

Intergenerational Communication in Congregations

-Rev. Beth Long-Higgins, 2023



We live in a very age-segregated society. Through our school years we interact with people our age, give or take three years. It is at the point of finishing formal education and entrance into the workforce, whether after high school, college or advanced degrees, that most people begin to interact with individuals who are significantly diverse in age. Given the emphasis on the nuclear family in our culture and the mobility for extended families to live across the country (and globe), most people do not have the benefit of having relationships with older generations within their own family systems as in previous periods of history. And yet, many individuals under the age of 40 would love to be in relationship with those in later life. And older adults value interactions with younger generations. The problem is they just don't know where or how to find each other!

Congregations are one of the last institutions in our culture where inter-generational interactions can take place. But even this is precarious as the larger societal demographics shift and there is less age diversity surrounding the towns and neighborhoods where faith communities are located today.

Consequently, communication between and with people across the life course is no longer a skill that is taught within extended family systems because they have little contact with each other. And yet we know from research that intergenerational relationships are just as or even more important than ever. So, what is important to keep in mind as we encourage intergenerational conversations and programming?

We all are aging. Regardless of the number of years you celebrate on your birthday, we all are aging. We generally think of this process positively when we are children as we call it "growing". There may be different developmental opportunities that are associated with a specific age, but we know that we all age. The challenge is there are many messages from the larger society that aging is something to deny, cure or avoid and that those who are in the later stages of their lives are of less value than those who are younger.

How we think about aging matters. It can affect how long we live and the quality of our own lives. The aging messages that we share with others also affect the systems and institutions around us. It is helpful to consider how inclusive our community is to persons across the life course.

Age is only a number. When we ask someone how old they are, that number only serves as a short hand to assumptions we make about the other person. Fifteen-year-olds *must* be excited about getting their driver's permit in the coming year. Twenty-somethings *must* be looking for a spouse or starting their careers or families. Those in their 60's are *obviously* anticipating retirement. But those assumptions are not true for everyone.

There are a lot of younger individuals today who wait for years before they get their driver's license. Those in their 20s are making more diverse choices for their lives than ever before. And a lot of people are rejecting the idea of retirement previously held by our parents and working longer. We need to be cautious about assumptions we make based on the number of years an individual has enjoyed life on earth.

Don't believe generational stereotypes. The generational labels that are commonplace today were invented by the marketing industry in the 1980s. "Boomers", "Millennials", "Gen X" etc. are labels given to people born within an arbitrary set of years in order to generalize common characteristics to help attract customers. I am certain that we have all heard comments about the generation to which we have been assigned that we know are not true for ourselves. Although there may be some helpful generalizations when using generational labels,

they can be more of a detriment for relationships between individuals and smaller groups than they are helpful. Be cautious when using these labels. Or better yet avoid them altogether.

We all have gifts and knowledge. Each one of us has gifts to share with others. How we share our expertise, knowledge or gifts matters. There are times when we can share from a role of mentor. Other times we might be more of a coach. And sometimes as Teacher or a friend. Beware of the ways in which knowledge, experience or expertise are used or perceived as power. Be careful when value to gifts or knowledge is based on the age of the giver. Even “experts” continue to learn new things. And “letting go” can be as important as “letting come” with the give and take of community life.

We all continue to grow. No one of us is the same today as we were yesterday, or last year, or a decade ago. Aging is all about change. Hopefully those changes enable us to continue growing until we take our last breath. The amount of information we learn continues to accumulate in our finite brains. Our imaginations continue to grow and can be as or more important in later life than it is in childhood. All of the world’s major religions suggest that the spiritual journey is one that is lifelong, and which leads us into new awareness of our relationships with each other and the divine. We can also continue to grow in our emotional health and experience an increase in happiness as we age.

And we all change. Aging equals change. If we expect that we will someday reach our pinnacle and never change again, we limit our social, psychological, and spiritual growth. If we expect change we will be more likely to embrace the aging process. Expecting change can increase our quality of life even as we experience the less desirable decline that happens over time within our physical bodies.

We are interdependent. No matter our age, we need other people. We need communities where we can receive support and care as much as we are willing to share it with others. There is no shame in acknowledging that we are all vulnerable and our lives are dependent on relationships with others.

Our teachers can be younger and older. Even though our teachers during our childhood were older than ourselves, as we mature it is increasingly helpful to find ways to learn from those who are younger. *Not all older people are wise and not all wise people are older.* How do we open ourselves to the wisdom embodied in the varied experiences of those around us? How well do we truly listen to the stories of those of all ages and abilities?

Share from your own experience. Don’t relay or repeat stereotypes about persons of different ages. And be willing to share from your experience when generalizations or stereotypes are made that do not connect with that experience.

One last note: When we talk about intergenerational communication or relationships, we are not just talking about those who are very old (grandparents) communicating with those who are very young (children). Think through the decades or think through life “stages” or circumstances to generate rich diversity. For instance, in thinking about care givers, don’t just assume that these are individuals who are in mid-life (40-50). There are many in their 20 and 30s who are care giving and there are many over the age of 70 who are caring for loved ones older and younger than themselves. Invite them to see connections from their similar experiences as opposed to focusing on their different ages or labeled generations.