

Church as Family Model for Ministry By Jason Stanland

1. The Average Church

A new problem faces American churches, this is the first time that we have 5 different generations that all attend church.¹ There are very few institutions that even have to deal with this problem. Most of our institutions are geared towards specific age groups according to their needs. However, the church actually has to have a place for all 5 generations to interact and integrate. Furthermore, for the church to be theologically and missiologically healthy, it must integrate all 5 generations.

Unfortunately, the average American church is highly segregated according to generation. According to Haydn Shaw, generational differences in America are more influential today than cultural differences due to the globalization of media and culture.² Two people from different, American cultural backgrounds and from the same generation will have more in common than two people from different generations than the same cultural background. This means that if you have a multicultural church, the senior adults from different cultural backgrounds will have more in common with each other than with their grandchildren from Generation Z.

In the average American church, the youth ministry is what I call the “step-child ministry out back.” The church bought an old house adjacent to the property and fixed it up as the youth house where the students can be as loud as they want, play whatever crazy games they want, and can even ride their skateboards without the adults from the main campus getting annoyed. So, the trendy youth pastor gives the youth group a trendy name, and they have trendy music, with a trendy atmosphere.

What happens when that child grows up out of the youth group and goes to college? They go looking for a trendy college group with trendy music and a trendy atmosphere. What happens when they graduate from college? They will struggle to integrate into “big church” with the other adults, because they have been living in a silo ministry for the last 6-11 years of their lives if they faithfully attended church all that time. In that model, there is no intergenerational ministry. You actually have two or more churches each with its own styles and preferences. There cannot be “big church, youth church, or kids church.” There needs to be the church.

Now, maybe you grew up in one of those youth groups, or maybe you led one of those youth groups. My first church I had a youth building that was a couple city blocks away than the main campus. We had to do it because we were out of space as a church. I say “step-child ministry out back” in a way that is “tongue and cheek,” but unfortunately this is the way that many churches are structured. You create multiple churches that are separated for the different age groups, and the result is there is no integration in the church.

The consequence of this model is that the students will struggle to become integrated, participating adults in the life of the church because they have very few experiences relating to the adults in their church. Therefore, they could potentially have more in common with the lost kids in their generation than with the Christian adults in their own church. According to 2 Corinthians 6:14 that should be impossible because what does the light and the darkness have in common? However, this is a symptom of a much larger problem, one that was really first documented in the 2005 in the National Study of Youth and Religion where students were not continuing the faith into their adulthood.³ When I have spiritual conversations with people who do not attend church, they often tell me fond memories of when they were teenagers in a youth group, but not often do they talk about the church as a whole.

The goal of proper discipleship is when a person moves away from home, he/she immediately looks for a new church home, because the church is his/her people. The church is his/her family. Therefore, I suggest what I call the “Church as Family” model for ministry. In a family, there is naturally multiple generations: children, parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and so on.

2. Biblical Foundation for the “Church as Family Model”

We have examples of families in Scripture. Timothy had a faith heritage from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice as noted in 2 Timothy 1:5. Paul had clearly interacted with them. Faith is supposed to be passed down from generation to generation. Many Christian parents would affirm this. The Old Testament of course has Deuteronomy 6, which many of us know and have preached about parents passing on their faith. Many of us who are parents want to accomplish this in our own families, but in our churches we follow a different pattern. This is why I created the “Church as Family Model” for my ministry.

Scripture refers to the church in familial terms. In Romans 8:14-17, we read words like “sons, Abba father, children of God, heirs, and fellow heirs with Christ.” I believe this rhetoric came about in the early church because the families of many of the believers were ostracized from them when they became Christians. The church then became their family for them. Often we read where they referred to each other as brother or sister. This is really what the church is designed to do is to become family for the other believers, because once you become Christian you should have more in common with a Christian from another culture than a non-Christian that lives down your street.

So, let’s apply the “Church as Family Model.” In a family there are kids, parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, maybe even great-grandparents. Start thinking of your people in these kind of roles. If you have a 13 year old kid who just became a Christian but has no family members who are Christian, the church will need to step into the other family roles. The goal is to get students to interact with as many godly adults as possible. Richard Ross wrote that the more adults the student builds strong connections with, the more likely that student is to continue in his/her faith.⁴

3. Programming

Once you adopted the “Church as Family Model,” you will need to adjust your ministry’s programming to accommodate for family time. Just like parents may set aside Tuesday as “family night,” you can set aside some programming for family styled events in your ministry.

Some Examples:

- Have a Volunteer Team that is Multi-generational
 - Start by recruiting volunteers in your ministry from all the generations. Too often, a youth pastor recruits too heavy to one age bracket. If he recruits a lot of collegiate aged kids, there will be lots of energy and fun, but little wisdom.
 - If the student pastor recruits all senior adults, they will lack energy.
 - There needs to be a balanced approach.
 - As a bonus, you can pair a more mature Christian/teacher with a younger teacher to aid in the discipleship of that younger teacher as well. This gives the church better longevity for its leadership.
- Cross-Train Students to Serve in Other Areas of the Church
 - Recruit your students to serve in different areas of the church. This is good for their growth as disciples, it helps the other ministries, and it gives the students access to more adults in the church.
 - We have students who help in our Kid’s Cove Worship. They lead worship, play guitar. Just like leading worship in youth group, but they do it for the kids.
 - We have a similar tech set up in the middle school room as the other 3 worship spaces on our campus.
 - On any given Sunday there is likely a student running a camera for our Sunday morning live stream, and they learned how in student ministry on a much smaller, cheaper camera!
 - Students make excellent greeters. As a bonus strategy, we ask students and their parents to be greeters in a rotation. This is good for the family as they can grow together.
 - Students can serve 1/month in our children’s and preschool ministries. Middle School can serve in Preschool, and High School in Elementary.
- Fun Cross-over Events
 - I hosted a game night one time for students and senior adults. It was 2½ hours long. We ate for 30 minutes, then the senior adults taught the students how to play their favorite games: dominos, pokeno, poker... just kidding.
 - The second hour, we pulled out the students’ favorite games. There was a Nintendo Wii, speak out with the mouth piece.
 - There was a girl name Becca there who had this disgusting habit of playing with her retainer in her mouth. Her mom caught her and told her to stop. One of our Senior Adults, Mrs. Donaldson said, “It’s ok, I play with mine all the time too,” and spit out her dentures. The students thought that was the funniest thing!
- Prayer Bookmarks
 - Lean into the strengths of the different age groups.

- We are making bookmarks for our senior adults right now that have all the major events for the student ministry listed on them. We are then sending students to their Sunday School classrooms to hand them out, explain our events, and ask the senior adults to pray for our ministry.
- Those Senior adults will be so eager to talk to those kids, and those kids won't realize what an asset in prayer those senior adults will be for them until much later in their lives.
- Prayer Partners [TIME]
 - My first experience with inter-generational ministry was when I was a kid.
 - My dad has been serving in his church for over 30 years now
 - He originally came as Pastor of Music and Youth
 - So, as a kid I went to camps, the beach, and Wet n' Wild with the teenagers
 - The church grew too big for Dad to do both, so he chose music ministry, and they hired a student pastor
 - As a bonus, Dad also became the Senior Adult Pastor, which he says is just like youth ministry. You go on trips, you eat a lot of food, and you even have boyfriend-girlfriend drama.
 - So, I went from Wet n' Wild to peanut boils and Gaither Concerts
 - Then Dad had an idea called Bridging the Gap
 - He connected senior adults to students as prayer partners. I got three while in high school. One was dud, but the other 2 were really good.
 - The last was Delmer Northam. Delmer Northam was a marine, who retired, became an arborist, climbed trees in his late 60's and cut them down, and would drink a hot cup of coffee at 2p in July.
 - Delmer would weekly check up on me. When I announced I was going into ministry, Delmer became one of my best advocates.
 - When I moved to the Baptist College of Florida, Delmer would send me McDonald's gift cards in the mail with notes of encouragement.
 - I can still remember the exact place I was at when I got the call he passed away from his cancer.
 - I still remember him.

¹ Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future is Bright* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2015), 184.

² Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 11-12.

³ Smith, Christian and Melinda Lundquist Denton. 2005. [Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Richard Ross, *The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 2015), 154-167.