

Kia ora e te whanau

Last week I shared a personal awakening – a call to prioritise ministry with seniors.

Its time has come. Most of our congregations are populated primarily by seniors. And what do we do? We dream of once again having a multi-generational church – a balanced number of children, youth, young parents, middle agers, and seniors. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but I've yet to see a congregation of seniors successfully grow itself downward in age into a truly multi-generational congregation. We all believe it's possible. We'll call in a denominational church 'consultant' who will tell us that what we need to do is employ a children's and young families worker, expecting this to 'fix' the problem. And it doesn't. Sure, we may get activities groups up and running for children, or for youth, yet the challenge is the cross-over – getting these cohorts to join the seniors. We will likely get a family or two, who will be loved and be part of our fellowship until the kids reach high school – then they move on. And maybe are replaced by another family keeping the cycle going. But there is never a critical mass sufficient to really become a healthy multi-generational church.

I expect to get some responses from those who claim they've made it work. I'll be delighted to hear from you, and know what was the 'secret sauce'.

My observation is that it is hard because the generational divide is too wide to bridge. Young people like to be where young people are, and older people have certain 'preferences' in how they like worship to be conducted. Compromise stretches only so far.

I have seen two strategies that work.

1. Planting a young congregation alongside an aging one. They share the same facilities, yet worship separately at different times. This requires a critical mass of young families that want to be together in worship in this particular facility.
  - a. They may be an existing congregation looking for a new home, or
  - b. the 'surplus' of an existing much larger congregation based elsewhere with a significant constituency from the local community being considered, - those willing to be part of a new congregation, resourced from their home church.
2. Where the aging group gets so small (<10) that they are open and willing to support a group/pair of 'attractors' working on their behalf in the local community and building the church with young families where, instead of feeling repressed by the oldies, they feel supported by them.

These two strategies actually work – they're still based on the multi-generational model, and the priority of seniors tends to get subsumed by the needs of the young. And, if the goal is simply to maintain a Christian witness, they're a possibility. But here's the challenge – the number of churches within our denominations capable of seeding 'daughter' churches is extremely small. Virtually in the unicorn category. It won't solve the wider problem we face.

There are those that automatically conclude that if a church does not have a healthy constituency of children / young families / youth – it is, must be, spiritually dead. We know that is not true – that would be to admit that most of our churches are already dead and we're simply waiting for the funeral. This leads me to a third alternative.

This strategy regards a multi-generational church as a ‘nice to have’, rather than a necessity.

My commitment is to developing churches of seniors - for seniors, by seniors. If younger generations join in, great, but let’s keep seniors as the priority. Seniors are usually relegated to the ‘also rans’ in ministry priorities. Their job is to pray for all the other important ministry in the church, and reach into their hopefully deep and ample pockets to pay for it. And, apart from being the cheerleaders for other ministries, to sit quietly and be grateful.

But what if? What if we kept ministry with seniors front and centre? What if we recognised that senior’s time is short, and they may well find themselves facing the biggest challenge of their lives – the end of it? What if we acknowledged that the biggest demographic bubble in our history (Baby Boomers) is steadily moving into ‘retirement’, and will likely find themselves singularly unprepared for the powerlessness that almost inevitably comes with old age? What if we face the reality that the largest suicide group (proportionally) is not young men, but old men (that got your attention!)? What if we realised that we could do something about the loneliness and alienation that so many of our seniors face? And that we could do it together. Ministry with seniors – by seniors, for seniors. My conviction is that we’re all capable of ministry – while we’re above ground we all have something to give. And when we give it we find our own living lifted, maybe transformed.

Anyone still reading, or have you tuned out?

There are plenty of churches well suited for ministry with the young. Attempting to ‘compete’ seems an exercise in futility – let’s leave the field to those equipped for the task. The reality is that most of those who give their hearts to Jesus will have walked away by the time they turn 30. Who’s there to pick them up further down the track? Perhaps much further? The oldest person I baptised [by full emersion] was 82 – seniors still come to faith. Perhaps we could ask the question “What is God doing?” (Jn 5:19) – and perhaps we might recognise that God is blessing us with seniors. Seniors are not a problem to be solved – they are part of the body of Christ that needs to be recognised, honoured, resourced and equipped and commissioned to mission and ministry.

### **Leadership & Personal Development Resources**

I won’t post any links to articles with commentary for now – I’d like what I written about to command the field of your consciousness for a little

### **Homilies and Preaching Resources**

**My response** to the lectionary for the 8<sup>th</sup> of February is titled ‘*Invitations into More*’ - reflecting on the invocations that we are declared to be salt and light, and are called to see the law fulfilled – Matthew 5 vs 13-20. What initially appears to be an odd, disconnected pairing, may have a consistency of theme embedded in it. The homily can be engaged with here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1vsp70qfzU>

**Gospel Conversations** - out of the Dunedin Anglican Diocese. They host a conversation of 4 Theologians / Practitioners - until this year around the Gospel lectionary text for the coming Sunday. The site with all its options can be accessed here: <https://www.calldedsouth.org.nz/gospel-conversations/>. Led by Michael Godfrey, they have returned in full force. At this point, rather than the Gospel text, they are focusing on the first (traditionally known as Old Testament) reading. For this coming Sunday the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, it’s Isaiah 59 vs 1-12. It can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96YRvXKPMFk>

If you are interested in exploring having a crack at posting homilies/sermons, please contact me at [yomyom@xtra.co.nz](mailto:yomyom@xtra.co.nz)

Again, it will help broaden all our reach if you '**subscribe**' and '**like**'.

Once again, use the videos as you will.

**Finally.**

As always, if you find you'd prefer not to receive this weekly newsletter, please let me know and your address will be removed.

Ngā manaakitanga

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UCANZ Ministry Facilitator



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