

First Unitarian Church

July 22, 2018

I'm going to talk about the generations and about being an intergenerational church this morning. First, I think it would be fun to see who's here. So I'll call out some ranges of birth years, and let's hear you clap and cheer for your generational group.

- born between 1982 to 2000
- born between 1960 and 1981
- born between 1943 and 1960
- born between 1925-1942
- born before 1925 (... let's all clap for our treasured elders who were born before 1925)
- born after 2000 (many of that generation go to the children's Religious Education program rather than the sanctuary...let's all clap for our treasured youngest members)

It's good to be together.

I'm excited to talk about this topic, but I have to let you know I didn't think of it all by myself. This sermon topic was bought. Someone paid for it.

That makes it sound like I'm running a little side business, hustling homilies.

It was purchased at the Social Justice Auction a few months ago, by Steve Phillips and Cheri Plavnik, who put their dollars together to outbid everyone else. Smart!

Steve, Cheri, and I exchanged emails afterward, in which they shared that they hoped I'd talk about "the importance of children, teens and young adults to a vital activist church." They also hoped I'd touch on the issues couples with young kids face that may give them pause to commit and become members of the church.

And later Steve added something else, and he gave me permission to share it with you. He wrote:

I miss interacting with young minds. They bring a vitality that is hard to replace. Furthermore, as [my wife and my] youngest grandchild grows into his early 20s even extended family life is becoming devoid of youthful thinking and living.

So, as we settle into elder-hood, we seek unity in our experiences. As we grow in our spiritual faith... we more acutely feel the absence of spiritual connection to young people.

They are not the only ones who long for intergenerational connections.

One of the things I hear most from our youth group is that they want to be part of the larger congregation. They don't want to be just a side group. They want to be involved.

But you know what? Sometimes we get in our own way.

Here's a trope I hear a lot: that young people today are addicted to their phones, have short attention spans, aren't motivated, and aren't interested in their elders; they are interested in twerking.

My experience of young people is different. The teens and twenty-somethings I know are deep thinkers, want to have fun and live meaningful lives, are willing to be vulnerable and authentic and are drawn to authenticity. Think back to the Coming of Age speeches we heard from our congregation's rising ninth graders in May. And the ones last May. And the May before that. Themes of community, alienation, hope, and humanism.

Church members often ask how they can attract young adults to their groups and committees. But I've also heard stories of youth being turned away from church groups, either explicitly because the group doesn't see itself as part of creating that intergenerational church we long for, or implicitly, when the youth don't feel seen and heard as full participants.

Recently, outside of the church, I attended a social justice training for people considering getting arrested to bring attention to systemic racism and this nation's distorted morality.

There were about thirty people there. As he began, the trainer lamented the fact that young people were not getting involved in the movement because they just wanted to be on their phones. I was so confused because fully one third of the room looked like they were between 18-30 years of age. It was like he didn't see them. Was it because they didn't fit the image in his mind?

The negative perception of younger generations is not a new phenomenon.

I'm part of Generation X- people born between 1973 and 1981. We are in our late thirties and early forties. Together, my group and the one before it known as Busters (people born between 1960 and 1972), together we are called the Thirteenth generation (because it's the thirteenth generation since the Declaration of Independence).

When the thirteenth generation was younger it was described by elders as "lost," "ruined," and "wasted."ⁱ We were accused of being driven by appetites more than

ideas. We invented the mosh pit and gangster rap. We wore baggy jeans and made our hair look dirty on purpose. It horrified our elders.

Who were those elders? The Baby Boomers born between 1943 and 1960. But you know what? When they were young, their elders had grave concerns about them, too. Their parents were from the Silent Generation, who fought in World War II. The Boomers took their parents' V-sign for victory and turned it into a peace sign. They rebelled against authority with protests against Vietnam. They were hippies and Black Panthers. They practiced free love. They invented Woodstock, disco, and lowriders, and smoked marijuana. Their poor parents! But wait...

Their parents were once fretted over as well. The Silent Generation was born from 1925-1942. They invented rock and roll and Elvis Presley's hip gyrations... and Playboy magazine! Their parents, the GI Generation, must have been appalled. But the Silent Generation was mild compared to their parents.

The GI generation was born from 1901 to 1924. They came of age in the Roaring Twenties and in the thirties. Women cut their hair short and wore pants! That generation listened to jazz and blues songs with scandalous innuendos—so scandalous that I looked some up and decided I can't repeat them here.

They also danced provocatively. The Charleston, with all those flailing arms and hip movements- totally immoral. The jitterbug was even worse, as during all the lifting and swinging, a woman's underwear might show. One anti-dance writer described the jitterbug as "conceived in hell and brought forth by the brothel."ⁱⁱ (That sounds way worse than twerking.) The GI generation invented speakeasies and made moonshine. Their bootleggers invented hotrods, to escape the police. Those cars could drive a mile minute! And not on a freeway. There were no freeways.

So... you see my point.

It's time to toss out what we think we know about people who are older or younger than ourselves, toss out generalizations about any particular generation, and just ... *see* each other. With big hearts. With openness and a spirit of curiosity.

This might seem like a very general thing to say. There have been all kinds of surveys and studies to see what would make churches attractive to young families, young adults and teenagers. But what I know is that you can incorporate all the laser lights, espresso machines, and hashtags you want into your church, if people hear people like themselves being described negatively, or are turned away from church groups for being too young, or frowned at in worship because their babies make a little noise, then it won't be their church.

And you know what? Some of us get noisier as we get older, too.

An intergenerational church is a cooing, coughing, fussing, laughing, clapping, oxygen tank whooshing, hearing aide whistling, occasional cellphone ringing thing

and we do our best to be together harmoniously but in the end you've gotta be down with the beautiful *boisterousness* of it.

And in the end, what everyone longs for is to be seen, accepted, and loved, and for their contributions to be valued. We want to be part of something meaningful that is larger than ourselves, and we want *depth*, to nourish our minds and spirits.

That is the most important thing I have to say this morning. Toss aside preconceived notions. Receive each other with big hearts. What's important is warmth and authentic community.

It's not just me saying it. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin are directors at Fuller Youth Institute. That's a research program at Fuller Theological Seminary, where they focus on youth and young adults in churches.

For their book, "Growing Young," they undertook a research project involving more than 250 congregations, and more than 1,300 young churchgoers, ages 15 to 29.ⁱⁱⁱ

When they asked those young churchgoers what they want from churches, the response was "authenticity and connection."

The team writes, "When we analyzed the terms that young adults used to describe the churches or parishes that they chose, we noticed repeated words: *welcoming, accepting, belonging, authentic, hospitable and caring.*" The researchers called it the "warmth cluster" and it turned out to be a stronger variable than any ministry program.

This warmth is not the same as niceness. Niceness is nice—we should smile and greet people warmly. But warmth is more than niceness. It's more than superficiality. It's about real relationships. Many of the young people who participated in the study likened it to a feeling of family. That's what they want.

A lot of human interaction takes place online, disembodied and curated. Of course there is a craving for warm, authentic relationships. And now the climate in our country has worsened—there's an increase in hate speech and in people being criminalized for just being. How can the soul thrive in such a toxic context? We need each other.

The researchers offer some practical suggestions for what churches can do to increase their warmth.

One is, "Redirect your budget to facilitate warmth whenever you can." They give the example of a church that gave youth program leaders money for eating together with the youth regularly. Breaking bread. That's a warm, relationship-building thing to do.

A few of years ago we increased funding here for what we call "community bonding." Staff job descriptions were revised to include community bonding as a priority. But there is still plenty of room to grow.

Another suggestion is to encourage intergenerational worship. Mix people together. Do you know, our youth group recently made the decision, on its own, to change their meeting time so that they can be in church with the older generations? Youth group used to meet during church. Now it meets after. How awesome is that? They've taken the first step.

Next the researchers say it's important to create tiny churches within a larger church, through small group ministries. Like covenant groups and support or spiritual study groups. They suggest reassessing existing programs to see if they could be more effective for warmth.

Finally, they say, it's important to integrate newcomers as soon as possible. Don't let people feel anonymous or like strangers for longer than they may want to. That's the job our Membership Director does, along with helping new small groups get started. We increased the membership director's hours by 50% a few years ago, but that's still only fifteen hours per week. A church of 850 members could easily keep a full time membership director busy. So we have room to grow there, too.

Warmth is something we cultivate, invest in, and are all part of creating. Just as it takes patience and vision to grow our budget a little more each year so we can do the things we dream about, warmth also takes time and commitment. Niceness is fast. Warmth is slow.

Interestingly, when we've asked parents at First Unitarian what they want their kids to experience in our children's programming, many of their answers also sound like the "warmth cluster." They want their children to be known and to have a sense of belonging. They want them to have intergenerational connections, and to know they are part of a community.

One of my favorite stories is the time a mom in our congregation found her four-year-old son in his bedroom stacking his stuffed animals up, one on top of another. When she asked what he was doing, he explained that he was making a bridge so all the animals that go through it will know how much they are loved by the others. It's just like we do with our arms in worship, when we "sing the children out" through an arch of love.

Parents also want their children to learn spiritual practices and grow in their sense of self, and they want church to be a sanctuary that can hold space for whatever scary things children experience in the news or in our city. And church can do that. A couple of things help.

One is for us to be adaptive in our programming for families and young kids. To listen for what's needed and try new things and get feedback and try some more. We want to be a church for 21st century families, but the first eighteen years of the 21st century have been a wild ride.

When this century began there was really no social media, for example. Facebook opened up to the public in 2006. There were no smartphones. Texting was not a

thing. iPods were about to happen. Remember iPods? Soon they'll be cool again, like a Walkman. Technology and the social changes it brings have been moving at breakneck speed.

One thing we know is that young adults and young families are not as likely to attend church weekly as previous generations. They are more likely to be balancing competing needs, demands and interests that overflow onto Sunday mornings. Our Director of Religious Education, Mia, develops programming that is adaptive to this reality. Children don't have to be present every week consecutively in order to stay on track with their lessons.

However, it's still true that the more they are here, the better they can develop that sense of warmth and community. And parents have some say in that. It's typical that kids of a certain age start complaining about having to go to church, or they want to do other things instead.

My own kids went through this phase, and I made them come to church. I conveyed that it was important to our family, and I expected them to be here. If they didn't want to go to children's or youth programming, they didn't have to. They could come to the service in the sanctuary, or they could be volunteers. They could decide how to be involved. But they had to come.

It didn't always work the way I wanted it to. I remember one Sunday about seven years ago. I was still fairly new here. It had been a real battle to get my fifteen-year-old daughter to come that day, but she did. And as I was shaking hands in the receiving line, I realized where she had decided to be. She was right behind me. Giving the stink-eye to every person I greeted.

The thing is, if we don't convey to our youth that we value their presence, that we think it's important for them to grow in spirit and that we want them to be Unitarian Universalists, then, well, in the words of UU minister Meg Riley, can we really even call ourselves a church?

We need all of us.

(My daughter is a lovely person, by the way. That strong will is now powering her through nursing school, and I could not be more proud.)

Another thing young adults and young families say is important to them is justice work. Making the world a fairer, more compassionate place.

Some of the most influential people in the history of faith based justice work, including Unitarian Universalist history, were young. The nineteenth century preacher Theodore Parker was ordained at 27, wrote an influential manifesto at 31, and went on to be quoted by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. In the Gettysburg address, Lincoln describes a democracy as "government of the people, by the people, for the people." That's a paraphrase of Parker, who said it is: "government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people."

I think that “all” was important, don’t you? Parker was a famous abolitionist. Kept a gun in his desk at his church office in Boston to deal with anyone who came looking for fugitive slaves. Can you imagine your minister keeping a gun in her desk?? I think he meant that “all.”

Lincoln should have left that in. And in his book *Ten Sermons of Religion* Parker wrote this:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. was paraphrasing Parker when he said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Do you know how old King was when he led the Montgomery bus boycott? Twenty-six.

Young minds are some of the most important minds among us. The determination and passion of young people is crucial for social change. I learned community organizing from Marshall Ganz. Ganz had dropped out of college in the 60’s to organize with Martin Luther King Jr. and with Cesar Chavez, He spoke often of the centrality and power of young adults in shaping society.

Ganz went on to help design the organizing model of President Obama’s 2008 campaign, in which young adults were again central. But he had a role too as an elder. We who are not young adults all have that role. It is believing in them and encouraging them. It is, in the words of the Rev. Dr. William Barber, answering the call to “suit up one more time” and stand with them and behind them, trusting, counseling, supporting.

That all sounds like a force to be reckoned with.

Doesn’t it all sound beautiful? There are quite a few teens, young adults, and young families in our congregation already. More than many churches can boast. As a whole community, we can practice warmth and welcome to continue growing into the intergenerational vision we share.

In one of his messages to me after the social justice auction, Steve—one of the people who bid on it, remember?—also spoke of “the rich spiritual life that grows out of multigenerational worship because life’s important moments (birth, death, coming of age, marriage, really all of life itself) naturally emerge in a vibrant multigenerational church.”

That’s where it’s at. It’s good to be together.

ⁱ Strauss, William and Neil Howe. Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069. Quill: 1992 (319)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/timelines/zt8dwmn>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/06/to-attract-young-people-to-your-church-youve-got-to-be-warm-not-cool/?utm_term=.bd0bb27057cb