom. Typically these teams of three are mixed teams, a middle age or older adult might go out with junior high students or a junior high student

might go out with middle-aged adults to share the gospel. Following this time of going out into the community, all of the groups reassemble at the church for a time of reflection. Brad says that intergenerational relationships are often formed through this ministry. "Hearing people of all different age groups tell of their experience in sharing the ageless message of Christ has a way of drawing people together." Out of this sharing time new ministries are frequently birthed.

"The people who go out to practice personal evangelism often see community needs, such as a need for serving post-abortion women or caring for children. It is here that the different generations connect around a common need and go out serving the community side by side. The relationships that we introduced during the reflection time at the church are taken to a deeper level as the people serve alongside one another."

Honoring Older Adults

From owning the latest piece of technology to reading the most recently released novel, American culture promotes a message that *new* is to be valued. Add to this the fast-paced life that many Americans live and what results is a society that does not have much time or desire to listen to the wisdom and experiences of its elders.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of the older generation telling their story to the younger generation. [Psalm 71:18](#) serves as an example, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come." Some churches are implementing programs that encourage the older adults to pass on their life story to the young.

EVENTS THAT ENCOURAGE THE SHARING OF STORIES

Through a variety of experiences, Carolyn Lovelady, minister with Capstone (55-plus adult ministry) at **Council Road Baptist Church** in Bethany, OK (<http://www.councilroad.org>), had it impressed upon her that something needed to be done to honor the World War II veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 1,100 World War II vets die each day and

a memorial in Washington D.C. was constructed to honor these former soldiers (<http://www.wwiimemorial.com>).

Out of this realization, an entire program to honor veterans through Council Road was developed. On the Sunday of Veterans Day, the church rearranged all of their regular programs in order to create one special service to honor the older adults who had served their country. The entire church family from the very young to the old were able to attend the service. Carolyn says the 2500 seat auditorium was completely full. Prior to the day of the program, the service men (and the widows of those men who had already died) were personally invited to attend a special service which would honor their lives. In addition to the invitation they were sent a preferred parking pass and a ribbon to wear on their lapel.



Former WW II soldiers were honored at Council Road's Veterans service.

Carolyn said that because Council Road had so many of their own veterans, they did not do any specific publicity outside the church. However, the word about this special day spread and it became a blessing to many families who were not members of Council Road. Carolyn recalls one 80 year old man who drove from Texas to Oklahoma because his daughter wanted her father to be recognized.

On the Sunday morning of the service, the veterans were met at their cars in the parking lot and/or were given valet parking. They were escorted to their seats by young people. The Sunday service included a 100 voice choir and the army national guard band. Carolyn said, "It had all the pomp and circumstance of a huge military service." In addition, the senior pastor delivered a sermon on the values held by many of the World War II veterans and how these values should be integrated into the lives of adults today. He also spoke about sacrifice and taught from the Scripture about the lives of Abraham and Isaac. Special music included the Battle Hymn of the

Republic and Taps. The veterans were seated together in the front of the auditorium and they exited the service to a standing ovation. They then participated in a luncheon where the Army National Band played 90 minutes of Big Band music. The room was decorated throughout with individual pictures of the veterans in uniform.

Other highlights of the day included a Hall of Heroes where war medals and other mementos were displayed. The Hall of Heroes was set up in the church's chapel area and was designed to be a somber and respectful experience. Service men in full uniform stood at attention in the Hall. People began their tour by viewing a professional documentary that had been produced by a man who worked for the local public service television station. Prior to the event, he interviewed many of the veterans and wove their personal stories into the film along with historical footage from the war. The stories of many of the men were printed, enlarged, framed and put on display throughout the Hall for people to read. People stayed late into the afternoon to reflect on the impact that these men had made on their lives.

Another lasting piece from the event was an 80-page booklet telling the individual stories of over 50 different men. A published author and member of Council Road volunteered to personally interview the men and write their stories. The printed booklet was given to each of the veterans on the day of the program. Council Road also made books available to other interested people for a donation. The donations they received were used to send care packages to those currently serving in the military.



To recognize the lives of World War II soldiers, Council Road church displayed medals and several veteran's personal stories in their Hall of Heroes

Carolyn reports that the real success of the event was found in what she witnessed near the close of the day. Two young children, brother and sister, were standing near each other in the Hall of Heroes. The fourth grade girl was carefully reading out loud the story of a particular soldier for her younger brother (in first grade) to hear. Carolyn said, "The crowd had thinned out and for a long time I just stood and watched this brother and sister go from one display to the next, intently studying and reading about the lives of these men. And I said, 'That is success—the dream of my heart—that children would know these stories.'"

RECORDING THE STORIES OF OLDER ADULTS

Grace Presbyterian Church (<http://www.gpch.org>) in Houston, TX recognized the power of preserving the individual stories of people and took on a book project *Stories of Grace*. The 174 pages in this book tell the individual stories of 24 people—stories of children, young adults, middle-age adults, and older adults. Each person was interviewed and asked to specifically consider the question, "Where are the handprints of God in my life?" The interviews were then edited and written in the form of stories. Doug Ferguson, the senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian said in the forward of the book, "Among the things that hold families together are the stories that are told and passed on from generation to generation...they are the stories of God's mighty acts among us, stories of faithfulness and stories of grace." The book brings value to each generation, recognizing that everyone has a story that needs to be passed on to others.

Dave McElheran, older adult ministries pastor at **Cedar Mills Bible Church** (<http://www.cmbc.org>) in Portland, OR has attempted to capture and share the faith stories of older adults by using multimedia. Harvey Scarper, a member of Cedar Mills, lost his wife and was searching for purpose. After being asked to serve in the children's ministry, Harvey began to involve himself in various ministries around the church and grew in his relationship with the Lord. Even after discovering he had cancer and only a short time to live, he continued to communicate his great joy found in Christ. Harvey tells of serving on a short term missions team in Slydell, Louisiana and



Young adults and older adults often serve side by side at Cedar Mills.

being so thankful to God that he was not given his cancer diagnosis until he returned from this trip. Speaking about this event Harvey said with a huge smile on his face, “Isn’t God good? He waited to reveal this to me until after my time working in Louisiana! Isn’t that great!?”

Dave wanted to honor Harvey and have his legacy of faith be heard so he interviewed Harvey while a professional photographer from the church video taped the interaction. After editing the interview and weaving photographs into the film, the result was a six minute media presentation of Harvey sharing his testimony. The piece has been used in a variety of settings including adult Sunday school classes, high school groups, and even with individuals in Dave’s office. “I show it to individual older adults in order to disarm many of their excuses about being involved in the later years of life. Harvey’s testimony shows people that even when you are not feeling well or you think you are too old, God can still use you.” The DVD was also viewed by the entire church family during a Sunday morning service with Harvey present. Dave said, “The presentation helped to breakdown the fear that our young people had toward older people and also helped our older adults be much more assertive in their ministry with the church. Overall, it communicated to the entire church body that our older adults are valuable.”



HARVEY SCARPER

Educating the Generations

An important component of intergenerational ministry is educating the church body and church staff on the vision of having a multi-generational church. This type of education moves beyond the classroom and takes on many different forms.

First Baptist Church at the Mall (<http://www.fbclakeland.org>)

in Lakeland, FL often creates DVDs on specific topics that are then shown during the Sunday service. The short media presentations discuss upcoming events in the church or specific spiritual topics like tithing. Dave McClamma, senior associate pastor of adult ministry says, “Our senior pastor is passionate about making sure all ages in the church are receiving communication. One way we do this is by ensuring that a variety of ages are represented on these DVDs.” Currently, the church is in the middle of a capital campaign called For Future Generations. The senior pastor interviewed Boomer age and older adults on why they were going to give to this campaign and then showed this to the entire church body during a weekend service. On the Sunday morning when they collected the commitment cards and offerings for the campaign, the ushers included children standing alongside older adult men. Together, they gathered the offering. These intentional methods of mixing the generations communicates to the entire church body that everyone is important and valuable to the church.

Dave McElheran at Cedar Mills invites a different church staff member to speak each month at the older adult luncheons. “While this is great for our seniors it also encourages our various staff members to really consider how the older adults are an integral part of the church body.” Dave also educates the church staff during meetings and one on one interaction, communicating how the church can become more multigenerational by not poking fun of the different generations. He points out that this is how ageism creeps into the church.



Cedar Mills plans activities where people from different generations can learn from one another.

Ageism is a term first coined in 1975 by Robert Butler, an academic leader in the field of aging. The term is used to describe the negative attitudes and prejudices that are attached to people simply because of their age. Ageism can occur towards the young, as is seen in Paul's exhortation to Timothy when he says, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young..." (1 Timothy 4:12). But most often in today's society, ageism is used to refer to the negative feelings people have towards the later years of life.

Dave is teaching his older adults to not say derogatory things about themselves. He is reinforcing this through regular elder care workshops where a variety of specialists from the county speak to the Boomer age adults regarding the truths about aging. For example, many people believe the myth that memory loss is a common occurrence as people age. The truth is that age is not an indicator of memory loss. This type of education helps all age groups in the church begin to view the later years of life in a more positive way.

He also uses a monthly newsletter as a venue to communicate to the older adults their value and worth. Dave is very intentional about not putting any jokes about age in the monthly newsletter.

Another way that education happens within the church is through advocacy. Mark Fenn, senior adult pastor and Dwight Munn, median adult pastor at First Baptist West Monroe have both taken on the responsibility of helping the staff

better appreciate the feelings of the older adults. Mark says, "For the most part, the older adults have been the backbone of the church, therefore it is disrespectful to not listen to their needs and concerns. And then in turn we help the older adults recognize that the preferences of the young people are just as relevant as their own likes and dislikes. When each age group can begin to recognize these differences, then understanding and acceptance can occur."

Multi-Generational Worship

One of the most challenging arenas in which to bring the generations together is the Sunday morning worship service. Music preference plays a huge role in this struggle. People typically respond to and like the music that they enjoyed during their high school and college years. Churches are using a variety of different methods to encourage unity among the generations in the area of worship.

One Sunday each month Cedar Mills has a service called Generations Unite. During the service they have all the high school kids (about 150) be present in the service with many of them being a part of the worship band. Dave says, "We will have a 65-year-old playing lead guitar next to an 18-year-old drummer. We also have junior high students serving communion and being ushers in the service." Cedar Mills is taking this concept a step further by starting a Sunday service called Family Gathering where all ages, from children to older adults, will participate in a 45 minute worship service. Chris Holck, Encore Team leader with Faith Evangelical Free Church comments, "The opposite of generations unite is generations polarize."

The goal at Faith Evangelical Free is to create a worship service that spans the generations and allows the congregation to be unified in the worship experience. The worship service is called Mosaic and attempts to blend the different preferences of the generations. Brad Jensen said, "When we first began we would try to blend the music by using the lyrics from a hymn but adding drums to it or slowing down a more contemporary song. It didn't work because none of the age groups were able to fully engage in worship. This

is when we decided to try Mosaic Authenticity—having each piece of music sound like it was designed to sound.”

This means that the Faith Evangelical worship band may play two pieces and then sit down so that a full orchestra and choir can play the third piece. “If a hymn was designed to be played with an organ then we make sure we do this.” The

result has been that people engage more fully on the songs that they do know. Brad feels that both the young and the old have responded positively to this format. “When a young person sees a 75-year-old man with tears in his eyes, fully worshipping God to a hymn like “Holy, Holy” it draws the younger generations into the presence of God.”

Another key is doing all of the various styles with excellence. “When Ken Carlson, a long time church leader approaching the age of 80, leaves the service saying, ‘what a great service!’, we know we did something right.

Even though only one or two songs were of his style preference, being true to the style of all of the pieces creates a meaningful worship experience. People value being able to sing a song and not wonder if the second verse is going to be altered in some fashion.”

Other churches offer a variety of different worship venues with the hope of reaching out to multiple generations and musical preferences. First Baptist West Monroe has one traditional service with a full orchestra and two contemporary services with a worship band. Interestingly, age does not define who participates or attends these services. Mark says, “We have high school kids through senior adults who play their instruments in the orchestra and we have a 70-year-old man as well as a

number of high school girls who sing in the contemporary choir.” Keith Rushing is a 50-year-old who sings in the contemporary choir and sometimes fills in as a guitar player in the worship band. His daughter also sings in the contemporary choir. Keith says, “The variety of ages in the band and the choir shows the congregation, ‘look what we can all do together.’” He believes, “those of us who are older need to be more understanding of the younger ones music—we were young once and therefore we should attempt to be more accepting and flexible.”

In the midst of all the challenges that surround worship style, Don Wilcox, director of the Encore Generation Leadership Community says that the one common denominator in connecting the generations in worship is that the church leadership is talking about the issue. “They are not ignoring it or trying to take the easy way out—those churches that are really making strides in unifying the generations are constantly dialoguing about how to engage all ages in the worship experience.”

Intergenerational Small Groups and Bible Classes

One way that intergenerational relationships begin to occur is when a church organizes small groups around affinity rather than age. Historically, Sunday school and other adult Bible groups have been organized around age and at times even around gender. There are benefits that occur as people who are experiencing similar life issues—such as young married couples or adults parenting adolescents—interact with one another. However, there are also blessings that happen as people connect with different age groups.

Council Road Baptist organizes the majority of their Sunday adult Bible classes around age and stage of life. However, Todd Tamura, the Connection team leader who oversees all of these

THE VARIETY OF AGES IN THE BAND AND THE CHOIR SHOWS THE CONGREGATION, “LOOK WHAT WE CAN ALL DO TOGETHER.”



Some churches communicate the value of intergenerational ministry by having all ages participate in the Sunday morning worship service.

classes, says that some of the healthiest classes are those that are intergenerational. One of these classes, called Mosaic, became intergenerational almost by accident. It began as a median age adult class and in order to grow, the members began to invite other married couples that were younger and older to join the class. Around this same time, a different class lost their teacher and many of these single and married adults migrated to the Mosaic class. The result is a group of people of many different ages and backgrounds, including newlyweds, grandparents, and single adults. On a typical Sunday they average 35 people. Todd has observed the blessings of a class like this and says, “When you have all ages and stages in a class then there is always someone further along than you on the road of life. The couples with young children can look to those who are older for advice and so on.” Todd also says that this class truly is doing life together. “They enjoy fellowship at different homes, they serve together at the church on Wednesday nights, and they help each other in times of crisis.”

One single mom in the group has found people from the class who are willing to help with childcare, with her plumbing problems, and even with financial help. Todd says, “She found a home in that class rather than being in a group with other single parents.”

First Baptist at the Mall has seen age barriers broken down through various affinity groups. The church has a variety of connect groups including Faith Riders motorcycle ministry (<http://www.faithriders.com>), a cowboy ministry, and victory lane, a classic car ministry. Most of these groups have a Sunday morning Bible class that corresponds with other activities they participate in throughout the week. Dave McClamma, senior associate pastor of adult ministry, says “Several of the people in Faith Riders don’t even own a motorcycle but they have an interest in bikes or they really like the teacher of the class. The group gathers around their similar interest, not their age.”

People at First Baptist at the Mall are encouraged to try any group. “Many locate a group by checking out a promotional piece that we publish

called “Connect”. Listed in this is every connect group affiliated with the church from preschoolers to older adults. Some people start out trying an age based group (young adults with young adults, older adults with older adults) but if they don’t feel connected we encourage them to try an affinity group—something that is of an interest to them.”

First Baptist at the Mall is discovering what many other churches are discovering—you can’t force older adults to fit into a certain mold. A well-researched principle of aging is that older adults are a very diverse group of people. They do not all like the same things, vote the same way, or hold the same values. They have differing experiences, interests, and needs. Groups that are designed around a mutual interest—rather than age—can become a place for older adults to connect with others of all generations and grow in their relationship with God.

Strategic Intergenerational Events

Because relationships that cross generational lines do not happen as naturally in American culture as they did in the past, some churches plan events that have intergenerational contact as the primary goal.

Encouraging connection between the generations is a major thrust of the older adult ministry at **First Evangelical Free Church** in Fullerton, CA (<http://evfreefullerton.com>). One of the primary ways they champion this value is through events called ‘Back to the Future.’ Junior high students, high school students, and young adults of First Evangelical Free have all participated in the Back to the Future nights. The event involves approximately 24 older adults who come to a regular youth group activity. The entire group is broken into small groups so that one to two older

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adults are interacting with about 10 to 12 students. The older adults are given a list of questions to discuss with the young people. Some of these questions are:

- *What was it like for you to be a 12-year-old? A 16-year-old? A person in your mid-20s?*
- *What was your first car? What were the popular dances, singers, and actors of your youth?*
- *What did your classroom look like and who was your best friend?*
- *When was a time in your life when God started to make sense?*
- *How did you come to know Christ?*

Often the older adults will bring their yearbooks, letter jackets, and report cards for the younger people to see. The students are encouraged to ask questions and simply talk with the older adult about dating, family issues and other things of a concern to them. Rosalyn Encarcion, director of senior adult programs, says there are many benefits that come from these events. "Our older adults realize that their lives are significant and valuable as they pass on the lessons learned from their own life experiences. In turn, the youth have a broader worldview as they hear the wisdom of the older adults. The event is also a great way for breaking down the negative stereotypes that each generation may have toward the other. For example, not all older people are cranky and not all young people are irresponsible and reckless." Rosalyn also says that mentoring relationships

and prayer partnerships are sometimes formed from the connections made during the Back to the Future nights.

Dave McElheran from Cedar Mills says that you have to believe in the value of these types of events in order to get them started. "I sat down with our youth pastor and we brainstormed various activities that we thought the students and older adults would both enjoy. This is how our yearly miniature golf event was born." After people have signed up for the event the youth pastor and Dave match approximately two teens to one older adult. "We put a lot of care into how we pair the people up as we want to create the best environment we can for on-going relationships to occur." The night of the event they have a meal together and are given various questions that they can use to get to know each other. After this, they ride on buses to the miniature golf course. There are various prizes awarded, such as a Starbucks gift card that the older adult and the teens are to go out together and enjoy. "Everything about the night is to encourage positive relationships." Each golf team has their picture taken and then the names of the people along with their phone numbers are written on the back of the photo and given to each person. 75% of the teams maintain at least an acquaintance relationship and about 25% develop a lasting relationship that continues on and goes deeper.

Dave tells of one older woman, Peggy Horning who was flying to the east coast with her husband. When Dave asked her why they were



The Cedar Mills miniature golf event is a way for high school students and older adults to connect.

making the trip, she said it was to attend the wedding of a special young woman from the church. How had this older woman and this young adult gotten connected and developed such a strong relationship? It began through the miniature golf event.

In the beginning it took a lot of effort to encourage the young people and the older people to get involved. "Both age groups had a fear of the other group, which is precisely why we do these kinds of activities. Now, after doing this for five years, we have junior high students that cannot wait to be in high school so that they can be a part of the mini-golf night."

Mentoring

A mentor as defined by Webster's Dictionary is "a wise and trusted counselor or teacher; a loyal advisor." The concept of an experienced and wise adult passing on their knowledge to a young person has been gaining momentum in recent years. Schools and other secular organizations, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters have seen the value of older adults spending quality time with a young person. Churches are also finding that one-on-one mentoring relationships can become a way for love, care, and support to occur between the generations.



Churches are also finding that one-on-one mentoring relationships can become a way for love, care, and support to occur between the generations.

FORMAL MENTORING PROGRAMS

Some churches participate in formal mentoring partnerships with local schools and community groups. Mike Smith, a lay leader at Cedar Mill Bible Church heard about a local high school mentoring program through a Chamber of Commerce event. The school had an existing mentoring program, but the only mentors had been parents from the school. Mike was the first "outside" person to volunteer and has now been participating for over four years and has mentored 6 students. When Mike first began meeting with

one of his current mentorees, the student was struggling to maintain any grades above a D, but now he has a 3.0 grade point average. Mike says, "It is hard to describe how great it feels to know that I'm making a difference in the lives of these high school boys. To see the smiles on their faces or to have them run down the hall to give me a hug makes it worth all of the time and energy that I invest."

Many of the students participating in the program come from broken homes or just difficult situations. Each student has to personally ask to be matched with a mentor and their parents have to approve of the relationship. The mentor then makes the commitment to meet with the teenager for one hour, once a week, for an entire year.

Research has shown that students who have a committed mentor have better school attendance, a better chance of going on to higher education, and tend to trust their parents more. In addition, mentoring appears to help prevent substance abuse among teenagers.²

But even beyond these benefits, some students are getting to hear about Christ. "During one of my first visits, the student asked me if I was a Christian. For the remaining hour I told him about my faith and answered many of his questions. We've even had some of these teens visit our church."

Cedar Mills now has an on-going relationship with the school and supplies them with many mentors each year in addition to providing the training of all new mentors (whether these mentors come from the church or the community). Dave McElheran says, "We have a very good relationship with the school, thanks to Mike. In fact the principal attended one of our Sunday church services to publicly thank our congregation for our commitment and partnership. It is a great way that our adults are able to make a difference."

INFORMAL MENTORING

There are a number of organized mentoring programs throughout the country but it is difficult to quantify how much mentoring occurs outside a formal structure. Lola Boyd at the age of 82 was one of the founding members of the Compassion

House at First Baptist at the Mall in Lakeland, Florida. This particular ministry receives food and clothing donations and then gives it to people from the community in need. According to the church's website (<http://www.fbclakeland.org>) the



Lola Boyd (right) was a mentor to those that served with her at the Compassion House.

Compassion House has seen over 2,000 decisions for Christ, has baptized and disciplined over 200 and has seen many join the church family.

Lola tirelessly gave herself to the ministry, working every day that it was open, which totaled three days each week. During her years serving many young people, home school kids, college students, and teenagers would volunteer their time. Lola personally

took these groups under her wing, trained them, and put them to work. Before Lola passed away, she told Dave McClamma, senior associate pastor of adult ministries, "I want these young people to serve in this ministry when I am gone." Dave said, "It was her desire to reproduce her passion in each of them—and she did." One of the best examples was seen at her funeral service. In her years serving with the Compassion House, Lola constantly was asking people to donate peanut butter to the ministry. Anytime she was given an opportunity she would tell people, "don't forget the peanut butter." Lola worked at the ministry until she passed away at the age of 90 and at her memorial service the front of the church was lined with hundreds of jars of peanut butter.

Chris Holck, Encore team leader with First Evangelical Free in Fort Collins, CO, recalls a mission trip to Mexico City with a number of young adults and one 65 year old man named Ray. "All of us were influenced by Ray's hard work and positive attitude." Kevin, a 35-year-old, was especially impacted by Ray and the two men continued to grow in their relationship even after returning to the States. "When Kevin had important business decisions, he would call Ray for advice. Kevin didn't have a Christian dad to look to for spiritual wisdom and coaching and so

Ray became a trusted advisor in his life." While these two men didn't intentionally set out to form a mentoring relationship that is exactly what occurred.

Whether mentoring happens through structured programs or in more organic environments, the result is still the same. Young people are gaining valuable wisdom and insight while older adults are being able to pass a piece of their life on to future generations. It's a win-win for everybody.

An Investment in the Future

In the New Testament era, what Timothy received from his mother and grandmother as recorded by the apostle Paul in **II Timothy 1:5**, is one of the greatest blessings that can occur through intergenerational relationships. Paul writes, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." This may be one of the most important goals of intergenerational ministry—to leave a legacy of faith for the next generation. In a society where the retirement years are often seen as a time for 'self'—some retirees are turning this idea upside down and investing themselves in the future generation.

Ronnie Green, an adult lay leader at First Baptist West Monroe did not set out to intentionally do something intergenerational, he simply wanted to use the second half of his life in service to God. At the age of 55, Ronnie went on his first mission trip and now nearly 10 years later, he's been on over 10 trips. His work has taken him to Africa, Alaska, Guatemala, and Mexico—not to mention the various ministries he has been involved with in the states. Ronnie has come in contact with many young people throughout these years of ministry and has had a tremendous impact on their futures.

One of the goals of a recent trip to Zambia, Africa was to develop a promotional DVD and other material that missionaries could use when they raise support. Prior to the trip, Ronnie became acquainted with a young man named Jacob who was graduating from college. "His interest was in technology and film and he had just received a

high-quality video camera for a graduation gift. I invited him to participate in the mission trip and he was excited to use his new equipment for something significant.” During the months before the trip, Ronnie developed a growing relationship with Jacob as he coached him in how to raise financial support from family and friends and how to prepare himself spiritually for the trip.

The two men, one in his early twenties and one in his early sixties, slept in Zambian huts, worked in a Zambian church, and ate Zambian food. Ronnie says, “I consider it a privilege to have been able to come alongside Jacob and show him how his talents and interests could be used for Kingdom work. By the end of our trip, Jacob said that he was thinking about being more involved in missions.”

On another trip to Zambia, Ronnie asked an eight or nine-year-old African boy if he could talk to him and his friends about Jesus. At first the boy said ‘no’ but then said, “if you’ll climb up in a tree with us old man then we will listen to you.” Zambia does not have very many older adults and the novelty of this white-haired man seemed to make these young people more open and receptive. Ronnie says with a laugh, “At my age, I wouldn’t climb up a tree for just anybody! But for the chance to share the gospel with these children I was more than willing. I have found that if you just make yourself available to God, then He will take care of all the excuses you have about why you can’t serve Him, even the excuse that you’re too old.”

This was never more evident than when Ronnie was working at a youth retreat in the states and an overweight girl felt like she could not participate in one of the races. “All her life, she had been told that she could not run. I told her, ‘Even though I’m 64, I’ll run this race if you will run it with me. And she did.’ God continues to stir in his heart a passion for young people. With a lump in his throat Ronnie recalls a freshman boy asking him a simple question during the last days of a youth camp where Ronnie was a sponsor, “Mr. Ronnie, can we go pray together?” Ronnie says, “We found a quiet place to pray and I will never forget feeling this teenager’s tears fall on my hands as we opened ourselves to God.”

Many churches are discovering the exact thing that Ronnie is experiencing—intergenerational ministry is a rewarding, God-honoring work. Whether it be through serving opportunities, strategic events, the Sunday morning worship service, or mentoring relationships, these churches are striving to break down the walls that have been erected because of age differences. And in the process, people are finding ways to fulfill what the psalmist wrote in [Psalm 78:4, 5b-7](#), “...we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done...He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds but would keep His commands.”



AMY HANSON



DON WILCOX

Amy Hanson is a freelance writer for Leadership Network, as well as an educator, speaker, and consultant in older adult ministry and gerontology. She was the active adult (50+) ministries director at Central Christian Church in Las Vegas, before moving to Nebraska to complete her Ph.D. in Human Sciences. She teaches several aging courses at the college-level and has conducted research on volunteerism among older adults in the church. Amy lives in Omaha, NE, is married to Jon and they have a three-year old daughter named Ella. You can find out more about her ministry by visiting www.amyhanson.net.

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* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Quote from <http://missionalcommunity.com/2>

² *Mentoring: A Promising Strategy for Youth Development* by Susan Jenkins, Kristin Moore, Elizabeth Hair, and Harriet Scarupa. In Child Trend Research Brief, February 2002. Retrieved on 5/27/08 at <http://www.childtrends.org/Files/MentoringBrief2002.pdf>

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