

Generational Conflicts Can Be Addressed

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"What happens when "Father Knows Best" meets "Married With Children?" wonders Mike Martin, a therapist with the UBA Center for Counseling. "In the church, the result is often conflict."

Whether a church's controversy centers around the budget, the choice of music in worship, or the vision for the future, the underlying issue is often the difference between how the various generations see the world.

Older church members, who grew up singing hymns in their "Sunday best" sometimes clash with younger people who prefer to sing contemporary worship choruses in jeans and T-shirts. Gen-Xers tend to look beyond denominational differences when choosing a church while traditionalists usually value the theological distinctives of the denomination. Put them all together in one congregation and conflict will eventually follow.

"My impression is that generational conflict is normal and happens as times change," says Molly Little, a UBA Center for Counseling counselor. "It is a normal part of church life—it has happened before—and it is part of the process of change and growth. The most important things are keeping a biblical basis for what we do and using good tools for conflict resolution."

Church members can take steps to protect the church from the potentially destructive effects of conflict:

- ***Be aware of your own generational biases.*** "We're all products of our generation. It shapes how we see the world," says Martin. "Resolving conflict means stepping outside our script, our worldview." Young adults may have to question their suspicion of everyone over thirty. Likewise, Baby Boomers may need to examine their fears of aging and how they view the older generation. It helps if each person is attentive to his or her own prejudices and assumptions.
- ***Value the strengths of each generation.*** Even though the generations are different, they each have important strengths to offer the church. The older generations are likely to be experienced, stable, and protective of important traditional values. Baby Boomers are often well educated and are able to mobilize resources to get things done in the church. Gen-Xers may bring enthusiasm, inclusiveness, and a commitment to relationships. Any one group lacks the strengths of the others. When all work together, the church is balanced and stronger.
- ***Develop connections between people of all ages.*** One disadvantage of graded Sunday School programs is that the generations have little opportunity to get to know each other. We often continue that separation by age when we choose where to sit in the worship services and when we eat dinner together on Wednesday night. However, when we study the Bible together on Sundays and serve alongside each other during the week, we are less likely to have conflict along generational lines and are more likely to view each other as friends and allies. In one congregation, the young mothers asked the women with grown children to share what they wish they had known when they were at home with small children. The ensuing conversation and laughter helped to heal a rift between the two groups that had been widening for years.

- **Work for a win/win outcome.** Conflict becomes destructive when one group of people pursues one outcome at the expense of another. When someone has to lose for someone else to win, we all lose. When the whole congregation seeks solutions that will benefit everyone, everyone wins. Little recalls a congregation grappling with the complexity of generational change. "They established several committees, looked at all different parts of the problem, and realized that it was a much more complicated issue than they originally thought," she says. "By going through the process and working together to find solutions, everyone realized that they were on the same team and not adversaries. No one wanted all the older people to leave or all the younger people to leave."

Generational conflict may be inevitable but it doesn't have to be destructive. The differences between the age groups can be divisive, or they can add diversity and keep things interesting, clearing the way for growth and change in the church.

Center for Counseling therapists are available to assist your church through presentations to groups and/or individual counseling. For more information on services offered, contact 281-487-3864.