

bridging the gap

I often wonder what the apostle Paul would think if he were to visit our churches today. As the great teacher of church as the body of Christ, would he be surprised at the way in which we've become such a dislocated body? Still together, but, kind of not.

Many good things have happened over the last century as we've recognised the distinct developmental stage of adolescence and the particular needs of that age group (which interestingly is ever-expanding), but with all our good intentions in highlighting the specialist needs of this age group have we ended up marginalising young people from the rest of the church body?

In their research *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton noted that many young people desire significant relationships with other adults in their congregations and yet a significant number report that they have few, if any, such relationships.

With the professionalisation of youth ministry and the increasing number of churches employing youth ministers, are relationships actually suffering? And more importantly, is the body of Christ being weakened?

Please, don't hear me wrong, I'm very much for the changes we've seen but I just wonder if in our desire to see young people nurtured well, we're actually denying them the soil in which healthy nurture happens –

intergenerational relationships. And, on top of this, if we take Paul seriously, we're stunting the growth of the rest of the church community.

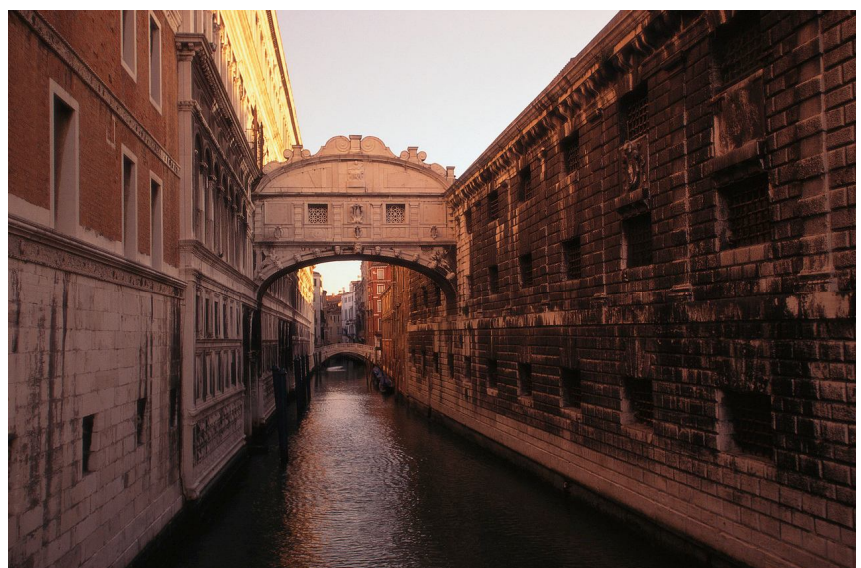
So, how do we go about bridging the gap that has developed between the generations in our churches? How do we start to overcome some of the fear that seems to exist between people of different ages?

Youth leaders have a tremendous role to play. In many ways we need to start thinking of ourselves as advocates – advocating on behalf of young people to the church, and also advocating on behalf of the church to young people.

Jason Gardner, in his book *Mend the Gap* helpfully puts it like this: 'Perhaps we need to understand that our youth workers aren't youth workers at all. They're church leaders who work with young people, the church and the wider community. If we see the role of the youth worker in our church as subordinate to the role of senior pastor, then it seems that we're guilty of viewing children and youth as "becomings" and not "beings" in their own right' (p155).

But it's not just about the employed staff member, all of us as youth leaders have a role to play.

A full re-integrating of young people into the life of our churches



Youth leaders have a tremendous role to play in bridging the gap between the generations.

is going to require some big thinking and maybe, for some churches, something of a culture shift. As Jason Gardner puts it: '... In reaching out to an "alien" culture, the church has often adopted an overseas mission mentality when it comes to youth work: employ a specialist who speaks the lingo, so that you don't have to, and who will conduct a mission that doesn't directly impact your church ... We can't expect a youth worker to integrate youth work successfully with mainstream church without adapting church structure' (p150).

This is going to take time and the full support of those involved in the leadership of the church, with teaching on the body of Christ, and a recognition of the need we have for each other and the need to create an environment in which **all** people are valued, young **and** old, for what they bring to the community today.

But in the meantime there is much that can be done to bit-by-bit re-introduce the generations to each other.

Mentoring

One of the most effective ways to bring the generations together is to set up a mentoring scheme within the church. As young people get to know individuals within the church, suddenly people have names and faces, stories are shared and relationships built.



Asking: What can we do together?

There is still need for us to do things separately, but maybe not as much as we think. When planning different things, it's always good to stop and ask the question of whether we really need to be apart for this activity or are there ways in which we can join together. Offering people choices on a Sunday morning which aren't driven by age (which after all is a fairly recent construct) but rather by activity is a good way of starting this.

Think beyond Sundays

As you read through the Old Testament, the people of God are often commanded to stop and celebrate together. To have a party

sharing all that God has done. Introducing celebration into the life of our churches does wonders for that sense of belonging. As we create memories together, bridges are built and relationships strengthened.

Representation on decision making groups

There's a lot of fear that young people will want to change how things are done, and they may well. But often we assume that we know what they want without asking them. Invite young people to be a part of the decision making bodies within the church so that real ownership can happen and greater understanding can develop between the ages.

Real belief that we need each other

The Bible demonstrates that all the people of God are responsible for the nurture of young people. Young people desperately need people who will show them what it means to be an adult and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. But equally the adult congregation need the enthusiasm, example and passion that young people bring - that alternative perspective and incredible wisdom that show things in a whole different light. When we grow together something more of God's manifold wisdom is known.

