

# What are the main points of Sticky Faith?

Giving seniors a “graduation journal” and hoping for the best just isn't cutting it. Roughly 50% of involved Christian students walk away from the church after they graduate high school. That is why Fuller Youth Institute conducted its College Transition Project, studying over 500 Christian high school seniors across the country during their first three years in college. Sticky Faith gives ministry leaders a theological framework they can offer parents and families, along with a host of practical relationship and programming ideas that develop long-term faith in teenagers.

**It's never too early or too late to start developing faith that sticks.**

We have uncovered three main shifts that are needed in order to help young people develop a faith that sticks:

**1. Shift from a behavior-based gospel to a grace-based gospel.** When asked to describe what it meant to be a Christian, many of the students in the study pointed to a list of behaviors. They believed God would like them better if they behaved well. This type of faith is analogous to a jacket; it can be put on and taken off, but doesn't change what's on the inside.

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**2. Shift from separating teenagers from the rest of the church to integrating them into the overall life of the church.** Our research shows a strong connection between intergenerational worship and relationships and mature faith. The problem is that as youth ministry becomes more professionalized, the more it tends to segregate students. The whole church misses out on rich relationship and discipleship opportunities.

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**3. Shift from a “dry-cleaner” view of parenting to partnering with parents.** Dry-cleaner parents drop their kids off at youth group expecting to pick them up 90 minutes later all clean and pressed. In other words, they've learned to outsource their kids' spiritual development. Instead, youth leaders need to imagine new ways to partner with parents in their kids' faith formation.

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## **Assessment: Taking A Closer Look**

The leadership needs to assess current ministry practices and motives, including examining how deeply age-stratified ministry is valued prayerfully and honestly among the leadership and members of the congregation and how open the church will be to change.

### **Begin with existing structures.**

Churches that have been successful started with what they were already doing well in one of the ministries of the church, then asked, "Since this is already good (or even great), what would it take to move to the next level and use this to become intergenerational?" Identify key influencers in the congregation who already have an intergenerational mindset and enlist their help.

### **Establish Intergenerational Community as a Core Value**

Intergenerational is not something churches do—it's something they become. The findings emphasize that becoming intergenerational is nothing short of a paradigm shift, and the whole church must value intergenerational relationships and community at a core philosophical level. This shift requires that all of the leaders of the church (not just the youth leader) buy into the value of intergenerational ministry and commit to changing the culture of the church over the long haul.

Intergenerational is a way of life. Making such a shift requires overcoming the individualistic mindset that is so strong in our culture and developing a community mentality in which all generations and ministry departments are valued and involved with each other in significant ways throughout the church body. Cross-generational valuing must become an integral part of the congregation's collective story. As one panelist shared, "The vision of the church needs to include assimilating our children and youth into the church today, not someday."

### **Keep Intergenerational Values in Balance with Age-Specific Ministry**

Establishing intergenerational community does not mean eradicating age-specific ministries. As important as it is to embrace intergenerational values at a core level, it's also important to keep that in balance with age-specific ministry. We need to realize that exclusively age-specific ministry may be "working" to varying degrees, but has not proven sustainable for ongoing transmission of faith among young adults who have grown up exclusively in youth ministries. At the same time, all ages still need their own space to grow and develop at their own pace. Everyone needs to be part of a web of relationships that includes their peers AND members of other generations.

### **Leadership Must Be Fully Vested**

Successfully transitioning to an intergenerational paradigm lives (or dies) with the leadership. In order to make such a culture shift, the senior leadership team must get on board with the vision early and all the way, and actively take the reins in leading the congregation through the transition. A youth pastor wanting to create intergenerational community must cast vision for the value of intergenerational relationships in all directions across age groups, starting with senior leadership.

### **Be Intentional and Strategic**

Do not try to reinvent everything at once—start small and avoid big sweeping program changes, particularly before there is adequate ownership of the vision on the part of all stakeholders. Celebrate little wins. Tell stories of success

to encourage the congregation and build momentum. A positive comment from a student about an older adult, or vice versa, is a win! An adult learning a kid's name and saying hi to them in the hall is a win!

### **Build in accountability and support structures**

Ministry leaders should pass everything through an “intergenerational filter” and regularly ask themselves how their plans can be made in such a way as to keep the church moving toward being an authentic intergenerational community.

### **Experiment with Intergenerational Ministry Practices**

The main congregational worship service is one key area of opportunity to implement intergenerational strategies, as long as the services are designed to include all generations. Intentionally involve teenagers and younger kids in corporate worship, and plan worship gatherings with every age in mind. Start small—maybe once each quarter the entire congregation worships together and experiments with creative approaches. Or restructure the first or last “X” number of minutes in the service to include all ages before splitting out into age-level ministries.

However, multigenerational worship services alone may not be effective in building authentic community without providing other settings to develop and maintain meaningful relationships between generations. [[See The Perceived Efficacy of Multigenerational Worship Services for Establishing Intergenerational Relationships Among Adolescents (2010) by Brenda Snailum.]]

Consider ways to build relationships between all combinations of children, teenagers, singles, parents, empty-nesters and senior adults. Try integrating intergenerational relational opportunities in small groups, Sunday school, Bible studies, outreach events, mission trips, and special programs.

## **Cautions and Hindrances**

### **Only a method, not a value.**

The area of greatest caution raised by all of the panelists deals with the failure to fully embrace an intergenerational paradigm at the core philosophical level. Too many times churches try to do intergenerational rather than become intergenerational. So often churches fail to keep momentum going and as a result, “intergenerational” is only a temporary emphasis or strategy, rather than a culture shift.

### **Uncommitted leaders.**

One of the reasons that churches find it difficult to become intergenerational communities is because there is not enough buy-in from senior leadership. This makes it nearly impossible to make significant gains in the congregational climate. It may be particularly hard for a youth pastor to lead the charge, especially for young 20-somethings fresh in ministry. Cast vision “up” and try to cultivate a heart for it among the senior leaders. Youth pastors in this situation should respectfully attempt to share books, articles and stories offering glimpses into intergenerational community in an effort to inform and inspire the senior leadership rather than leading unproductive kamikaze missions.

**Generations lack understanding of each other.**

Another common error is that churches often set up ministry opportunities that force youth and adults together without adequately preparing and equipping them for the experience. For instance, an intergenerational mission trip requires a lot of framing for the adults to understand that the goals and expected outcomes are going to be different when kids are involved. The same applies to trying to incorporate kids and adults into small groups together.

**The congregation lacks understanding of biblical emphasis on intergenerational community.**

Often members of the congregation are not aware of the strong biblical foundations of intergenerational ministry. But without a clear Biblical ecclesiology that drives older generations to invest in younger generations, intergenerational ministry will stall out.

**Self-centeredness is the enemy.**

Self-centeredness and age discrimination manifests itself in individuals within the church and can become a dominant force at work in generational cohorts and the culture at large. This deep-seated selfishness is a formidable foe that can potentially derail the best intergenerational ministry efforts. True intergenerational community is built on genuine love for every generation beyond a consumerist “What’s in it for me?” mindset.

**It just seems too hard.**

One of the common complaints from youth ministry leaders desiring to implement intergenerational ministry ideas is that it seems like it will require a tremendous amount of additional time and effort, and youth leaders often feel as though they are overworked already. At FYI, we often encourage leaders to start by looking at everything they are currently doing in ministry and pinpointing where intergenerational connections already exist, as well as where more connections could be made with a little tweaking.

In other words, don’t start by immediately adding new programs. In fact, some leaders have found that they can de-program various aspects of ministry in ways that open up space for kids to engage adults and/or younger kids in established venues. For instance, one church decided this year during Lent to consolidate all of their mid-week programs into one big community gathering. They share a meal, worship together, then discuss content, pray, or serve together in small intergenerational groups. Small, even short-term programming changes can often pay big dividends for churches and ministries.

**Action Points:** If you were to place your ministry on a continuum between intergenerational engagement and age-stratified relationships, where would you fall? What about your church as a whole?

When you read through the list of cautions and hindrances above, which seem particularly poignant for your context? What can you do to guard against these hindrances?

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What would you add or subtract from the list of approaches above? What seems like a first step in your context?

Questions regarding small group ministry at BSLC:

1. What is the purpose of small group ministry? And what do you want from a small group?

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2. Are there any landmines (challenges) that we need address?

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3. What are key elements to help develop deeper sharing and accountability within the groups?

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