

Generations Serving Together

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In 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam was faced with his first big leadership challenge as the king of Israel, and he met with his advisors to seek their wisdom. It is interesting to note that he met with them in two separate groups though. “Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, ‘How do you advise me to answer this people?’” (1 Kings 12:6). After listening to their advice, he met with his “other” group of counselors. “But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him” (1 Kings 12:8). The different advice from the two camps reflected a generational tension among the leadership of God’s people and destroyed the unity of the nation of Israel.

Certainly we are right to wonder how those older, wiser leaders in Rehoboam’s day had failed to mentor and lead those younger men. They should never have allowed the situation to reach the point where there were two groups of leaders. And yet, before we judge them too harshly, we should note that generational disagreements are common among God’s people today, too. Most assemblies contain some Christians who love the “old hymns” as well some younger members who enjoy singing the songs they have learned at youth rallies and church camps. Issues like how we incorporate technology into our worship service and even the way we dress when we assemble for worship tend to pit different generations of Christians against each other. Our culture is one that tries to fragment us into “microcultures” based on our generation. Advertisers have split us all into different “demographics” and treat us as if we only have things in common with those closest to us in age. When these ideas come into the church, we can see the same fragmentation of the body of Christ. Suddenly the youth group is no longer a specific enough category for our school age members. Church bulletins around the country trumpet events for Tweenagers, Junior High, and High School students. But the divisions don’t stop with the children! Twenty somethings become young marrieds who graduate to the parenting classes at church. As their children are categorized in the youth group, the parents will naturally begin to gather with other parents whose children are in the same classes. After the children graduate (and join the college group), the parents are added to the Empty Nesters before finally joining the

Senior Saints. While such divisions allow a church to focus its ministries on the issues facing specific groups of members, they can unintentionally lead to such fragmentation that the individual members feel more a part of their “group” than their congregation as a whole. When that happens, the stage is set for some ugly generational clashes!

A Foundation of Relationship

What is needed is common ground. And while many wars have been fought over worship styles and practices, one area where everyone can find agreement is service. Intergenerational service, where members of different ages work together in ministry, has proven to be a great source of blessings. When we serve together, we lay a foundation for a relationship with each other. And when those relationships are built in service, they can then be used to deal with other, more difficult issues. Working alongside each other allows us to have conversations about topics that range from the weather to some of the more thorny issues of theology.

Teach Instead of Tell

In addition to laying a foundation, having generations serve together and serve one another allows the older generation to teach instead of just tell the younger ones about truth and wisdom. Life lessons can be taught in service projects. Recently at our congregation some ladies got the young people together and taught them how to bake homemade bread. The youth group then took the loaves they had baked and delivered them to widows in our congregation. In this one project, the younger generation learned a lesson about baking bread as well as taking care of widows. In another project, our older members adopted members of the youth group and encouraged them throughout their work that year in our Lads to Leaders program. Each child received great encouragement but was also taught a lesson in how to personally encourage another Christian. Many of them also developed relationships that blossomed into friendships that have lasted through the years. We remember so much more of what we are shown than what we are told and serving together is a great way to teach the lessons we want the next generation to learn instead of just telling them.

Our Strongest Service

When we serve together, we also realize the full potential of work that we can do. Combining the energy of youth with the wisdom and experience that only comes with age brings

about a greater level of service than either group could achieve alone. Reaching out to our community is hard work, and it takes each member working together to do our best work. Our congregation hosts a Christmas meal that is open to the entire community. We also deliver meals throughout our county. In fact, that day 1 out of every 10 residents in our county eats a Christmas meal that was prepared and delivered by members of the church. This project is so big that several area congregations help us with it. But even with their help, no one generational group is big enough to pull off all the planning and work it takes to reach out to our community in such a big way. Only when the whole church works together can we realize the full potential of our abilities.

Whose Job Is It?

Whether they use PowerPoint, flannelgraph, stained glass windows, or just a pile of rocks (see Joshua 4), God has always expected the older generation to teach the younger generation the truth and practice of the faith. This may occur within a family, but increasingly, it is happening within the church family as a whole. Being part of the church is a privilege that God has given us for a time. But when our time is up, we cannot simply tell the next generation, “We were faithful! Good luck to you!” God expects more of us than that. Paul encouraged the older women to teach the younger women (Titus 2) and he himself referred to Timothy as his “son in the faith” (Philippians 2:22). Within the church, intergenerational relationships often provide opportunities for mentoring that would never occur in another setting. It is the duty and responsibility of the older generation to reach out to the next generation.

A congregational plan for having the generations work side by side would have to include serving together and serving each other. Projects that involve the entire congregation are great opportunities for the generations to grow closer together as they serve together. In addition to this, the church paints a more realistic picture of itself for the community. The truth is that most congregations are not “young” or “old” but a mixture of generations. When the community sees these generations serving together, they get a clearer picture of the church as God intended it to be. But a good plan for serving together should also include having the generations serve one another. Let the youth prepare a meal for their parents or host a banquet for the senior citizens. The older members can also honor and encourage the youth. As the generations practice serving one another, they find common ground and learn to respect their differences. Through it all, the

body of Christ will grow in maturity and in number. The church was never designed to be a one generation operation. Rather it is a timeless movement in which each generation takes its place as leaders for a time and then hands it off to the next generation of leaders. It is wonderful to be able to mentor and teach that next generation of Christian leaders. What a comfort to know that the next generation of the church will be guided and led by those we are training today!