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She has been in leadership with children and young people for over 30 years, and has a passion for nurturing their faith. Her ministry has been in rural, urban and suburban settings, including some time with street ministry with youth in Scotland.

Christine spent 7 ½ years in a team ministry where her focus was children and families. She has nearly completed her Masters of Ministry and is currently researching faith development and expression across 3 generations in families.

Her husband Scott is a Deacon working in the Corrective Services. Their children are nearly 13, 11 and 7.

Ministry across ages- more attitude than a generation gap?

A person walks into the room and starts singing 'Who's the leader of the club that's made for you and me'. Instantly some people start to sing along- "M.I.C.K.E.Y.M.O.U.S.E". Others in the room give those who are singing strange looks. What is going on?

Another time and place and a song blares out. The movie 'Priscilla, Queen of the desert' has just been released. Many of the teenagers at school start singing along. So does their Scripture teacher- over 20 years their senior. The young people are amazed. "Gee miss- you know the words of this song. Your cool" says one young person. Little did they realise that the teacher had learnt the music from the first time around- when they were originally sung by ABBA!

Shared experience

The cohort we grow up in is the age group from approximately 5-10 years either side of our age- irrespective of our age. Our cohort is the general age group which shared many of our experiences of society, (with a special focus on music). For example- those who lived in the time of the landing on the moon, or who grew up with Countdown or Australian Idol or Big Brother- or those for whom September 11 had a significant impact. Some teenagers now have little recollection of life before 'the war on terror'! We are very aware of the Baby Boomers, X generation and Y generation. There are key factors which are common to people born within a certain time frame in history, their cohort, which has been used to 'label' particular people or generations. Sometimes this can be helpful, but many more times- it excludes people who do not fit into the broad categories or key indicators of a particular generation. Even the use of 'first or second generation' can be exclusive and the term '1.5ers' is not necessarily helpful either. What each of these terms does is indicate a particular characteristic of a group of people. This may have some similarities to other groups of people- but each group is distinctive in its own right.

Traditionally, the church has divided ministry and people into groups dependent upon their age group or life stage. This may have been helpful in the past and still is in some areas. However, the church is being challenged to rethink its theology of ministry to children and young people. For people can discover faith at any age and the nurturing of an individual's faith and the expression of that faith is quite distinctive. How can we connect with people, nurture their faith and help them find authentic expressions of faith in worship, church involvement and especially in their ministry in the wider world?

Changing Experience

In the Uniting Church the Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery has significant ministry with people from a range of different ethnic backgrounds as well as children, youth and families. In 2005, 12 Youth workers and 13 Children/Family workers were employed within congregations. Now, many of the congregations have moved from employing 'youth workers' to 'family and children and youth' (in some combination). Some understand the 'family' aspect to be the families of the children and youth, whilst others are starting to look more at intergenerational ministry. Some are even beginning to see the importance of connecting people across ages focusing more on intentional ministry at times of transition, shared interests or relationships. There are some key lessons from the Presbytery which are helping to move the congregations (and the wider church) forward into what is potentially a very positive future.

Attitude for change:

Recent research¹ with two groups of young people (14-22years) highlighted the importance of the attitude of the congregation in encouragement and acceptance of the young people, which in turn linked with expression of faith through church attendance.

The attitude of the congregation enabled the young people in one group, where there was an 'attitude of encouragement', to feel accepted, encouraged and CONNECTED with those of other generations. Interestingly this group of young people were born overseas but raised in Australia- so that their significant faith development has been as the 'second generation' in an Australian context.

The second group came from a large, regional congregation with many youth activities, but young people experienced an 'attitude of tolerance'. Many of the young people in this congregation have already left the church- not just this congregation- and others are getting ready to leave. This 'attitude of tolerance' is displayed in the style of worship, in opportunities for leadership and using gifts and skills, and in the decisions making process. There are significant connections with key leaders- those who are involved in ministry with young people- but in general terms these young people felt 'forgotten...disapproved of...and discounted'.

It should be noted that many older adults in a cohort around 45years age also express similar feelings in relation to this second congregation. They express a sense of deep frustration that the words and visioning of the congregation might be forward thinking and there is a stated significant positive focus on change but that their experience is that of being excluded and 'taken for granted'. This congregation has many small groups involved in Bible study and similar interest groups. But many other groups are 'life-stage related' which is excluding to those who don't quite fit in to the 'clique' or particular life-stage. Many of these adults have also expressed concerns about the general attitude of the congregation towards change- where words don't quite meet action- and they thirst for something more authentic and relevant for them and their families.

Perhaps some of the way forward comes from finding ways where there can be many style of worship and expressions of faith. Those who have a preferred style of worship are free to worship in that way, while others have freedom to do so in other ways². And there are other

opportunities for people to connect with worship beyond their local congregation. However, this is then balanced by a range of opportunities for more intimate and authentic connections across ages in fellowship or social settings, or where there can be significant faith sharing between people-irrespective of age or life stage!

'The Second generation question'

Much is being written about the 'second generation' and the challenges faced by young people who experience tension between their cultural and ethnic identity (usually displayed in a particular way of worship or church) and their experience of growing up in Australia. This is significant for the church and especially for those involved with children, youth and family ministry. However, some of the lessons are more to do with generational differences accentuated by the cultural tension, than it is to do with a distinctive 'second generation' label.

At a recent seminar held in Sydney, Rev David Chai from the Korean Presbyterian Church in America focused on lessons for eh church about second generation. He used a case study from Koreans in Hawaii to highlight three key lessons. Although 7000 Koreans moved to Hawaii and set up 30+ churches, over a period of time these were reduced to basically 4 churches with some Korean identity. He identified three failings.

- 1) The language- the church stuck to their first language- in worship, in meetings and in the records.
- 2) The lack of forward planning- the church did not do any forward planning for where they would like to grow the church into the future.
- 3) The lack of trying to connect with second generation people- resulting in a 'silent exodus' where 97% of the younger people left the church.

He identified the Korean church in Hawaii as a 'one generation church'. Unfortunately, many of the 'Anglo' churches are stuck in the same pattern and although the language may be English, the worship culture is still 'one generation'!

Some positive signs are seen in congregations though. Cook Islanders in Sydney's West plan worship and activities to connect with the younger people and

this has been a positive experience for those wanting authentic and interactive worship, the lay leaders have experienced some negative feedback from some of those in the congregation, but mostly receive 'nothing' or even 'tolerance'. Many young people (and some of the older adults) say there is still a 'classroom' feel to the worship rather than many opportunities for engaging and interactive space.

¹ C Bayliss Kelly, 2007, *A study of young people-faith and the church*.

² The regional congregation believes it has three distinctive styles of worship but it is really a traditional style/liturgy with differences in music, a limited 'children's bit' at the 'family service' and 'the-removal-of-the-tie-feel' for the evening. Occasionally lay leaders lead worship in ways which are quite creative but this is limited. While

communication is generally in English, with some first language in songs. Worship follows a similar pattern but the liturgy has room for creativity and interaction which is positive. Cultural learning happens as an extra intentional activity to enable the young people to own and understand their heritage but to integrate it into who they are. Tongans in another congregation meet once a month to have a service in English 'for the young people', but the style of worship is traditional and, although the young people are encouraged to lead prayers, there is little else to connect with them in a creative way. At least this is more promising than in another congregation where young people could never read the Bible or lead prayers as this is a privilege that comes with age and respect!³ By contrast, Filipino young people actually help plan and lead worship which is intergenerational, interactive and has an 'authentic feel'.

Unfortunately the 'one-generation' church is all too familiar and we need to work through ways of connecting with the 'second generation church' irrespective of the ethnicity factor!

Ways forward

In 2006 Thomas Bandy conducted a number of seminars about church growth. He identified the need for the church to become more contextual (something those in youth ministry and experienced in a good theology of youth have been doing for a long time!!!). However even though he identified three significant life-changing experiences in his own life **when he was a child and a teenager**, he believed that church change could ONLY happen by focusing on the adults⁴.

The change to appropriate contextualisation for the church needs to happen, but with a good theological basis. To ignore the significant faith development of children and young people as a secondary matter following on from the focus on the adults puts the church at great peril. And it shows a poor theological understanding of faith development of children and youth.

In many congregations ministry needs to be intergenerational as the very nature of community is across generations. We see this in the way many of the children and young people in ethnic congregations care for each other, in a very natural mentoring relationship. These connections may be in worship where a congregation manages to create authentic and engaging intergenerational worship. However, for

many other groups of people worship may be very separate experiences and the connections need to be made through other ways, e.g. mentoring processes or intentional intergenerational groups.

There does need to be intentional work on changing the attitude of congregations by focusing on ALL people across ages. Perhaps by growing new cultures of church alongside the traditional ways there may be more positive experiences of church for all people. Perhaps this can be helped by the changing focus to ministry with families where families are understood as across the generations.

There is hope, and some exciting times lie ahead.

³ Recently 3 linked Tongan congregations had their first 'youth camp' with 77 registered young people aged between 2 and 19, and some barriers began to break! Not to mention a new style of singing and worship which opens up even more possibilities.

⁴ Thank God there were people in HIS life who believed ministry with children and youth is vital to faith formation.