

BUILDING
Cross-Generational Relationships
IN THE
Congregation

By Jacquelyn Brown Thorpe



In recent decades, our concept of the “family” has been redefined. The tendency today is to conceptualize “family” as a single-family household with fewer offspring or a blended family of step-parents and step-children. This idea can inhibit us from developing significant cross-generational interpersonal relationships. Add to this our heavy reliance on the Internet for communication, and such relationships become even harder to build.

In the church, the use of traditional age-level ministries (by themselves) can add to our growing sense of isolation from one another. Cross-generational ministries in our congregations can help bridge this gap, and many faith communities are engaging in such activities more and more, regardless of what name we use to describe such efforts.

Since “family”—whatever the composition—is still valued in our society and in our churches, it is necessary to understand that the needs have changed. We still need to plan, anticipate and implement Christian programs, mission projects, worship experiences, fellowship times and Christian education for all ages, but how we implement them in cross-generational settings is growing more important.

John Scanzoni made the case in the early ‘80s for faith communities to position themselves to be most helpful when he wrote, “The church might be the one institution in our society uniquely suited to raise aspirations aimed at new family traditions and to provide a framework for their attainment.”¹ More recently, Patty Meyers, another Christian educator, explores intergenerational ministry and learning in her book, *Live, Learn and Pass it On*, which includes models, stories, theoretical and practical helps for building a practical cross-generational ministry in any church.²

Congregations can model cross-generational relationships for society. This idea is grounded in scripture, as Psalm 145:4 emphasizes that generations are related to each other and need each other for life together in God. If we believe the Great Commission, we must be serious about equipping persons of all ages to mentor and be mentored in the faith because our generations need each other, now, more than ever.

What Works?

Cross-generational ministries require a lot of intentionality, as the gamut of ages may not come together naturally. Gather

your congregation for a variety of occasions that start by bringing all ages together for fellowship. (Sharing a meal is a natural icebreaker.) Send them with a common set of instructions into various educational settings (by age-level or age-integrated), and then bring everyone back

*One generation
shall laud your
works to another.*
(Psalm 145:4)

together at the end for a common celebration. This method works well for worship experiences, mission projects, and family Vacation Bible School programs. The one-room Sunday school teaching/learning setting for all ages works well in small congregations.

Other tips:

- Tell and listen to peoples’ stories. It is hard to over-estimate the power of storytelling for building relationships in our faith communities. To gain more appreciation for storytelling that is biblically based and affirms the African American culture, see Anne S. Wimberly’s *Soul Stories*.³
- Know the established preferences of your faith community and start new ministries with new groups.
- Keep good records of what your church does at cross-generational gatherings. Record-keeping is a ministry that is well worth doing by people who value it. Administration is a priority for all, rather than the sole possession of a few.

Successful Programs

Over the years, I have seen many successful church programs that include all generations. Consider a few ideas:

- A Harvest Festival helps the church family reach out to the neighbors and the community in a non-threatening way with activities for all ages. Many visitors who stop to shop and play come back to worship. It is hard to resist kid-friendly inflatables, youth-operated concessions, and adults of all

ages who interact with all who attend.

- Advent and Lenten fairs in a church’s fellowship hall are fun for all and help educate people about the liturgical seasons. Some learning centers are for all ages and some are age-specific.
- An after-school tutoring program with a spiritual formation component brings young and old together through mentoring relationships.
- A spiritual gifts discovery workshop for all ages helps participants explore their own gifts while learning to appreciate those of others in the church community. (I recommend using Charles Bryant’s *Rediscovering Our Spiritual Gifts*.⁴)
- A Mother/Daughter or Father/Son Banquet with a cultural theme based on your country of choice can be an exciting event for several generations since we are all daughters and/or sons.
- Lent, Holy Week, and Easter can involve cross-generational music concerts, chancel dramas, worship for all ages, labyrinth-walks, Stations of the Cross, and other outward spiritual prayers.

Whatever you do, remind parents and church leaders to erase any lines between church and family because cross-generational gatherings are for everybody. This article cannot give you an exact blueprint because churches are different, but the bottom line is that being and making disciples for Christ together brings us closer to God and to one another no matter what age we are. □

1. White, James W. *Intergenerational Religious Education*. (Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, 1988), 4.
2. Meyers, Patty. *Live, Learn, and Pass It On!* (Discipleship Resources, Nashville, TN, 2006).
3. Wimberly, Anne S. *Soul Stories*. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2004).
4. Bryant, Charles. *Rediscovering Our Spiritual Gifts* (Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 1991.)



Jacquelyn Brown Thorpe is an ordained deacon and an adjunct faculty member of Religious Education at Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, DC. She is co-author of *The Web of Women’s Leadership: Recasting Congregational Ministry* and editor of *God Delivers Me: A Model From Strengthening The Black Church for the 21st Century*, published by Abingdon Press.