Among is a powerful preposition. Its derivation is the word “crowd” and is close to another word meaning “to mix.” The first definition entered in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (11th ed.) is “in or through the midst of: surrounded by.” The definition certainly applies to this edition of Issues.

We live among more generations than at any time in our nation’s history, and the church “is probably the only place where the potential for four, five, even six generations to be together under the same roof exists.” (Ross) With that said, there appears no end to the challenges and opportunities facing those who live and serve among the generations. One statistic is illustrative of 21st century generational ministry challenges and opportunities. Consider the number of cases of Alzheimer’s disease which will quadruple worldwide by 2050 (Lincoln Journal Star, June 10, 2007).

But what is the challenge and opportunity? Various generations raise varied challenges: health care costs, globalization, environment, technology, urbanization and poverty only extend the list Terry Dittmer enumerates. To identify the challenge and opportunity may be so obvious that we tend to look beyond it. From my vantage, the challenge is alienation from God, first experienced by the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their disobedience began the aging process and destroyed forever the harmony, oneness, community and perfect condition into which we were created to live and serve (note Michael Middendorf’s article on the body of Christ). By abandoning a perfect relationship with God who walked among Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, the world’s first generation sought a better knowledge, a better relationship and a better view of God within themselves. From then on the need to understand sinful people by stereotype and generality and to adorn one generation by degrading another rather than to live and serve “in or through the midst of” the generations became the norm.

Thus, the opportunity in this edition of Issues and far beyond is to identify the malady and to consider how we, the church of Jesus Christ, through the power and work of the Holy Spirit, might serve and live among those of every generation in order to proclaim the answer to the challenge each generation from first to last faces. St. John said it this way: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” May your ministry be graced by the One who has come and is among us always.

Brian L. Friedrich, President
“Carving Out” Ministries

The story is told of the family who gathered for Sunday dinner. As the eight-year-old daughter watched the preparation of the various dishes, she noticed that her mom did something unusual with the roast. Mom proceeded to hack off each end of the roast before placing it in the pan. Curiously, the daughter asked why she had done that. Her mother responded that this was the way that Nana had always prepared it, and so she thought that it was best to do likewise.

Not satisfied, the little girl had to investigate further and walked into the other room where her Nana was seated. She asked the reason why she had prepared the roast in such a fashion. Similarly, she had cut off the ends of the roast because that was the way she had seen her mother prepare it. More intrigued, the girl went onto the porch where her great-grandmother was relaxing on the swing. When asked the same question, her great-grandmother responded, “I don’t have any idea about the other two, but I had to cut the ends in order for the roast to fit into my pan.”

With similar reasoning, we start and form ministries in the manner by which “we have always done it that way.” We carve out our ministries to the various children and youth groups in our churches, placing them within the precise boundary of their appropriate age group. There is a special nursery and classroom for toddlers and preschoolers. We develop a children’s church for the elementary age. Let us not forget each of the specialized ministries for the middle and high school students, just like the Walther League days. Then, in our growth, we might even consider ministries to reach out and impact young adults, parents, empty-nesters, retirees and older adults. We separate each age group for their opportunities of worship, education and service in the church. We claim to be creating “community,” but have we lost the flavors found in a greater community? In doing so, we “hack off” each group into its separate entity and place it into its separate location.

It seems more like cooking the roast without the potatoes, carrots and onions—missing out on the aromas and flavors that are enhanced by the combination of the various foods. We might consider the addition of a “Sunday Dinner” style of ministry to enhance the fullness by which we taste and see that the Lord is good and grow as the body of Christ. With a “Sunday Dinner” ministry, a church will create the opportunity for multiple generations to join together to learn, to serve, and to grow alongside one another. There will be some time in the kitchen—serving side-by-side and providing examples that model and teach. There will be time spent on the porch—relaxing together and sharing conversations of laughter and tears of life. There will be time spent in the yard—playing on teams, using and blooming the talents and gifts of the various members.

With the separation and scattering of generations in today’s society, we need to recreate this sharing by generations in our church families. Begin to make it happen as you take something that is already being done and add some new spices to it.

- Potluck meals that are not attached to voters meetings.
- Work days with jobs for even the youngest hands which are paired with an older, non-family member.
- A confirmand and parents that invite another church member to be his/her spiritual guide during their faith journeys.
- Older members mentoring the younger ones in handyman or reading skills. Younger members mentoring the older ones in computer and electronic knowledge.
- Adopt-a-grandparent programs for families that are separated by distance from their biological families.

In these various places, the divergent converge for a moment in time as they linger over their plates, share their various stories, and groom new ideas in sharing the Gospel and their lives.

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Ministry Among Generations

Ministry among generations is not a new topic, but rather something that continues to reoccur. History shapes generations’ attitudes, assumptions and outlooks. These affect each generation’s self-understanding and religious assumptions. (Eeman, 2002) How to minister to succeeding generations has always been an issue as each generation reacts to the previous one and responds differently to religion and the institutional church. My purpose is to outline some of the challenges and opportunities that arise as we consider ministry among generations.

Our concerns are often with the institutional church and the external behaviors associated with traditional religious practices. Yet, Jesus came to challenge the institutions of his time and especially the religious establishment. So, is it any surprise that these are issues we still confront today? Generation X wants new forms of religious expression that are authentic and life changing, while Generation Y detests routine and desires practical, meaningful ways to express their faith. (Howe & Strauss, 2000) This desire is not new, but falls outside traditional religious practices. (Perrin, 2002; Finke & Stark, 1992)

Studies by Wink, Dillon and Fay found that religiousness and spirituality are positively associated with caring and concern for the welfare of others. (2005) Individuals who combine both elements of religiousness and spirituality have the strongest and most balanced expression of concern for future generations. So, the rise of the therapeutic is not incompatible with spiritual engagement. (Wink et al., 2005) Commitment can be an outcome of either spiritual seeking or participation in institutionalized religion. Much spiritual expression occurs in a social context, often within organized religion. Spirituality represents the functional, intrinsic dimensions of religion so it fits with the relational focus of Generations X and Y. (Marler & Hadaway, 2002)

Whatever age, religious leaders need to be aware of changing needs and find creative ways to keep worship meaningful. (Carlson & Seicol, 1990) Carlson and Seicol are speaking about older adults, a group needing attention and study. Spiritual well-being for many older adults is related to their participation in worship experiences. Physical, cognitive, psychological and social changes can create a need for adaptive worship. With increased age comes a need to find meaning beyond the immediate experiences of physical aging and its associated losses. (Dalby, 2006) The desire for meaning is evident for younger generations, too, and we must adapt to make religious experiences meaningful for all. Wesley Black cautions that we need to attend to the gap between high school and young adulthood because no one seems to be addressing it. (Black, 2006)

Yet, there are many gaps we need to be conscious of and address. One study found that among churchgoing tweens their attitude toward church becomes less positive between the ages of 8 and 14. (Francis & Craig, 2006) Tweens like to feel part of the group, and they do not want to be separated out and catered to by services specifically designed for their age group. They are best served by services designed for all ages, with some special provisions for age-related activities for their ages. This could be applied to all age groups. Rather than offering separate services for different ages, all ages should be taken into account.

Only a small minority of churches have responded to the changes and challenges of our contemporary American families in terms of the ministries offered in their congregations. A study of traditional and non-traditional family programming in conservative Protestant, Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations found that conservative Protestant churches offer more non-traditional ministries than Catholics or mainline Protestant churches. (Wilcox et al., 2004) Our white and black churches are still ministering primarily to married couples with children, which is a demographic group in decline. (Chatters, Taylor & Lincoln, 1999) Men and women who divorce are more likely to drop out of organized religion altogether or to switch to a conservative Protestant church. (Sherkat, 1991) The apparent inability of American congregations to minister to adults in unconventional family situations helps explain why as the number of traditional families has declined so has the membership in most mainline denominations. (Chaves, 1991)

In conclusion, the need for intergenerational ministry is reflective of the need for our religious institutions to adapt to the needs of our changing families—young and old, traditional and non-traditional forms. The institutions that do are thriving. Much of this adaptation comes in the form of communication, education and training, to help all ages connect to and live out their faith in meaningful ways.

(Continued on next page)
Wade Clark Roof comments that the "quest culture" can be found both inside and outside the churches, and that it influences organized religion greatly. According to Finke and Stark, it is this dynamic aspect of faith that gives religion in America its vitality. (Finke & Stark, 1992) Thus, our challenge is also our opportunity for ministry.

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Three Challenges of Intergenerational Ministry

Take a peek into a staff meeting at Our Father, Centennial, Colorado, and you’ll note a spectrum of ages. There is the Wise Patriarch of white hair and beard (that would be me), two other part-time geezers (oops, I mean ‘patriarchs’), three younger women in their 40s and 50s, and two under-30 male church professionals—a pastor and youth minister. It is a wonderfully effective, mission and vision-driven staff that accomplishes much, and what’s very important, we really do like, even love, and respect one another.

The make-up of our staff also presents some interesting insights into collegial ministry across the generations. As I reflect on three challenges across the generations, see whether some chords are not struck for you in your staff and ministry.

The Wired Ones
The most obvious generational gap for me has to do with technological sophistication. As a devoted DayTimer® user for well over 20 years, I wince when our younger colleagues’ Palm Pilots® appear on the table to register the names, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, and perhaps even birthdays of all the members of the Ministry Council. Oh, the wonders of the digital age! I have learned much from the younger guys about the possibilities inherent in the rapidly exploding high-tech world. They push and challenge me, and if I catch them on a good day, they may take the time to teach me a thing or two. I am grateful.

But there is a seductiveness to such technology, and perhaps a less technologically sophisticated generation as mine might raise a caveat or two. Laptops at meetings are not always helpful. While the PC or Mac can record information and provide wireless resources, it also can act as an impediment to relationship. I can’t see you behind your laptop barricade. I want to know you and what you are thinking.

Yes, e-mails and text messages are a cheap, efficient way of communicating, but the sound of a voice on a phone, or better, the human presence across a table can work incarna-tional wonders that digital bytes will never accomplish.

Power-point sermons and film clips in the classroom or sanctuary can be great communication aids, but the witness from the heart of a preacher or teacher who lets the word come through their very human presence is even more essential to the communication of the Gospel.

In short, the lure of the digital age needs balance. The generational dialog is essential and ultimately enriches the whole community of Christ.

Boundaries
Here’s a tricky one. We older church worker types somehow absorbed the notion over the years that being “professional church worker” meant allocating not merely 40, but 50 or 60 hours a week working at church. Family, of course, would have to adjust—it was the work of the Lord, after all, and if Mom or Dad didn’t make the soccer game because of Education Board, well, we’ll just have to acknowledge how terribly indispensable we are, and make the best of it.

What I sense in my younger colleagues, however, is a healthy reluctance to consistently sacrifice family time to the never-ending work of the church. They are much better than I at setting limits to their time at work. Perhaps they’ve seen the toll that the never-ending work week has taken on their elders. They work very hard on duty, but know when to say “no.” This challenge of intergenerational ministry is that of negotiating, as much as possible, how to distribute an infinite work load across a finite staff. Forty-hour work weeks have seldom been possible for church workers, but if we can agree on expectations and hold one another accountable, we may even be at the son’s soccer game. Or my grandson’s.

One Big Family
Family Systems theory tells us that we tend to replicate family of origin conflicts in our network of relationships over the course of a lifetime, and I’ve had to be aware of projection issues in working with younger staff. After one dicey conflict episode many months ago, my associate and I took time to understand that I had stepped out of a collegial into a parental role, and he not surprisingly reacted as he would have to his parent. Ooops. We could later laugh about it and agree to watch for future infractions. Though I’m old enough to be his father, I am not, and a healthy professional relationship is aware of that dynamic.

Energy
At its best, transgenerational ministry is symbiotic. We older types have experience and hopefully, wisdom. You young professionals have energy, new paradigms and tools for ministry. We need one another and through it all, recognize that together we have the Gospel and that baptismal bond transcends the years.

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