



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 So Great a Cloud of Witnesses
(Where Wisdom Is Found,
pp. 74-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

We in the Church must re-establish a connection with Christians who have gone before us in a way that is meaningful to those who will come after us. Could there be any greater wisdom, or harder challenge, than Jesus' injunction to love one another across generational lines as he loved us?

Prayer

The way of the Lord is wise.

The council of the Lord leads to understanding.

Walk in the fear of the Lord and gain wisdom.

We will humble ourselves before the Lord and gain insight.

In living this way, you will reveal God's mind to this foolish, frustrated world.

We will know ourselves and we will be fully known. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 2:1-11

Reflection

We do not grow into wisdom quickly or in isolation. Christian wisdom—in both its theoretical and practical dimensions—must be built up over time as the Body of Christ, the Church, purposely hones its judgment and refines its practices in light of the gospel. To grow in wisdom, then, requires that we honor and critically sift the insights of earlier generations of disciples. But it is this vital connection with our past, Jeanie Miley fears, which we are in great danger of losing.

"At some point, you have to decide what kind of relationship you're going to have with the past," a wise woman recently said to Miley. "And that means *the* past and *your* past. You can't run away from the past, either the good stuff you want to inflate or the hard stuff you want to forget, and so you might as well decide if you're going to be a friend or an enemy to your history."

Congregations lose contact with *their* past when they adopt the prevailing values of our youth-worshipping culture. "We tend to discard yesterday's ways and buildings in a rush to see who can be the first with the latest trend," Miley notes. We lose touch with *the* Christian past when we neglect "to mine the deep veins of meaning in our history."

"My generation has been so busy trying to out-run age and to defy death," she confesses, "that we have modeled disrespect of older people, disdain for what is quickly deemed irrelevant and outmoded, and a worship of 'what's happening', what's new, and youthful and 'in.'"

To access the wisdom from *the* past and *our* past that we need to continue to produce healthy spiritual fruit, Miley suggests:

- ▶ *We recount how God has been faithful to us in the past.* "Children love to hear the stories of how their elders did things in the past. They need to know the ways in which we overcame difficulties; they need to hear stories of faith that connect them with their own heritage, but inspire them into their own futures," says Miley. Telling them stories of faith from the Bible and religious tradition can "put authentic heroes in our children's lives so that they will not have to substitute celebrities or pop 'icons' where real heroes



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belong.”

- ▶ *We engage in intergenerational conversations about our relationship to the past.* As we “examine which traditions need to die a natural death and which ones have life and energy to them...we must be able to own the victories and the failures of the past, and have the humility to learn the lessons of each without being too attached to either.”
- ▶ *We confront our culture’s individualism.* If congregations are going to be conformed to the image of Christ, they must “challenge the detrimental and destructive ideas of church as a capitalistic venture and a competitive organization” which takes its cues from “the narcissistic behaviors of the worlds of consumerism, entertainment, sports, and marketing.”

The Church stands “at a crucial juncture in history,” Miley concludes. “The old ways are passing away, and the new ways are not yet clear to us, but in this in-between time...we can call upon the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of those who have gone before us to stabilize us and ground us in what is nourishing and life-giving.”

Study Questions

1. According to Jeanie Miley, what attitudes in our culture are obstacles to intergenerational sharing of wisdom?
2. In your congregation, how do older members share their personal stories of faith with children or young people, and teach them stories from Scripture and tradition that connect them to their own heritage?
3. How does your congregation encourage intergenerational conversations about both *your own community’s past* and *the Christian past*?
4. When Jeanie Miley asked the older women in her congregation to share some wisdom from their life in the community of faith, they demurred. “I don’t have anything worth passing down,” several said. Why was this troubling to her? How would you respond to her request?

Departing Hymn: “For All Your Saints, O Lord” (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

For all your saints, O Lord,
who strove to live by faith,
who followed you, and kept your word,
receive our grateful praise.

They all, in life and death,
with you, their Lord, in view,
learned from your Holy Spirit’s breath
to suffer and to do.

Your earthly members fit
to join your saints above,
in one communion ever knit,
one fellowship of love.

Richard Mant (1837), alt.

Suggested Tunes: FRANCONIA or ST. THOMAS (Williams)

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how growing in Christian wisdom requires that we honor and critically sift the insights of earlier generations of disciples
2. To identify obstacles in our culture to intergenerational sharing of wisdom.
3. To discuss how congregations can foster intergenerational conversations about both their own community's past and the Christian past.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-14 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "For All Your Saints, O Lord" locate one of the tunes, FRANCONIA or the more familiar ST. THOMAS (Williams), in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Jeanie Miley recounts her visit to Iona, the small island off the western coast of Scotland where in 563 Saint Columba established one of the most important monasteries in early medieval Europe. "Iona draws pilgrims from around the world for short visits and longer retreats. Those who visit Iona speak of 'tapping into ancient strength and wisdom' and 'feeling the power of the early Christians' there," she writes. "The ruins of the nunnery reminded me that we have not yet gotten it right about serving God, but the fact that pilgrims flock to those ruins indicates a yearning to retrieve something precious and rare from the cloud of witnesses who lived out their faith on that island. Returning to the mainland of Scotland, I thought about how alienated the generations are within most churches, each with its separate programs and services. I thought about how much we need each other and how part of the problem is that we value what is new more than what is old."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Proverbs 2:1-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Though ancient Israel's sages assumed "the Lord gives wisdom" (Proverbs 2:6), they were sure that great gift must be received, cultivated, and treasured through intergenerational dialogue. Thus it may be a sage speaking to a pupil, or a parent talking to a child that we overhear in Proverbs 2:1-11. In this discussion, Jeanie Miley explores the obstacles to intergenerational sharing of wisdom in congregations today. Miley is a great storyteller and in her article, "So Great a Cloud of Witnesses," she practices what she preaches: she shares wisdom by

recounting her stories of faith. As you discuss her insights, share some of Miley's stories. And encourage members to share their own stories of faith with one another.

Study Questions

1. Jeanie Miley focuses on three cultural attitudes. First, our *"youth-worshipping"* attitude values being young, looking young, acting young, and defying death; this stance devalues the experience and contributions of older people. Second, our *"individualism-run-riot"* leads to a "go-it-alone" approach for each person. Finally, we share a *disdain of tradition* in general, and Christians particularly "are conflicted about how to relate to [their own] past and move into the future." Do you think other cultural attitudes should be added to this list of obstacles?

Miley regrets her generation's leaving behind "the deep, eternal wisdom of adults...in the ash heap of plastic surgery, a reckless abandonment of tradition, a terrible fear of growing older, and a relentless need to be relevant." Is this only characteristic of 'Baby Boomers,' or do other generations share this disregard of age and tradition? Is our penchant for distinguishing and clichéd tagging of "generations" helpful, or is part of the problem Miley is describing? Some observers believe that young people today are more interested in recovering the past than their parents were. Do you agree? If so, what accounts for this difference?

2. Discuss how older members participate on a regular basis in your congregation's formal organizations for children and young people – e.g., Sunday School, children and youth groups, mission organizations, etc. Consider how older members interact with children and youth in other settings – e.g., supper clubs, family-based mission projects and trips, whole-church gatherings and Bible studies, projects that focus on the congregation's heritage, worship planning, etc. Would children and young people get to know the faith stories of older members over time through worship, congregational prayer times, etc.?
3. Unfortunately, as congregations grow and establish more generation-specific programs of study and worship (for children, youth, young adults, married adults with families, senior adults, etc.), they may provide fewer opportunities for intergenerational conversations on any topic. So, you might begin by discussing when members from different generations come together for worship, study, and fellowship. Also consider how more active members interact with homebound older adults.

Discuss how these conversations can involve *the community's past*. Do children hear an oral history of the congregation? Is anyone recording interviews with senior members? Has the congregation published its history? Are stories about the congregation shared in the context of worship? Do old and young share stories around the table at congregational meals? Also consider how these conversations might involve *the Christian past*. Are quotations and stories of faith from Christian history included in the worship guide or newsletter? Are there opportunities for young and old to explore the story of the Church together?

4. None of the older women were willing to share "some wisdom from their life in the community of faith that they would want to pass on to future generations." Jeanie Miley worries, "Was the resistance born of *humility* or *lack of awareness* about how profoundly their lives and their faith over a long period of time had impacted our congregation?...Had they been so busy doing good and living out their faith that they had not taken the time, or not had the time, to own the good gifts they had given to others? Or was there in them that *terrible sense of shame* about being old in a culture that worships youth? Were their reactions a result of coming to accept that whatever they might say would be passed over because, after all, what do the old know about life in this twenty-first century?"

If you were asked to share some wisdom from your life, how would you respond? Discuss how your response might depend on who made the request, on the specific context of the request (e.g., the congregation is facing an important decision, a history of the church is being written, etc.), on how your comments would be recorded and shared, and on who would be listening to or reading them. If you wanted to garner wisdom from the older members, whom would you seek out and how would you approach them for their counsel?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.