

Come, Let Us Worship

BY TERRY W. YORK

“Old and young together!” exclaims the psalmist, “Let them praise the name of the Lord.” Congregations are realizing this vision in creative ways, through cross-generational worship in which all ages help plan, lead, and participate in their coming together to adore God, encourage faithful discipleship, and nurture community.

Despite much good that is done in generation-focused congregations and their worship, there is a growing awareness that we need to reunite the generations for worship. Congregations are beginning to experiment with cross-generational approaches in which members of all ages help plan, lead, and participate in worship. Here are helpful resources for establishing cross-generational worship.[†]

FINDING A COMMON STORY

Those who “grew up” in church or who have been members for many decades are a “membership generation” quite apart from those who joined recently, no matter what their age. Gil Rendle, in *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (The Alban Institute, 2002; 150 pp., \$18.00), focuses on differences between long-term and short-term membership generations, but he also makes helpful observations about cross-generational worship.

Rendle finds that stories are fertile ground on which the generations can meet. He invites members to “find the [biblical] story they are living, and...to explain why they believe they are living that story. [He] will often expand the possibilities, allowing the group to use a denominational hymn if they prefer to find the hymn they are living” (p. 52). As they weave together the biblical story, Christianity’s story, the congregation’s story, and their personal stories, members realize that they are living together in

a colorful tapestry of overlapping and intersecting narratives.

Multi-generational congregations are indeed “countercultural institutions in an increasingly market-driven culture,” Rendle admits (p. 23). They may face tension and conflict when they move toward cross-generational worship. If this struggle is identified and explained early in the process, it can be approached as a challenge, a goal for the community to accomplish together. Congregations can meet the challenge when they enjoy strong, yet flexible, leadership, foster careful communication on the part of clergy and laity, and keep in mind the value of cross-generational worship. The generations do, in fact, need each other.

THE NEED TO LINK THREE GENERATIONS

Certainly, worship is closely linked to a congregation’s whole life: worship energizes a church’s entire ministry, even as other dimensions of congregational life energize worship. That is why participating in the whole, working together and worshiping together, lies at the heart of cross-generational congregations. Their worship fits with, and expresses, the joy they share in a sweep of cross-generational ministries.

Still, it takes arduous spiritual and emotional work to understand what other generations’ “music and dancing are all about.” Henri Nouwen explores this implication of the generations coming together in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Doubleday, 1992; 151 pp., \$16.00). “Not only does [the father] run out to welcome the younger wayward son, but he comes out also to meet the elder, dutiful son as he returns from the fields wondering what the music and dancing are all about and urges him to come in” (p. 102).

Younger and older generations in a congregation need to learn the significance of each other’s music and worship practices. Knowing what is important to others and how that importance is expressed is essential for communicating, working, and living together.

Commenting on the parable of the vineyard, in which the landowner pays the same wage to those who worked all day as to those who worked only a short time, Nouwen says, “God looks at his people as children of a family who are happy that those who have done only a little bit are as much loved as those who accomplish much” (p. 104). What youth offer to worship is important to the congregation, but so, too, is what older generations offer. This is not just a matter of playing fair; rather, it is the full community of God functioning at its best. Nouwen’s commentary prods us toward cross-generational worship. “God is so naïve,” he continues, “as to think that there would be great rejoicing when all those who spent time in his vineyard, whether a short time or a long time, were given the same attention. Indeed, he was so naïve as to expect that they would all be so happy to be in his presence that comparing themselves with each other wouldn’t even occur to them” (p. 104). Our worshiping together reflects

mutual love and respect of this magnitude by nurturing generational connections from childhood all the way through the senior adult years.

Encouraging all generations to participate in worship planning and leadership does not call for one-sided accommodation from elder toward younger. In *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Morehouse Publishing, 2000; 176 pp., \$14.95), John Westerhoff points out we are called to maintain the continuum of ages within the community. “True community necessitates the presence and interaction of three generations,” he writes. “Too often the church either lacks the third generation or sets the generations apart” (p. 52). The third (oldest) generation is the generation of memory. Without it, he contends, the other two—the generation of vision and the generation of the present—are locked myopically into the present moment. Together, the three generations preserve a fuller view of life. So, too, authentic worship calls for all three generations to be active; when this happens, the spiritual vitality and well-being of the entire congregation is enriched.

MAKING CROSS-GENERATIONAL WORSHIP HAPPEN

How can we bring the desire for cross-generational worship to fruition? *Celebrating Passages in the Church: Reflections and Resources* (Chalice Press, 1999; 224 pp., \$19.99), reminds us of the opportunities that our life-milestones present. Editor Hugh W. Sanborn gathers essays and worship materials that address two distinct sets of milestones: developmental passages, including transition from infancy to childhood, childhood to adulthood, midlife for women and men, and later maturity; and major transitional events such as birth, believer’s baptism, graduation, marriage, divorce, vocational change, serious illness or accident, retirement, and death. The typical congregation does not recognize or celebrate many of these important passages. “We Protestants,” Sanborn gathers from this, “often [give] lip service rather than embodiment to our understanding that Christianity is a way of life” flowing through these significant transitional periods and events (p. 2).

The contributors help us celebrate more of these life-milestones in corporate worship. Each author addresses a particular life passage or transitional event biblically and theologically, and then offers guidance to incorporate this life-milestone perspective into worship. Many include creative orders of worship with scripture readings, prayers, hymns and songs, worship rites, and congregational responsive readings.

Celebrating Passages offers a rich resource for bringing the generations together in worship to commemorate the experiences we hold in common. This approach to worship celebrates life’s grand moments of joy—birth, baptism, or marriage—and mourns, but with hope, in those occasions of desperate grief—death, divorce, or life’s many losses. It reawakens in us the knowledge that all of our years spill over with sacred time and grace-filled events. When, as a community of faith, we celebrate this fullness of

human life, sharing together in the sorrows and the joys that are particular to the young and the old, we strengthen generational connections and nurture the community's worship, faith formation, and discipleship.

LED BY THE HEART

Congregations need not erupt in conflict as they move toward authentic cross-generational worship. There is no reason to rush through careful listening and planning, actions which are themselves ministry that lead to cross-generational worship.

Thomas Long's *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001; 119 pp., \$16.00) encourages us to work within the bounds of what "the congregation knows by heart." He shares the following personal story which suggests cross-generational worship may be closer at hand than we might suspect. One Sunday when the usual call came for the congregation to confess their faith by reciting the Apostles' Creed, Long became aware that, for the first time ever, his eleven-year-old son joined him in reciting the creed. "Where did my son get this Trinitarian formula?" he wondered. "We never explicitly taught David the creed, never sat at the kitchen table with flash cards reading 'I believe in God, the Father almighty.'" David learned the Creed, of course, "by being in worship, by hearing it recited week after week, until that day when memory and maturity and motivation converged and he stood up and joined in the chorus of conviction" (pp. 86-87). This beautifully illustrates operating within the bounds of what a congregation knows by heart.

Long offers four insights to facilitate reforming congregational worship: pastoral leadership is key; some congregational conflict is inevitable; changing worship requires significant lay involvement; and education and publicity, for children and adults, paves the way for renewal. Before launching into reforming congregational worship, consider the "state of your communion." A great deal of practical help in assessing a congregation and determining a path toward cross-generational worship that minimizes conflict can be found in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Abingdon, 1998; 256 pp., \$43.95), edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Charles S. Dudley, and William McKinney. This book addresses not only worship, but also a congregation's whole life and work.

Establishing cross-generational worship is not an end in itself. When achieved, it cultivates a congregation where the good news of Christ is lived and shared, vibrantly, by young and old alike.

NOTE

† Much of this article is borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my article, "Cross-Generational Worship," *Family Ministry: Empowering Through Faith* 16:4 (2002), 33-46.
