

Four Stories

The following vibrant stories illuminate how intergenerational experiences are transforming churches as they engage teens and emerging adults, encourage young married couples, support parents struggling to spiritually nurture their children, and foster *attachment* between older and younger congregants.

When the Bulletin Becomes a Menu

Melissa Cooper

A couple of years ago, I decided to spend Lent eating a vegetarian diet. For the first time in my life, entire menus weren't available to me.

Every experience eating out became a scavenger hunt. At most restaurants, I had a maximum of one or two entrée options to choose from without requiring substitutions. I didn't like always having to ask for things to be made slightly differently *just* for me.

I work in camp and retreat ministry serving hundreds of churches, so I visit churches about as frequently as I visit restaurants. I've noticed that churches and restaurants have something in common.

A menu.

You know—that piece of paper each person is handed as they enter worship.

Church menus come in all shapes and sizes—color or black and white, some with stock images of Jesus with children, or a chalice and bread on the front, some a single sheet, some a large, complicated booklet.

The intention of the bulletin is always to engage. Most immediately, the bulletin shares what you'll be doing within the next hour. But there's also always a page or more devoted to all the other activities happening throughout the week.

Those are the pages intended to get you *really* engaged—not just for an hour, but

ultimately, over your lifetime. Those pages tell you how this church is the right place for you: “Look at all these things we’ve got going on; and here are the ones *just* for you!”

Most church bulletins have become more complicated over time. In a world of consumeristic Christianity, where we have to compete with the yoga studio, coffee shop, or church down the street, we feel like we have to show that “there’s something here *just* for you!”

In order to do that, we need page after page to show what classes are available after worship, and what groups meet throughout the week, and when there’s childcare and when the youth group is going on a trip . . . and . . . and . . . and.

We have to be sure everyone finds something on our “menu” *just* for them.

And we’ve taught them to expect this—we’ve told them we will be sure there is something for everyone.

And yet . . . what if you’re a vegetarian? What if you were not carefully considered when the menu was created?

When I look at these bulletins—“church menus”—I seldom find anything I can eat. I’m not one of the desired consumers who was carefully considered as the menu was crafted.

I’m thirty-two years old. I’ve been married for eight years. I don’t have children, and I don’t plan to. I very seldom find anything “*just* for me.”

And even when I do, as a millennial, I’ve been catered to my whole life through media and community events—so I know what’s going on. I know pandering when I see it.

But you know the churches I find most inviting—the ones that I feel like I could fit in the most with? It’s the little country churches—small and vibrant and vital.

I don’t wonder if they have something just for me; I don’t have to search a long list of activities and classes to see if I’ve been considered. They know they can’t have a menu long enough to meet everyone’s needs, so they don’t try. The few activities they do offer are open to *everyone*.

So I wonder . . .

How do we stop treating the bulletin like a menu?

How can we stop exhausting ourselves trying to meet the needs of each individual who walks through our doors? How can we make it clear that this church is for everyone, without having to name every group it includes?

What if we didn’t have to treat our bulletins and calendars like menus? What if we instead sought ways to bring people together around commonalities other than age or stage in life?

Being intergenerational does not mean we add more items to our church calendar; it doesn’t mean we add an intergenerational “program” to an already long list of groups and classes and activities. Instead, what if the majority of our existing programs were meant for everyone?

We may still have a specialty offering here and there; but if we can make the core of our church’s life something that includes all and welcomes all, regardless of age or stage, then no one has to go searching for what they’re allowed to attend, and no one has to ask for substitutions.

So I challenge you: As we vision and dream for the future of our churches, let’s stop

treating the bulletin like a menu that offers “something for everyone,” along the way leaving someone out. Let’s create documents that serve as invitations to participate in a vibrant, vital community. How about we make most of our “somethings” actually for *everyone*?

Parents as Partners

Amy Kippen

“What is the matter with parents these days?” “Why are parents not involved?” “Are families too busy for church?”

These were common questions at my congregation, mostly asked behind closed doors; questions that smacked of judgment; questions that produced not a solution, but increasing resentment toward parents. At the same time, more and more of our youth were “graduating” from church in their teen years.

Our faith formation approaches at the time were not accomplishing the goal of creating lifelong followers of Jesus who value Christian community.

And asking these questions produced more questions. Why are parents intensely involved in their kids’ activities, but not committing to church involvement? Why does the hockey or dance coach get parents’ commitment?

The answers were hard to acknowledge, and the truth was hard to face.

Parents are the primary teachers of faith whether they know and acknowledge it or not. Parents are indeed busy; however, they are constantly making choices about their time. Those coaches we resent actually expect parents to be involved; if you are going to be a dance parent, you must work the fundraiser. It comes with signing up.

Along the way, our age-specific church programs have inadvertently become just one more thing on the family’s weekly schedule, no different than piano lessons or soccer practice. Yet even when parents meet our expectation that they bring their children to church, many children are not becoming lifelong followers of Jesus who value Christian community.

Acknowledging these truths meant making a significant change in the way we cultivate faith formation in our church, and we needed to find a way to get families to practice faith at home too. We needed to raise the expectation of parents both at church and at home—and ordering a new curriculum wouldn’t suffice.

We needed to change the entire system.

So, just short of twenty years ago, we stopped doing Sunday school and started a weekly family program. No longer could parents drop their children off at church. Faith formation was now something families did together. There were no Sunday school classes and no teachers. We had intentionally become the church with no class.

Was this change easy? No. Were some parents upset? Yes. Were we confident that God was calling us to make this change? Yes.

So, in the midst of our fear, we stood on the knowledge that God had called *us* to be brave, visionary leaders. And if the leaders of our church didn’t lead the church into a new future, who would?

We called our weekly family gathering *GIFT*—Generations in Faith Together. GIFT is a

lively mix of Sunday school, VBS, family Bible camp, and worship. All ages and stages learn together, creating lasting intergenerational connections. To help alleviate parents' fears, we said again and again, "Just know that you don't need to know anything you don't already know or be anyone you're not. Just come."

And from the beginning, we communicated our mission through this motto:

*Bless the child
Gift the family
Every week at church
Every night in every home*

These four simple lines convey that GIFT is for the child and the family and set the expectation that faith formation happens both at church and at home. This motto serves to outline a *partnership* between parents and church, and, as in any healthy partnership, there are agreed-upon roles and responsibilities.

Every Week at Church

The *church's role* is to make GIFT engaging for people of all ages—a weekly highlight for all. We commit to modeling the love of Jesus and helping everyone know and experience God's love.

The *parents' role* is to make attendance a priority, to decide up front that "we are a family that goes to church unless we are sick or out of town." Additionally, we ask parents to be engaged with GIFT—to fully participate with positivity.

Every Night in Every Home

We challenge *parents* to practice faith through a simple, nightly, five-step faith ritual called *FAITH5*. Families get together each night for a Home Huddle to check in, read Scripture, talk, pray, and bless one another before turning out the lights on the day. This nightly ritual sets a family on the firm foundation of shared faith enabling them to grow together spiritually.¹

In a recent poignant conversation, a GIFT dad shared,

I didn't want to come to GIFT with my family, and I certainly didn't want to do that FAITH5 thing every night. You know, I'm not really a churchy person. But last week, when Cali [five years old] led our FAITH5 prayer, it struck me—faith is not just something we do; this is who we are.

Moving our understanding of church from drop-off culture to partnership, and seeing parents as the main faith mentors and the church as an ally, is who we have become.

Friday Night Live

When I was in my twenties, if you had asked me how I imagined my Friday nights ten years into the future, I would have described a fabulous scene where I would be dancing and laughing with friends at fancy lounges. I would *not* have said, “At church, with a bunch of children and teens eating, playing, praying, and learning.”

But as it turned out, that’s exactly where I found myself in my thirties. Eating, playing, praying, learning, and laughing with a bunch of children and teens and Jesus-loving adults. Every Friday night, I found myself conversing around the table, sitting on the floor, creating with crayons, or eating cupcakes. Every Friday night was fabulously alive . . . and I wouldn’t change it for the world.

First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica (known as First Jamaica) is located in the heart of Jamaica, Queens, New York. First Jamaica has existed for 350 years and has a strong history of serving and loving on the incredible community that surrounds it.

In 2010, First Jamaica began a program for families called LOGOS. LOGOS is an intergenerational ministry that has blessed congregations, communities, and families for over fifty years. Through Bible study, a shared meal, worship, and recreation, the goals of LOGOS are to live out Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The LOGOS motto represented what we wanted to live out among the families in our congregation and what we wanted to share with the community. That motto is this: “You are a child of God and I’ll treat you that way.” But back in 2010, the real question was, “What will it mean to show people that they are children of God, and how will we treat them that way? Where will we begin?”

We started with getting ourselves in the right frame of mind regarding what intergenerational ministry actually means. Even though we didn’t use the term *intergenerational*, we knew that this ministry would be more than just putting different ages of people in the same room to eat, learn, worship, and play together. We knew that it was about building relationships and creating space for those relationships to be nurtured and to grow. It was about being at the table together with no other intention than to show this love of God that we had been called to live.

Intergenerational ministry is about living this life together. Knowing names, knowing these children of God in ways that we somehow miss on Sunday mornings during the worship hustle and bustle. It is about spending time learning things like where people are from, what they like (and don’t like), and what their dreams are. It is about taking the time to get to know the people we sit next to each week, no matter how old or young they are.

It also means listening to each other.

It is amazing what you can learn about someone if you take the time to sit and really listen to them as you share a meal. There is something very intimate about taking the time to eat together. You never know what surprises might lie ahead.

One night at LOGOS, one of our adult leaders found out that Rosa was turning fifteen soon and that Rosa had been dreaming of a quinceañera. (A quinceañera is a celebration of a fifteen-year-old girl’s birthday; its cultural roots are in Latin America.) Rosa’s dream was beginning to fade because her mom didn’t have the resources to plan such an elaborate

celebration.

At the end of the night, the adult leader came up with a brilliant idea. What if we, her LOGOS family, hosted her quinceañera?

So with the help of most of the Friday night LOGOS youth, volunteers, and church staff, we were able to host her dream Sweet 15. We used all the gifts of the LOGOS family to plan and lead the religious ceremony, to decorate, and to find sponsors for the dresses and suits of the quinceañera court. LOGOS parents who were professional hair stylists, make-up artists, and photographers donated their supplies and time for the day. Another volunteer baked a three-tiered cake and decorated it with sparklers to light up the room. As a community, we were able to show Rosa that she was a child of God and that she was loved. We were living this motto out loud!

Friday nights became moments of grace, fun, and opportunities to love beyond our walls. They became a place where we could appreciate each other and experience God's love firsthand.

Friday nights became a place where middle school kids could be encouraged to say what they believed; Bible study became a place where they could express who God is to them; worship became a place that was about opening their hearts and mouths to honor God with their whole being. It was a place where a community of caring adults poured into them—a place where no one was alone, and everyone was loved.

Friday nights became alive in moments where young brown boys found a safe space in a world that often tells them they are not worthy. And a world that does not treat them as the children of God they are. A world that does not always welcome them with open arms. Here, on Friday nights, these boys could lead, be led, be loved, serve, be served, grow, and be who they are.

Friday nights became moments where strangers became family, where children became stronger, and where adults learned to laugh again—where we messed up a few times but came back every week to do it again because we believed that God was doing something far greater than what we could see in the moment.

God gave this congregation—and me—a breath of fresh air, a reason to celebrate, and a chance to be living children of God treating each other with love and respect while passing the potatoes and dancing in celebration. Twenty-year-old me might not approve of my thirty-year-old Friday nights. But right now, forty-year-old me is grateful to God for the blessing of a group of adults, children, and teens who made me a better person and reminded me that I am a child of God and absolutely treated me that way.

The Caring Church: Intergenerational Caring as a Foundation for Church Life

Jim Merhaut

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone . . .’”

—Genesis 2:18 (NRSV)

“The best thing to hold onto in life is each other.” —Audrey Hepburn

Resting quietly beneath the flurry of church administration hides an often-overlooked foundation that is both soft and potent: the expressions of love that we call caring. Like God breathing life into dead clay, caring expressions of love across the generations are the animating principle of Christian congregations. Human beings are wired for caring connections. Dr. Susan Johnson, clinical psychologist and researcher, often comments that emotional connection among human beings is like oxygen. It is no exaggeration to say that warm, intimate, and continuous caring expressions of love are essential for human life and for Christian community.

Johnson tells a story of a Spanish bishop in 1760 who worked in an orphanage. He recorded in his journal that there were some children in the orphanage who were dying from loneliness. He could discern no other cause for their decline and death. Nearly two hundred years later, psychologist John Bowlby developed his theory of child attachment that confirms the essential importance of intergenerational caring for human thriving.²

Bowlby concluded, “the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment.”³ Notice the careful choice of words that paint a picture of deep intergenerational connection: warm . . . intimate . . . continuous intergenerational relationship in which both generations find satisfaction and enjoyment. The benefits of human connection run in both directions up and down the generations. This is not something that church leaders can accomplish with a packaged program or resource. Building affectionate and continuous experiences of human attachment requires changing the culture of congregations from peer-centered efficiency to places where relationships of all kinds reign supreme. In the caring church, getting things done is not as important as with whom and for whom we get things done.

How many times in churches are young children and older adults excluded from activities or experiences because they might “slow things down”? When the center of our target becomes accomplishment and not relationship, we cease to be Christian. The celebrated spirituality expert Michael Downey once said, “If you are what you do, when you don’t . . . then you’re not.”⁴ This doesn’t mean that doing is unimportant; it simply means that the foundation for all Christian activity is caring relationships.

Bowlby’s career ended before he could test his child attachment theory on adults; however, Phil Shaver and Cindy Hazan carried on his work at the University of Denver. They tested attachment theory on adults in the 1980s and found that the emotional attachment needs that form the foundation of thriving for children do not go away as we grow up.⁵ The myth of the detached, stoic, independent adult as the paradigm of adult maturity was shattered by Shaver and Hazan and has continued to disintegrate in study after study on adult thriving. Adults need caring expressions just as much as children do, and when they are experienced across the generations, they can be even more powerful for adult growth and development.

One church in Ohio set the following goal: to inspire and support friendships across the generations. In the spirit of this goal, they have transformed their Vacation Bible School into an intergenerational learning experience. Parents, grandparents, and other adults are enriched

by the presence of children as they together enjoy lively and engaging activities around biblical themes. They have also developed a youth ministry initiative to empower adults to reach out in friendship to teens on Sundays. This was accomplished by giving brief presentations to all adult groups in the church with information about the power of intergenerational friendship, and then offering three simple strategies to adults for how they might connect with teens around Sunday worship:

1. Make eye contact and smile.
2. Deliberately seek out teens during the offering of peace.
3. Ask teens about school, hobbies, work, friendships, prayer, etc.

At the end of the presentation, every adult was given a small card with the three strategies and a pin that read, “We love our teens!” At the same time, children and teens were being encouraged to take on roles in the congregation that traditionally were reserved for adults. This church did not have to add new programs; it simply had to bring the generations together in programs that already existed. It’s so simple. It’s so powerful. Imagine what your congregation can do by connecting the generations with expressions of care.

One of the best things we can do for both young and old is structure our churches in ways that facilitate continuous caring encounters across the generations so that all ages can be enfolded in the warmth of the full body of Christ. It is when the full body is engaged with all its generational diversity that both the church and the world will experience a congregation’s transforming power.

Notes

¹See www.faith5.org for a fuller explanation of the FAITH5 process.

²Dr. Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 16–27.

³John Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health: A Report Prepared on Behalf of the World Health Organization as a Contribution to the United Nations Programme for the Welfare of Homeless Children* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1951), 13.

⁴Michael Downey, “Magnificent Distractions: Hurdles to Living Contemplatively,” paper presented at the monthly meeting of the First Friday Club of Greater Youngstown (OH), January 5, 2017.

⁵Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver, “Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 3 (1987): 511–24.