

7 MARKS OF TRANSFORMATION

Be a Family for All Ages and Abilities; Be Gracious Amidst Messiness

Psalm 71:17-18; Proverbs 14:4

When some of the church leaders and committee members of our Project Spring-Winter (PSW) met for a holistic narrative session on 28th November last year, there was a strong resonance amongst those present, that one of the definitive features that should characterise PSW is “inter-generational.” Other words like “life,” “active” and “energising” also emerged from the session, adding to the list of distinctive features that would mark our new facility.

We foresee, therefore, that our integrated PSW facility will be one where we have a nursing home which serves to provide the elderly with a purposeful and engaging life-giving experience; and such experience will come mainly from an active and energising interaction with the children from the pre-school, all this taking place within an intentional, safe and conducive environment. In light of that, there is a sense the Lord will also cultivate such an environment within SJSM even as He continues to teach us about relating to both the elderly and the young within our premises, intentionally and graciously.

Be a Family for All Ages and Abilities

So how can SJSM learn to think inter-generationally and be a family community for all ages and abilities? And what does intergenerational mean in our context?

The Oxford Dictionary defines “intergenerational” as relating to or affecting several generations or age categories. Sociologists first developed the theory of a generation gap (or institutional age segregation) in the 1960s, when the younger generation, known as baby boomers, seemed to go against everything their parents believed in. There are three broad categories in a person’s lifespan, namely childhood, midlife and retirement. When any of these age groups is engaged in its primary activity, the individual members become physically isolated from people from other generations with little interaction across age barriers. According to sociologists Gunhild Hagestad and Peter Uhlenberg, this generational segregation is of great concern as it fosters ageism and increases the risk of isolation as people age.

In contrast to this, the church has always been known for its inclusion of all who professed their faith in Jesus Christ. During the time of the New Testament, the Greeks excluded slaves from most social groupings while Christians included them. The Jewish temple separated worshippers by race and gender. Christians brought them together around the Lord’s Table. In contrast to Rome’s mostly male aristocracy, the Christian church allowed women and the poor to take on leadership roles. This is because for Christians, our new identity in Christ supersedes all other identities and class distinctions. Paul reminds us of this in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Relating inter-generationally across all ages and abilities is important as each generation, when interacting with each other, has a wealth of information, wisdom and advice to pass on to others. Nonetheless, many of us still have a tendency to only relate to our own

generation and those of a similar age to us. We tend to be drawn instinctively to those who are similar to us. We need therefore to allow God to break down our prejudices to see that He has created us to relate “in Christ” to people of all ages, racial or ethnic background or abilities.

Moving forward, how can we allow God to transform us to be more intergenerational and be a family community for all ages and abilities? In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes his relationship to the believers using the imagery of a parent – a father and a mother. His instructions can provide us with some help as to how we are to relate to one another and behave like a family across the generations.

Like a mother: Paul writes this in 1 Thess 2:7-8, *“But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”*

The picture that Paul uses here is one of provision and nourishment. It is derived from the early days of a child’s life when the mother provides breast milk for the child. It is a picture of tender loving care. If one were to draw out a list of what a mother gives to her child, the list would probably be endless. One could list the meals cooked, the washings done, the tidying up undertaken and so on, but we soon discover that listing the jobs is not the point. It is not so much that a mother gives time, food or energy, but that she gives herself. Paul describes his ministry to the Thessalonians in similar terms. It is the sharing of life and the self-giving that is at the heart of Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians.

For SJSJ, we do need to pray that God will teach us to be like “mothers” who will take time to give of themselves to care, comfort and love others, especially those of the younger generation, and even those who are older.

Like a father: Paul also writes in 1 Thess 2:11-12, *“For you know how like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into His kingdom and glory.”*

Paul’s fatherly role involved him dealing with “each one of you” (v11). The father knows that each child is a unique person and has his own needs, character, fears, weaknesses, strengths, potential and personality. Paul’s emphasis here is that of individual care. One of the most crucial roles for a father is that of guiding and caring for his son or daughter and making sure he or she takes the right path in life.

We do also need more “fathers” in SJSJ who are willing to mentor and develop the younger men, guiding them and imparting life skills and journeying with them till they are able to walk on their own.

Be Gracious Amidst Messiness

In Proverbs 14:4, the writer wisely points out that “where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.” This image of the oxen, manger and crops comes from the agrarian world of the Old Testament and is used by the writer of Proverbs to address the issue of resistance to hard work and industry in the field. If a farmer chooses to be lazy and save himself work and expense by not keeping any oxen, he would naturally not have to contend with a messy manger. But what he will also get is an empty barn as he will not be able to gather in the harvest without any oxen.

An abundant harvest can only come about from “the strength of an ox.” In Judea, oxen were used in several aspects of husbandry – in ploughing the land, the transport of crops and in threshing or threading out the grain (cf. Deut 22:10; 25:4). Even though oxen may eat a lot and keeping them can be quite costly, and even laborious and messy, they are nonetheless essential for an abundant harvest.

As God prepares us for the “new thing” that He is bringing about through Project Spring-Winter, we can expect change, growth and harvest in the coming years. What we can also expect are inconveniences, disagreements and messiness as we face the ongoing changes in the physical and spiritual landscape in our midst. Construction works will be going on in the compound, facilities availability will be affected (especially car park and meeting rooms), all kinds of people will be entering our church grounds, etc. It is very easy to get on each other’s nerves and become antagonistic towards one another in such a messy and transitional environment.

We do need to remember that it is out of this uneasy messiness that we will find the fruit of opportunities and potential for ministry to the elderly and to the pre-school children. That must be the main motivation for us to learn to deal with all the discomfort and mess we are going to face. The only biblical and Christian way to cope with and adapt to this inevitable “mess” is with graciousness. And that is surely a trait which God will want to grow in us as He continues to transform us through such circumstances. Pray that we will indeed become a more gracious people of God, not only to one another but also to the different kinds of people He will bring into our midst.

Sources:

Charlie Cleverly, *Epiphanies of the Ordinary* (UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012).

Derek Tidball, *Leadership the Bible Way* (UK: IVP, 1999).

Wikipedia, “*Generational Gap*.” Accessed on 19 January 2016.

Questions for Cell Discussion

Question 1

Discuss some practical ways in which we can be a family to people of different ages and abilities, individually, as a cell and as a church.

Question 2

In light of PSW, what are the different kinds of messy situations that may arise which can lead to ungracious behaviour amongst SJSMers? Discuss some practical ways in which we can extend grace and guard our unity in Christ in these messy situations.

Sermon Notes