Chapter Ten

Well-Being, Discipleship, and Intergenerational Connectedness

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This chapter outlines what is currently known about the intersection of well-being, discipleship, and intergenerational connectedness. These findings form the hypothesis of a research project that is in progress among ten churches in Australia.

Social Connectedness and Well-Being

The World Health Organization has recognized depression as "the single largest contributor to global disability."[1] With such a pervasive and life-threatening disability that contributes to close to eight hundred thousand suicides worldwide per year,[2] it is quite relevant to note that there is strong support from research that suggests depression is influenced by levels of social connectedness.[3]

Social connectedness is defined by Chin-Siang Ang as "the degree to which a person is socially close, interrelates, or shares resources with other persons in a number of social ecologies such as families, schools, neighborhoods, cultural groups, and society."[4] Since physical health is impacted

by mental health, socially connected people have a higher life expectancy.[5] This impact is evidenced through the Blue Zone research of Dan Buettner and Sam Skemp, who investigated the world's longest-living communities. Buettner and Skemp found that the members of these communities share a highly cohesive social bond with each other.[6] Positive social connectedness influences individuals to behave in a healthy manner, which increases their survival rate; and beyond this, it also creates a stress-buffer in individuals, thus promoting healthy mental well-being.[7]

It has become evident that the greater the number of social groups people are members of, the less likely they are to become depressed; and if they do become depressed, symptoms will be fewer and less intense.[8] However, it is not merely the *number* of groups one is a part of which ameliorates depression, but rather the number of "groups with which we *identify*" that have this ameliorating effect.[9] Thus, mental health and well-being are significantly increased with improving and maintaining social group relationships, whereas a lack of social connectedness would be typically detrimental to an individual's mental health and well-being.

While it is true that no one desires to be lonely, the reality is that many people are indeed lonely, and loneliness impacts far more than the thwarting of that simple desire for companionship. One study found that "data across 308,849 individuals, followed for an average of 7.5 years, indicate that individuals with adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor or insufficient social relationships."[10]

Furthermore, current research "indicates that the quantity and/or quality of social relationships in industrialized societies are decreasing."[11] The same study found a general decrease in relationship quantity and quality, reporting, for example, that there are three times the number of Americans who report having no confidante in their life compared to two decades ago, indicating a sharp increase in loneliness in the overall population.[12]

Intergenerational Connectedness

This chapter will focus specifically on intergenerational connectedness, or *intergenerationality,* as it has been found to be a major form of

connectedness that is decreasing, particularly in the industrialized west.[13] Intergenerationality is of vital importance as it enables an exchange of both tangible and intangible resources between generations. Of more interest to this study are the *intangible* resources that are notably missing when there are few intergenerational connections. Generational segregation leads to an absence of opportunities of many worthwhile interactions between generations, such as those concerning learning and understanding and, particularly, mentoring.[14]

In an effort to explain the mechanism whereby intergenerationality provides such a wealth of benefits, Holly Allen and Christine Ross proposed the situative-sociocultural perspective on learning.[15] This theory takes the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky[16] and further develops it using the situative learning approach of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger.[17] Allen and Ross explain that the rationale for intergenerationality as an effective approach flows from three premises. The first premise is that "individuals learn best in authentic, complex environments."[18] Studies have shown that one of the most effective means of learning is in collaborative environments where real problems are resolved through a social group.[19]

The second premise is the assertion that "the best learning happens when persons participate with more experienced members of the culture (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development)."[20] This can take place by means of mentorship and modeling, whether incidentally or through a directed learning activity.

The final premise taps into Lave and Wenger's communities of practice theory which explains that individuals become a part of a community of practice through participating in that community's activities; through such participation, they learn the attitudes and practices of that community.[21] When solidarity exists within a diverse community, individuals are more likely to learn, since identifying with others typically begets trust and empathy.[22] Such trust and empathy encourages intimacy, which can deliver empowerment through tangible resources such as finances, property, or equipment,[23] and intangible resources such as education, respect, and authority.[24]

Given this understanding of the benefits of intergenerationality, it is prudent to seek contemporary examples of intergenerational communities.

However, very few such communities exist within the contemporary western world.[25] Urban planning studies have found that neighborhoods are becoming more age segregated, often due to economic advantage.[26] Though there has been a global rise in schools that try to incorporate intergenerational programs in their curriculum (and they have had positive results), these schools are the minority overall and the programs could not truly be considered all-encompassing intergenerational approaches.[27]

Interestingly, there is one kind of community that has still managed to withstand, at least to a certain degree, the barrage of generational fragmentation within the industrialized world, and this is the religious community.[28] Given the variety of religious faith communities to choose from, this study will specifically focus on intergenerational connectivity within the Christian faith.

While several authors in this book have given ample reasons as to why Christian congregations should be intergenerational,[29] the question that will be addressed in this chapter is regarding what drives connectedness—intergenerational connectedness or otherwise—in Christian congregations. Previously, we discussed the situative-sociocultural learning theory as the mechanism for intergenerational connectedness, noting that individuals learn better in complex and authentic environments via mentors and models in communities of practice. Both biblical directive and recent literature indicate that such a mechanism of connectedness is enabled through the process of discipleship.[30]

Discipleship

Discipleship is a lifelong process that results in an individual becoming more aligned with what Jesus would desire him to become and allowing God to be God, thus allowing God to transform him.[31] Reviewing both the academic literature and Scripture, three factors appear to be integral regarding discipleship: growth, faithfulness, and love.

Taking a look at growth first, ongoing personal growth is an integral aspect of discipleship; though the ultimate end goal is unachievable, it is yet worthwhile as a pursuit.[32] As disciples, we are to continually grow in our spiritual walks, becoming better people than we were in the not-too-distant past. Thus, growth is an essential part of discipleship.[33]

Concerning faithfulness, when we read Matthew 28:18–20, it can be easily argued that we are mandated by Jesus Christ to disciple. This text is often read, however, with the focus on baptizing, with relatively little emphasis on teaching. It is important to note, however, that baptizing and teaching are not separate from discipleship, nor are they themselves discipleship.[34] They are indeed *part* of the process of discipleship, and being faithful disciples means that we adhere to all that the Lord is telling us to do.

The meaning and purpose of discipleship focuses on fulfilling the Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:19–20, which is not merely the multiplicity of teaching and baptizing, but it also results in saving others from disconnection from God and gives them hope and meaning through a life of service to God and others.[35] Therefore, in the Christian mindset, reconnection and restoration to God is salvation.

Being a disciple means being obedient to what God is asking one to do. A disciple follows the commandments of God, but discipleship is not merely about keeping the commandments.[36] As disciples, we need to go beyond treating the commandments as a checklist of righteousness and surpass them, as Isaiah 30:21 directs: "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'"

Consequently, at the center of Christ's call to discipleship is the third factor, which is love. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35 NASB). Further to this, Paul describes love in detail in 1 Corinthians 13, arguing that without love, all accomplishments and virtues are empty. In a like manner, love is what qualifies both growth and faithfulness as factors of discipleship. Faithfulness to God is simultaneously prompted by, progressed by, and a product of love, and it results in growth, which leads to more faithfulness.[37] Growth without love produces pride; and faithfulness without love cannot exist, as we are commanded to love.

Having discussed discipleship as the mechanism for connectedness within Christian congregations, it is relevant to address what discipleship produces, which is well-being. While we understand that discipleship uses growth, love, and faithfulness as its methods, the purpose is found in the

summary of God's commandments, which is expressed by Jesus in three of the Gospels and is a reference for two commandments given in the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Matthew's account reads,

> "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (22:37–40)

Although there may seem to be two identities in which to pursue love from this text, there are in fact three: love of God, love of others, and love of self. It is proposed that love in this sense is very similar to the term *positive connectedness,* as both concern the promotion of welfare through positive relationships—that is: (a) love of God being spiritual connectedness, (b) love of others being social connectedness, and (c) love of self being psychological well-being. Love of self is to be understood as a positive and healthy view of oneself in light of being a child of God—as opposed to narcissism, which is characterized by self-absorption and self-worship, and leads to disconnection with others and God.[38]

Current Research

The purpose of the current research with ten churches in Australia is to investigate the impact of intergenerational discipleship on well-being. In this research, *well-being* is defined as the positive functioning of the psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of an individual, integrated and interdependent with each other as a holistic and unified characteristic. In this sense, well-being is a product of loving oneself, others, and God, thus incorporating individual, social, and spiritual connectedness. From the Christian perspective, an individual who exhibits healthy well-being has positive and meaningful relationships, is capable of achieving desired goals, has a positive self-concept, is continually growing as an individual, and finds meaning, purpose, and guidance through connection with the divine.

With this discussion in mind, increasing connectedness should enhance a person's well-being. Furthermore, with the understanding that one of the largest areas of disconnection in society is due to a lack of

intergenerational connectedness, it can be surmised that discipleship that takes place in intergenerational congregations may lead to higher levels of well-being. Therefore, the research question that is being addressed in this current study is: Does discipleship in an intergenerational Christian congregation contribute to better well-being?

It is the hypothesis of this study (and indeed of this book) that intergenerational Christian experiences do in fact benefit people of all ages in a number of ways. Biblical, theological, theoretical, sociological, and anecdotal support exists for this premise as well as empirical support in various forms, both large and small.[39] This current Australian study at the congregational level is part of the ongoing call for empirical research that further explores this hypothesis.

Notes

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[2]World Health Organization, "Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders."

[3]Tegan Cruwys, Genevieve A. Dingle, Catherine Haslam, S. Alexander Haslam, Jolanda Jetten, and Thomas A. Morton, "Social Group Memberships Protect against Future Depression, Alleviate Depression Symptoms and Prevent Depression Relapse," *Social Science and Medicine* 98 (December 2013): 179–86.

[4]Chin-Siang Ang, "Types of Social Connectedness and Loneliness: The Joint Moderating Effects of Age and Gender," *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 11, no. 4 (December 2016): 1173–87.

[5]Catherine Haslam, Tegan Cruwys, S. Alexander Haslam, Genevieve Dingle, and Melissa Xue-Ling Chang, "Groups 4 Health: Evidence That a Social-Identity Intervention That Builds and Strengthens Social Group Membership Improves Mental Health," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 194 (2016): 188–95.

[6]Dan Buettner and Sam Skemp, "Blue Zones: Lessons from the Word's Longest Lived," *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 10, no. 5 (2016): 318–21.

[7]Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review (Social Relationships and Mortality)," *PLoS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (2010): e1000316, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

[8]Cruwys et al., "Social Group Memberships."

[9]Tegan Cruwys, S. Alexander Haslam, Genevieve A. Dingle, Jolanda Jetten, Matthew J. Hornsey, E. M. Desdemona Chong, and Tian P. S. Oei, "Feeling Connected Again: Interventions That Increase Social Identification Reduce Depression Symptoms in

Community and Clinical Settings," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 159 (April 2014): 145. Haslam et al. found essentially the same thing in their study ("Groups 4 Health").

[10]Holt-Lunstad et al., "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk," 14.

[11]Holt-Lunstad et al., "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk," 2.

[12]Holt-Lunstad et al., "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk," 2.

[13]Albert Sabater, Elspeth Graham, and Nissa Finney, "The Spatialities of Ageing: Evidencing Increasing Spatial Polarisation between Older and Younger Adults in England and Wales," *Demographic Research* 36, no. 25 (2017): 731–44; Richelle Winkler, "Research Note: Segregated by Age: Are We Becoming More Divided?" in cooperation with the *Southern Demographic Association* (SDA) 32, no. 5 (2013): 717–27.

[14]See, for example, Darshini Ayton and Nerida Joss, "Empowering Vulnerable Parents through a Family Mentoring Program," *Australian Journal of Primary Health* 22, no. 4 (2015): 320–26; Giulia Cortellesi and Margaret Kernan, "Together Old and Young: How Informal Contact between Young Children and Older People Can Lead to Intergenerational Solidarity," *Studia Paedagogica* 21, no. 2 (2016): 101–16; Giselle Massi, Aline Romao dos Santos, Ana Paula Berberian, and Nadine de Biagi Ziesemer, "Impact of Dialogic Intergenerational Activities on the Perception of Children, Adolescents and Elderly," *Revista CEFAC: Atualizacao Cientifica em Fonoaudiologia e Educacao* 18, no. 2 (2016): 399407.

[15]Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

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[17]Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Learning in Doing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[18]Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation,* 104.

[19]Heidi Yeen-Ju and Neo Mai, "Leveraging Web Technologies for Collaborative Problem-Solving in an Authentic Learning Environment," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 6, no. 7 (2016): 536–40.

[20]Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 104.

[21]Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.

[22]Cortellesi and Kernan, "Together Old and Young," 101–16.

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[25]Sabater et al., "The Spatialities of Ageing."

[26]Simon Biggs and Ashley Carr, "Age- and Child-Friendly Cities and the Promise of Intergenerational Space," *Journal of Social Work Practice* 29, no. 1 (2015): 1–14; Sara

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[30]Robert H. Bolst, "Spiritual Formation through the Practice of Spiritual Disciplines within the Seventh-Day Adventist Church" (DMin thesis, Fuller Seminary, 2012); Beverly Vos, "The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, no. 2 (April 2012): 100–14.

[31]Rick Taylor, *The Anatomy of a Disciple: So Many Believers, So Few Disciples* (Fresno, CA: The Well Community Church, 2013).

[32]Sherene Hattingh, Lindsay Morton, Kayle de Waal, Kevin Petrie, Rick Ferret, and Julie-Anne Heise, "Developing a Discipleship Measurement Tool," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 12, no. 2 (2016): 86–104.

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[36]Brant Himes, "Discipleship as Theological Praxis: Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Resource for Educational Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 8, no. 2 (2011): 263–77; Beverly Vos, "The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, no. 2 (April 2012).

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[39]See national studies by Barna (David Kinnaman. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church . . . And Rethinking Faith.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011); Christian Smith (Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Kara Powell (Kara Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). Smaller studies include dozens of DMin and PhD projects, including those written by Frederick R. Fay, Lynne Kammeraad, and Larry Linderman.