

Many Members, One Household: Intergenerational Life at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church

Evan Kolding

The Lingering Question

A few things in life strike a chord of “rightness” in our soul. Often it’s hard to put into words what makes the encounter so right but something deep within resonates: the old worn-in jeans, a kitchen full of good friends, that perfect spot in your bed, or fog billowing over the Berkeley hills while the sun shines in the East Bay. The experience, the moment, the process, the history, and future hope of it all – our soul speaks “right” and our hearts delight.

I believe Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church experienced one of those moments during Baccalaureate Sunday in June. In a time when church attendance across the country is in significant decline, with the greatest void among the 18 to 32-year-old demographic, 35 graduating seniors, with at least 10 not in attendance, stood before our congregation. As they returned to their seats, 42 children and adults took their place on the chancel, each holding a sign with a single word written on it from Ephesians 1 which spoke of who they are in Christ: “blessed,” “holy,” “loved,” “forgiven,” “free.” Ranging in ages from 2 to well over 70 years old, they represented the whole MVPC family. Once we’d read the signs in context of Ephesians 1, each one presented their sign to a high school senior, and we stood as a church to surround them in prayer and commission them into their next season of life.

Still buzzing from the beauty of the experience, on my way home I wondered: How did this church family get to a place where we collectively feel invested in the discipleship of nearly 50 high school seniors? Since then the question has lingered: *Is it possible for MVPC’s discipleship culture to become one in which we regularly and intentionally put ourselves in close proximity with people of other generations, believing we have something to learn from them about God?*

During the nearly two years I have served as MVPC’s Director of High School Ministries, I have been blessed and burdened with hundreds of stories of what life in our faith community was like, is like, and could potentially look like. Stories of children who treasure the hymns they learned with their grandparents. Teens who are having their relational desires shaped by the many strong, Christ-centered marriages they observe at MVPC. Our oldest generation ministered to by the faith of children, the idealism of young adults, and the perspective of new parents.

In so many of our gatherings children, teens, and adults of all ages actively share and participate with each other. When we continually and intentionally put ourselves in close proximity with people from other generations with the understanding that they have something to teach us about God and our mission as Christ-followers, we live into the beauty of intergenerational discipleship. We are truly a church of many families who uniquely make up a single Moraga Valley Presbyterian household.

Blueprints, Dreams, and Sticky Faith

The Family Ministries Staff has had exciting conversations around Sticky Faith, a project of Fuller Youth Institute. FYI ran a longitudinal study of high school students who were core kids in their youth groups to discover the reasons behind the national trend that shows 40% of dedicated youth group kids completely drop out of faith by their second year post-high school. Their research reveals that the “stickiness” of a young person’s faith is in direct correlation to how intergenerational their home faith community was.

Let's define terms. To put it simply, *multigenerational* communities consist of many age groups while in *intergenerational* communities, those of different age groups *interact with* each other. When my family gathers for a holiday meal we often have a kids' table, a space for kids to be kids while adults discuss adult things. That is multigenerational: each age group occupies a different space. An intergenerational meal would have everyone at the same table, adults and kids sharing food and stories.

Intergenerational discipleship is the idea that, as a faith community, we take intentional steps to put ourselves in close relational proximity with people of other generations expecting to learn more about God. Though it sounds simple, it will take some time and effort to reorient ourselves. As the Family Ministries staff began our Sticky Faith conversations, my initial fear was that we would need to invent new programs, buy new curriculum, recruit leadership teams, and make budget proposals. But intergenerational discipleship is less about programs and more about perspectives. The bottom line? It's up to each one of us to enter into settings looking for God to speak and move through people of all ages.

This paper is not about our need for more adult volunteers in our children's or student ministries. Instead I see our faith community as poised to capitalize on our many biblically-based strengths. Let's dream about what could be based on what has been, and imagine what God could do if we saw ourselves as tutors, coaches, students, and teammates for all generations in our community.

It Takes a Village

Intimate, sentimental, and invested. These three words come to mind as I read the aged Apostle Paul's words to the young Timothy in 2 Timothy 5:5-7. Paul writes to encourage this young church leader in his adventures and struggles in faith. Paul begins by reminding Timothy that his faith results from not just one parent, grandparent or Sunday school teacher, but all three. Timothy's faith is an inheritance from adults – Lois, Eunice and Paul – who invested in his formative years while the Spirit of power, love and self-discipline is a gift from God.

Stan Oberg volunteers with our high school ministry. He taught French at Acalanes High School for 39 years before retiring to spend his best years with his wife, Sue, and their children and grandchildren. Three years ago pancreatic cancer took Sue's life. I met Stan just before the one-year anniversary of Sue's death when he was the Elder for Senior High Ministries. He told me he could never imagine that year without the joy, love, concern and intentionality of the kids he served every Wednesday night. He said their love for him kept him moving and keeps him moving still.

Many of the kids who knew Stan when Sue passed away have since graduated and moved away. Stan dedicates himself to writing one or two cards each week to college freshmen and sophomores as they reorient themselves to a new life. They write him back as well! In fact, on the anniversary of Sue's death a college freshman called him to let him know she was thinking of him and Sue and praying for his family. This is a beautiful picture of intergenerational discipleship as believers nearly 50 years apart in age encourage each other's faith in Christ.

Sitting, Walking, Lying, Rising

In Deuteronomy 6 God summarizes the Ten Commandments: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This is the fundamental framework on which God instructs His people to build all aspects of life, then and for all generations to come. God calls Israel to invest in the younger generations through teaching these Ten Commandments; every moment of the day has potential for teachable opportunities. God says, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

When I first met my wife she was a part of a small group. Christina had become a Christian in college and was soon adopted into a Bible study led by church Elders. Single college students and career adults along with married couples with or without kids met together for dinner and study. Every week the kids shared dinner with them, and then would go to a different room to watch a movie. However, many nights one or two kids chose to stay with the adults for their study. As a young single Christian, this became an attractive picture for Christina to see how to raise a family in a faith community.

As I spent time with this group I began to realize that they took the calling of Deuteronomy 6 seriously. They also saw all members of their faith community as belonging to their extended faith family. This meant their calling to use every day teachable moments for discipleship extended to their friends’ children as well as other young or new believers who needed faith instruction. Christina says that in this community she felt like a daughter to her elders, an auntie to their kids, and peer to all.

As kids are welcomed to share in the same meal at the same table as the adults they hear the stories of their community, develop a faith language, and practice the spiritual norms of their parents and faithful aunties and uncles.

The Hearing of Youth and the Vision of Elders

The story of Eli and Samuel is fascinating. Samuel is a young boy studying, living, and learning under Eli the High Priest of Israel. Eli appears to be an unqualified mentor because he has slowly allowed himself and his family to stray far from obedience and relationship with God. Yet 1 Samuel 3 shows us how God can honor and utilize intentional intergenerational relationships in such a way that both youth and elder become encouragers for each other’s spiritual growth.

Three different times on three different nights God calls out to Samuel while he sleeps. Samuel is too young to have gained the discernment to recognize God’s voice. The first two times Samuel hears God, he believes Eli is calling. Eli tells him to go back to sleep. The second time Samuel wakes Eli, he says to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant hears.’” The third time God calls, Samuel responds directly to God.

Working with teenagers, I have learned that young people may be able to hear, notice, and pick up on spiritual nuances to which I have long lost sensitivity. Yet these same teenagers may not know how to respond to all they hear in prayer, Scripture, and conversation.

Last December, 24 high school students spent a weekend at Ponderosa Lodge. Kika Grupe came as a leader for the freshmen girls instead of the junior girls she’s been with for five years.

Knowing nothing about them beyond what she learned on the drive, Kika was willing and apprehensive.

These freshmen girls immediately ran to their cabins as Kika stayed with the adults to cover the plan for the evening. When Kika arrived at her cabin she expected either complete mayhem or no trace of the girls. What she saw took her breath away: the girls were sitting in a circle with open Bibles, sharing their favorite verses.

Kika realized these girls were hearing God call them as a group to be dedicated to Scripture. She also recognized how, over the years of leading her junior girls' small group, she had slowly incorporated less Scripture as the girls had less time.

Kika chose to believe that she had something to learn about God from these young girls sharing Scripture. How different could this encounter have been had Kika chosen to commandeer the moment to teach or correct the girls about how to do "grown up" Bible study? Like Eli when he realized Samuel was hearing something he was not, Kika chose to humbly place herself in the position of a learner as the younger generation reminded her of the importance of Scripture.

The Boldness of the Uneducated

Kathy Veitch, MVPC's Director of Early Childhood, told me a wonderful story of intergenerational discipleship. It was a Sunday morning during Advent and Promiseland was in full swing. Promiseland is MVPC's class for children ages two through Kindergarten, which also has a number of middle school helpers. During offering time, a three-year-old was chosen to walk around with a basket to collect money from children and adults to benefit one of MVPC's mission partners. As this child approached the class helpers, one kid casually shook his head to indicate that he didn't have any offering money. The three-year-old paused, composed a very serious expression, leaned in and said, "If you ask your dad for a dollar, he will give it to you. Then you will have a dollar to put in the offering." In child-like faith, he spoke a bold word of reminder that God, our Heavenly Father, gives abundantly so we can give back and bless others.

Kathy had tears in her eyes as she recounted this story. This child had spoken a profound truth in such a poignant moment and she could not help but be moved, inspired and challenged. This encounter reminds me of Acts 4, when the Pharisees heard the disciples teaching about Jesus: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

All Believers Everywhere

Each table has eight to twelve moms seated around it. They know the joys and struggles of raising a family. They are familiar with the intricate balancing act between family, work, self, husband, and friends. They have much in common, but maybe not their ages. At my wife's Moms' Council table the women range from early 30's to 70's. Siv Ricketts recently confided that when she first joined Moms' Council she thought she mostly needed friends her own age who could relate to raising two young children in a new town. She soon recognized the depth and breadth of wisdom she had to gain from the older women at her table. The richness of the prayers offered by moms who had been in her shoes became an invaluable support. She also hoped that other women were encouraged by her energy, perspective, and the blessing of getting to know her family.

Ministries for moms with children of a certain age have many benefits but what sets Moms' Council apart is the interconnectedness of moms from different generations gathering in relationship with each other to continually grow in their understanding of who God is in their lives as moms.

Ephesians 6:18 says "Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere." In a multigenerational church, discipleship is lived out almost exclusively in an "age-and-stage" paradigm and people are content to notice that occasionally generations older and/or younger may be present. Admittedly, this paradigm can be easier to negotiate, coordinate, and lead, but works from the assumption that peers have and need the same things for spiritual growth. As we become more intentionally intergenerational in our discipleship we recognize that the opportunities for chaos, awkwardness, and misunderstanding increase. Yet we also allow greater room for profoundly teachable moments that bring renewed, refreshed, and reimagined perspective on the truth of what it means to be a follower of Christ in the family of God.

What's Next?

These are only a few examples from Scripture and our own community. As a byproduct of being a strong and large multigenerational community, MVPC has shared more than a few beautiful intergenerational experiences where kids and adults have encouraged one another in faith. Yet it seems that with each passing month I hear more stories of people being creative, bold, and faithful in their desires to invest in and advocate for generations of believers both older and younger than themselves. As I hear these stories, I recall Isaiah 43:19 where God's Spirit speaks through Isaiah saying, "For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?" Moving toward becoming a more intentionally intergenerational community is a subtle shift with powerful implications for our future.

So what does this mean for you and for me? What could our community life become if we took the next steps to being *intentionally intergenerational* throughout the whole life of our church? Rather than create new programs, what can each person do? Let's consider just a few practical ideas.

Commissioning Kids

I had a recent conversation with some pastors around the issue of integrating children into worship services. It's not easy to facilitate worship experiences that equally engage 5- and 50-year-olds. One pastor floated a simple yet amazing idea: kids begin the service in the Sanctuary with their families and before they're dismissed to their classes, the pastor leads the congregation in prayer for the kids. Often they encourage the congregation to extend their hands toward children sitting nearby, which helps each member focus their prayers on specific children.

This act of prayer tangibly and publicly affirms the children's place in their faith family and reminds everyone that children's classes have more value than "big kid nursery." The pastor reported an amazing discipleship byproduct: these prayer times facilitated intergenerational relationships between kids and adults who regularly sit near one another but would otherwise have had no obvious reason to get to know. Even without a programmatic shift in our worship gatherings, what might God do if each of us at MVPC on a Sunday morning took time to be intentional about prayer for and conversation with people of different generations?

Family Five

MVPC's Family Ministries Department has chosen to encourage parents to develop intergenerational relationships as they create a Family Five for each of their kids. The Family Five are adults the child recognizes as their unconditional fan and whom the parents respect, for example, Sunday school teachers, family friends, aunts or uncles, coaches, teachers, or neighbors, people who are a strong positive presence in their child's life. The Family Five gives each child or teen adults beyond their parents with whom they can process life in ways consistent with their parents' values.

You'll hear more about Family Five in the coming months, but start simply by asking your child, "Who are some of your favorite grown-ups at church, coaches, troop leaders, neighbors...?" Then follow up with, "Why?" Choosing from among the people your child mentions, let those adults know your child recognizes them as an important person in their life. Then ask if they would be willing to spend intentional time encouraging and supporting your child. Whether its ten minutes after practice, a note in the mail, cheering at a swim meet, or a monthly breakfast, every intentional act benefits the whole family.

If you and your child can't quickly identify five adults as unconditional fans, start with three, two, even one other adult. Research and experience bear the truth of the adage, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Young at Heart, Wise in Years

Obviously, intergenerational discipleship is broader than just adults and teens mutually encouraging each other in faith. Adults in their 20's, 30's and even 40's might be viewed as "youth" to adults in their 50's, 60's and 70's. I have a group of friends in their 20's who all got married within a few years of each other. Knowing they were beginning a new stage of life ignorant to the struggles and joys ahead, they invited couples to lead their Bible study who had been married longer. Four newlywed couples shared life around God's Word while being mentored by one or two couples a decade or two ahead of them in their own marriages. Our marriages, and families, might be strengthened when we begin intentionally intergenerational relationships with couples who have been through trials and are stronger as a result.

The Extended Family

Existing ministry contexts can present great opportunities to creatively rethink how they might include a broader range of ages. We know that teens who feel they've been adopted into the larger church life are the ones who have the stickiest faith after high school. What could it look like to host Mother/Daughter teas, intergenerational clothing swaps, and trips to the women's shelter to serve and listen to hurt and broken women? Women of different ages and stages could share their unique personalities, styles, and strengths and discover their similarities as well.

How differently might our young men view themselves if their dad's friends and Bible study members invited them along on their adventures? I know a lot of men who are regulars at St. Mary's basketball games, Oakland A's games, or who regularly barbeque and build around their homes; invite some younger men from the MVPC family! I heard that some time ago a group of men, from teens to retirees, enjoyed a weekend of hiking, climbing, swimming, camping, and

surviving in the wilderness. It might be time to replace the mirrors we use to see the great memories of our past with windows that allow us see the great adventures ahead of us.

Embracing the Awkward

Inevitably there will be awkward moments ahead of us. When I was a first-year intern with Young Life, a para-church ministry focused on outreach to unchurched teens, I was in charge of our new drop-in center on opening day. I was so excited to change the world through this little center but terrified that nobody would think I'm cool or that our center was worth their time. My fears were validated and compounded when 45 minutes after opening the director showed up to discover we still had no high school kids. Instead of scolding me for poor planning or promotion, he took me two blocks down the street to the high school. His assignment: meet teenagers. I knew how to create programs, build and train leadership teams, lead Bible studies, and play games, but to simply walk up to a group of teenagers and begin regular conversations, no clue.

As a 21-year-old college student accompanied by a 56-year-old Young Life veteran trying to spark friendships with teenagers, I felt paralyzed by an overwhelming awkwardness. However, my Young Life director completely embraced the awkwardness by choosing not to let his own insecurity rule the moment. He simply began asking questions. And wow, did he ask questions! I learned that day that great questions get great answers. No leading questions, no assumptions, just honest questions about who these kids were, what they were interested in, and what music they listened to. The kids responded so well to him, and indirectly to me, too, because he didn't approach them as an authority but with the genuine humility of a learner. What a great way to begin a friendship and build trust.

The Bible shows us so many scenes of Jesus caught in potentially awkward moments with people trying to trap him in conversations. Jesus remained rooted in the truth of who He was. He asked people amazing questions about who they were, what they were about, and allowed each person the opportunity to reveal and even discover themselves. This will be the key as MVPC creates a thriving intergenerational discipleship culture: we need to understand that whether we are 17 or 75 years old we are all rooted in the same identity, children of God living fruitfully in the Body of Christ. With our core identity in common, we can choose to embrace the awkward and humbly approach those who are both older and younger, understanding we have much to learn together in faith.