

Generational ties: Bridging the gaps

by [Adam J. Copeland](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

I began the visit with “Hello, I’m the new pastor at the Presbyterian church.” An innocent enough introduction, I thought.

“Wow. But you’re so young!” came the reply.

“Well, I just started. And sure, I’m on the young side,” I said, hoping to move on quickly.

“No, I mean, *you’re really young!*”

At this point it was difficult to know what to say. To be honest, I was frustrated. I thought of pastors in other denominations who are ordained with only a bachelor’s degree, or those who are pastoring without having ever attended college. I didn’t go to college for four years plus three years of seminary plus an extra year of internship to have my lack of wrinkles and my intact hairline greeted with absolute shock. But I bit my tongue and took a deep breath.

“Well, just think of me as a rookie serving a congregation kind enough to show me the ropes.”

When in doubt, go for the sports analogies. Nothing brings the generations together like an idiom or two. That seemed to go over well, so I continued the visit, offering pastoral care to someone 72 years my senior.

I had anticipated generational differences when I was searching for my first call at age 25, but I hadn’t fully anticipated what awaited me when I received that call. Many members relate to me not as if I were their grandchild, but as if I were their *great-grandchild*. It’s taking time, but slowly I’m learning to appreciate and honor generational differences and, in the process, to better understand my pastoral identity.

Here’s an example of a generational gap: I can’t remember the last time I listened to a cassette tape; I owned only a few of them before CDs caught on. But when I

walked into my new study at the church, I was greeted by stacks of cassettes filled with recorded worship services. A few months ago I dreamed of podcasting my sermons on iTunes; now I'm encouraging the board of deacons to update our cassette recording system.

I post each week's sermon manuscript to my blog, which is linked to my Facebook page, and I tweet a link on Twitter each time I do so. I'm also a member of a group of young pastors who covenant to e-mail our sermon manuscripts to one another each Sun day. I'm not sure what previous generations of pastors have done, but sharing my sermons helps me acknowledge the worldwide community in which I live. Reading sermons by other young pastors keeps me grounded and motivated to preach my best. I have a friend who posts his sermon manuscripts on his Facebook page before he preaches, hoping that feedback from 500-plus friends will positively influence the sermon he delivers on Sunday. Surely no generation of pastors has preached in a vacuum, but my generation claims interconnectivity and exploits it for the kingdom.

Another generational difference is my generation's lack of denominational allegiance compared to the dyed-in-the-wool affiliations of previous generations. The Presbyterian congregation I serve was founded over 125 years ago by Scottish immigrants who wanted a Presbyterian church in which to worship. The faith and polity of their parents' Reformed (Church of Scotland) heritage made founding a Presbyterian church an easy decision. Soon Scandinavian immigrants came to the area and founded a Lutheran church a few blocks away. They were followed by Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Mission Covenant and Assembly of God congregations. (We have more than our fair share of churches for a town of 1,200 people.)

A pastor in my weekly text study group jokes that his congregation's de facto mission is "to be *the* Lutheran church in town." This may be true in their case, but I left seminary with a very different mind-set. I was taught, and still believe, that most members of Generations X and Y have little regard for what makes a congregation Lutheran or Presbyterian. My generation tends to be leery of any large institution and cares more about "what you can do for me today" than about the denominational label on the sign out front. Historical considerations like the doctrine of consubstantiation and the Westminster Confession matter less than the availability of compelling programs, fresh worship and free-trade coffee.

I am pastor to a Presbyterian congregation that is certain of its identity as Presbyterian—but unsure what to make of that identity in a 21st-century context. Our younger people are more influenced by the Christianity they encounter in Christian bookstores and by generic Protestant pop culture than they are by their denominational identity. As someone committed to ecumenism, I live in this tension, unsure of how our mission as a Presbyterian church is any different from that of the Lutheran church half a mile away.

A few weeks into my call, the congregation celebrated two wedding anniversaries; each couple had been married for 69 years. I tried to fathom the extreme dedication and love that makes a marriage thrive for almost three times as long as I've been alive; then I thought about friends in their twenties and early thirties who have been with partners for years and have no intention of marrying any time soon. Who knows, they figure, marriage might mess up a solid relationship. Add to this skepticism the effort to keep up in other ways with members of the Greatest Generation. As that generation reaches age 90 and beyond, I sometimes wonder, what's left for Generations X and Y? Sometimes I wonder if we should lower our expectations and strive only to be the "Second Greatest Generation."

But before I can get too discouraged, I catch a glimpse of grace that snaps me out of generational assumptions and makes my life as pastor unpredictable and exceptionally interesting—like e-mail from the 80-something who questioned a post on my blog, or the Facebook friend request from a great-grandmother, or the conversation about church music with a grandfather who enjoys attending his granddaughter's contemporary worship service. At times like these I remember that our God of the ages isn't bound by generational distinctiveness; God moves in the nursing home as well as on my Facebook homepage.

It's that foundational belief in God's working in and through old ways and new technology, old folks and young ones, that keeps me going. Gradually I'm learning to revere the past with some members of my congregation while at the same time opening my eyes and theirs to what God is doing with a younger generation. It's a slow process, but essential. And I'm not in it alone—I have the good company of several seniors at breakfast at the town diner each week and the Twitter community to check in with on my way to church.