

P.R. Mans

Dr. P.R. Mans, Mentor-Associate Petra Institute for Children's Ministry De Doorns.
E-mail: rudim@absamail.co.za
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1867-0168>

P.A. Rousseau

Dr. P.A. Rousseau,
Independent Researcher.
E-mail: 214pa@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3089-715X>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v44i1.8307>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2024
44(1):187-212

Date received:
21 August 2023

Date accepted:
9 April 2024

Date published:
28 June 2024

Ecclesiological implications for the church as intergenerational space focusing on families

ABSTRACT

The church is God's primary vehicle to minister in a global landscape dotted with globalisation, social media, wars, environmental issues, global economics, global social developments, and politics. Given the fact that the family is the microcosm where discipling should take place according to Psalm 78:4-7 (also Deut. 6:7-9; Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 3:4-9), this focus naturally leads to the critical question: Where do families fit in this mandate? Segregation in ministry results in divided age groups, lack of inclusiveness of all members in all of church life, and a low view of children as part of the church (Holmes et al. 2022:1-3). The article revisits a biblical framework of what church should be, in order to refresh insight into how the church could and should respond to an intergenerational understanding of the form and function of the church.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in times where the focus on children seems to enjoy increasingly more attention from academics. More material is produced on various topics related to children and church. Over the past 15 years, theologians such as Bunge (2006), Grobbelaar (2012), Merhaut (2013), Roberto (2012), White (1988), and Zimmermann (2015) explored various theological perspectives on children issues and the potential value for the church when children are fully part of the church.



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



In Australia, for example, the Intergenerate Australia Movement (2021)¹ explores the various possible engagements with children in ministry as well as children's inclusion in church functioning.

Other movements such as Global Children's Forum² connect continuously with global leaders in children's ministry to explore challenges and, in particular, the development of contextual resources for children's ministry to encourage children's experiences as church. This trend to critically include children in the ministry of the church is a welcoming sign and needs encouragement and further exploration.

The contextual realities, however, point to more questions than answers in terms of ministering to, and with children and families. This situation would raise a fundamental question, namely: Where does the family (in all possible forms and shapes) fit into the discipling mandate of the church? Existing movements that intentionally shift their emphases to an intergenerational church community aimed at families as the best way to support children in their faith journey seem to raise more questions concerning the place and value of families as the core members of the church.

Various documents were recently developed in the field of advocacy and theological frameworks proposed on family discipleship by a specially selected committee of which the author is part. Such developments call for both theological frameworks and an environment for children's faith development as part of family life. The purpose of the article is to stimulate a way of reasoning which may develop to find contextual responses to challenges faced currently in the church regarding the church as a family ministry.

The article reflects broadly on some Biblical perspectives. While it does not represent a detailed theological exposition, it is an endeavour to help explore some theological reasoning on the matter.

-
- 1 Intergenerate Australia (2016) is a movement that started in 2016, with a number of interdenominational representatives hoping to collaborate globally to create spaces for people in churches (intergenerational) and constantly exploring what could be added to their faith journey and community.
 - 2 Global Children's Forum (2008) is a movement that developed in 2008 in the United States of America. The movement facilitates numerous ministry agencies globally who constantly explore contextual challenges concerning children issues and developing resources for children ministries. It is described as a partnering community striving to see children everywhere walking with Jesus.

2. GLOBAL FAMILY CULTURAL TRENDS AND CONCEPTS INFLUENCING THE INTERPRETATION OF INTERGENERATIONAL MINISTRY

It might be suggested that postmodern trends to individualise people in societies contributed to separation of generations in all walks of life and, in particular, the church. This statement needs elucidation to support such a notion. The apparent eroding of family life in society in general challenges the church to reconsider prevailing ecclesiological understandings. It asks questions on how much is church life individualised and how much collective church life is visible? Such questions could be rephrased: “What would be different in a church where the impact of families as core discipleship units was to be experienced in full?” One key concept to clarify is the word “intergenerational” which would have a clear implication for a family approach in ministry.

“Intergenerational” describes the interaction of persons who are significantly differentiated by virtue of their chronological age (Harkness 1996:3). The age differences may include the emphasis of something different to the common understanding of a generation as the chronological interval between parents and their offspring. Ever since the development of Christian faith communities in the post-Pentecost era of Christianity, there has been a consciousness that such communities need to encourage and embody a genuine intergenerational-ism (Harkness 1998:431).

Research and related theories developed in the field of social science confirm the impact of intergenerational interactions on personality and societal responses with youth (Holmes *et al.* 2022:3). The voice of the church would be critical in any discussion on this topic. It would also be important for children’s ministry practitioners to understand some of the implications and challenges an intergenerational approach to ministry entails. The broader aim of this article is to stimulate conversation towards clearer understandings of why and what is meant by intergenerational approach to ministry and the implications for the church.

The terms “individualism”³ and “collectivism”⁴ will, in various ways, support or challenge the reasoning in this article. These terms are used to distinguish between opposite cultural approaches to relationships in life that influence

3 Individualism stresses individual goals and the rights of the individual person. It is all about the individual’s needs. See Futurelearn (2012).

4 Collectivism focuses on group goals, what is best for the collective group, and personal relationships. See Futurelearn (2012).

the way in which the church is understood and expressed. Collectivism, the social “earth” in which communities existed and grew in the 1st century, emphasises the group’s needs rather than the individual’s. This inclination is expressed in African cultures and particularly in the biblical (Mediterranean) culture (Malina 2001:62-68). In this dyadic culture (Malina 2001:2), people understood and “knew” themselves in terms of, and in relation to the group in which an individual was embedded.

The negative connotation to collectivism, in our time, is that it can also be interpreted as a “communist approach”. This interpretation must then be debated in terms of church as a movement of the people of God,⁵ as expressed in the story of the Old Testament and in the Book of Acts, in particular. The question is whether the new uniquely created individual (2 Cor. 5:17) becomes part of the people of God as the body of Christ or as an individual follower of Christ. Groups existed as collective selves and not as individualistic selves (Rousseau 2003:108) and the phrase “people of God” describes the concept of total inclusivity of families, extended families, and other brothers and sisters in that specific community.

We must take cognisance of and acknowledge the fact that collectivism and not individualism was the norm in the first faith communities. This was perfectly in keeping with social norms and the overarching culture, where there are clear differences between individualism (prevalent in Western societies) and dyadism (as the definitive characterisation of the 1st-century Mediterranean world) (Joubert 1992:61). People were connected and a person had meaning in his/her connectedness to others (Malina 2001:62). In the Christian community of faith, believers were bound to their others/in-group with which solidarity was maintained. Paul describes this solidarity/group-centredness as “love” (1 Cor. 13) – they were one by virtue of their relationship to the head of the community, Jesus Christ (Rousseau 2010:139).

Rousseau (2003:84) tabulated the differences between individualism and dyadism (as an expression of collectivism) as follows:

Individualism	Dyadism
Personal success <i>determines</i> quality of life	Honourable conduct (to satisfy group demands) <i>is</i> quality of life
Acquisition of wealth/material gain is of <i>primary</i> utmost urgency	Maintenance of group honour or steering clear of shame is <i>crucial</i>

5 People of God are related to the Old Testament concept of God’s people on a journey on earth to fulfil their destiny and history ordained by God. In correlation with the Old Testament, it is proposed that the church continues as people of God to fulfil the last part of the earthly journey.

Individualism	Dyadism
All people/individuals are equal; society is <i>horizontally</i> structured	Society is hierarchically fixed and <i>vertically</i> structured
<i>Gender equality</i> is advocated	<i>Male-dominated</i> society
Prosperity <i>belongs to</i> the prosperous person/ <i>the individual</i>	Prosperity is for the <i>welfare of the group</i>

Whereas individualism in Western cultures acknowledges the individual's right to be who s/he is, it also contributes to a negative phenomenon, namely to alienate or separate people (Anthony 2023:1-2). Such separation is evident in Western societies when a typical day in a normal household is measured in terms of hours of togetherness, relationship-building, and out-of-house activities by the members of the household. The ripple effect of the emphasis on individualism had a negative impact on societies, namely the erosion of family life (Lewis 2003), absence of values, and shifting of personal freedom to control by whoever is in charge.

The current debates on schools, children's rights, gender issues, and government control over children in places such as Canada, America, and Europe underscore the global trends. Individualism prevails predominantly in Western cultures where career achievements, work pressures, divorces, and emigrations tend to separate nucleus families. In the ministry of the church, this trend of individualism is also experienced, when the various ministries of the church narrow down to any number of individuals with their own agenda and goals and participation for a selected few.

In turn, these factors pose challenges to the church to reconsider prevailing ecclesiological understandings on who and what the church really is, and how the church should include all ages as a movement of people of God. Research done in North America explored the future of older people and their long-term destiny in America. An important and relevant question began to surface some time ago. In an article for the American Association of Retired Persons, Wiener, Illston and Hanley (1994:8) enquired "[w]hat would happen if the [various] (researchers' emphasis) generations started seeing themselves not as separate teams but as players in a single team?" It is suggested that actual physical integration between generations can open doors for elderly people to contribute to their communities. By implication, this means that children and older people could mutually benefit through the integration of age groups. In a later edition, Knickman and Snell (2002:849-884) made the following recommendation "(4) Altering the cultural view of aging to make sure all ages are integrated into the fabric of community life".

A key concept that needs to be considered in this article is to understand what is meant by “intergenerational theological perspective”. As indicated earlier, “intergenerational” describes the interaction of persons who are significantly differentiated by virtue of their chronological age (Harkness 1996:3). The *Oxford Dictionary* (2021) gives the meaning of “intergenerational” as relating to, involving, or affecting several generations. Merriam-Webster (2021) lists “intergenerational” as a concept that refers to existing or occurring between different ages. The suggested age differences may include the emphasis of something different to the common understanding of a generation as the chronological interval between parents and their offspring (Harkness 1996:3). Harkness (1998:431) contends that early Christian communities of faith encouraged and embodied a genuine intergenerationalism. We must bear in mind that pre-Pentecost (Acts 2) there were, strictly speaking, no Christian communities or churches.

Over time, the Hebrew family culture seems to suggest a togetherness of people more than individualism. Darvic (2003) posits that the Jewish calendar stretches back over 5,000 years, during which a great number of Jewish traditions and customs accumulated. Many traditions and customs still maintain a deep sense of family and togetherness. Many aspects of contemporary Judaism still exist where families feature prominently as the learning space for Jewish children.

The Old Testament makes it clear that religion is not an individual affair but a corporate and communal life of faith and obedience to Yahweh. In this environment, children occupy a rightful place (Pridemore 1977:28-29). The Israelites and the first Christian communities may not have used the phrase “intergenerational faith formation” to describe the faith story and expressing such a way of life to the next generation, but history testifies to the inclusion of all ages earlier in the faith journey (Roberto 2008:1).

Intergenerational faith formation was an integral element of the Christian church in the New Testament and the way to convey faith from generation to generation (Roberto 2008:1). This sense of intergenerational life was maintained by the churches of the New Testament, drawn from their Old Testament roots. Up to the Protestant era, the life of both the Israelite and Christian communities was distinctly intergenerational (White 1988:75-79) and that occurred in and through aspects of ecclesiastical life that included religious instruction, art, worship, seasonal observances, family feasts, and life rites. What, then, has changed?

3. INFLUENCES FROM SOCIAL REALITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE ON CHILDREN'S MINISTRY AND THE PRAXIS OF THE CHURCH

It appears that the church followed developing science trends over the years when approaching children in the church. Children's ministry practitioners constantly developed educational learning models for children based on prevalent scientific theories and popular children's ministry trends. Praxis in children's ministry developed albeit, without questioning ecclesiological principles. One possible reason could be traced back to Piaget's⁶ emphasis on the various development stages of children. This prompted the education field to separate children in age-related groups for better learning (McLeod 2020:1). McLeod's (2020:1) article explores Maslow's hierarchy of needs within the scope of behaviour science and concludes that the individual's needs exist regardless of cultural differences. It appears that Piaget's developmental theories were also influenced by the prevailing behaviourist views. Piaget's developmental theories had a profound effect on learning models for years. His theories were based on influences such as biological maturation, activity, social experiences, and equilibration encouraging children's self-discovery.

Vygotsky,⁷ on the other hand, encourages learning of children by a "more knowledgeable Other" (McLeod, 2020:2). Both theories posited by Piaget and Vygotsky are valuable in exploring children's developmental needs within an intergenerational setting (McLeod 2020). The Renaissance period embedded the idea of individualism even deeper (Pettinger 2006). The main outcome from the application of behaviour science theories was that the focus shifted from community life or communal-oriented learning to nucleus families and individuals. Population growth and ever-changing societies evolved further, so that even family life became a rare learning environment in the 20th century. Children's learning and growing up worlds are further segregated by wars and displacement, absent fathers, increased single parenting situations, and parents caught up in time-consuming economic pressures. Research conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council and the South African Race Relations Institute state that 60 per cent of South African children's fathers are absent and over 40 per cent of South African mothers are single parents (HSCR, 2020). Statistics South Africa (March 2018) found that, in 2016 in South Africa, most of the children aged 0-6 (47.6%) lived in single-parent families.

6 The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) developed works on child development (1923; 1924; 1948).

7 The Soviet psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's (1896-1934) best-known work is *Thought and language* (1934).

Since 2002, the Child Theology Movement contributed valuable academic works and articles concerning children and their place in church. However, less discourse was initially done on children as part of family in the church. This contribution is clear from academic works such as *Entry point* (Willmer & White 2014), “Toddling to the Kingdom” (Collier *et al.* 2009), and “Child theology and the African context” (Grobbelaar 2012). The growing theological interest in children and the Bible, with suggested responses from the church, managed to create better theological frameworks and created space for deeper investigation on the praxis of the church.

This article contends that the church currently remains the predominant learning environment for children’s faith development within the instructional/schooling approach. Drawing from scientific theories on children’s development stages, it was assumed that specific age groups should be grouped together for catechism, and, as such, encourage segregation in the church. When Raikes⁸ started the Sunday school movement during the Industrial Revolution, the instructional model became the standard practice in the church. Missionaries duplicated this model as part of their ministry strategies in church planting.

This approach served the church for a long time but it evolved to follow current global trends in the quest to find more creative and attractive ways to accommodate children in the church. Movements such as Lausanne Movement, founded in 1974, Global Children’s Forum, initiated in 2008, 1/50 training group, and Max 7 from Australia joined global ministries in developing contextual resources for children’s ministries in churches. Although it appears to be a positive development, a recent Global Children’s Forum meeting in Brazil (March 2023), where global children’s ministry leaders met, confirms the need to revisit children’s ministry practices with the focus on intergenerational and family inclusiveness.

Common arguments observed over the past 30 years of ministry are that church leaders and congregation members believe that children could not understand what happens in adult services and that children are a distraction for adults in church (Mans 2015:13). One common argument raised by church leadership over many years of engagement is that the church service is a holy moment and children’s activities are disruptive. These arguments seem to stem from tradition, cultural practices, prevailing customs, adult comfort, selfishness and possibly even an attitude of superiority that contributed to support the separation and individualising of children in the church.

8 Robert Raikes was an English philanthropist and Anglican layman who started the Sunday school movement in 1780.

A strong argument for removing children from the service is that children are best accommodated in age-appropriate groups for peer learning. Such arguments may have elements of truth, but they do not necessarily represent a correct understanding of what church is, or is supposed to be, with the proposed inclusion of children. The exclusion of children from some parts of church life creates the perception that the church views children as future members-cum-assets to the church, but not as current church members.

Another possible reason for segregation in church is the fact that, in the past, hardly any theological and academic attention was paid to explore and develop clear theological tenets about children's inclusion in church life (Bunge 2006). Simultaneously, family life, as we understand it, continued to erode (Parkinson 2020:4-5). The suggested erosion of family life challenges the church to reconsider prevailing ecclesiological understandings.⁹ Through Life Long Faith ministry (2024), Roberto uses resource development, research activities, and articles to stimulate meaningful discourse in the field of intergenerational faith formation. Lately, more pressure is exerted on societies by governments outsourcing children's formation to educators for critical learning experiences (Levy 2022).

One Hope Ministries' Global Youth Culture research project (2021:20-21) produced significant findings concerning young people's faith commitments, relationships, and core spiritual influences in Africa. The same study also points to gaps within children's faith journeys. Most of the respondents in Africa indicated that they want to be unique individuals contributing to their communities. Essentially, while the motive is a noble one, it appears to diverge from the collectivist African culture. The respondents also indicated their dependence on healthy families and need for open conversations about life questions. It appears, however, that they feel distant from the church and would respond more favourably if invited more intentionally into church life.

In light of the core findings in this report, the voice of the church would then be critically important in any discussion on this topic. The development of children's ministries might, therefore, be viewed as another response outside the church to reach children and include them fully into church life. It is thus equally important for children's ministry practitioners to understand some of the implications and challenges of an intergenerational approach to ministry.

A core question arises: Do children need adults and/or do adults need children to be church? Considering the academic discourse and works published over the past 10 years, it appears that the church is at a critical point in history to revisit its ecclesiological understandings and practices. Whilst

9 Ecclesiology is the study of the church, where theology is applied to the nature and structure of the Christian church.

some churches made progress on the road to develop more inclusive ministry elements, the challenge remains of how to practically integrate all generations in current church ministry practices, given the various ministries of the church. Roberto (2012) suggests that the lack of intergenerational contact between all ages leads to each generation to consider itself as a separate subculture rather than an integral part of an entire community.

Exploring a framework for the church as an intergenerational space seems a very timely and contextual necessity.

4. HISTORIC DEVELOPMENTS INFORMING THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

In the Book of Acts, the church developed into a dynamic entity. The dynamism evolved within the parameters of Spirit-driven, contextual influences and human interpretations of the Word and events. A revisit of the hermeneutical processes concerning the church over the years would help understand why and how church models develop in form and function. Through the ages, the elements of context and human interpretation contributed to the formation of perceptions about the church (White 1988:79-81).

The various models, rites, rituals, tenets, form, and function of churches play out in a diverse tapestry of reflections in societies. While it appears that the diversity of communities of faith is a positive reality with many practices and models, it does, however, raise questions on how intergenerational such ministry is. In Chapter four, "Intergenerational faith formation for the Christian community", Roberto (2024:1), posits that,

when a church commits itself to building a culture of intergenerationality, it becomes a sign of and instrument for the full experience of the body of Christ by all ages and generations.

The global postmodern trend to shift away from the hermeneutical lens to the context lens affects the authority of the Bible and brings into question previously established, prevailing Christian doctrines about the church. The narratives about the church in the New Testament do, however, give a more simplistic view of an intergenerational experience of church. The New Testament as the "product" of dyadism-grounded authors and belief societies reflects a deep sense of togetherness and mutual care between Christians. As indicated previously, the definitive characteristic of the 1st-century Mediterranean "world" of the Bible was not individualism-directed (as is prevalent in Western societies); it was dyadic (Rousseau 2003:82). Dyadic persons are characterised by deep group-embeddedness or strong group-orientation (Rousseau 2003:78). Neyrey's (1993:52) synonym for

dyadism, “other-directed-orientation”, bears out the collectivist nature of the relationships of the Bible. In this dyadic relationship, true piety is the norm (Rousseau 2010:139). The whole church (adults, children, slave, freeman, man, woman) served the Lord together.

Piety must not be confused with pietism (Morecroft 1997). There is a clear distinction between the two concepts. *Eusebismos* is pietism as opposed to *eusebeia* (piety) (Trakakis 2005). *Eusebismos* describes an individualistic pietism and *eusebeia* describes the collectivist, within-the-group-working-piety (community of faith/congregation and the individual in that group [Rousseau 2010:139]). In these collectivist, first communities of faith, the members were in true unity and love (1 Cor. 13) because everyone was in Christ. Acts 2:42 articulates this deep, dyadic sense:

And they steadfastly persevered, devoting themselves constantly to the instruction and fellowship of the apostles, to the breaking of bread [including the Lord’s Supper] and prayers ... And all who believed were united and [together] they had everything in common ...

In verse 45, the Acts narrative points to an even deeper commitment to each other by selling and sharing what they have. The first members of the church then continue, in verse 46, to get together with a unified purpose. They visit each other in their homes, share food, and partake in the Lord’s Supper with simplicity and generous hearts. The collectivist paradigm challenges the current picture of church where individualism and segregation often dominate in communities of faith. The Pauline epistles similarly reflect messages of encouragement and call for a collective response as a community of faith and refer to both individuals and the household.

The Apostle Peter (1 Peter 1) calls for the community of faith to love each other from a pure heart and to exercise brotherly affection while developing Christian life (2 Peter 1). John (1 John 1-5) encourages the faith community to enjoy their collective fellowship as partners and partakers. The New Testament consistently expresses elements of togetherness, inclusiveness, and collective response from the new communities of faith. Segregation within the church probably developed through factors not only from inside the institutional church.

A by-product of the Reformation in the 16th century was the emphasis on “The Word” (Franklin 2018:1). This emphasis gave rise to the conceptualisations of childhood that led to children being increasingly marginalised and diverted from the rituals and life of the congregation (White 1988:79-81). It appears that the model of separate generation approaches in ministry was fuelled by changing cultural and biblical perceptions about what “church” is, supposedly to become and where children fit into church life. One main outcome was that

children were considered future assets of the church and church-in-becoming – not already church. The reformation age also suffered from remnants of deep cultural and custom concepts of the value and place of children in society divided over the Hebrew culture. Culture played a major role over the ages in influencing various aspects of life in developing societies and, in particular, attitudes and behaviours. The development of church was furthermore influenced by the religious wars, evangelical crusades, the Roman Catholic resistance to evangelical expansion, revival, and the missionary periods that followed.

At the same time, the church started to be influenced by popular science in the fields of child psychology and educational psychology. We can refer to child development theories developed by Erikson, Maslow, Piaget, and Vygotsky, as a major influence on the approach to children in the secular and church environment. The initiation of the Sunday school model by Raikes (schooling – instructional model) could be considered a very timely and necessary phase for poor and vulnerable children at that time. However, it was probably adopted by the church as a model without deeper theological and ecclesiological investigation. Serious lack of constant theological debate on children's issues also contributed to the marginalising of the deep values supporting the critical role of families and communities in the faith formation of children.

Critics of the schooling-instructional model have expressed their concerns over many years. Bruner (according to McLeod, 2023, cited in General Synod Board of Education, 1991a:5) asserts that

the church took a wrong turning when it substituted the technique of the community for the technique of the classroom in religious education.

The development of effective children's ministries could be considered another response from the church to reach children. This resulted in wonderful children's ministry practices globally with very specific focus areas of resources, engagement, and methodologies. These ministries produced exceptional ministry models, materials, methodologies, and effective practitioners over many years.

The question is: Why are we not content with the status quo? The argument is that it supports still more segregation than integration. There are ministries that try to bridge the gap but, in general, we find different ministry silos where the focus is on individual needs and groups and not on the corporate understanding that all generations need each other. Exploring Scripture could assist in developing some biblical tenets that support intergenerational church life.

5. BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK THAT SUPPORTS INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

This section explores the concept of the church as intergenerational space regarding the possible relationship between the New Testament church and the people of God in the Old Testament (Mans 2015:80). The phrase “people of God” in the Old Testament perspective needs to be understood regarding its composition, purpose, and relationship with God, in order to align it with the New Testament church.

The characteristics in the gatherings of the people of God in the Old Testament might be indicative of what God intended for the church as a community of faith in the New Testament (Mans 2015:80). When the people of God gathered, Scripture reflects mostly that the whole family and even slaves were together in God’s presence. As such, a notion of intergenerational faith formation seems to reflect distinctive features of communities of faith in both the Old and the New Testament eras.

Current theological conversations in the field of Practical Theology postulate the church as an intergenerational space that creates a more inclusive and welcoming environment¹⁰ for all people (Harkness 2012). It appears to correlate with the elements of inclusiveness as discovered in the Hebraic tradition. Inclusiveness seems integral to the covenant and fundamental to the relationship between God and God’s people (Merhaut 2013:28). The Old Testament shows that religion was not an individual affair but an inclusive and communal life of faith and obedience to Yahweh, in which children occupy their rightful place (Pridemore 1977:28-29).

The Israelites and the first Christian communities never knew, nor used the phrase “intergenerational faith formation” to describe their faith story. But this story expresses a way of life to the next generation that includes all ages in the faith journey. The churches of the New Testament maintained this sense of intergenerational life that they drew from the Old Testament roots. Psalm 78 provides clear expectations within the Hebrew family on transferring faith from generation to generation. Up to the Protestant era in the early 16th century, the life of both the Israelite and Christian communities of faith reflected distinctive intergenerationality that came about through factors and aspects of ecclesiastical life. Religious instruction, art, worship, season observances, and life rites all helped (White 1988:75-79).

10 The following studies all focus on the aspects of an intergenerational church environment: Philip (2020), Payne (2016), Allan & Ross (2012), Roberto (2015), as well as Weber & De Beer (2016).

Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2015) proposed a new paradigm in understanding the church as a “hospitality” space. They considered four principles flowing from this paradigm, namely relational, intergenerational, narrative, and missional. Whilst their work focused on the church as hospitable space, where the ministries of the church considered the question on the implications for the real world, was not fully explored.

6. POSSIBLE FRAMEWORKS FOR THE INSTITUTED CHURCH AND BROADER COMMUNITY OF FAITH

The tenets or main principles of beliefs of the evangelicals are clearly reflected in the ministries of the church. In exploring an ideal intergenerational church model, the reality is that there should not be a single model but rather a contextually oriented framework that takes into account cultural, community, and environmental aspects. Joubert (1992:1) reminds us of the art of understanding the difference between Mediterranean and Western values when interpreting the biblical text from a cultural perspective. Positing a framework of biblical and human science principles and praxes could help create foundational theories for churches to explore and to encourage practical ministry praxes and intentional moves to become more intergenerational.

6.1 Implication for the praxis of the institutional church

A common methodological error among Christian leaders occurs when investigation into the ministry praxis of the church is approached from the wrong premises. To improve upon any praxis, the norm is to start thinking about and planning better programmes and their contents. Normally, the context and praxis are used as a point of departure for better praxis development and not for revisiting the theological research bases. Researching children’s issues and church are exposed to a number of challenges when endeavouring to reach significant findings.

Common errors such as the lack of understanding of cultural aspects of psychology create contestable assumptions and perceptions when researching church and ministry praxes (Ratner & Hui 2003:67-94). These errors could be the reason why Christians, since the first church, seem to have developed a propensity for spiritual and religious experiences which (to them) “outweigh” the preferable seeking of a deeper understanding of what biblical and spiritual principles support and guide such experiences in ministry.

The following focus areas, approached from a process paradigm of thinking, may present a way forward to create a more intergenerational space. In any process, order is a logical imperative, but process should not

be bound or curtailed by rigidly fixed steps. The following section will take into account the four principles in a hospitality space for an intergenerational church, as discussed earlier, namely relational, intergenerational, narrative, and missional. It is believed that Coetsee and Grobbelaar's (2015) article pays sufficient attention to the different ministries. This article will not suggest particular praxes and programmes, due to the value principle that each community is unique and that principles should be used to respond to that context. Some key focus areas, which could turn the tide against segregation in the church and encourage the church to become an intergenerational space, are suggested and expanded with the following brief discussion on advocacy,¹¹ theology,¹² ecclesiology,¹³ and ministry.¹⁴

6.1.1 Advocacy

Advocacy is a tool for raising awareness and effecting change in the ministry of the church for it to become more relational, more intergenerational, more narrative oriented, and missional. The advocacy process envisages clear strategies and actions to address the needs explored through the process. Such processes continue to respond to ever-changing context and developments in societies. There are many different role players in the field of advocacy who work alongside the church from inside and around the church. Global advocacy currently happens extensively and globally in the areas of wounded/vulnerable children and is generally considered to be the calling of NPOs and NGOs such as UNICEF, Compassion International, World Vision, VIVA, and others. Whilst the efforts of these bodies are mainly driven and executed by Christian-oriented people, they do not officially relate to, or as part of, the ministry of the church. These NPOs and NGOs could rather be viewed as being in competition regarding resources such as support bases, governmental acknowledgement, monies, and people skills. These organisations follow a key strategy, that is to highlight the plight of vulnerable children and use various advocacy methods to involve governments and individuals.

11 The act or process of supporting a cause or proposal.

12 Theology. In this article, the use of theology focuses more exclusively on supportive biblical perspectives or a framework where children are fully part of God's people journeying on earth. It searches for inclusion in all walks of life, where life happens.

13 Ecclesiology. The focus on the church forms a critical part of the discussion as it seems to challenge prevailing perspectives on what church is, supposed to be, and what it should do.

14 Ministry is considered an activity by Christians to spread and express their faith. It could mean the office, duties, or functions of a minister. The body of ministers of religion: Clergy. Ministration it could also be a person or thing through which something is accomplished. Agency or instrumentality Ministry.

The church is arguably a people of God present in the same world as these compassion organisations. The critical unsolved challenge over many years is how to involve the whole church with the whole gospel in this broken world. Where could one start to effect change? The church provides the motivation and space to be Jesus' hands and feet to the world. The church has calling, authority, skills, resources, motivation, and opportunity to engage life's challenges. The mandate of the church according to Luke 4:18-19 and Romans 10:14, is the "kérygma" of the Good News. In essence, it is the advocacy proclaiming the new covenant with God through Christ Jesus.

Advocacy would seem to be the most logical solution to help the church respond appropriately. There is a more comprehensive understanding, with the implementation of advocacy activities necessary to ensure appropriate and sustainable responses from the church to the fate of all vulnerable children in our world. To effect change in the church's role and engagement as an intergenerational space for church, families, and other vulnerable children, the following focus areas could be considered critical points of engagement through advocacy activities:

- Sensitise the church to discover an ecclesiology of what and who the church is as a people of God which includes families with their children fully on its journey of faith.
- Sensitise the church to discover the mandated responsibility to, and biblical response to and with children within the family context.
- Sensitise the church to re-discover a community-oriented, contextual ministry praxis to impact on society through families and children, as being part of the solution.
- Sensitise the church to re-discover the family as space where family discipleship happens.
- Sensitise the church to re-discover how to impart skills and examples of the biblical journey in faith development (Felix *et al.* 2011).

This challenge seems to call for a more integrated advocacy strategy which then targets families, communities of faith (Christian communities, churches, church leaders, and academic institutions), and society in general.

6.1.2 Theological contributions that can support intergenerational ministry

The community of faith depends on more intentional theological exploration to develop the necessary theological constructs that can direct church programmes and practices in the field of ministry where children are integrated in all of church life. In this regard, a greater effort should be made towards

the development of clear theological underpinnings for ministry practices. Such underpinnings would find supportive scriptures that reflect inclusiveness of biblical motivated relationship-building, intergenerational faith-formation practices in the church ministry, a more intentional use of the narrative approach in preaching and witnessing, as well as missional projects and experiences within local communities further afield.

Theologians still tend to consider children's journey of faith within a classroom setting. In exploring the question what is children's theology, Zimmerman (2015) posits "[i]n order to advance theological competency, a process of confrontation, examination and reflection must take place in classroom situations". Whilst the work developed useful insights into the possible empowerment of children to articulate their theology, the proposed setting is somewhat contentious.

The focus on an intergenerational ministry in all spheres of theological discourse and training will remain a critical objective and necessity for the church. This shift would include the challenge to first explore children from an anthropological perspective to be able to develop their real potential. Each newborn person is, according to Psalm 139, unique with gifts and qualities created by God. An anthropological focus will help create more understanding of children's uniqueness as well as their potential of being part of family and growth in their faith formation.

We may assume that the practical implementation of intergenerational praxis, derived from the theological basis developed by scholars, could help the church move into the marketplace as people of God, with families and children being fully part of the people of God – the church. More theological research, short papers, peer evaluation, and reflections of a church in communities could affirm the biblical principles for relationship-building, intergenerational ministry practices, authoritative biblical narrative preaching, and missional ministry practices.

6.1.3 Possible ecclesiological implications for intergenerational ministry

The four marks of a true church are posited as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic space. When the various arguments and related suggestions in this article are applied to the ministries of the church, with inclusion of the requirements to be relational, intergenerational, narrative-inclined, and mission-oriented, they give context and content to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic character of the church as the model in Acts. Such a church will shift from a church-building bound space to a presence in its community. As such, the main faith-forming space will shift to homes, families, and broader communities of faith, where all generations will play their role as people of God. This body, people

of God, can constantly invite, welcome, minister, equip, and serve through the spirit of gentle hospitality in the vein of Philippians 4:5: “Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.”

Children are often vulnerable and detached from the dynamics of co-being church, while the church must be the place where children – already part of the church – should be raised as the next generation of the people of God. The exploration of ecclesiological perspectives will, therefore, afford an opportunity for the church to develop clear family ministry models. Models must be based on a correct understanding of what church is and is supposed to be in this age (Rom. 8-15).

Church as a concept should, therefore, be revisited, extensively explored, and given constant attention from both practitioners and practical theologians. The church could be an intergenerational community of faith constantly on the move and expressed as a people of God, where children are fully integrated in the journey to meet God and grow in faith. Children’s ministry inputs can encourage the church to become a community of faith, where all ages are welcome, accommodated, and sent out on the believer’s mission to the world (see Matt. 28:19).

6.1.4 Implications for the ministry of the church

Ministry denotes the idea of service as the focus of the church. A disjointed ecclesiology will, logically, result in ministry practices that do not impact on societies relevantly and effectively. The correct methodology to suggest is, therefore, a more people-centred approach for this proposed intergenerational model.

First, we must consider what environment could welcome and accommodate all generations. It is suggested that ministries do have the creativity and capacity to contribute in significant ways in creating the favourable environments where the people of God journey together according to God’s plan. One critical opportunity in the church is to encourage relationship-building between the various age groups as groups as well as individuals. Developing programmes, content, and practices could help the community of faith intentionally build relationships between generations and create mutual learning and ministry environments. One key change from the current situation with the church would be the willingness and ability to also listen to children’s inputs in matters regarding daily life as Christians.

The understanding expressed in this article is that there cannot be a blueprint model, as each faith community will become a space adhering to biblical principles, with each a unique movement informed by the Spirit, context, and member interpretation. Such a community of faith can then translate into ministry practices which align with such a community of faith's values and tenets.

Secondly, children's ministry, as part of ministering to God's people, should be considered an interrelated, integrated process that can also be independent at the same time. Integration into the whole scope of ministry of the church could assist in creating various supportive environments where children can be welcomed, accommodated, protected, nurtured, and grown to be and become what God intended them to be. In essence, children's ministry provides various environments for children where faith development is encouraged (Mans 2015:247-250).

Children's ministry practitioners, organisations, and leaders can significantly influence current trends in the fields of theology and ecclesiology. The call is not to stop what is happening in current children's ministry practices, but rather to find creative ways to foster new relationships between different generations through intentional programmes and activities that would create a safe, welcoming, and accommodating environment for intergenerational ministry. Such an approach would not rely on good programmes but rather on a good understanding of faith formation in community for all ages and a solid theological basis for whatever practice is developed.

Should the following assumption be true, how would it influence what children's ministries do? The statement proposes

intergenerational faith formation builds individuals' faith by providing opportunities for parents and children and broader¹⁵ family members to share the mysteries of every day faith experiences through talk, pray, worship and discipleship (mentorship).

Family faith fosters life values in communities (Roberto 2012:1, 2). If the idea that faith formation builds family faith by providing opportunities for parents and children to talk about the mysteries of faith experienced every day and in prayer and worship is true, how would it influence what children ministries do?

15 Both biological family and faith-related family members (the church).

7. CONCLUSION

Exploring the relationship between the churches as intergenerational space and intergenerational families as expression of the church in the world would appear to challenge the traditional understanding of what the church really should be and do. Philosophical arguments, historic developments and trends influencing the church's being and children's ministry practices, strengthen arguments that it is necessary to re-visit the place, function and Biblical expression of what we consider church to be. Ecclesiological reflections point to key elements such as the ministries of the church, theology on the church's mandate and faith practices present in church, on the earthly faith journey of the people of God. It proposes a family discipleship approach where families disciple each other and as part of the church move into communities making disciples of those they reach.

Defining family as expression of different interrelationships between various generations opens up the welcoming and inclusiveness of the church to everyone of all ages. Such a family-oriented church could be viewed as part of one body living out the mandate of the church. This article also suggests more in-depth exploration of a sound theological framework that could support an intergenerational church model. Such intergenerational faith movement as people of God will represent all possible role players such as babies, children, adolescents, fathers, mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, as well as extended or relational families.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALLAN, H.C & ROSS, C.L.

2012. Intergenerational Christian formation: Bringing the whole church together in ministry, community and worship. *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10(1). [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/073989131301000126?journalCode=ceja> [10 August 2023]. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000126>

ANTHONY, T.

2023. How the American dream convinces people loneliness is normal. Individualism politics and philosophy. *Britannica*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.britannica.com> [16 May 2023].

BRUNER, J.S.

1960. *The process of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674028999>

BUNGE, M.J.

2006. The child, religion, and academy: Developing a robust theological and religious understanding of children and childhood. *Journal of Religion* 86(4):549-578. <https://doi.org/10.1086/505894>

CARM (CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS AND RESEARCH MINISTRY)

2023. Ecclesiology. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://carm.org/?s=Ecclesiology> [10 May 2023].

CHRISTIANITY.COM

2021. Robert Raikes. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://m.christianity.com>church>robert-raikes> [20 February 2021].

COETSEE, D. & GROBBELAAR, J.

2015. "A Church where children are welcome": A new paradigm for children's ministry in Africa. In: I. Phiri *et al.* (eds.) *Handbook of theological education in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books International), pp. 803-817. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcphf.87>

COLLIER, J. (ED.)

2008. Toddling to the Kingdom. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://childtheologymovement.org/toddeling-to-the-kingdom/> [6 September 2013].

DARVIC, D.B.

2003. "This Jewish life read the spirit books". Stories of discovery, connection, and joy. This Jewish Life. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://readthespirit.com/bookstore/books/this-jewish-life/> [7 May 2021].

ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA

2020. Jean Piaget. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Piaget> [6 May 2022].

2021. L.S. Vygotsky. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/L-S-Vygotsky> [6 May 2021].

2024. Robert Raikes. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/facts/Robert-Raikes> [15 August 2023].

FELIX, P. *ET AL.*

2011. *Book of forgotten crafts. Keeping the traditions alive.* Newton Abbot, UK: David & Charles Ltd.

FRANKLIN, K.J.

2018. How can the Reformation's focus on faithfulness of Scripture inspire us for mission? *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4817>

FUTURELEARN

2012. Global university systems. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.futurelearn.com> [18 April 2023].

GENERAL SYNOD BOARD OF EDUCATION, 1991A.

2023. General Synod Draft diocesan boards of education measure 1991. [online] retrieved from <https://www.leicesterbe.org>. [05 March 2023]

GLOBAL CHILDREN'S FORUM

2008. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://childreverywhere.com/gcf/> [1 November 2023].

GROBBELAAR, J.

2012. *Child theology and the African context*. London: The Child Theology Movement.

HARKNESS, A.G.

1996. Intergenerational Christian education: Reclaiming a significant educational strategy in Christian faith communities. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.

1998. Intergenerational education for an intergenerational church. *Religious Education* 93(4):431-447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344089809304040>

2012. Intergenerationality: Biblical and theological foundations. Asia Graduate School of Theology Alliance, CEJ. Series 3, Vol 9, No1. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131200900109>

HOLMES, S. ET AL.

2022. Multinational research project. Do church structures enable children and family ministry to grow? [Online]. Available at: https://youtube.be/von3N_FqzQ. (Accessed, 27 February 2023).

HUMAN SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNSEL

2020/1. R&D Statistical report. [Online] Available at: <https://www.dst.gov.za/index.php/resource-center/rad-reports/r-d-survey-reports> (Accessed, 15 December 2022).

INTERGENERATE AUSTRALIA

2016. www.intergen.org.au.

JOUBERT, S J.

1992. Van werklikheid tot werklikheid. Die interpretasie en interkulturele kommunikasie van Nuwe Testamentiese waardes. *Scriptura* 41: 55-65. <https://doi.org/10.7833/41-0-1678>

KNICKMAN, J.R. & SNELL, E.K.

2002. Aging U.S. baby boomers and their retirement. *Health Services Research* 37(4):849-884. DOI: 10.1034/j.1600-0560.2002.56.x

LEVY, B.

2022. How political contexts influence education systems: Patterns, constraints, entry points. RISE Working Paper Series, 22/122. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/122 [15 May 2023].

LEWIS, J.

2003. Family breakdown, individualism and issue of the relationship between family law and behaviour in post-War Britain. In: S. Cunningham-Burley & L. Jamieson (eds), *Families and the state* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230522831_4

MALINA, B.J.

2001. *The New Testament world. Insights from cultural anthropology*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

MANS, P.R.

2015. The ministry strategy of the Church of Pentecost in Accra, with specific focus on children. Unpublished PhD thesis. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch.

MCLEOD, S.A.

2020. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Simply psychology. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html> [15 March 2023].

MERHAUT, J.

2013. Intergenerational faith formation today: Its impact and sustainability. *Lifelong Faith* Fall 2013:27-36.

MERRIAM-WEBSTER

2021. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intergenerational> [3 May 2021].

2024. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advocacy> [10 April 2024].

2024. Ministry. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ministry> [10 April 2024].

MORECROFT, J.

1997. Heiligmakingsverband: Ps 1 en 2. [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.ligstryders.tripod.com/wysheid/97sep.html#2> [24 Feb 2023].

NEYREY, J H.

1993. Dyadism. In: J.J. Pilch & B.J. Malina (eds), *Biblical social values and their meaning: A handbook* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), pp. 49-52

ONE HOPE

2021. Global youth culture, Africa Report. [Online.] Retrieved from: www.globalyouthculture.net [10 January 2023].

OXFORD DICTIONARY

2024. Intergenerational. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american-english/intergenerational> [3 May 2021].

PARKINSON, P.

2020. Faith and family in a multicultural society. New College Lectures, 22 September 2020. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/patric-parkinson-eroian-of-family/1261648> [8 May 2021].

PAYNE, M.

2016. Messy togetherness: Being intergenerational in messy church. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.messychurch.brf.org.uk/latest/resources/messy-togetherness-being-intergenerational-in-messy-church/> [15 October 2023].

PETTINGER, T.

2006. Facts of the Renaissance. Oxford. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.biographyonline.net/facts-about-the-renaissance/>, 12 January 2016. Updated 26 June 2017 [10 February 2023].

PHILIP, D.

2020. Children in an intergenerational church community. Unpublished MTh Abstract. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.

PIAGET

1923. *The language and thought of the child*. Geneva, Institut Rousseau. Read Books Ltd

1924. *Judgement and reasoning of the child*. Great Britain, London. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

1936. *The origin of intelligence in children*. New York, International Universities Press Inc; First Edition (January 1, 1952)

PRIDEMORE, J.S.

1977. *The New Testament theology of childhood*. Hobart, Australia: Ron Buckland.

RATNER, C. & HUI, L.

2003. Theoretical and methodological problems in cross-cultural psychology. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33(1):67-94. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00206>

ROBERTO, J.

2008. Lifelong faith formation for all generations. *Lifelong Faith*, Vol. 2.1. *Lifelong Faith*, Chapter 5: Spirit and culture for youth ministry, Spring 2012. [Online.] Retrieved from: www.lifelongfaith.com [10 November 2023].

2012. The importance of family faith for lifelong faith formation. *Lifelong Faith*, Chapter 5: Spirit and culture for youth ministry, Spring 2012. [Online.] retrieved from: www.lifelongfaith.com [8 May 2023].

2015. *Reimagining faith formation for the 21st century*. Naugatuck, CT: Hillspring Books, Inc. Lifelong Faith Publications.

2024. Intergenerational Faith Formation for the Christian Community. *Lifelong Faith*, Chapter 4: Building an Intergenerational Church Culture, Presentation to the Minneapolis Synod of the ELCA. [Online.] Retrieved from: www.lifelongfaith.com [15 April, 2024].

ROUSSEAU, P.A.

2003. The social meaning of love in the gospel of John. Unpublished DTh thesis. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

2010. Noutetiese berading van persone met pietistiese mistastings oor lewensheiligheid. Unpublished PhD thesis. Potchefstroom: North-West University.

STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA

2018. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.statssa.gov.za>>2018/03 [6 January 2023].

TRAKAKIS, N.

2005. Piety and pietism. *Theandros. An Online Journal of Orthodox Christian Theology and Philosophy* 2(3). [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.theandros.com/pietism.html> [22 February 2023].

VYGOTSKY, L.S.

1978. L.S. Vygotsky. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/L-S-Vygotsky> [6 May 2021].

WEBER, S. & DE BEER, S.

2016. Doing theology with children in a South African context: Children as collaborators in intergenerational ministry where all focus on the aspects of an intergenerational church environment. *HTS Teologiese Studies* 72(1), a3572. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3572>

WHITE, J.

1988. *Intergenerational religious education*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.

WIENER, J.M. ILLSTON, L.H. AND HANLEY, R.J.

1994. Sharing the burden: Strategies for public and private long-term care insurance. *Political Science Quarterly* 110(2):329-330. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2152381>

WIKIPEDIA

2019 Ministry. [Online]. Retrieved from: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry> [6 March 2019].

WILLMER, H. & WHITE K.J.

2013. *Entry point. Towards child theology with Matthew 18*. Mill Grove: WTL Publications Limited.

ZIMMERMAN, M

2015. What is child theology? Children's theology as theological competence: Development, differentiation, methods. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2848>

Keywords

Trefwoorde

Family

Familie

Children

Kinders

Faith formation

Geloofsvorming

People of God

Mense van God