

# Collective and Individual Trauma: How Developing Intergenerational Connections Can Heal the Post- COVID Church (and Beyond!)

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Decades ago, we knew the United States would be experiencing a culture shift. Evolving from modern to postmodern culture was expected, predicted, and observed from afar, as many European countries made this transition decades ahead of us. Our churches were warned. We knew it was coming. But now that it's here, we're panicking. Not only has our culture experienced a monumental shift over the past generation, but we are also dealing with the after-effects of a worldwide pandemic; social, political, and racial unrest; and diminishing connectedness like we have never known. No wonder the church in America is hurting! "Every new generation inherits their parents' unresolved trauma, and until we accept this truth and take active steps to address the past, the church will soon become irrelevant."<sup>1</sup> Researchers are pointing to both new and old ideas that may provide needed direction to our churches. Based on my research, here is what I see: The church that emerges from the pandemic era will be healthier if it is able to deal with individual and collective trauma in ways that support and integrate the different generations.

## **Generational Theory**

Generational theory operates on the assumption that "important historical events and societal developments experienced in one's formative

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1 Janyne McConaughy, *Trauma in the Pews: The Impact on Faith and Spiritual Practices* (Glendora, CA: Berry Powell Press, 2022), 29.

years influence individual behavior.”<sup>2</sup> Frederique Demeijer and Hijme Stoffels believe this theory can be similarly applied to our “religious behavior, attitudes and experiences.”<sup>3</sup> Any group of people born at a similar time and place will share “trauma that has shaped their identity”<sup>4</sup> and affected their experiences and expectations with and of religion. In this study done with Dutch participants, the researchers concluded that the participants’ “life narratives [were] influenced both by their specific religious subculture as well as by their general socio-historical context.”<sup>5</sup> Lest we think of trauma as something only experienced by an individual, Chwi-Woon Kim reminds us that “unconsciously shared anxieties... [shape] a group’s traditional customs and their identity over time.”<sup>6</sup> She looks at Israel’s stories of the exodus from Egypt, their exile into Babylon, and the songs of the Psalms as evidence of the “Israelites’ transgenerational transmission of their ancestors’ unresolved trauma.”<sup>7</sup> Trauma is real and affects us all, to one degree or another. For churches to be agents of healing, they must be tuned in to the collective effects of trauma, intentional about the stories they tell, and cognizant of the differing needs of each generation.

## Individual and Collective Trauma

Each church body will contain different trauma and different needs. Generational theory asserts that each generation has its own specific experiences and needs, a challenging truth the Church must recognize. Regarding the “current collective trauma...it is only as [the Church learns] to face [its] situation together in community that [it] can build the collective resilience and strength”<sup>8</sup> necessary to move toward healing. This is why intergenerational ministry will be vital to the health and formation of the coming generations. In our churches, especially, it is important that we not be reluctant to embrace the gift of intergenerational connections.

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2 Frederique A. Demeijer and Hijme C. Stoffels, “Social Generation as a Lens: A Qualitative Take on Generational Theory,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 14, no.1 (2019): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1558/firm/39509>.

3 Demeijer and Stoffels, 54.

4 Demeijer and Stoffels, 55.

5 Demeijer and Stoffels, 67.

6 Chwi-Woon Kim, “Psalms of Communal Lament as a Relic of Transgenerational Trauma,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 3 (2021): 555, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1403.2021.5>.

7 Kim, 531.

8 Deborah Van Deusen Hunsinger, “Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care: Lifelines for a Healing Journey,” *Theology Today* 77, no. 4 (2021): 359-60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573620961145>.

We may think the advantages of intergenerational ministry are primarily for younger people, but the reality is, our older generations benefit from it as much, if not more. The research of Fragoso, Valadas, and Paulos describes “structural solidarity” as an “opportunity structure for cross-generational interaction reflecting geographic proximity between family members.”<sup>9</sup> When translated to a church body, this describes a body of believers who are living and interacting as a family. The study observed older men with primarily low education and low economic status. I believe the study results can be translated to many of our elderly congregants—including those able to transport themselves to church as well as those who are home-bound and no longer able to attend services in person. The authors noted that “loneliness is a serious problem”<sup>10</sup> as many of the men interviewed were unable to initiate visits with their own family members and were “destined to wait for the visits of their adult children and grandchildren.”<sup>11</sup> Many older congregants experience the same loneliness. If we as the church body are a family, then part of our intergenerational ministry should be toward alleviating that loneliness.

## **The Post-COVID Pastor**

In light of the differing needs of distinct generations within our churches and the collective trauma we have all endured over the past five years, I believe the pastor of the post-COVID church needs to be someone who knows how to counsel, care for, and address the individual and collective trauma of her congregants in ways not valued pre-COVID. This pastor must find ways to bring the generations together to use their gifts to build up and serve one another. She or he will need to be trauma-informed and patient with the healing and growth of a hurting body of believers. The postmodern and post-COVID pastor would do well to understand the pace and characteristics of healthy spiritual development, which is usually slower and more meandering than we’d like to think. This kind of “pastoral care consists of assisting people who are disoriented in their life and in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Hetty Zock describes Erik

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9 Antonio Fragoso, Sandra Valadas, and Liliana Paulos, “Social Disadvantages and Intergenerational Solidarity Views from Older Adults: A Qualitative Study,” *The Journal of Health Care* 60 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177.00469580221144621>.

10 Fragoso, Valadas, and Paulos, 5.

11 Fragoso, Valadas, and Paulos, 5.

12 Hetty Zock, “Human Development and Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age: Donald Capps, Erik H. Erikson, and Beyond,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, (2018): 443, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0483-0>.

H. Erikson's life cycle theory and relates it to three important functions of the pastor: pastor as moral counselor, pastor as ritual coordinator, and pastor as personal comforter.<sup>13</sup> Erikson was famous for his life cycle theory, developing the idea that we move through certain predictable phases of life, from birth to death. The "virtues" connected to each of these eight stages are "hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care and wisdom."<sup>14</sup> Imagine these virtues on a timeline, starting with the hopefulness of infancy and childhood, and ending with the wisdom of the aged. Intergenerational ministry finds value in connecting each other with each of these virtues: the hopefulness of childhood with the wisdom of having lived a long life; matching the will and purpose of the teen years and early adulthood with the grounded love and care of later adulthood; and juxtaposing the competence of midlife with the energy and vigor of hopefulness and idealism characteristic of the young.

The pastor of the post-COVID church faces unique challenges. COVID brought an experience of collective trauma like we've never seen before. "The particular historical, social and cultural context *in which each of us lives, also lives in each of us...* It is for this reason that personal experiences of traumatic stress can easily be reactivated when collective trauma strikes."<sup>15</sup> And it wasn't just COVID. We've been inundated with racial trauma, previously unexperienced natural disasters, wars, rumors of wars, shootings, and the continued death and loss associated with COVID. Matthew 24 comes to mind.

The pastor of the future can sit in the space of brokenness and pain and still hold on to the hope of the gospel. She reminds us not simply of our eternal salvation, but rather, of the healing and wholeness being offered to us today. In the case of trauma, what better way to find wholeness than to equip the whole body to work toward healing? Our older and wiser congregants have lived through traumatic times before. Their wisdom and perspective offer a welcome salve to our fear and anxieties today, even as the vigor of our young people requires us to persevere. Together, we can effect change in our own communities today. Janyne McConnaughey insists that "[t]rauma-[r]esponsive [m]inistry *unconditionally receives stories*."<sup>16</sup> Imagine the wealth of experience, compassion, and empathy our generations can express to each other if we share close relationships. These relationships cannot be built simply by waving to each other across

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13 Zock, 443.

14 Zock, 440.

15 Van Deusen Hunsinger, 115 (emphasis added).

16 Van Deusen Hunsinger, 360 (emphasis added).

the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. They are built in close contact with each other over the years, sharing hurts and joys, grief and pain together.

## **Re-membering a Broken Body**

Eugene Peterson, in his book *The Contemplative Pastor*, wrote about the unspoken words of a given congregation. He imagined a commission from the congregants to their pastor and passed it on to us. These paragraphs feel especially important for us today:

We want you to be responsible for saying and acting among us what we believe about God and kingdom and gospel. We believe that the Holy Spirit is among us and within us. We believe that God's Spirit continues to hover over the chaos of the world's evil and our sin, shaping a new creation and new creatures. We believe that God is not a spectator, in turn amused and alarmed at the wreckage of world history, but a participant.

We believe all this, but we don't see it. We see, like Ezekiel, dismembered skeletons whitened under a pitiless Babylonian sun. We see a lot of bones that once were laughing and dancing children, adults who once aired their doubts and sang their praises in church—and sinned. We don't see the dancers or the lovers or the singers—or at best catch only fleeting glimpses of them. What we see are bones. Dry bones. We see sin and judgment on the sin. That is what it looks like. It looked that way to Ezekiel; it looks that way to anyone with eyes to see and brain to think; and it looks that way to us.<sup>17</sup>

A pastor reminds us of all these things. She connects our pain to the traumatic suffering of the ancient Israelites through the holy Scriptures, as “expressing the language of rage contributes to a crucial process of healing for those who recover from trauma, to the extent that such language reaffirms divine justice and creates an affective space for grieving, remembering and reinterpreting traumatic events.”<sup>18</sup> As we gather together, young and old, hurting and joyful, suffering and healing, we remember the hope of ancient people as well. Peterson continues:

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17 Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 137-38.

18 Kim, 552.

But we believe something else. We believe in the coming together of these bones into connected, sinewed, muscled human beings who speak and sing and laugh and work and believe and bless their God. We believe it happened the way Ezekiel preached it, and we believe it still happens. We believe it happened in Israel and that it happens in church. We believe we are a part of the happening as we sing our praises, listen believably to God's Word, receive the new life of Christ in the sacraments. We believe the most significant thing that happens or can happen is that we are no longer dismembered but are remembered into the resurrection body of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Whether we are young or old, religious or not, "postmodern persons still need and may experience 'being part of a wider, cosmic order' and involved in a 'wider whole.'"<sup>20</sup> The Church of the future will benefit from being intergenerationally connected. Now, more than ever, we need these strong connections. Spiritual and biblical instruction is important. Offering programs to accommodate these needs is good, but these experiences can happen in generationally segregated groups. In fact, they have for decades. What will be most healing for our children and the generations to come, will be for the Church of the present to take seriously the call to be a healing presence in our communities. That starts with acknowledging, and then addressing, our own hurt, trauma, and brokenness. Imagine what a beautiful community we could become as we are "no longer dismembered but are remembered into the resurrection body of Christ."<sup>21</sup>

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19 Peterson, 137–38.

20 Zock, 446.

21 Peterson, 138.