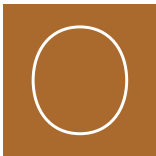




**Craig Ashby** reflects on what Alexandra Baptist Church is doing to bring generations together in worship, learning and fellowship.



ver the past few years I've noticed something pretty interesting. It seems to me that, generally speaking, the modern church has a tendency to separate and segregate Christians primarily along age/

stage distinctions.

I realise this is essentially stating the obvious, but in many of the churches I've been involved with virtually all of the ministries were broadly divided into the following age-related ministry categories:

- Children (up to 10 years)
- Intermediate (11-12 years)
- Youth (13-18 years)
- Young Adults (19-35 years)
- Adults (35-65 years)
- Seniors (65+ years)

Maybe your church is different. But my experience has been that these broad age-specific categories are common across many contemporary churches. And while I know there are undoubtedly significant spiritual and practical benefits to these age/stage distinctions, I still have had a nagging feeling that, in addition to the good work these specific ministries do, perhaps there should also be opportunities for all those within the church to collectively gather to worship, learn and grow together.

To be fair, this is probably what most churches aim to do each Sunday morning, albeit for a short time before the children's ministry or other age-related activities begin. Peter Menconi perceptively describes such situations in churches where the generations are passing each other with minimal meaningful contact as being 'like ships in the night'.<sup>1</sup>

When I began working with Alexandra Baptist Church (ABC) in 2015, I saw the potential for intentionally encouraging a culture of intergenerational ministry. Since then we have been on a journey to try and deliberately foster a sense of intergenerational spiritual formation within ABC. The lessons we've learned have largely been worked out from reading and research,<sup>2</sup> conversations within our leadership team, and subsequent interactions with members of our local church community, particularly our children's ministry team.

#### **Church-wide strategy**

In January 2017 we collectively formulated a church-wide strategy we hoped would begin to foster and underpin a culture of intergenerational ministry. This strategy drew upon *The Foundations of Ministry and Mission with Children and Families* document prepared by Baptist Children and Family Ministries.<sup>3</sup>

The strategy attempted to provide a pathway for the enhancement and extension of the children's ministry

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at ABC. On reflection, it has been really beneficial in providing clarity for the direction and quality of the children's ministry. However, of even greater importance is the way in which this strategy has increased our awareness of the simple and yet significant ways in which intergenerational Christian formation can happen within the wider church community at ABC.

For example, there are now four young people (ages nine, 12, 16 and 17) who regularly play with the main worship band at our Sunday morning gatherings. These young people are valued for what they bring to the team, and in return they have appreciated the musical advice and genuine care older members of the team show.

Joseph, one of our teenage musicians, remarks that "being part of the ABC worship team is one of the most satisfying ways to end a stressful week. While being on stage may seem anything but relaxing, the fellowship found in the team, along with the joy of all of us who are genuinely passionate about serving the Lord, really creates a worthwhile experience for all involved."

Other young people have contributed to Sunday morning services by reading Scripture, leading Communion, and sharing some of their personal stories and experiences. We have regularly shared stories from our older members before, but when our young people talked openly about their struggles and successes, many of those present gained a greater insight and awareness of what life is like for the younger generations.

All of this has helped foster a greater level of interconnectedness across the various generations at ABC.

### **Worship stations**

Perhaps one of the most significant events that helped demonstrate the importance of intergenerational Christian formation during 2017 was our worship stations event. At the culmination of a 10-week teaching series through Philippians titled 'Joyful', we arranged for the entire church to participate in a number of worship stations during the Sunday morning service.

Each station was based on a section of Philippians that had previously been taught on and required participants to actively do something. Some stations were reflective and contemplative; others were tactile and practical. For example, one station required participants to add a Lego brick to a tower as a demonstration of their God-given gifts contributing to the wider body of Christ (Philippians 2:1-2). One mother who was building Lego towers alongside her two small children said to me, "We've never had so much fun nor learnt so much in church together before!"

Initially many of the older church members were hesitant about the idea of these activities being a form of 'worship'. Nevertheless, they persevered—perhaps just to humour me! By the end of the event,

everyone seemed to have gained something really substantial out of the whole process.

John, a senior member of ABC, observed that "contemporary services can be very busy, leaving little time for person reflection. For this reason, I appreciated the 'Joyful' stations. For me, they were reminiscent of the Via Dolorosa which Christians have participated in for centuries."

We were blown away by how surprised and excited both young and old were when they realised they could genuinely worship God and reflect upon what he has done for us in ways that did not revolve around music or a sermon. What was particularly encouraging was seeing families explore the worship stations together and practice intentional spiritual formation through their conversations and interactions, something I believe families rarely get the opportunity to do together in traditional models of church practice.<sup>4</sup>

### **Where to from here?**

While there has been some progress in our intentional focus on intergenerational Christian formation for those who are part of ABC, we still have much to learn. As our society becomes increasingly fragmented,



*Members of ABC stack Lego bricks as a tangible reminder of their God-given gifts.*



our desire is to continue to encourage people to belong to the body of Christ irrespective of their age or stage.

Allen and Ross capture the importance of this for spiritual formation when they write: "But for intergenerational Christian formation to happen, the generations must be together; they must know each other; and they must experience life in the body of Christ together."<sup>5</sup>

This is certainly our aim, and while we're not there yet I'm excited and encouraged to be on this journey for the glory of God and for the growth of his people.



**Story: Craig Ashby**

Craig is Lead Pastor of Alexandra Baptist Church. He loves Jesus, his family, his church, his community, mountain biking and berry ice-cream, pretty much in that order.

**1. Peter Menconi**, *The Intergenerational Church: Understanding Congregations from WWII to www.com* (Littleton, CO: Mt. Sage Publishing, 2010), cited in Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 19.

**2. The text we drew most from was Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross**, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 29-46.

**3. Baptist Children and Families Ministries**, *The Foundations of Ministry and Mission with Children and Families*, 2015.

**4. Allen and Ross** identify this as a significant benefit of conducting a worship stations event (see p.201).

**5. Allen and Ross**, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 270-271.

# Karen says



Karen Warner, National Team Leader  
Children & Family Ministries

## MIXING GENERATIONS TOGETHER

When I think about my own spiritual formation, I am taken back to a man named Paul. Not the Paul of the New Testament, but a retired man with an anchor tattoo. I was in my teens and one of a group of young people trying to work out our faith and understand Scripture. Paul had recently retired. I guess he could have put his feet up or gone fishing, but instead he chose to speak into our lives each week. He told us stories, shared his faith, unpacked Scripture and challenged our thinking. I wonder who did that for you?

When I talk with pastors like Craig, who are wrestling with what it means to be the church and to see spiritual formation as something that involves people of all ages engaging together, I get excited. I am reminded why the Bible calls us to be a body of people who learn, serve and worship together. I had a young pastor in my office this week, who asked his congregation the difference between a dream and a vision—and the best answer came from a nine-year-old child!

Last year I met with a group of pastors in Nelson. We were talking about ways in which we could mix the generations together: ways that were natural and allowed relationships to develop. Shannan, from Blenheim Baptist, claimed the answer to this was for every pastor to have a pizza oven! He went on to tell us what had happened when they invited the congregation over for pizza. As the people were mixing around the tables, sharing cheese and olives, conversations were happening; older and younger were getting to know each other and relationships were forming. He went on to tell us that he saw fruit from this, as these same people interacted together on Sunday mornings. They knew each other, they talked together and they valued each other.

I believe this is the way God created us to be; the way he created us to grow and learn. It's all about relationship. Knowing each other, valuing each other and sharing the journey of faith together. This is the body of Christ in action.

So, let's all go out and buy a pizza oven! ■