

7 Ways to Bridge the Generation Gap in the Church

If you watched the Democratic Party's presidential debate last week, you'll know why San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro got poor marks from so many commentators and viewers. Castro seemed to be attacking former Vice President Joe Biden for his age, implying that the 76-year-old candidate is losing his memory.

"Are you forgetting already what you said just two minutes ago?" Castro said to Biden during the Sept. 12 event. The 45-year-old politician was upset that Biden didn't seem to remember what he had just said about his plans for a national health care system. (It didn't help when Biden suggested that low-income parents should "make sure you have the record player on" to encourage better education.)

Castro's comment during the debate revealed the obvious: There is a growing generation gap in American politics. Some younger politicians have even said that Biden, as well as Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren (who is 70) and New Hampshire Senator Bernie Sanders (he's 78), are too old to be president. And many of those same critics insist that Donald Trump should be replaced because he'll be 74 if he wins a second term in 2020.

This caustic us versus them mentality has also surfaced in the church today. I constantly hear older Christians complaining about how "those young people" are forcing them to change the music or the dress code on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile I hear young people griping because the worship, preaching or attitudes at a particular church are not as hip as they require.

We have marginalized each other. We've reached a generational impasse. Is there any way we can bridge this gap? It won't be

easy, but here are a few ways we could build a bridge:

1. **Deal with your prejudices.** Today we're super sensitive about confronting racism and sexism. Yet somehow we think it's OK to judge others because of age. When Jesus commanded us to "love one another" (John 13:34b), He didn't mean you should love only the people who are in your age demographic. He wants Facebook users and Instagram users to get together instead of avoiding each another.
2. **Stop writing people off.** The New Testament also calls us to "accept one another" (Rom. 15:7a, NIV)—which means to be tolerant and patient toward those who aren't like us. That means older Christians shouldn't be offended by tattoos, piercings, technology or the clothing styles of Gen Xers. It also means younger people should try to learn something from an older person's "old-fashioned" attitudes instead of rolling their eyes at them.
3. **Learn to show honor.** I buried my brain-damaged father last year, and now my 91-year-old mother has dementia. I spend a lot of my time talking to nursing home residents these days, and they have taught me a lot about compassion. Their bodies and minds are worn out, but they are precious to God. We should honor the old, knowing that one day we will be in their condition.
4. **Don't get stuck in your "era."** I don't understand older people who insist on "my way or the highway" when it comes to church styles. God is always moving forward. He is not stuck in the past, so why should I be? Even though I'm 61, I don't mind if my pastor is half my age or if the music reflects today's styles. I want my church to reach younger people, not just my generation. Be flexible and willing to change.
5. **Encourage mentoring.** I spend most of my time discipling younger guys. Even though I'm old enough to be their

dad, they enjoy spending time with me. They learn from my experiences, and I encourage them to achieve far more than I ever did. I hear so many older Christians bashing Millennials and Gen X Christians for being spoiled, but that has not been my experience at all. Today's young Christians are passionate for God and totally teachable.

6. **Be open to “reverse mentoring.”** Even though I invest a lot of my time in discipling younger Christians, that doesn't mean I don't learn from them. My spiritual sons and daughters have taught me so much—they've trained me in technology, introduced me to new music and books, helped me adjust my attitudes and even challenged me in physical fitness. I'm better today because of the input I receive from younger people.
7. **Embrace God's generational mindset.** God is ageless, and He isn't locked into one generation's viewpoint. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He transcends time. He wants one generation to declare His praises to the next. He wants the mantle that rested on Elijah to be transferred to Elisha. Why is this concept so difficult for us to embrace?

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, Peter declared: “‘In the last days it shall be,’ says God, ... ‘your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams’” (Acts 2:17, MEV). The Spirit wants to move across generational lines. He wants to speak through the young and the old. He wants to connect us, blend us and use us together as one united body of Christ. {eoa}