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BOOK REVIEW:

INTERGENERATIONAL CHRISTIAN FORMATION, 2ND EDITION

Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship

*Holly Catterton Allen, Christine Lawton, and Cory L. Seibel.
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2023. Total pages: 324.*

THE TERM “intergenerational” has become a buzzword recently in youth and young adult ministry, children’s ministry, and churches as a whole. It seems that most who use it have only a vague idea of what it means. Many confuse intergenerational—all ages together—with multigenerational—many ages, each in their own space under the umbrella of the whole church. Large churches are more likely to be multigenerational, complete with a senior pastor, youth pastor, and maybe even a young adult pastor and/or a children’s pastor. In that way, each age group gets its own pastor. Small churches could be at an advantage to more likely to be intergenerational simply because everyone present needs to be involved just for the church to survive and function. Yet when small churches have just one age group, such as senior citizens or a church plant of only young adults, they could be described as monogenerational. As this book title explains, being intergenerational is not merely about survival, but about Christian formation. In fact, all ages are more likely to grow spiritually by coming together with Christ as the head of their church Body.

When the first edition came out in 2012, it opened the door to a new way of thinking about church and about spiritual growth. Two female authors, Allen and Lawton, came from a background of children’s ministry, youth ministry, and religious education in Christian churches. Both completed their doctoral dissertations on the topic of churches being or becoming intergenerational for the purpose of Christian formation. Their joint efforts with their first publication quickly became “the Bible” for churches to become intentionally intergenerational, with solid reasons for doing so.

The first edition was helpful in defining and describing the term and concept of “intergenerational.” It drew strongly on behavioral sciences, benefitting from the doctoral work the two authors had recently completed.

In 2017 Dr. Allen started a bi-annual “InterGenerate Conference” hosted by Lipscomb University, where she taught full-time before her recent retirement. The developments through these conferences further developed the ideas and practices. This revised edition came out of that development. Some book revisions add a chapter or make a few minor additions or corrections. The second edition of *Intergenerational Christian Formation* could better be described as a complete makeover, even adding another co-author, Cory Seibel, who has been an integral part of the development of intergenerational churches. Those who have read the first edition will need to read the second one simply to be current.

For decades the ideal of church growth seemed to rely on the homogeneous unit principle of gathering similar groups based on similar interests. Grow your church by starting a Harley-Davidson motorcycle group of bikers who buy into Jesus and your church will grow. They can meet once a month and ride together. Hopefully some of them will join the church because of their shared interest in Harleys and they’ll get Jesus thrown in for a package deal. If not Harleys, try a ladies’ tea, or a teen mission trip, or a children’s soccer league. Sociologically, it seems to make sense—birds of a feather flock together, right?

Intergenerational Christian Formation challenged this assumption and practice, proposing that Christian formation matters more than numerical church growth. This draws on the Biblical concept of the Body of Christ and its different parts somehow, miraculously, working together. The authors emphasized that “the presence of *diversity* within the church actually is quite *essential* (83).” They continued, quoting Peter Steinke, “When a group is diverse, it is more resourceful, having many ideas, gifts, and functions at work . . . The church is a gathering of dissimilar parts. It is not necessary that the parts be *identical* to one another. It is necessary that they be *identified* with one another” (83) (emphasis added).

One of the appendices even includes 17 pages of Bible passages related to a generational outlook. Jason Santos, who wrote the foreword to this edition, classified these into three categories: intergenerational—two or more generations intentionally mutual in formation; multigenerational—two or more generations without necessarily being intentionally mutual in formation; and cross-generational—two generations with one operating from a power position rather than mutually.

The second edition has refined the concept, broadened the explanation and understanding, responded to some of the criticisms, and developed a much more robust theology and ecclesiology. Allen and Lawton acknowledged that their Google search for “intergenerational worship” for the first edition yielded less than 100 links. Their Google search when preparing the second edition provided more than 19,000 results. Not surprisingly, the revised edition drew on more research from current studies, including a review of pertinent dissertations from the past decade. This edition still contains multiple chapters of ministry ideas and best practices that illustrate the principles and spark ideas that can be used “as is” or modified for your particular ministry context.

This revised version of *Intergenerational Christian Formation* is a must-read for those interested in the topic. It can equip you to be more effective and broaden your understanding to help those oblivious or even resistant to the challenges of a church being intergenerational or hesitant to leave their comfort zones in order to be formed into the likeness of Christ.

Reviewed by Steve Case, president of Involve Youth and coordinator of the Intergenerational Church concentration in the Doctor of Ministry program at Andrews University.