Review

Cory Seibel, ed., *Engage All Generations: A Strategic Toolkit for Creating Intergenerational Faith Communities*, 2021. Abilene: ACU Press. 239 pages. ISBN 978-1684263219

By Michael Mawhorter, DMin

Overview and Purpose

We live in a society that has long segregated generations, creating almost distinct cultures within each: Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and emerging Gen Beta. We educate our kids by grades, have age divisions in social clubs and sports teams, and have adults only housing complexes, just to name a few.

The church, to some degree at least, often contributes to this generational divide, with graded Sunday Schools and Kid's Clubs, Junior and Senior High youth groups, young adult groups, as well as men's, women's and seniors' groups. This way of organizing our ministries comes from a desire for effectiveness in reaching and building people of different ages. The editor, Cory Seibel writes: "Sadly, one unintended consequence of this is that the church's capacity to offer our culture any sort of prophetic alternative to the intergenerational malaise that is so prevalent at present has been neutralized." (22)

Grappling with the tragedy of so many young people leaving the church after high school, the feelings of neglect and irrelevance by many seniors, and the general aging of the North American church, there is growing interest in many churches to become more intergenerational in our ministries, bringing generations together rather than segregating them. At least two of the contributors have pointed out that it is possible for a typical church to have representatives from seven different generations.

The chapters in *Engage All Generations* are a compendium of material from the second InterGenerate Conference, held at Lipscomb University in Nashville, May 20-22, 2019. Seibel, writes in his introduction:

> This book is composed of chapters based upon presentations given at the 2019 InterGenerate Conference. It represents a continuation of the conversation captured in the book *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches*

through Intergenerational Ministry, which reflected what took place at the inaugural InterGenerate Conference in 2017. (18)

The forward points out:

> Cory Seibel has compiled and edited as much of the conference as he could get into this book—the keynotes, papers, and workshops that *legitimize the conversation,* address those crucial *why* questions, and share the *one another-ness* stories of churches on the intergenerational journey." (Allen, 16)

The Three Sections

The book is divided into three sections, with multiple contributors in each.

Part One, **"Learning and Growing Together,"** provides a "wide-ranging exploration of what it means for people of all ages to be formed in faith in the context of intergenerational community." (24) In its eight chapters, it looks at the subject of intergenerational ministry theoretically from biblical, theological, and social-science perspectives. Then shows some practical ways that this is being applied in various contexts.

One goal of the section is to express why this is important: "Why should the church bring generations together in intentional relationship? Stated simply, to nurture Christ-centered community." (Perraud, 84)

Part Two, **"Praying and Playing Together,"** explores how intergenerational community can be fostered through spiritual practices, specifically singing, storytelling, and listening to Scripture together. But it also advocates playing together in a variety of settings. The thesis of the section is that as the generations become comfortable doing things together, they will grow in understanding and appreciation of each other. The eight chapters in this section describe how various churches have worked to bring generations together in worship and play.

Part Three, **"Leading and Changing Together,"** deals with some of the practical questions about becoming more intergenerational as a church. "One question many leaders find particularly pressing is how to guide a congregation through the process of change required to help it become more intentionally generational." (25). The six chapters in this section look at how to help a church

transition from a multigenerational to intergenerational focus, including some tools; as well as assistance in cross-generational communication.

The book ends with a concluding chapter by John Roberto on "Pathways to an Intergenerational Future."

Strengths

This is a helpful book that approaches the subject from a variety of perspectives, appealing to the artistic, theological, practical, and strategic facets of intergenerational ministry. One of the strengths of the book is the variety of contributors who are active practitioners. They are able to articulate the theoretical underpinnings of ministry to all generations but are also doing it. They approach the challenge from different directions, and focus on different aspects of intergenerational ministry, resulting in a broad-spectrum view of the challenges and opportunities.

One especially helpful component of the book was the definition of terms. Tolman describes the distinctions between multigenerational and intergenerational as what happens when a family comes to church. If they all go their separate ways, they are multigenerational. Intergenerational ministry attempts more mutuality in bringing the generations together to serve, worship, and learn. (198)

Merhaut, referencing a paper from the United Church of Canada, *Defining Multicultural, Cross-cultural, and Intercultural*, writes:

> Drawing from this resource and applying its language to intergenerational spaces, it could be said that the multigenerational environment is characterized by tolerance, living alongside, and superficial, polite interaction; in the cross-generational environment, there is some sharing, listening, and learning, but little individual or collective transformation; the intergenerational environment is one of comprehensive mutuality, equality, and reciprocity that makes individual and collective transformation more likely. (216)

These distinctions are helpful in clarifying where congregations fall in dealing with the various generations.

The book is also motivational, showing why "creating environments where the generations collide" (Tollman, 198) is so valuable, reinforcing how becoming more intergenerational tracks theologically, and showing practical strategies to help congregations grow in the intersection of the various generations that call that church home. Whether readers will be motivated to transition to a fully intergenerational ministry or work to bring the various generations together while maintaining some age-graded programs, they will have a greater sensitivity to and appreciation of the range of generational involvement in their churches.

Concerns

One area of concern is whether the book is practical enough in helping a church become intergenerational. Many of the contributors are in staff positions, overseeing a particular portfolio, rather than lead pastors, responsible for the unified direction of the whole. The advantage is that they are hands-on involved, so what they have to say is relevant and practical. However, there could have been more practical guidance on transitioning the church. It would have been helpful to see more attention to how intergenerational ministry was implemented, how long it took, and what advantages and disadvantages surfaced in the process.

Another concern (although concern is perhaps too strong a word) is with some of the exercises and projects described to help generate greater understanding and appreciation. Some seemed superficial or contrived. However, different approaches will appeal to different people. But with all of them, then what? How do they build on the experiences generated to help move the church forward?

Conclusion

Church leaders have a desire to see all the generations involved in their congregations grow in their faith and commitment to the Lord, and for people of all ages to feel a sense of value and belonging. This book is a helpful resource in working toward the generations growing together in their faith and commitment. It could be a valuable book for church staffs to work through together, to help formulate a comprehensive strategy toward more generational sensitivity and intergenerational ministry.

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