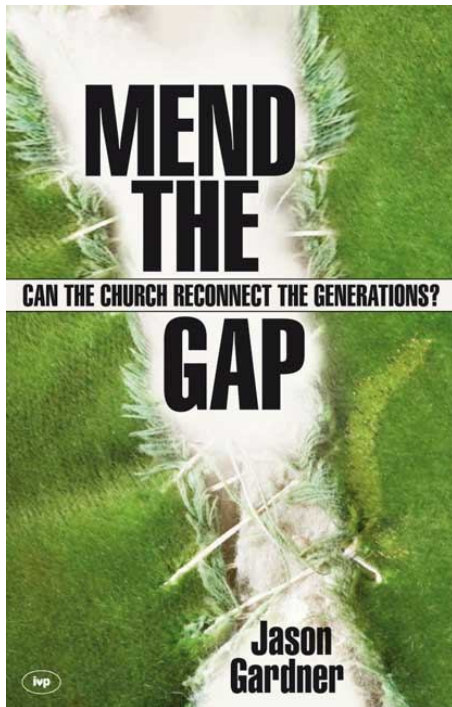


Mend the gap – can the church reconnect the generations?

by Jason Gardner



Reviewed by Andy Castle

Did you know that "the price tag on seeing a child through the first 18 years of life on earth is apparently £140,000"? Gulp! Maybe I will agree with my wife, Caroline, that three kids are enough now!

This book helpfully gives a brief overview of how the concept of "young person" came about and how the world changed (and is changing) dramatically as a result. Gardner (a youth culture researcher for LICC) explains how marketing and consumerism is almost completely aimed at this target age group and how this has had repercussions on society as people are not wanting to grow up, adults not really knowing what adult behaviour and conduct is, and effectively extending the period of discovering your self-esteem, image and purpose in life. He reflects on how adults still want to be young and free, with almost a desire to be a "perpetual adolescent".

So how does the Church respond? Jason suggests that it's useless to challenge teenagers on their materialism if our entire ministries are built on treating them as consumers so how can we enable young people to be participants in church life, not just consumers of what goes on? The answer is not to look at youth work, but what we are doing with our discipleship of adults. Do adults know what it is to be mature in Christ when they are facing this constant media pressure to be a perpetual adolescent? Are our adults showing young people what it means to actually be an adult?

The other development amongst young people is the importance, indeed preference, to gain wisdom from their peers rather from adults. In addition to this, are the technological advances which mean that a young person can more easily get information and knowledge from the internet, therefore making the passing on of information from parents redundant. In fact, there has been a complete reversal where wisdom is often passed up, not down, and this means that young people view old age in a completely different light.

The solution Gardner puts forward is to teach adulthood not as being a move from the dependence of childhood to independence, but rather as a move to interdependence. We need church to display what it is to be family: needing others around us, depending on the different people in our church. We need adults to be adults, to be mature in their faith and to take on responsibility for the youth work in the community.

Youth workers need to be a significant part of the senior church staff, who influence and teach the adults on bridging the age gap and being an all-age community, as much as they spend time working with young people. Gardner argues we must move away from seeing youth workers as "missionaries in our own country" to those of key skills experts to guide the rest of us in re-building Christ's body.

A great book for a youth leader to read as Jason speaks a lot of wisdom and sense. An even better book for church leaders to read to help them understand the exciting opportunities that the church faces as a whole, as we reach out to people of all generations.