







why  
we're  
unashamedly

# intergenerational

matthewdeprez

# Why We're Unashamedly Intergenerational

© by Matthew Donald Deprez

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## Part One: Getting The Back Story



## Defining Who We Are

At Frontline, we are unashamedly intergenerational. I love saying that. I can't get enough of it, actually. If you could see my face right now, I'm actually smiling. Before we get into the details on why, though, it's important that we clarify what we're talking about when we refer to being "Intergenerational."

We took the term from the Fuller Youth Institute, ([www.fulleryouthinstitute.com](http://www.fulleryouthinstitute.com)), which is a research division of Fuller Theological Seminary committed to leveraging research to local churches. We love the term (and the organization), so we have adapted it to what we do at Frontline. Throughout the rest of this "manual," you'll see this phrase used a lot. Just for clarification purposes, when these words are used, this is specifically what we're referring to: Students teaching adults and adults teaching students. Or young people teaching older people and older people teaching younger people. We believe that as followers of Jesus we all have something to offer each other. A 4 year old can teach a 40 year old about Jesus, and a 40 year old can teach a 4 year old about Jesus. It's as simple as that!

With that said, here we go...

I first thought about writing something like this a year ago. It was when I realized that people at Frontline see ministry from an entirely new perspective than a lot of other churches. Frontline

embraces risk in a way that I've never seen before. It's exciting and terrifying all at the same time!

The concept of this “manual” (or whatever you want to call it) came from a conversation at the gym with the Senior Pastor at Frontline, Brian Blum. While we were being “manly” and lifting weights, we talked about what it would look like to capture some theological, practical, and conceptual ideas that we have regarding student ministries, how it relates to the larger church as a whole, and cement them in paper (or a PDF) for everybody at Frontline to have. We thought it would be a great way to unashamedly talk about why we are the way we are.

Before we get into some of the theological reasons for why we believe what we believe, I think it's important to break down some misconceptions about the way student ministries have been perceived over the years. It's important to be clear that this is more of a “universal” approach to the way things have been viewed, as opposed to the way things are seen at Frontline.

### **1. Youth Pastors have a hard time being taken seriously.**

This has, in part, been a reflection of non-serious youth pastors. If you ask people to describe a “youth pastor,” here are some of the words that would typically (not in every case) be used: Crazy, fun, energetic, ADD, irresponsible, hilarious, etc. For the most part, (and once again, this is not universal), “lover of Jesus” or “spiritually mature” are not words that are associated with

somebody in a student ministries position. As a result, “youth groups” are often times not taken seriously. If the leader of a group is only about having fun or playing games, then why *would* people take it seriously? I can see why this misconception is so prevalent in our society.

When introducing myself one time, I told a person I was a pastor, and they responded back by saying, “Well...you’re just a youth pastor, right? One day you’ll be a real pastor.” Ouch! Yet, this is what society and our churches often think about youth pastors and student ministries.

## **2. Student Ministries have been looked at as a sort of “baby-sitting” service.**

Once again, not universal, but more often than not very true. At Frontline, there are parents who want the very best for their students spiritually. I am *very* glad for them, too! Often times I get calls asking how things are going with their students, if they’re connecting well, and what we talked about at our weekly program “Ignite” so they can follow up with their student. Inevitably, though, I get this during the phone call: “I’m really sorry to talk with you about all of this. I don’t want to be a nag.” I always follow those statements up by saying this: “I am actually *very* happy that you’ve contacted me about this. What makes me nervous are the parents who I’ve *never* talked to - the parents who aren’t invested in their student’s spiritual lives - who could care less what we do on

a Wednesday night. I *want* you to call me. It shows me that you care, and that you're not looking at what happens as a baby-sitting service." When I get a call from a concerned or inquisitive parent, I actually get excited! We need less parents who just drop their students off for baby-sitting, and more parents who are actively involved in the spiritual well-being of their students.

### **3. Adult and Students hate each other.**

We set the tone for what other people believe or don't believe. If adults tell students that *all* other adults in their church can't stand them, students are going to believe that. And the opposite is true, too. If students start telling other students to hate adults, they'll eventually start to hate them. As pastors, leaders, parents, grandparents, and students, we have to be responsible enough to set the right tone.

In a place where the tone has been set correctly, I've *never* heard about adults and students hating each other. It's always been full of embracing each other for who we are, no matter what age. In that regard, let's actually start talking highly of each other, instead of tearing each other down. Remember: We set the tone for what other people believe or don't believe.

### **4. Students are viewed as the "next" generation.**

If you've attended Frontline for some time, I'm positive you've heard this one before. This is a concept that we've tried to "squash to death" over the past couple years. When I came on staff, the

official title for my role was “Next Generation Pastor.” After a few days being on staff, I sat down with Brian, and said: “I’m not sure I agree with my official title. I don’t see students being a next generation. I see them as a NOW generation.” Thankfully, I have a great boss, and he said, “Ok - Now Generation Pastor it is!” And the rest is history! I even have business cards that say “Now Generation Pastor” on them. On the Frontline website I am listed as the Now Generation Pastor. Whenever I’m introduced up front on a Sunday morning at Frontline I’m called the “Now Generation Pastor.” Needless to say, we take this very seriously.

Sure, it’s probably a dumb semantics issue. But I see it being way more significant than that. I think when we call students the “next” generation, we’re intrinsically telling them that they’re not really a part of today’s generation. Deeply rooted in a student’s mind becomes an “isolation” of sorts. It’s no surprise, then, that students who have been isolated their entire “school-life” have a hard time getting connected into the “larger body of the church” when they turn 18 and leave for college. It starts to make sense why 18-25 year olds are leaving the church in historic numbers. People have actually started referring to this gap as the “Black Hole,” because they’re simply gone.

Regarding church, here’s what interesting about this point of view: *Everybody* is a part of the Now Generation. Whether we’re eight, eighty, or anywhere in between, we’re all a part of something bigger than ourselves. We all have value in the Kingdom of God. And it should never be relegated to age. At the same time that there

should never be a “next generation” in ministry, there should never be a “has-been” in ministry. An eight year old brings as much value to the church as an eighty year old.

There have been so many churches splitting and fighting because of this issue. People look at themselves as being a young person church, or an old person church. But what if we were both? What if age didn't matter? What if we could all do something significant for Jesus at any age along the spectrum? Brian said it brilliantly to me the other day. He said “Matthew, I don't want to be an old person church. I don't want to be a young person church. I want to be an intergenerational church.” Amazing! So refreshing to hear. Basically what he's saying is that he sees an equality in the Kingdom of God that isn't based upon age, but upon the fact that people are simply human beings. We are all equal, and the instant that we relegate people being able to do ministry at a specific age is the instant that we've missed out on the larger picture of the Kingdom of God. Age isn't an issue - And that's why *everybody* is a part of the Now Generation.

### **Students Are Taken Seriously**

With that said, can you see how students would all of a sudden be taken very seriously? If a student has value, and people believe they can be a part of changing the world while they're 8 years old, all of a sudden their input matters, doesn't it? No longer does a church want to isolate or separate their ministries. They see them as being intrinsically connected.

We refer to this as “silos” at Frontline. Farms use silos to hold different types of grain or seed. Each silo holds a different object. While churches often have separate ministries like children, students, young adults, small groups, etc., we see them being directly connected on a larger level. Why can’t a student be connected into a small group? Or why can’t an adult serve in student ministries? All age-groups can, in some level, be connected into all ministries. At Frontline, if we see ourselves becoming unhealthy silos, we have permission to call each other out. It keeps a healthy perspective that we’re all connected into a larger thing at Frontline.

When we’re connected to a larger picture, we all have a voice. This is why churches that are serious about the integration of all age groups don’t struggle with the Black Hole. Students who feel connected at an early age to the larger body of the church will often times stay in church when they graduate from high school. Compare that to students who don’t feel connected to the larger body of the church, and you see the numbers drop drastically. It’s no wonder why small, country churches are sending about three times as many people into full-time ministry than larger churches. In smaller churches, all people have is the larger body to connect. In bigger churches (much like Frontline), each individual ministry becomes “professionalized” and “separated.” This is why we’re so careful not to isolate and silo ourselves. It’s too easy to do. And thankfully, we have a group of people in leadership serious about making sure this doesn’t happen.

So...that's the back story. Let's get into some crucial reasons why we're unashamedly intergenerational. It's time to see how the Bible is unashamedly intergenerational, too.



## **Part Two: Theological Reasons Why We Are Unashamedly Intergenerational**



## **The Obvious Verses**

We don't just believe these things for the sake of believing them. It's not like we think they're just cool ideas. We believe them because it's a Biblical model for the way children and students are viewed! If you look in the Bible, you see an intergenerational approach playing into everything that gets said or done. God is constantly using children who are often the youngest and smallest in their family to do something great for God.

An 8 year old kid was actually appointed king of Israel at one point (2 Kings 22:1). And it seems to have worked, too. It mentions that he ruled Israel for 31 years. Not too bad for a child that would be in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in America. And David ruled as a young kid, too. When David fought Goliath, it mentions that he was the youngest in his family (1 Samuel 17:14). Most scholars believe David was probably between 12-16. Once again, not bad for a student that could have been in Middle School in America. Gideon mentions he's the youngest in his family (Judges 6:15), and then there are the disciples. Most scholars agree that Peter was the oldest of all 12 disciples, and he was probably only 17. It would be like a junior in high school leading one of the most massive movements in world history. A small group of followers of Jesus has turned into some 2 billion living people professing to believe in Jesus. Amazing. So I don't think there's any question that God uses any age-group He can to fulfill something great in the world.

## **An Underlying Current**

While those select verses are great to see, I think there's something bigger going on Biblically, though. I think if you look past what's glaringly obvious, there's an underlying current of intergenerational ministry that God wants us to see. Let me explain what I mean...

I believe that in the less obvious areas, God is showing us how to be inclusive in who we are as Christ-followers. For example, let's look at James 1:27. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..." At first glance, it seems as though James is simply talking about taking care of specific people groups, right? While this is true, I think there's something much bigger going on. Think about the people groups he mentions: "Widows and Orphans." I would argue that widows and orphans are quite possibly the most needy people-groups in the world. Widows and orphans have lost everything. But here's what's even more fascinating: Think about who takes care of widows and orphans? For the most part, the only people able to take care of orphans are people older than them. And for widows, for the most part, the only people who are able to take care of them are younger people. So these aren't just two random people groups. James is saying that there needs to be an "inclusivity" in how we take care of each other. I think James is basically saying, "Young people, take care of widows. Older people, take care of orphans." This includes *everybody* on the planet. Could this be a picture of what the most healthy churches look like? The most healthy churches seems to be churches that span all age-groups - Where adults realize that children are valuable to take care of them, and children realize that adults are valuable to take care of

them. And this whole “widows and orphans” thing appears *all over* the Bible! (A couple more examples: Deuteronomy 10:18, 27:19; Exodus 22:22). It seems as though he’s lumping together these people groups for a reason. And while I believe God is very serious about *actually* taking care of widows and orphans, I believe He’s trying to teach us that we all need to take care of each other. Think back to what James says is “pure and faultless” religion. He says that it’s taking care of widows and orphans. Could it be that what James is actually getting at is the fact that when we love all people-groups and all age-groups we experience “pure and faultless” religion?

### **Relearning What We’ve Already Learned**

This sort of thinking is completely along the lines of Jesus’ life, too. I love the way Mark chooses to explain what’s happening when the disciples rebuke people for bringing children to Jesus. Mark 10:13-16 says:

*“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.*

A couple things to note here:

## **1. Jesus gets “indignant”**

This isn't just Jesus getting mad. He's "indignant." But it might not be what you initially think it means. For a better understanding of what's happening here, we need to see the original Greek. The Greek word used here is "aganakteo." Our initial inclination is to just assume that Jesus is furious with the disciples. While this is probably true, there's something much bigger going on. The Greek word "aganakteo" actually comes from two roots in Greek. "Agan" means "much" and "Achthos" means "grief." So the way this could be translated into English is this: "...But the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, He had 'much grief.'" It's quite a different picture than seeing Jesus in a fit of rage, isn't it? When children aren't included in the Kingdom of God, Jesus is actually deeply grieved. It shows a compassionate side of Jesus that is incredibly beautiful.

## **2. The word “bless” is a loaded term.**

I think when we read this, we're just assuming that Jesus went around "wishing the best for children." And while this is true, (obviously Jesus wanted what was best for children), once again, there's a deeper meaning here. Historically, laying hands on people was a sign of ordaining or commissioning people for a new responsibility. Some theologians seem to think that when Jesus was laying hands on children, His intent was actually commissioning them to be followers of Him. Maybe we could look at the blessing

that Jesus is doing like this: Children, you are blessed to be a blessing to others.

And being blessed by children is an incredible thing, too.

I love when children experience new things. An onlooker can't help but get excited about a child's new experience, can they? I recently asked a friend what it was like to be a Dad, and he replied by saying, "I love watching my kids experience things that I experienced a long time ago. It's like I get to experience it all over again in a brand new way." Children *are* a blessing, aren't they? It's because we get to experience things all over again that we've taken for granted as we've gotten older.

I wish I could relearn most of what I've already learned about being a follower of Jesus. It's a huge reason why I'm involved in student ministries. I get to see students learning new things about Jesus every day, and it's amazing. I fear that if I'm away from students for too long, I may start taking every day things for granted. I fear becoming callous and not wanting to learn. Children are constantly learning and constantly experiencing. Jesus deeply understands the value of being around children. And He believes they can bless adults right now. Not later.

Children bless me way more than I bless them. As followers of God, we should constantly be learning new things, experiencing new lessons, and being shaped into Christ followers every single day.

Probably the easiest way to do this is to spend time with children... and become one ourselves.

### **The Over-Looked Part of 1 Timothy 4:12**

One of the most common passages that's used for students being an active part in changing the world is 1 Timothy 4:12. It reads like this:

*“Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.”*

It's very easy for a student to read this verse and quickly get mad about the fact that adults don't treat them with respect, and that they look down on them because they're young. Obviously I believe that students can actively take part in changing the world right now. And while I see a student's point on the fact that students shouldn't be looked down on because of age, students (or “young people”) have a tendency to miss the second part of this verse. The point of this verse is that students are getting a clear call to act a certain way. And if students *did* act a certain way, adults wouldn't look down on them because they're young. The focal point here is the five action points that are mentioned: speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.

### **A Call to Action for Teenagers**

What we need are teenagers all over the world committed to setting an example of these five things. Mouthing back at parents, hating people, and being impure are not the way to get adults to believe in students. Rather, what *will* get adults excited is hearing how a group of teenagers are changing the world through their actions. It's a student's faith in Jesus that makes an adult rally around them. When I was growing up, I did a horrible job at following these action steps. I used to throw into adult's faces all the time that they never respected me, and that they needed to treat me better. But if you would have asked me if I was following these five steps, there's no way I could have said yes.

The relationship between students and adults has to go both ways. I believe that adults need to respect students, and believe they can actively change the world right now, but I also believe that students need to become great at these five things. If you think about it, what makes an adult frustrated with a student is the complete opposite of what's being talked about in this verse. But what adult gets frustrated with a student following these five things? They really can't. No adult is going to get mad at a student who is loving to them, or being pure in all they do. I love that these five things are pretty much all encompassing on how to live life. If a student feels like they're being barraged by an adult, maybe what the student needs to do is sit down with these five things, and rate themselves on where they currently are. And if they aren't "setting an example," maybe it will make more sense as to why people are looking at them in a negative way. Simply put, no adult can get mad at a student that genuinely wants to be like Jesus.

## **Mosquitos in the Classroom**

In 2006, I attended a conference in Charlotte, NC, and heard some of these ideas by youth ministry veteran Kenda Creasy Dean. Buckle up, because they're brilliant. Presbycusis is "age-related hearing loss, or the cumulative effect of aging on hearing." More often than not, it's found in men, and gradually takes charge of your hearing after the age of 60.

Presbycusis is even more fascinating than you may think, though. Presbycusis is the most common sensory deprivation in the world. Everybody deals with it, but nobody ever really finds out they have it. When adults found out about this condition called presbycusis, they did something very fascinating. In England there were department stores that were full of loitering teenagers, and they didn't want them around anymore. Some brilliant British scientist developed something called "Teen Buzz." It was a high pitched frequency that only younger people could hear, but adults couldn't. When the "Teen Buzz" was played, kids would freak out, because the tone was so piercing. As a result, all of the department stores that had the "Teen Buzz" got rid of all the loitering teenagers, because the tone was so high. Even better, the adults who created it couldn't hear the tone that they had created! (I'm dead serious

about this! You can search all over the internet for it). But, I am proud to say that teenagers found a way out of this. They decided to take this “Teen Buzz” sound, and turn it around on adults and teachers. What these brilliant teenagers decided to do was create a cell phone ring tone using the “Teen Buzz” sound, and they named it the “Mosquito Ring-Tone.” These teenagers were able to use the ring tone in class, and the teacher wouldn’t even be able to hear it. BRILLIANT!

### **Spiritual Presbycusis**

I find it fascinating that teenagers are able to hear something adults can’t hear. But doesn’t the church often get “spiritual presbycusis?” The church has the great ability to not be able to hear God’s voice after a while. What I find most disconcerting about the whole thing is that it works just like the mosquito ring-tone. Adults lose their hearing first. I guess the thing I fear is that the older we get, the more we think we only need ourselves to live life. There becomes a huge difference between living Christianity rather than just studying it. There becomes a huge difference between preaching transformation, rather than actually being transformed. As one of my favorite authors has to say, “We’re not going to win the masses to Christianity until we’re able to live it.” There becomes a huge difference between saying what Jesus said, rather than doing what Jesus did. Let’s make it practical to the church. He goes on to say, “I am no longer interested in the church being an organization. I am interested in the church being an organism.” The church needs to be something we are, not something that we are forced to do. And I

think until we realize that, we'll continue to fall flat on our face as we try to "reach the world for Jesus." We need to figure out what it means ourselves before we go into the world to preach a message about something we either don't understand, or pretend not to understand. Soren Kierkegaard put it brilliantly like this:

"The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obligated to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world? Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the Church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close." I think it's a massive case of spiritual presbycusis, and it scares the life out of me.

### **Biblical Presbycusis**

And so I guess the question we need to answer is: If teens don't develop presbycusis until they're older, what do we need to glean from them? What are they hearing that we simply don't hear anymore? 1 Samuel 3 gives us a perfect illustration of what a case of spiritual presbycusis is all about. Not only that, but it gives us a perfect illustration of a teenager that hasn't developed spiritual presbycusis yet. "The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under

Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.” Ok, let’s stop there. I always had the impression that God spoke to tons of people, through many prophecies all the time. To me, I guess I thought hearing the voice of the Lord in the Old Testament was common. It just so happens, however, that in my studies I found something very interesting and profound. During the entire period of the Judges, apart from the prophet in 1 Samuel 2:27-36, we are told of only two prophets, (Judges 4:4; 6:8), and of five revelations, (Judges 2:1-3; 6:11-26; 7:2-11; 10:11-14; and 13:3-21), where there was actually a word of the Lord. Theologians think there’s a slight possibility that 2 Chronicles 15:3 refers to this time period as well, but it’s doubtful. I look at that and say to myself, Wow...the word of the Lord really was a rare occurrence! In the entire book of Judges, a word from God only came five times! And so we have this boy named Samuel who is studying under a man named Eli. In 2:26, it actually says this about Samuel, “And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.” (Wow, that sounds vaguely familiar!? Where have we heard that before?) In Luke 2:52, the same thing is said about Jesus. So there’s this boy who we know has gained “clout” with people. Not just with people, though, but with the LORD. It seems clear that this boy has stepped out on the right path of life. His parents would probably be pretty impressed with him. If his parents owned a mini-van, they would have a bumper sticker that says, “My son is an honor roll student at (blank) middle school.”

### **Random Sleeping Place**

Moving on in the story, something fascinating happens. “One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see,

was lying down in his usual place.” Now, the Biblical writers are very clear when it comes to them wanting to get their point across. They do it in whatever way they can. Right here, the writer is clearly trying to get his point across. Look at what the writer says. Eli was “lying down in his usual place.” The phrase “usual place” right there jumped out at me so quickly when I read it. “Usual place” has some significant connotations in the Old Testament. The same Hebrew word, “Maqowm” is used in Genesis 28:11 when it refers to Jacob sleeping on the side of the road. This is not a significant place. It’s just a random place somewhere in the Temple. Not just that, it’s his “usual” place. It’s the place where he sleeps every night. And this usual place where Eli sleeps is some random place in the Temple. But moving on in the next verse it says this, “The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord where the ark of God was.” While Eli was in his “usual place”, Samuel was in a specific place. Samuel spent his nights right by the Ark of the Covenant. This doesn’t sound like anything significant to us, but it was tremendously significant back then. The Israelites had a pretty limited understanding of who God was and where He resided. To the Israelites, they thought God only resided in one place, in one room at the Temple. They were convinced God’s presence resided in the Ark of the Covenant, and guess who we see hanging out there every night? Samuel. A young boy who was ministering under somebody else. And that somebody else, Eli, was in a random place somewhere in the Temple. So the Lord calls Samuel. The Scripture says,

“Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me. But Eli

said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down. Again the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” “My Son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The Word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak for your servant is listening.”

So, there is this pretty crazy thing that happens between God, Samuel, and Eli. Samuel is having these conversations with God, but thinks it's Eli the entire time. So he goes to talk to Eli, and Eli is telling Samuel that he hasn't called him. I can only imagine what Eli's reaction is. At first he's probably totally out of it, and in his sleepiness he tells Samuel to go back to bed, and that it wasn't him. The second time I bet Eli was either frustrated or very confused. But the third time...I really think the third time is different. Obviously it doesn't say anything specific about what his reaction is like in the Scriptures, but when I read this story I sense an urgency from Eli. An urgency that says, Samuel, GO! Don't miss this! Please hurry - and by the way...this is serious. I would surmise that Eli was very confused as to why his student has heard from the Lord, and he didn't. I really don't think this is any different than our lives now, though. After all, Eli was in his “usual place”. He didn't even give God the chance to talk to him. Samuel on the other

hand, just a young boy, consistently put himself in the position to hear from the Lord. And how long had he waited? It said the word of the Lord was rare. Had he waited years to hear a message from God? It says in the passage that Samuel did not yet know the Lord. This is not a reference to him understanding who God was. This was only a reference to him not understanding God's voice. He had been taught who he was, (probably by Eli), but he wasn't able to understand God's voice when God spoke to him. He needed Eli's help in order for him to understand it was God speaking to him. This has tons of implications for us today.

### **Docks and Drowning with Goliath**

Last year I was with a friend doing a project for his aunt. They have a cottage at a lake, and for some reason the dock wasn't sturdy so his aunt asked us to go fix it. I had never fixed a dock before, so I had no idea what I was getting myself into! The dock was huge! (It seemed even bigger underneath it, chest deep in water). Not only was it huge, it was made of wood, and had metal framing all over the place to add structural support. My friend who is 6'6," 320 pounds, (I call him by two names: Goliath and Monster), and myself, who isn't so tiny, walked out on the unstable dock. At that point the entire left side of the dock slipped down and was only about 6 inches off the water. When this happened we had to go under the dock, and try to lift it up in order to make it flat again. (I bet you can tell where this is going). As rugged as we are (yes, that's a joke...), there was hardly any budging this huge dock. We had minimal success. So here we are, two grown men underneath a

dock, and we're trying to literally pick it up, and shift it over about one foot while it's submersed under water. We thought we were making progress until - BAM! All of a sudden an entire section of the dock slipped off, and yours truly happened to be underneath it. A large metal framing fell directly on my shoulder, and the section of the dock, (which had to weigh hundreds of pounds), shoved me straight under the water. I was literally stuck, totally confused as to what had just happened. It was a couple seconds later that I realized all of this was taking place, and I was feeling a sharp pain in my shoulder while I was under the water. All I could think was that my enormous friend had better pick this thing up off me! After a few seconds, I came up groaning and gasping from the weight of the dock. All I heard my friend saying was, "Dude, I am SO sorry! Matt, I am so sorry!" (Thankfully "Goliath-Incarnate" was with me, so I only ended up with a sweet scar).

As I think back on that story, all I know is that if it hadn't been for my friend picking up that dock off me, I'm not sure what I would have done. Being pinned, I probably would have died. I needed him in that moment. I had to have him there. And the thing is, Samuel had to have Eli there to tell him it was the Lord. We need each other. We need each other to survive. We need each other to learn. If it hadn't been for Eli, Samuel may have never known it was God trying to speak to him.

Thankfully, Frontline is a place where we deeply understand what it means to fight for each other. Recently I've had an overwhelming amount of adults come up to me and tell me they want to pay a student's way to Never the Same Camp, an incredible camp in Houghton, NY. Beautiful. THAT'S the kind of stuff we need. We need

adults fighting for the spiritual well-being of students every single day. And students need to know they're genuinely being loved and cared for. We need students to know that adults are praying for them on a regular basis. (Or dare I say, we need adults knowing that students are praying for *them* on a regular basis?) We simply need each other in everything that we do. "Church" is no longer about the isolation of student ministries versus "adult church" ministries. (You'll see more of this in the "Application" section). To be the church that God really intended in the world, there has to be an interconnectedness and an inclusiveness. And this is why theologically we're unashamedly intergenerational at Frontline.



**Part Three: Practical, Conceptual, and Applicational Ways To Get  
There**



Now that we've talked about the theological implications of what it means to be intergenerational, let's dig deeper into some of the practical, theological, and applicational ways that we can be intergenerational.

### **Kelencia (Kul-en-see-uh)**

In October 2009 some women from our church took a mission trip to Haiti. While they were down there, they met a little girl named Kelencia. She became very ill, so her Mom dropped her off at the orphanage where they were serving. At the time, she was two years old and wore size one diapers. Due to malnutrition, her growth was completely stunted. Doctors ran some tests and found a hole in her heart. They said that if she didn't get a surgery very soon, she would die within a year.

One of the women from the trip came to me a couple weeks later explaining the entire story, asking if students could help. I'll be honest - I didn't think there was much we could do. I knew the surgery would be very expensive, and my thoughts were confirmed when we heard that the surgery was \$100,000.00. Adding to the fact that only six doctors in the U.S. did this specific surgery, the situation looked quite grim.

Somebody we knew called the doctors, and (crazy enough) one of the doctors (only two hours from Grand Rapids) agreed to do the surgery completely free!

The only problem was that Kelencia was in Haiti. Our main goal then became getting Kelencia to Grand Rapids for her to *have* the surgery. This is where our students come in. We challenged the students of our church to raise enough money to get Kelencia to the U.S. She would need a plane ticket, passport, visa, temporary guardianship paperwork, and a multitude of other things. We launched this "idea" during a series of teachings in December 2009 called "Injustice. Over the course of three weeks, we asked each student small group to participate in raising money for Kelencia. Here's *some* of what happened:

1. Knitting Washcloths/Dish Towels: A group of high school girls had just learned how to knit, so they teamed up with an adult who loves to knit at our church and spent two straight weekends knitting washcloths and dish towels endlessly. Throughout the two weeks, they went door-to-door explaining the situation and asking people if they would be willing to purchase their washcloths and dish towels. In the end, they raised over \$200.00 by themselves.

2. Jelly Beans: Another small group and leader bought a bunch of jelly beans and created a "poem" based on the different colored jelly beans in the bag and how they related to Scripture. They packaged them in small baggies with the poem and story

attached, and sold them to friends, family and complete strangers. They made \$250.00.

3. Soda-Can Drive: Now, this sounds like a pretty typical idea, but...it was December in Grand Rapids. One Saturday one of our small groups went door-to-door showing people the picture of Kelencia and asking if they would be willing to give cans. It was below zero outside! They collected cans for THREE HOURS! They went back out two more times. They raised over \$300.00. At .10 per can, that means they collected 3,000 cans.

4. One non-Christian high school student named Joe has been attending our youth group for over a year. I was told by his leader that he went to a family reunion telling people that instead of a Christmas present, they could write checks directly to the “Kelencia Project.” He gave away over \$200.00.

5. A high school student named Chelsi personally handed me over \$200.00 of her Christmas money, telling me that Kelencia needed the money more than she did.

6. A student named Ian was so profoundly changed that he actually went to Haiti in April 2010 with his Dad and a group of adults from our church and got to spend time at the orphanage with Kelencia.

We ended up raising all the money we needed (and more) for her to come to the U.S., get all her paperwork, clothe her (in the frigid Michigan winter) and feed her while she was here.

Three days after we had raised the money we needed, though, the earthquake hit Haiti. We didn't know for 24 hours if she had made it. Finally we got a phone call and were told that Kelencia's entire town was leveled, and she didn't make it. That night we made an announcement to the students who had just raised all this money for her. Words can't describe what that night was like. Students literally wept for hours. It was horrible.

Through all of that, though, I saw something in kids that I had never seen before. They wanted to do more. They asked what else needed to be done in Haiti. I genuinely saw a new kind of passion in students. A passion that didn't quit when turmoil presented itself. To be perfectly honest, a lot of these students had more faith than me. Twenty-four hours after we made the announcement that she hadn't made it, we got another phone call from Haiti saying that she was alive at the orphanage and that she barely had a scratch on her! It was a roller coaster for 48 hours.

In July 2010, Kelencia came to Frontline where we had the opportunity (and privilege) to dedicate her, and have a student pray over her before her surgery. It was beautiful.

If you give students the opportunity to change the world, they will...

### **“Isolated” Youth Ministry Needs To Go Away - Forever**

Youth Ministry in the last 40-50 years has taken a massive shift in the way things have been done. Kara Powell has stated that with the start of para-church ministries, youth ministries started moving away from the connectedness of the “adult” church and more to the isolated student ministries. This is not to say that the organizations themselves are bad. In fact, they’re pretty incredible. But when a student grows up isolated from the larger church as a whole, they start thinking that ministry is about an isolation, of sorts. Some isolated students will barely see an adult while they’re in school. And if they do, they don’t see what adults do in “big church”. Because of these programs, (once again, not necessarily bad programs), it was great for a student while they were in high school. But the instant that the student left high school for college, they had no idea how to get connected to “adult church”. Students don’t understand why adults aren’t playing “Steal The Bacon” or other youth group games at church. What has ended up happening is 18-25 year olds leaving the church in historic numbers. Some statistics estimate that 80% of 18 year olds will leave the church within three months of leaving for college. At Frontline, this is not acceptable. We are not “OK” with this. Ironically enough, most of these para-church ministries have realized where they’ve fallen short, but it feels like walking through mud. There’s so much catching up to do, reevaluating programs, and teaching people a new way to think. Compare that with church whose focus is being

intergenerational, and the statistics completely flip-flop. For churches that are inclusive of students and children, some statistics say that 80% *will* get connected to a church when they graduate from high school. And it makes sense why. They're not just seeing their isolated youth ministry bubble anymore. They see church as being something more than just playing games, eating pizza, and having a 5 minutes lesson (that is often times poorly put together). For a growing church to survive, there has to be a connectedness among people. There's a reason why small country churches are sending three times as many students into full-time ministry than mega-churches. It's because in small churches, all students have is the larger congregation as a whole. In large churches, youth ministry becomes "professionalized", and often times the more professionalized the youth ministry is, the more isolated it becomes. As Frontline becomes one of those "mega-churches", this is something we're not going to let ourselves fall into. Rather than running through the mud and trying to "catch up" years down the road, we're taking an active stance that students can be a part of the larger congregation as a whole.

### **Cutting The Sunday Morning Programs**

In September 2009, we made a massive change to our Sunday morning programming. We saw the destructive nature of isolated programs and decided that it needed to stop. We instituted intergenerational serving opportunities on Sunday morning for all students, and the results have been astounding. In six months we've basically tripled the amount of connected students by asking them to "serve" on a Sunday morning rather than sit in an isolated Sunday

morning service for just students. Each week we're continuing to see those numbers rise. On the Frontline website we've explained what Sunday mornings are like by saying this:

*Recent statistics have shown that students who are in an isolated student ministry separate from the larger body of the church on a Sunday morning will probably not remain in church when they turn 18. We see that as a serious problem here at Frontline.*

*Our goal is for your student(s) to be connected in such a way that students see themselves as a crucial part of what happens at Frontline. Now here's the good news: Statistics have also shown that students who are connected into the larger body of the church will more than likely stay in church when they graduate from high school. We call this "Intergenerational Ministry", and we're really serious about it. Students teaching adults as well as adults teaching students.*

*In that regard, we've asked ourselves the question: Can a student serve in the same capacity as an adult on a Sunday morning? We see the answer being a resounding yes! Since the fall of 2009 we've done the unthinkable - Allowed students to serve on a Sunday morning! (Shocking, I know...). And what we've seen has been nothing short of incredible. Students on Sunday mornings are serving in children's ministry, handing out bulletins, greeting people at the front door, making coffee, taking the offering, cleaning the floors, and the list could go on and on. In just a few*

*short months, we've seen so making students take the step of being connected into a larger picture of a church rather than just "student ministries."*

*Since our Sunday morning services are conducive to a middle school and high schooler's spiritual growth, we ask students to serve one service, and attend one service. This way students are getting solid discipleship twice per week (Sunday morning and Wednesday night), and are able to put this discipleship into practice as well on Sunday mornings. Pretty cool, huh?*

*How to get signed up: We have an amazing adult named Diane Warmuskerken in charge of scheduling and can answer any question (s) you may have regarding Sunday morning serving opportunities. Please feel free to contact her by email at: [diane@warmuskerken.com](mailto:diane@warmuskerken.com) or by phone at: 616.363.7938 to see how you or your student can be involved. We can't wait to have your student serving!*

### **Is It Still Important to be Age-Appropriate?**

I'm sure some of you are reading this and saying, "But students learn differently than adults. There has to be something age appropriate still! Is it important to be doing age-appropriate ministry?" First of all, this is a great question. As we've thought through Intergenerational Ministry for the past year, this is a question we've come back to many times. The answer to your question is: Yes! Age appropriate ministry is still crucial. It would be

ridiculous to think that a 3 year old would learn from a 45 minute sermon on a Sunday morning. In that regard, we still have age-appropriate ministries on a weekly basis. We run an incredible children's ministry that is growing like crazy. We even have different segments of the children's ministry that is divided by age. The nursery is in a completely different section than elementary aged children.

## **Ignite**

For students, this is no different. There has to be something for students to come to and still be... students. This is where "Ignite" comes into play. At Frontline we run an age-appropriate ministry for both middle school and high school students that we call Ignite. Ignite currently runs on Wednesday nights from 6-8pm, and is basically "a church service geared toward students in middle school and high school." During the evening, we break up further by dividing middle school and high school groups to be even more age-specific. We take Wednesday nights very seriously, too. It's not something that we feel like we have to do out of obligation, but it's something we do because we love it, and because there still has to be age-appropriate discipleship for students of that age group. Ignite is the *main* emphasis of discipleship for students. While at Ignite students hear a lesson aimed at teaching them the ways of Jesus while they're still in high school, and afterward students break up into age-appropriate small groups to go deeper into the lesson. What's been incredible is that since we've instituted our Sunday morning changes, Ignite has exploded! We have more than

doubled since this time last year and the numbers keep climbing! Students *want* to come on a Wednesday night and learn how they can be changed by Jesus. But what I would say has been the crucial part of the growth is the fact that students feel like they're taken seriously. Age-appropriate ministry has grown because of Intergenerational Ministry. We have seen a direct correlation of growth with Sunday mornings to Ignite on Wednesday evenings! This is exciting, because we see both as being an integral part of discipleship for students. As the website mentions, students get quality discipleship twice per week (one age-appropriate and one intergenerational) and are able to put their discipleship to the "test" by serving alongside adults on Sunday mornings.

To sum it up, our Family Life pastor Terri Hanson has said it brilliantly: "We need to provide age-appropriate learning, but integrated opportunities."

## **Advocacy**

If we are going to take this seriously, and if we're going to genuinely believe that students are going to take as big a role in changing the world as adults do, we must start looking at students as advocates. Steve Argue of Mars Hill Bible Church has used this language a lot, and he's absolutely right. We have to listen to them. We have to trust them. We have to take them seriously when they have ideas. We have to include them. Basically, we have to believe in them. The great thing is, if we're all a part of the "Now Generation," there's no reason why we shouldn't do these things already, right? The

simple fact of the matter is that if we can all be Christians at any age, then we can all change the world at any age.

Typically, for most youth pastors, advocacy would only be centered around students. Historically, a youth pastor is only around a church to advocate for “his/her” students, and push his agenda on the adults of the church in order to get his/her way. Most youth pastors have a difficult time balancing the needs of both students *and* adults. Although my job is being a “youth pastor,” I see myself as being an advocate (or a bridge) to help adults as well as students. This has to be done in order to live effective intergenerational ministry. Nobody is better than another person, and no group is better than another group. With that said, I am available as much for adults as I am for students. As the student ministries get larger at Ignite, the need for more adults to be active on a weekly basis becomes greater and greater. In that regard, we need to keep the communication open for parents and students to remain connected - which is why we advocate for students *and* adults.

### **Individual Students Are More Important Than Programs**

I’ve had many talks with a mentor of mine named Ian. Ian is another “now generation” pastor at a huge church that is obsessed with seeing students seek Jesus with their entire being. We were talking one day about why students aren’t taken seriously and he brought up something that I can’t stop thinking about. He wonders if it doesn’t have to do with the fact that often times student ministries are seen as a “program” rather than individual students. The more

he brought it up, the more it started making sense to me, too. The thing that's fascinating is that churches don't look at spiritual maturity as a corporate thing, do they? Spiritual maturity has more to do with individual lives as opposed to programs. So why is this the case with student ministries? I'm not sure, but I do know that if adults were to hear individual stories about how lives have been changed it would make an enormous difference. What we need to make sure we're doing is focusing on the bigger question of how an *individual* student's life is being changed, as opposed to how a *program* is succeeding. And once we see that there's an individual behind the program, we start seeing things from an entirely new perspective.

### **Why Is This Such A Big Deal?**

Some of you may be asking that question right now. Why write up an entire book(let) about all of this? Why change all the programs around? Who cares? Those are legitimate questions. With that said, if you were to ask me where the future of youth ministry is headed, I can't think of another option other than becoming intergenerational. I don't think this is some sort of passing fad. It's not as if we're going to look at things from this point of view for a couple of years, then decide to change it all up again.

All in all, here's the big question: What is the most impact we can make as we structure our youth ministry? As I reflect upon that question, I think intergenerational ministry answers all of the

biggest questions concerning students remaining in the church once they graduate from high school. And that's what it's all about anyway, right? What we all want to see are student's lives being completely changed by Jesus both in school and out of school. In the end, it all comes down to living an entire life for Jesus. We're not simply interested in how a student can be changed now... we're asking how they'll be changed later as well. This is why effective intergenerational ministry works! It brings students to the place where they believe there's a place for them within the larger scope of the church after high school. And because we all believe in each other, it works. We're not OK with students graduating from church when they graduate from high school. At Frontline, we won't rest until the Black Hole is eradicated.

### **What We Do Now Drastically Affects The Future**

In the summer of 2004, I was with a friend climbing a huge mountain in Maine. We were about half-way up the mountain and were exhausted, so we decided to take a break. As we sat there, a man who had been climbing the mountain stopped to take a break and eat with us. He was from Eau Claire, WI. During our conversation he asked both of us what we did. At the time, I was still at Bethany Bible College, so I told him I went to a tiny Bible College in New Brunswick, Canada called Bethany Bible College. His face sort of lit up, and he said, "HEY! I've heard of that place before!" Now, before I go on any further, I was sure he hadn't heard of the place. My college had about 275 students so I was positive he was thinking of something else. After a while he was still pushing the fact that he'd heard of it and finally said - "No, really, I've met

people from there.” He then proceeded to tell us a story about how a group of kids from Bethany Bible College were in Times Square in New York City in 2001, and one girl named Sarin Postma helped him carry some of his things to a subway. She mentioned she went to Bethany Bible College, talked to him about Jesus for an hour, and told him she was on a mission trip to the city for two weeks. Well, it just so happened that I knew a girl from Bethany Bible College named Sarin Postma and I knew she had been to New York City. But then he said this: “I still think back to when we were talking. She made a huge impact on my life. She said some things that I’m still thinking about today. And although I haven’t become a Christian yet, I still wonder why a random girl like that would help a random guy in New York City.” Over two years later, I am having a conversation with a man from Eau Claire, WI, on the side of a mountain in Maine about a 10 minute conversation he had in the New York City subway with somebody I knew from my tiny Bible College. Amazing...

If we ever get to the point where we think what we do doesn’t matter anymore, we’ve given up on everything. We don’t know what happens to people years and years down the road. All I know is that if we serve Jesus, we’ll make impacts on people who will still be thinking about us in the years to come. What we do now drastically affects the future, doesn’t it? And this is why we’re unashamedly intergenerational at Frontline.

**More resources on Intergenerational Ministry:**

- Fuller Youth Institute - [www.fulleryouthinstitute.com](http://www.fulleryouthinstitute.com)
- Leadership Journal - “iGens” - Summer 2009 edition
- Anything by Kara Powell and Chap Clark
- Youth Ministry 3.0 by Mark Oestreicher
- A New Kind of Youth Ministry by Chris Folmsbee
- Four Views of Youth Ministry and The Church (especially View One  
- “The Inclusive Congregational View”) by Malan Nel

Notes:

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