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Scripture: Generations in the Church

Canadian Dolly Gibb was in the news last week. Anyone know who Dolly Gibb is? She was, at the time, the oldest living Canadian. She died on Wednesday, June 5 at the age of 114. If I use Dolly as my standard, my life is less than half over! Can you imagine all that she had seen and experienced in her lifetime?

Born in 1905, the automobile as a standard means of transportation was only in its infancy. The Wright brothers had only just successfully tested the first powered aircraft, the Kitty Hawk in 1903. There was no indoor plumbing, refrigerators or stoves. There were no microwave ovens. Dolly lived through two world wars and a great depression. She has seen 19 different Canadian Prime Ministers come and go. Communication has progressed from mail delivered by horseback to early landline telephone to telegraphs, fax, to instant communication via the internet. We now have email, cell phones, text and facetime and Dolly had seen it all. She lived through her teenage years without TV which meant no Netflix! Can you image the cultural changes she has witnessed over the years? Or even the fads that came and went? It makes my mind spin.

The population of Canada currently is about 37.28 million people. As of this week the oldest living Canadian is now Sarah Patenaude Bruyere at 112 years. In case she has passed away in the next week, there are four other Canadians that are over the age of 110. The youngest Canadians are being born at a rate of about 44 per hour in our country. That means for the first time in our history, there are six defined generations in our families, communities and churches.

This past week, I visited with Madeleine Hanway. Madelaine was born in 1919. On May 28th, two weeks ago, she celebrated her 100th birthday.

The most recent birth that we are aware of in our church community is little Jace George McElroy, born on April 21. Between Madelaine and Jace, that is six generations in our church. Six. Amazing the span of experience and diversity we have right here in our church family. But it can also create some tension. Am I right?

When you were born affects your view of life and how you relate to those around you. We are shaped by our generation in ways that we realize and maybe don't realize. Generational differences can create misunderstanding, tension and even conflict that come when we don't seek to understand one another. Have a look at this picture on the screen. Maybe you can relate.

I want to take a moment to look at the names that our culture has used to label each generation. Each label serves as a short-hand to reference nearly 20 years of attitude, motivations, and historic events. The truth is that most of us rarely self-identify as a Baby Boomer or a Millennial, they are generalizations, maybe even stereotypes that are mostly used by marketers but I think there is some benefit in looking at how each generation is defined. Look at the screen.

The first and oldest generation alive today in Canada are the:

The Greatest Generation Born 1901-1926

- Their Depression was The Great One; their war was The Big One; their prosperity was the legendary Happy Days.
- Community-minded.
- Strongly interested in personal morality; standards of right and wrong.
- Marriage is for life.
- No “retirement”, you worked until you died or couldn’t work anymore.
- Avoided debt. Save and buy with cash.
- They remember life without airplanes, radio, TV and other household conveniences.

Mature/Silents Generation Born 1927-1945

- Enjoyed postwar happiness which included: Jobs, Suburbs, Television, Rock ‘n Roll and Cars.
- Civil Rights became a focus
- Women generally stayed at home to raise children, if they worked, they tended to be a teacher, nurse or secretary.
- Men pledged loyalty to the corporation, once you got a job, you generally kept it for life.
- Marriage is for life
- “Retirement” meant reclining in a rocking chair and living your final days in peace.

Baby Boomer Generation Born 1946-1964

- The “me” generation. It is all about us.
- The first TV and “Rock and roll” generation.
- Free love, hippies and “non-violent” protests
- Buy it now and use a credit card. Debt
- First two-income household generation. Moms in the workforce
- Divorce was acceptable.
- Envisioned technology and innovation.
- “Retirement” meant enjoying life after the children have left home. Instead of sitting in a rocking chair, they go skydiving, exercise and take up hobbies, which increases their longevity.

Generation X Born 1965-1980

- The “latch-key kids” grew up street-smart but isolated, often with divorced or career-driven parents.
- Entrepreneurial and individualistic
- Skeptical of Government and big business
- Computers introduced in their school years.
- This generation averages 7 career changes in their lifetime, not normal to work for a company for life.
- AIDS
- Late to marry (after cohabitation) and quick to divorce...many single parents.
- Into labels and brand names.
- Want what they want and want it now. Credit card debt.

Generation Y/Millennials Born 1981-2000

- “The 9/11 Generation”
- School shootings; they learned early that school is not even a safe place.
- They feel enormous academic pressure.
- Have never known a world without computers. They get all their information and most of their socialization from the Internet.
- Envision the world as a 24/7 place; want fast and immediate service, Amazon and eBay.
- They have been told over and over again that they are special, and they expect the world to treat them that way.

Generation Z Born after 2001 (Digital Generation)

- Growing up in a world that is diverse.
- They have never known a world without computers and cell phones.
- Their choice of profession is no longer Doctor or Lawyer or Teacher but “Youtuber”
- Children are leaving behind toys at younger age. By four and five, they become less interested in toys and begin to desire electronics such as cell phones, iPad and video games.
- They are Savvy consumers and are over saturated with brands.

I don’t know if you recognized yourself in any of those descriptions. Again, they are generalizations but they do shed light on why in a church this big,

we can have so many differing life perspectives, experiences and opinions even though most of us, have Jesus in common. Do you understand?

You can imagine the challenges in designing a worship service that meets the needs of such a varied group as we have here today. Some like worship songs that are louder and upbeat, others appreciate quiet, more contemplative worship. Some of you wear jeans and sandals, others are more formally dressed. Some of you think the sermon is too long and others of you...no wait, probably everyone thinks the sermon is too long! But you get the idea.

Where there are different generations gathered, there is a possibility of a little or a lot of angst. But when we come together, willing to be flexible and listen to one another, the result can be amazing and God honouring and an example to the world. Amen?

You know, I left out one category in each generational description. Does anyone know what it was? I didn't mention their distinctive attitude and opinion about Faith and church. Maybe you were able to surmise that with each passing generation, from the Greatest Generation to the Silents, the Baby Boomers, Gen X, the Millennials, Gen Z there has been an increasing distancing away from God in our culture. Faith and the church have become less and less important to each generation to where we find ourselves today, Canada has become a secular nation. God, religion and the church no longer plays an integral role in most Canadians' lives and that is what makes the role of this church even more important today.

Did you know that the bible has a lot to say about different generations? It was an important biblical topic.

Flip through your bibles and you will discover that generations are mentioned quite often. In fact, in my daily devotion time I am currently in the midst of reading the Old Testament book of 1 Chronicles. The first nine chapters of this book of the bible are basically just a listing of the generations, a genealogy.

The New Testament opens with the book of Matthew and do you know how it starts? With a listing of the generations from Abraham through to Jesus.

If you are a parent or grandparent or someone who regularly deals with different generations, you have probably felt the effects of a "generation gap". That is where they do things you don't understand or don't agree with or are opposed to what you were taught. Do any of you have children that are maybe doing things that you don't understand or necessarily agree with? I tried to think of where I have a struggle with the younger generation today and maybe it is with the whole ripped jeans thing. In my day, we did everything we could not to have rips in our jeans. In fact, we cover them up with patches that said, "groovy" or had a peace sign of a big smiley face.

I have stated this before, but for me, I also don't get the whole tattooing thing in our culture. If you have a tattoo here today, it looks good on you. I just don't think it looks good on my kids. Three of the four of my children have tattoos, the other one is getting the inheritance! I understand the significance and meaning of the tattoos. They represent significant life events.

In my day, we drew those events on paper not on our skin. Hey, the Raptors won the NBA championship last week. I may buy a poster and put it in my office, I am not going to have a picture of "Kwahi" tattooed on my bicep! It is not my cup of tea. Carolyn always has to remind me with my kids' tattoos, *Paul it is not your arm*. I hear that. But without me, that arm wouldn't exist!

Maybe you have your own points of contention or irritation in your home. Generation gaps.

Generation gap issues are mentioned all throughout the bible. Have you noticed? Eli, a religious leader during the time of the Judges in the Old Testament had two sons. Look as they are described in,

1 Samuel 2:12

Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels who had no respect for the LORD

THEY HAD REBELLED FROM THE WAY THEY WERE TAUGHT IN THEIR HOME.

Look how Hezekiah, a King in the Old Testament is described as,

2 Kings 18:3-4

He did what was pleasing in the LORD's sight, just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and cut down the Asherah poles.

Contrast that with the way his successor, his own son Manasseh is described,

2 Kings 21:2-3

He did what was evil in the LORD's sight, following the detestable practices of the pagan nations that the LORD had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites. ³ He rebuilt the pagan shrines his father, Hezekiah, had destroyed. He constructed altars for Baal and set up an Asherah pole, just as King Ahab of Israel had done.

Manasseh had gone out of his way to sabotage the work of his Father. Maybe you have had that experience. Even David, a man after God's own heart, knew what it was like to deal with the rebellious nature of a child.

If you are here today and you are experiencing something lost in translation between you and your son or daughter or grandchild, a generation gap, you are not alone and God understands.

But we need call on God to help us break through those gaps to gain a better appreciation and understanding of one another so that we can continue to share about the love and hope of Jesus with our children and grandchildren.

The Psalmist declares in,

Psalm 78:18

*Now that I am old and gray,
do not abandon me, O God.
Let me proclaim your power to this new generation,
your mighty miracles to all who come after me.*

In *Psalm 145:4*, David says this to God,

Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power.

From these passages and others in the bible, we can see clearly that each generation is called to build on the foundation left by the previous generation. All generations are in great need of each other to complete that work that God has called his church to fulfill.

I would suggest that that comes, not by continuing to segregate our community along generational lines. Oh there is some practical and logistical need for that sometimes, but more and more we should be facilitating opportunities for building relationships and community across all ages.

I was meeting with a young couple recently. They were in their twenties. In the course of the discussion they mentioned that they were in a small group. Out of curiosity, I asked them the names of some of the people in their group. I was expecting to hear the names of other "twenty somethings" but to my surprise, the first names they mentioned were people my age. I think I even said to them, *Really*. Then I thought, *that is so cool*. To have intergenerational small groups, learning and growing in their faith with one another. Sharing experiences and perspectives with one another.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. Last year, I had a young woman in the church approach me with a request. She wondered if there would be a time when her small group made up of mostly couples in their thirties with young children could meet together with my small group, made up of mostly, well- people like me! Only better looking.

We were different generations and at different stages of life. So we arranged a time to get the groups together and we had a great time enjoying conversations, playing some games and just getting to know one another. Some of those connections have led to deeper reciprocal relationships. When I asked her recently why she wanted to connect our groups together she wrote this; Paul,

We covet the Godly opinions of your generation, and desperately seek after what you have learned along the way in order to hopefully land with feet firmly planted, roots deeply secured, with families intact and serving the Lord.

In a world full of hardship, we want to glean all we can from those we look up to, and respectfully lean into those a few steps ahead of us so that we can look back proudly, and look ahead to offer the same support to those a few steps behind us.

Listen to how she ends the note.

We crave community that extends generational boundaries. We want a life enriched by your friendship and the lessons you've learned along the way.

Isn't that beautiful? Those of you who think you are old or over the hill or past your "best before" date, did you hear that? The younger generation *craves* your wisdom and experience! This benefit of nurturing intergenerational relationships became even clearer for me last Saturday. Most of you know that I have a 26 year-old son, Scotty. He spends most of his time working in Waterloo.

Occasionally, you will see him up here, playing guitar with Michelle Valladares worship team because he comes to London two days every week to teach guitar and piano lessons to children. Last Saturday, he had a small "end of year" music recital for all of the students he teaches in London. Carolyn was out of town so I wanted to go and show our support. To cheerlead him because you never stop cheerleading you children, do you? As I stood at the back entertained by the music, I also scanned the crowd of parents and grandparents. There were many people from North Park. And at least two families were from that small group that met with our small group last year.

Carolyn has built solid relationships with those young moms particularly and now those families are impacting my son as he goes into their homes every week to teach their children. He observes the way they are living out their faith and raising their families in God honouring ways and it is making an impact on him. He, in turn, is influencing the lives of their children through his teaching. I love that, but it gets better. My son decided to hold the recital at a Nursing home up the street so that the older residents could enjoy the music, some of it worship music, played by these children. Do you see the influence and interplay between all of these generations?

Intergenerational community has always been a part of God's vision for his church. Listen to how the Apostle Paul explains it to Titus, a young leader in the church whom Paul had mentored.

In *Titus 2*, Paul says:

As for you, Titus, promote the kind of living that reflects wholesome teaching. Teach the older men to exercise self-control, to be worthy of respect, and to live wisely....Similarly, teach the older women to live in a way that honors God....These older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children,...In the same way, encourage the young men to live wisely.

It is a wonderful vision of intergenerational relationships in the church. Paul modelled it and called others to live it as well.

Can I take a few minutes to share some of the benefits of intergenerational relationship in the church community?

The first benefit:

1. Wisdom

Maybe the most obvious benefit of intergenerational relationships is the wisdom that comes from perspectives other than our own. Do you know what happens when we stick to our own kind? When we only surround ourselves with those of a similar age or perspective of life. We get generational narcissism. It's the attitude that shows itself with comments such as, *Those whippersnappers have a lot to learn.*

Or

Those old folks don't know nothing.

We don't realize that there may be blind spots in our generation and we aren't humble or patient enough to be open to other viewpoints, which can bring wisdom.

Throughout our married life, Carolyn and I have always made it a practice to intentionally engage with a few couples that are younger than us and a few couples that are older than us and we gain great insight and wisdom from both ends of the spectrum. We pray that we can offer something beneficial to them as well. We have encouraged our children to

look for these relationships in their lives. We pray for them. I can't tell you how thankful Carolyn and I are for Gerry McLarty. Gerry sits here in these pews most of the time at the Sunday morning, 9:00 am service.

Gerry is part of an intergenerational group from North Park that serves at Ark Aid in downtown London. Carolyn and I are also involved. About three years ago, I started to invite my son DJ to serve with us. DJ would have been 20 at the time.

He was assigned the role on the line, serving the food. His partner for the night was Gerry who was in his late seventies at the time. Well, they just had the greatest time together. Each month, it became the "Gerry and DJ" team serving the food. Gerry took an interest in DJ. He engaged him in conversations and the next thing we know they are hanging out. They are meeting for lunch. DJ would regale us with the wisdom he had gleaned from Gerry and I am sure Gerry would say that he has learned something from DJ.

Parents, do your children have other trusted adults building into their lives. See here's the thing. We can get jealous or protective when our kids seek the advice of someone other than us, right? But we can't let our insecurity stifle these other relationships that can be so healthy and enriching for our children. Do you see that?

My daughter Tess is getting married next May. The quandary for my kids is because I am a pastor is; do they want dad to officiate at the wedding or do they want dad just to be dad. My oldest daughter asked me to officiate but Tess just wants me to be her dad, which is cool. So she has asked her brother in law to do the wedding. But, what do they do about pre-marriage counselling? It is usually done by the pastor that marries a couple.

A brother in law, or a dad doing the pre-marriage counselling? That is a bit awkward. So, Tess and Luke reached out to Patrick and Rachel Hoefnagel. They are a couple from North Park who are my age. Tess met Rachel as a volunteer in children's ministry a few years ago and they kind of connected.

They have developed a bit of a mentoring relationship so it only seemed natural for Tess and Luke to ask them to walk beside them as they prepare for life as a married couple. To glean some

wisdom from Patrick and Rachel who has been married over thirty years.

That doesn't threaten Carolyn and I. We prayed for these relationships for our kids. Have you ever experienced the joy of an intergenerational friendship? The learning goes both ways if you are open and willing to receive.

The second benefit of intergenerational relationships in the church community.

2. Wonder

Let me explain it like this.

A few weeks ago, I was in my office and one of the admin staff came in and told that Jack Devries was sitting in the office area and was just mentioning my name. He didn't ask to see me, he just felt this urge to pray for me.

Let me give you some background. I first met Jack shortly after I arrived here 6 ½ years ago. He is in his late eighties. Jack is always here early on Sunday mornings and so we usually have a chance to chat each week. He often gives me notes of encouragement and shares about the ways that he has reflected on the sermons.

I have always enjoyed his insight. Each week he is sure to inform me that he is praying for me. Which I appreciate. A few years ago, at Jack's request I officiated at his brother's funeral so I got to know him even better.

So when I heard he was in the office and had me on his mind, I finished up some things I was doing and I went and brought him back to my office. He said to me, *Paul, I don't know why, but this morning I woke up and you were on my mind. I got in the car and it just seemed to point me to North Park. I just feel like I have to pray for you.*

What Jack didn't know was that I had just returned from two weeks at school. I came back overwhelmed by the work I had to do for school and the work I had to catch up on at North Park. I was anxious that morning. When he was explaining his need to pray for me, I just felt the anxiety melt off of me as I invited him to pray what God had laid on his heart.

When he left, I was filled with wonder at the work of God that he would prompt this dear man to come and pray for me and that this man would be

obedient to the nudge of God to come the church even if he wasn't quite sure what it was about.

When we are open to hearing the stories of God's work in the lives of people across generations, His faithfulness in good times and more difficult, it grows our sense of awe and wonder in God's provision for our lives. Do you understand that?

By the way, I have experienced this sense of awe and wonder engaging people not just older than me but also younger. Jesse and Catherine Dick are a young couple in our congregation. They are in their late twenties. He is an engineer and she is a lawyer. The truth is they could afford to live rather comfortably but instead they have determined to quietly cap their lifestyle and live in a poorer area of the city. They are utilizing their resources to shine a light for Jesus in their neighbourhood. I have known Jesse since he was a boy. His mom and dad were great friends of ours. I had the privilege of officiating at Jessie and Catherine's wedding. The way that I have witnessed Jesse and Catherine practically living out their faith has filled me with a sense of wonder in the one they follow, Jesus.

Who is it for you? When you see their faithfulness, you are left with wonder and praise of God. Or have you ever thought that perhaps it is your life and faith that is an example to others and fills them with wonder for the Saviour you serve?

The third benefit of intergenerational relationships in the church community is:

3. Transformation

Friendships that break through age barriers can transform lives. Here is the thing, the more someone is like me, the easier it is to love them. Would you agree? I don't have to adjust too much. It is comfortable.

But to love someone different from me requires me to love more deliberately. To ask more questions and listen more intently. It means sometimes having to break through the silent moments when you don't know what to say to one another or to laugh at the corny jokes that aren't really that funny. It may mean that you have to go to uncomfortable places.

Do you know that when Gerry and DJ first met for lunch, they met at Western where DJ was a student? That meant that Gerry had to navigate the traffic, the parking and find the meeting spot on the

sprawling campus. It meant that he had to negotiate his way around an environment that is bustling with students 50 years younger than Gerry. But he did it. It probably would have been easier for him to meet at a Tim Hortons somewhere off campus but Gerry went to DJ. Do you not think that had a profound impact on my son?

Gerry was willing to sacrifice a bit for the relationship. To go to the uncomfortable places. That is what transforms us. It helps us find common ground with others and helps us to develop humility. Opening our lives to the perspective of someone not saturated in our generation's assumptions can expose lifestyle patterns that upon closer reflection, don't line up with God's will. God can use these relationships to transform our hearts and to draw us closer to Him.

Of course, developing intergenerational relationships in the church community also have their difficulties for sure, but my experience has been that the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Older generations provide wisdom, experience, faithfulness and commitment and the younger generations have the energy, passion and fresh, innovative thinking.

We can learn in and through each other as we allow Jesus to be the glue that holds us all together. In Ephesians Chapter 2, the Apostle Paul reminds us that Jesus, through his work on the cross, broke down every barrier that might divide us, including the barrier of generations. It is when we elevate God together, sharing our stories, our struggles, our prayers, our worship and our gratitude and praise, that we will draw closer to each other, even across generational lines.

What a wonderful picture of the church that Jesus envisioned from the very start. That we are one body loving and serving with one another for the glory of God. Is that a picture of North Park church? If not, what is holding us back?

Look around this auditorium. There are so many with so much to offer. The journey to beginning an intergenerational relationship starts with you. It may be a little risky. It may mean striking up a conversation with someone different today, not just your friends or family. Or maybe you have respected someone from afar and never really taken the initiative to engage them in a conversation.

Why don't you do it today? Why don't you drop them an email this week? Invite them to have a coffee. It could be an amazing, life changing experience for both of you. It may grow your wisdom, sense of wonder and transform you.

The challenge for us as a church is to look for opportunities to break out of ministries that are segregated by age and intentionally look for chances to invite all generations to become involved.

Diversity, especially across generations, is a strength in the church, not a weakness.

Proverbs 20:29

The glory of the young is their strength; the gray hair of experience is the splendor of the old.

We have them both here, the young and the old. My prayer is that we leverage intergenerational relationships more and more to grow our lives and the unity of the church.

Amen.

Points to Ponder

Community

Being Deeply Connected Generations

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Share with one another, the generation that you are a part of. Discuss how you feel about the labels that are used to distinguish the generations. ie. Great, Silent, Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z.
2. Share any awkward experiences you have had with generational gaps. Where has there been a failure to communicate or understand someone of another generation?
3. In Psalm 145, David says, *Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power.* What have been some of your positive and negative experiences with the way the older generation shared about God with the younger generation in the church?
4. Describe an intergenerational relationship you have had with someone. How was it helpful to you? (ie. Wisdom, Wonder and Transformation) What were some of the challenges?
5. What are some of the concerns that hinder you from pursuing an intergenerational relationship with someone?
6. Share with each other, someone who you admire and respect of a different generation in the church that you would like to get to know a little better.
7. Discuss ways in which North Park Church can move to being more intergenerational.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. For those that expressed an interest in establishing an intergenerational relationship in their life, pray that they would have the courage to reach out to someone who they have respected from afar. Pray also for the wisdom of the leadership of North Park to facilitate more intergenerational opportunities.