

Navigating the Multigenerational Retreat

BY CHRISTIE DUNCAN-TESSMER

“Touch someone wearing blue!”

“Now touch someone who has healed you or helped you when you were hurt!”

“Touch someone who has given you shelter, someone who has kept you safe!”

After singing “When I Needed a Neighbor, Were You There?” (*Worship in Song*, #293, Quaker Press of FGC), participants in a workshop played out these and other verses of the song in a game of “Touch Blue” together. The exercise pointed out how wide or narrow was the band of people who touched each other within the community. The activities went on to emphasize how building a peaceful community and world starts with reaching out to our neighbors and by having a biblical definition of who our neighbors are. And this workshop worked for all of the participants who ranged in age from 5 to mid 70’s.

A retreat that is designed to bring children and adults together for specific and key portions enriches and deepens the community in a way that parallel programs, or programs with no room for children, can’t. Children’s frank, simple, concrete and magical ways of seeing the world can expand an adult’s understanding of a question. An adult who listens as earnestly to a child’s answer as to a peer’s validates the child’s position in the community. Learning, worshipping and having fun together all bring the community into deeper relationship which is all the richer for including everyone.

Planning a multigenerational retreat is a balancing act. Children and adults need time with their peers to be balanced with the amount of time they spend together. The activities that include all generations need to strike a balance between seriousness and levity, and should be fun, engaging and meaningful. The activity content needs to be presented in a way that can be understood on multiple levels. This way the youngest children who think in concrete terms and the older abstract-thinking participants can all dive into it. I’ve found an approach to planning this sort of retreat that works well for me and another that has not.

To plan an unsuccessful multigenerational retreat, the adult program should be planned first and then the children’s program and the multigenerational pieces should be conceived to fit in with it. There are two main reasons why this seems to be a formula for problems. One reason is that the multigenerational piece feels like an imposition on the adults’ program that is already set. Too much is compromised and the activities end up satisfying neither the adults nor the children. Another reason is that such a program can lead children to feel they are less important or marginalized. Fortunately multigenerational programs planned in this way do not always have this negative effect on children; groups have had wonderful parallel children’s programs. However, sometimes the

children's programs and multigenerational components are added as an afterthought and feel more like babysitting. I have led children's parallel retreats where the parents continually refer to the children's program as babysitting. One result of this lack of intentionality may be that there are few children who are interested in attending and therefore few parents who attend.

My most successful experiences with planning multigenerational retreats have been when the facilitator for the adult program and the facilitator for the children's program work closely and prayerfully together from the beginning. After the theme is set and each facilitator has had time to think about how to explore the theme, they start sharing and talking and planning together. In this way, the theme can be addressed at different levels and in different ways for children and adults in their separate sessions. However, they can also come together at the beginning, the middle and the end in a way that recaps and builds on the work that each have already been doing. The community building that results is wonderful. Not only do the generations get to listen to the ideas, beliefs and views of each other, they can clearly see how the same theme is so important in all of their lives. While one facilitator may have primary responsibility for the multigenerational pieces, they consult together to make sure those pieces address the needs of both groups. Adults need content that will either push their thinking in a new direction or help them put together ideas in a new way. Children need action and something other than words to be part of the activity.

It is certainly not always appropriate to have children present at retreats. But there are many times when it is appropriate and other times when it is necessary in order for adults to be able to attend. In these cases, careful attention to planning a multigenerational component to the retreat can make it a more powerful experience for everyone.

Suggestions For Successful Multigenerational Retreats

- Start and end as a community. The opening and closing sessions should be inclusive. If they are separate, the message is sent that there are two different programs going on here in the same space. Additionally, if the retreat lasts for more than one day, simply starting and ending with singing together each day reinforces the community aspect.
- The theme and the work should be similar for children and adults. This way sessions that are together flow naturally for everyone and don't end up being perceived as a break for the adults to play with the children or for the children to get down to work.
- The activities need to be meaningful for all ages. Use discussion questions that can be answered on multiple levels, for example, "who is someone who has healed you or helped you when you were hurt?" Find an active way to ask the questions. For example, using the game Touch Blue, or turning everyone into detectives who have to find out information from various people.
- Keep the multigenerational parts short. Time the activities well, keeping in mind the different attention spans of all the participants. The types of activities which actively

engage young children for long periods of time could be tedious for adults, and vice versa.

- A culminating session should be done together. This isn't necessarily the closing activity of the retreat, but something that underlies the main theme of the work you have been doing together.
- A key ingredient: Adults must be willing to play and children must be willing to work! This willingness is rooted in the culture of the group and some groups may simply have a harder time adapting to multigenerational work than others. The tone the facilitator sets from the beginning can help to loosen up stiff adults and motivate the children.
- Trust in the Spirit: Facilitators are encouraged to have faith, giving a retreat their best discernment, planning and facilitation, and leaving the rest open to God's movement.

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