



Encouraging intergenerational faith communities to flourish through leadership



Tammy Preston was the founding pastor of an intergenerational faith community in Australia for 18 years and is a founding member of Intergenerate Australia/New Zealand. She is currently doing her PhD in Intergenerational Ministry at Cardiff University in Wales. Here, Tammy shares some of her research findings about effective intergenerational leadership.

Over the past three years, as part of my PhD, I have interviewed 114 people from intergenerational faith communities. I spoke to a range of people, including volunteers and paid church leaders, as I wanted a balanced representation of all generations. My aim was to understand the structures and behaviours that encourage an intergenerational faith community to flourish.

The most interesting observation (and one I did not anticipate during my studies) was the noticeable difference in leadership styles. In some communities, I observed 'ladder' or 'bridge' leadership structures, which convey a familiar image in Western culture: thinking about leadership as helping others 'move across' or 'climb towards' the leader's goal.

Siloed churches¹ found it challenging to transition into intergenerational communities, as many leaders haven't received training in different ways to lead. As one pastor confessed: 'Leaders don't understand the power they have got. They lack imagination and the ability to adapt and imagine another way.'

However, the communities who adopted different styles of leadership found it easier to flourish across all the ages.

A different style of leadership

Leaders who want to engage all ages must consider their mindset, language, and the structures they operate within. Instead of a 'ladder' or 'bridge' structure, it may be helpful to describe the way a community serves, worships, and learns together as a circle. Faith communities see and describe themselves as family; a village of people of all ages doing life together for a greater purpose than themselves. Changing the language and structure shifts the community's direction and sense of belonging.

Leading an intergenerational community needs creativity and new ideas. Children's and youth workers, and the arts can help us to think creatively and to learn about leading differently towards collaboratively shaped goals. It is interesting that these voices and ways of creating and working have been siloed in many mainline churches.

We can also consider how Jesus led, and follow his example. Jesus modelled the body concept² in the way he led. The pace was slower, more inclusive, rich and communal. Through his leadership, Jesus showed the power of the circle rather than the ladder. A circle where no one is more important than the other and everyone brings different gifts to the table. A circle encourages a listening posture, ensuring all voices are heard, accepted, and valued.

This is a brave form of leadership and requires humility and patience. As one pastor said: 'If it is all up to me, then the community is robbed of other people's genius and other people's creativity. We benefit from other people's contributions; it is the community of God's people gathering and contributing their gifts and we all benefit from it.'

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What do these different leadership styles look like?

When we consider frameworks that encourage all generations to engage in serving, worshipping and learning together, there are styles of leadership and environments that connect rather than separate communities.

Walking with versus talking to

I asked a 13-year-old what learning and worshipping together looks like. She said:

'People can talk about the message together; adults can still learn even though it is presented in a child-friendly way. We do it together.'

¹ Siloed churches are where children, youth, and adults meet in separate spaces according to age, for learning and/or worship. In contrast to an intergenerational church where worship and learning is done together, building accepting, mutual and reciprocal relationships between the generations.

² 1 Corinthians 12

“To shift meetings from consumption to conversation, faith communities must embrace social interactions, laughter and walking ‘with’ each other.”

An 80-year-old church member also explained: ‘We listen to each other and respect each other. Within the framework of services, listening time, creative time, discussion time. It is varied; it is built into our rhythm.’

It’s a way of leading that is about walking ‘with’ rather than talking ‘to’. Jesus was 40 times more likely to ask questions than answer them. To shift meetings from consumption to conversation, faith communities must embrace social interactions, laughter and ‘walking with’ each other. This approach fosters connection and combats isolation.

Acceptance versus winning the argument

Interviews with community members consistently showed that intergenerational spaces thrive when founded on acceptance and love, rather than arguments and preferences.

A 75-year-old said: ‘A matter of love and respect, that makes our community different. We don’t place conditions on each other.’

A member described how well the leadership led a whole church meeting to discuss a difficult issue. She said: ‘The church provided an arena in a safe way. Lots of parameters, everyone gets to speak and ask questions. Many agreed to disagree, but relationships are still good.’

Society and social media highlight the importance of being right, which creates division and hostility. Gatherings that accept and celebrate differences create a rich environment for all ages.

Mutuality versus my way

‘A mixed age group is good when we eat together. Love hearing what young and old have to say. I am happy to be in mixed groups. I think it is more interesting. I am interested in what our youngest or eldest have to say.’ (74-year-old)

I explore the meaning of the word, ‘collide’ in my book of the same title. Rather than something negative, the scientific definition refers to the close approach of two or more particles or substances that results in an abrupt change of momentum or exchange of energy. Different age groups see the same thing through different lenses. When we encourage age groups to ‘collide’, it has the potential to transform us all. This mutual exchange of viewpoints and ideas is a wonderful framework for all ages doing life together. But it requires us to turn toward each other and ‘collide’ rather than to stay isolated.

Collaboration versus individualisation

A 26-year-old said: ‘It’s always being able to have a voice in spaces like AGM’s, etc. Brainstorming and all having a chance to speak out and see it come to life.’

Ninety-five per cent of those I interviewed, aged five to 95, valued a collective voice in learning, teaching, worshipping and serving God. As one 54-year-old member said about serving together, ‘For me, it gets hard when you try to do it by yourself. It is the ‘doing’ together that makes it better and easier. The times I find it difficult are when I have to do it by myself. Even to have just one person on the journey with me, all of a sudden, I feel blessed and encouraged. The task feels easier and more achievable.’

So, what keeps people together? The sense of collaboration. That thought that if I am not there, a part is missing, and it won’t be complete. A 15-year-old reflected on serving with the older generation: ‘In preparation for the autumn fair, me and my sisters always helped the older ladies with baking apples pies. I felt all grown up and special that they allowed us to whisk the eggs. I felt like I was contributing towards something for the whole community to enjoy.’

Being a follower of Jesus is about community over individuality. As Romans 12:4-6 teaches, believers are like parts of one body. Each with different roles, but all belonging to and supporting one another.

I observed a transformative whole-community meeting aimed at introducing a new ministry that would impact all aspects of community life. The community had been divided, but months of open communication, shared information and opportunities for input helped foster unity. Respected elders collaboratively led the meeting and included and listened to voices from all ages. Leadership was shared, not centred on the pastor. No one tried to win the argument and they walked it out together. As an older attendee reflected: ‘I came undecided... I felt the unity. The tone of the meeting and the way people spoke from the heart was great.’

The pastor echoed this, saying, ‘Today shifted something... It was giving all people a voice, and to be heard.’

This meeting demonstrated a different style of leadership right across the whole community.

What could this look like in your faith community?

When leading a faith community seeking to be intentionally intergenerational, consider whether your leadership styles and structures will encourage the community to flourish.

Do you need to *walk with* rather than *talk to* each other? How can you practice more acceptance, mutuality, and collaboration?

This may be challenging for leaders who have led with a different style for a long time. But we must be open to the humble reminder that Jesus came to serve all people with compassion. Jesus was inclusive, treated people equally and empowered all voices to be valued and heard. I want to be that kind of leader, don’t you?

This is the kind of leadership that can enable our intergenerational communities to flourish.

Want to learn more?

- Listen to a conversation with Tammy on this topic on the Roots podcast; www.rootsforchurches.podbean.com
- Watch Tammy Preston and Darren Philip’s Webinar on the Roots YouTube channel. bit.ly/4ex1D3d
- Read Tammy’s book *Collide*. <https://bit.ly/44pog1q>

This is the last in our **Intergenerational series**, we hope you have enjoyed the range of articles – all of which you can revisit here: www.rootsforchurches.com/i-g