EXPLORING THE ROLE, MEANING AND POTENTIAL OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EPISCOPAL CONGREGATIONS

by

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CHAPTER 1 - CONTEXT, HYPOTHESIS, METHODS, AND METHODOLOGIES

Intergenerational Relationships: Experience and Commitment

My curiosity regarding the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in Episcopal congregations rises from countless personal experiences with intergenerational relationships in Episcopal congregations. From the first time I walked into an Episcopal worship service as a college student, people the ages of my parents and grandparents welcomed me, taught me to use *The Book of Common Prayer*, invited me to join them in prayer groups and Bible studies, and encouraged, cajoled and otherwise persuaded me to join them in caring for people in the congregation and in the wider community.

I will never forget the woman who helped me when I was a newcomer. As the worship service proceeded, she passed me a prayer book or hymnal opened to the correct page for the next prayer we would pray or hymn we would sing. I will never forget the women who invited me out for tea and cake and who encouraged me to become a part of their Episcopal women's prayer group, a group in which I have now participated for over thirty years. I will never forget the woman who taught me and other women in our parish the fine art of candle making, so that we could carry on the tradition of making a paschal candle "from scratch" each year for Easter.

These intergenerational relationships connected me with individuals, the congregation and God, in ways that transformed my life. Of course, over the years I have also had relationships with fellow parishioners of all ages that were less successful, in which personalities clashed or momentary annoyances were slow to fade. However, connection with fellow parishioners of all ages has been an essential element in my personal spiritual development and in my choice to continue to be a part of The Episcopal Church.

It seems that my experiences stand in contrast, however, with the experiences of many current and former Episcopalians whose engagement in congregations as children, teens, or young adults has waned or ceased altogether. I wonder: if their experiences of intergenerational relationships in congregations were as welcoming and transformational as mine have been, would they participate in worship and church activities more frequently?

In my role as Canon to the Ordinary, I visit an array of Episcopal congregations. I often hear from members of congregations that they hope young adults will join their congregation, but sometimes when I see people at coffee hour after Sunday worship services, the retirees are sitting with other retirees, and the middle-aged couples are standing with other middle-aged couples by the coffee urn. If young adults are present with their small children, they often make a beeline to the door after worship rather than hang out at coffee hour, where they struggle to have conversations while also keeping track of their kids. I wonder: What might be contributing to dynamics like these in some congregations? How might relationships across generations become more welcoming and inclusive?

Many contemporary books and articles on congregational vitality and church growth reflect on the reasons that young adults are not attending church and offer strategies for "getting them in the door."[1] In congregations across the denomination, however, adjustments specifically designed to attract young adults and their children – changing worship schedules, installing coffee bars, and providing activities for children during worship – appear to be failing. It seems that many congregations which have taken such advice are not growing any faster than others –

[1] E.g., articles on the website of The Barna Group such as "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," March 4, 2015, https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/.

or have had a brief growth spurt but then, like neighboring congregations, continue to decline.[2] What might happen if the resources currently expended on transactional approaches to ministry are re-directed into relational ministry, into development and deepening of relationships, specifically *intergenerational* relationships?

Why Focus on Intergenerational Relationships?

For two thousand years, the Christian faith has been passed down from generation to generation.[3] Over the course of those two thousand years, there have been many peaks and valleys in the dynamism of Christian congregations. Since the founding of the United States, there have been waves of Christian fervor and periods of waning attention to religious devotion and congregational life. The most recent increase in membership in The Episcopal Church and other mainline Protestant churches occurred following World War II. Families were eager to return to congregations for spiritual renewal and sustenance after the great tragedies and griefs of the war.

Over the past fifty years in US Episcopal congregations, however, participation in mainline Christian congregations has rapidly declined, especially among young adults and children, and opportunities for faith sharing across generations have significantly diminished. Approximately thirty-one percent - almost one third - of Episcopalians "are age 65 or older, as compared to only 14% of the US populations".[4] Practically speaking, this means that if older Episcopalians fail to connect across generations, small Episcopal congregations, which are comprised of over 50% people age 65 or older, are unlikely to survive beyond the lifespan of

[2] Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, "America's Changing Religious Identity," Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 2017, https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/.

[3] "One generation shall praise thy works to another…" (Psalm 145:4). "And his mercy on them that fear him from generation to generation." (Luke 1:50). [King James Version]

[4] Kirk Hadaway, "Episcopal Congregations Overview: Findings from the 2014 Survey of Episcopal Congregations," The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, The Episcopal Church (2014): 2.

their current, aging parishioners. Therefore, interaction across generations must occur if relationships in congregations are to be a bridge to personal transformation and engagement in the congregation.

In a presentation to the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes in February 2018, Bob Johansen, a sociologist and distinguished fellow of the Institute for the Future, argued that the most important leadership challenge for The Episcopal Church today is "seeding hope across generations." This generativity will be key, Johansen argued, if the Episcopal Church hopes to avoid "being stuck in the past or the present, selfishness, despair, depression, or polarization."[5]

Indeed, mid-way through the year 2021, the United States is politically polarized, increasingly secularized, and widening the gap between the wealthy and poor, as the world-wide pandemic begins to resolve. White Americans are being called to account for white supremacist, racist attitudes and actions, and are struggling to come to terms with the oppression we have visited upon - and continue to visit upon - those deemed to be "different": persons of color, women, people who are LGBTQ, the elderly, those who are differently abled, and others. Perhaps if churchgoers in their congregations meaningfully engage with people who are, even in very small ways, different than they (e.g. in age), their experiences may lead to repentance and transformation in other relationships.

The grounding hypothesis of this research project is that intergenerational relationships may be an overlooked, undervalued resource in the life of congregations. Therefore, this project explores the perceived role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships through focus groups of younger and of older adults in Episcopal congregations. Understanding the

[5] Bob Johansen, "The New Leadership Literacies," Presentation at the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, February 23, 2018, Grand Hyatt Hotel, San Antonio, Texas.

perspectives and experiences of churchgoers themselves provides essential insight into whether Johansen's notion of "seeding hope across generations" might plausibly be accomplished.

Plan and Resources for this Research Project

Through qualitative research in Episcopal congregations, this project employs narrative strategies to engage older and younger adults attending Episcopal congregations. In focus group conversations, stories and reflections are gathered regarding participants' understandings of the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in their congregation. Contemporary pastoral theological method developed by Christie Cozad Neuger is employed in the analysis of narrative data collected in these focus group conversations.[6] Resources from modern, modern-postmodern and postcolonial ecclesiology and from the social science subfield of gerontology are brought into dialogue with stories and reflections shared by churchgoers, in order to identify the perspectives on intergenerational relationships operative in these congregational contexts. The process of research and analysis culminates in suggestions for constructive pastoral theological approaches to ministry in Episcopal congregations. In the closing pages of this project report, the limitations of this project are reflected upon and directions for further investigation are commended.

What follows in the remainder of this first chapter is an explication of the methods and methodologies employed in the research and analysis for this project, introductions of selected conversation partners in ecclesiology and gerontology, and definitions of key concepts and terms. First, the pastoral theological method which undergirds this project is described and discussed. Next, a brief explanation of narrative theory is provided, as this is the theory which grounds the gathering, analysis and interpretation of the stories shared by focus group

[6] Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

participants. Following this, the specific conversation partners in ecclesiology and gerontology whose work funds thickened analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data are named and introduced. Finally, definitions are offered to concepts and terms which are important to clarify for the purposes of this research study and/or specific to the context of The Episcopal Church and Episcopal congregations.

Pastoral Theological Method

The research, analysis and conclusions of this project follow the pattern of Neuger's correlational spiral and draw on additional resources from contemporary pastoral theological method, as well. In his article "Pastoral Theological Methodology," in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling,* Theodore Jennings identifies the layers or orders of theological reflection. First order reflection is the initial layer of reflection. For example, the everyday religious language that a person might use in talking about God or human nature is first order reflection. Second order reflection excavates beneath first order reflection, explaining and evaluating the language used, developing, and articulating theological understandings. Third order reflection, then, excavates beneath the articulation of theology. Third order reflection explores the underpinnings of these theological articulations, identifying and critically evaluating the procedures, commitments and sources utilized by the pastoral theologian, to examine how and why the theologian selected these particular approaches and resources.[7]

Joretta Marshall expands on Jennings's definition, suggesting that a fulsome pastoral theological method has five elements:

> The explicit or implicit role of theology; (2) the relationship to various fields and disciplines outside of religion or theology, especially the social or behavioral sciences; (3) the awareness of the import of communities and context; (4) the integration of theory

[7] Theodore Jennings, "Pastoral Theological Methodology," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling,* ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990), 862.

> and praxis; and (5) the role of the experience of individuals and communities in the construction of theological and faith claims.[8]

These elements of pastoral theological method undergird the collection, analysis and deep engagement of the data gleaned in the surveys and focus group conversations in this research project. Undergirding this research study is pastoral theology's communal contextual paradigm, which prioritizes relationality and community, appreciates particularity and difference, acknowledges asymmetries of power, and emphasizes mutuality.[9] Attention to communal contextual analysis is essential in research involving human interaction, group dynamics and communal contexts, contexts like Episcopal congregations where human interaction and group dynamics are shaped by and help define the communal context itself.

In this project, the narrative data gleaned through guided conversations in focus groups has been engaged, interpreted, and analyzed using the correlational spiral created and described by Christie Cozad Neuger in *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach.*[10] As Neuger suggests, engagement with the narrative data begins with lived human experience, as understood in context. The process of interpretation, analysis and understanding continues as "behavior, experience, and contextual analysis is brought into conversation with resources from the social sciences and theology, using these disciplines to better understand the experience of individuals . . . and to use their experience to critique and hold accountable the disciplines and resources of pastoral theology."[11]

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[8] Joretta Marshall, "Methods in Pastoral Theology, Care and Counseling," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Expanded Edition*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 1418.

[9] Karen Scheib, "Contributions of communion ecclesiology to the communal-contextual model of care," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 12, no.2 (October 2002): 31.

[10] Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 33ff.

[11] Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 33.

It is the hope of this researcher that the experiences and stories gleaned from congregations and here brought into dialogue with theology and social science theory will in the future be reflected upon by churchgoers in these and other congregations so that experience, reflection and practice will continue in the pattern of Neuger's spiral. Further, it is hoped that these conversations will "help to generate effective and relevant practices that can be taken into the lived experience" of congregations, as congregations continue to enhance parish life by becoming more self-aware and by living out their values of inclusion and connection more vibrantly.[12]

Unfortunately, the spiral of experience, reflection in dialogue with theology and social science and refined practice (experience, reflection, practice) is easily undermined in the context of a US culture that promotes doing and rewards being busy. In congregations, cycles of experience and practice can easily occur without reflection. Without reflection, the spiral process stops and, as Neuger states, "When the spiral process stops and the practices exist without these dynamics of correlation . . . ministry becomes stale, irrelevant, and often dangerous."[13] Clergy and churchgoers are typically not intentionally neglectful of working through the ongoing spiral of experience, reflection and practice. It is simply often the case that the difficulty of continual commitment to this experiential, reflective cycle causes clergy and churchgoers alike to believe that they simply cannot 'keep up with it.' As Anglican lay theologian G.K. Chesterton has said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."[14]

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[12] Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 33

[13] Neuger, *Counseling Women,* 33.

[14] G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2007). Unabridged republication of edition published New York: Shee & Ward, 1952; originally published in 1910.

Following the arc of the correlational spiral, resources from the disciplines of ecclesiology and gerontology are used to facilitate deeper understanding of the experience of individual churchgoers and their congregations. These experiences and understandings then challenge and inform notions of ecclesiology and gerontology as previously understood and practiced, critiquing these notions and holding them accountable to fulfill their transformative potential. Constructive shifts in gerontology and ecclesiology are suggested, as assumptions regarding the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships are challenged, questions are reframed, and potentially transformational practices are suggested.[15]

Because the purpose of this project is not only insight, but also creation of recommendations for actions that might be taken to enhance parish life, Neuger's advice regarding the development of constructive practices is useful. Neuger asserts that in order to make constructive shifts, one "must ask three basic questions when conceptualizing this process":

> The first is, How might we think about the way people form a sense of self, a sense of identity in community, and a sense of how they are to engage and respond to the world? This question helps to incorporate the study of personality theory into an evaluation of this constructive position. The second is, When the sense of self and world isn't accurate or causes significant problems for people, how do they go about changing their self-perceptions, among others, and their ways of being in the world? This question leads into the development of counseling (psychotherapeutic) theory, which studies the process of change in people and their behaviors. And the third is, Why does it matter? Or, Who are the people and communities called to be? This question explores this position in the context of theology.[16]

An exploration of the fundamentals of personality theory and theological anthropology are beyond the scope of this project. However, since sense of self, sense of identity in community, and potential to live into God's calling in parish community are all at play in parish interactions

[15] Neuger, *Counseling Women,* 33ff.
[16] Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 34.

(and in the focus groups reflecting on those interactions), it is helpful to employ resources from personality theory which affirm the sense of self that is in keeping with the theological anthropology typically operative in Episcopal congregations: the notion/concept of human being as made in the image of God and, though separated from perfect union with God and others by sin (personal and communal trespass), constantly experiencing opportunities for re-union and transformation. Therefore, in this understanding of human being, there is constant interplay/unfolding between the story of God and the story of each person. The centrality of story, then, makes narrative theory a natural place to link into an aspect of personality theory.

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory is grounded in the notion that people are, at a fundamental level, storytellers. Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication. People engage in the world in and through stories; stories both create and define the reality in which people live. As Tim Sensing states, "The purpose of narrative research is to examine how participants impose order on their lived experiences thus making sense of events, thoughts and actions in their lives."[17] Because the aim of this research study is to discover what churchgoers in four congregations believe to be the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships, collecting stories and reflections from churchgoers in these congregations - in other words, narrative research - is a very appropriate approach. Meaning making is an integral part of what churchgoers do when they come together as a faith community. The stories that each person brings into the church context interact with the stories of others and shape their collective lives and relationships.[18]

[17] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 157-158.

[18] Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 13. Note: White and Epston's work is referenced as a resource for narrative as a framework within this research was conducted. The specific tools of narrative therapy are not utilized in this research study.

Grounding this research study in stories of and reflections on lived experiences of churchgoers is an intentionally egalitarian act. The Episcopal Church is a hierarchical church, and too often, the clergy control the narratives in/of the congregations, through sermons, teaching and representing the congregation in the public arena. It is hoped that by centering the stories of churchgoers, churchgoers begin to see how their experiences and their interpretation of those experiences shape the church community in which they participate. Externalizing stories in the focus groups may alert churchgoers to the some of the choices they are making and to some of the stories they are creating about their experiences, further empowering them as participants in their congregation.

Narrative research does have limitations. One of these limitations is that stories are told in a particular context and at a given space of time. The sharing of stories changes the stories and their meanings. Therefore, it must be understood that data gleaned from the focus groups is a snapshot of beliefs and understandings at the time the focus group occurred rather than changeless fact reflecting beliefs and understandings that are always and universally held. Another limitation of narrative research is that a story can be understood by the researcher in a way other than the way a focus group participant intended it to be understood. It is beyond the scope of this study to return to all of the focus groups to confirm the data. In order to reduce opportunities for faulty interpretation, an additional reader/coder has coded the data independently. Then the researcher and additional reader/coder compared coded data and noted remarkable discrepancies.[19]

[19] See page 23 for brief description of the person assisting as an additional reader and coder of the data.

Ecclesiology

The appropriate theological framework for engaging issues regarding roles, meaning and potential in/of Episcopal congregations is the theological sub-field of ecclesiology, which centers on the nature, beliefs, and structure of Christian denominations and congregations. Understandings of and assumptions about the purpose, meaning and potential of relationships in a congregation function at conscious and subconscious levels and are evidenced in the stories that people tell about their experiences in church. The purpose of this project is not to evaluate or critique Episcopal ecclesiology by exploring intergenerational relationships but, rather, to explore perspectives on the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships to gain insight into ecclesial praxis, "the actions of a Christian community and their implicit meanings."[20] How do churchgoers view their relationships with other churchgoers of varying ages? How do they conceive of the meaning and potential of these relationships? How does their theology of the church, the body of Christ, shape the ways in which they invite and include others in relationships?

The ecclesiology operative in Episcopal congregations in the United States contains elements of ancient, modern, modern-postmodern, and postmodern ecclesiology.[21] Thoroughgoing explication of Episcopal ecclesiology is beyond the scope of this project, but engagement with the apparent operative ecclesiology will facilitate reflection on whether or not, and how, congregations are living what they profess to believe about relationships in the body of Christ.

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[20] Regis Duffy, "Ecclesiology and Pastoral Care," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Expanded Edition*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 332.

[21] Explication of this assertion will be undertaken in Chapter Three.

To identify and engage the operative ecclesiology of churchgoers and their congregations (as evidenced in the narrative data gleaned in/through focus groups), this project draws upon representative texts from modern, modern-postmodern and postmodern ecclesiology. For the purposes of this project, ecclesiology written by theologians with close ties to The Episcopal Church is employed. As noted above, the purpose of bringing narratives from focus group conversations into dialogue with these ecclesiological texts is not to diagnose or judge the operative ecclesiology reflected in these conversations, but to imagine how relationships and relational practices might shift if/as operative ecclesiology shifts.

Modern ecclesiological notions reflected in the focus group conversations are engaged in dialogue with the ecclesiology of Paul Marshall, a 20th century bishop and scholar in The Episcopal Church.[22] In articulating his "American ecclesiology," Marshall draws on the early work of William White, one of three "founding bishops" of The Episcopal Church following its break from the Church of England. A devotee of John Locke, White - and subsequently, Marshall - articulate a more democratic and egalitarian ecclesiology than their forebearers, an ecclesiology that continues to shape the polity and practice of the Episcopal denomination and her congregations.

The elements of focus group conversations that reflect modern-postmodern ecclesiological notions are engaged in dialogue with the ecclesiology of Letty Russell, a seminal theologian in the field of feminist theory. Russell revolutionized Christian ecclesiology by introducing the action-reflection spiral model of faithful Christian engagement with the world. Russell argues for the full and essential inclusion of marginalized persons and reimagines the kitchen table as the altar around which God's people transformatively gather. Although Russell

[22] Paul V. Marshall, *One, Catholic, and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004).

was not herself an Episcopalian, the appropriateness of engaging Russell's kitchen table metaphor, as well as other aspects of her ecclesiology, is reflected in the way Episcopal congregations gather, congregations like George Center for Community in Seattle, Washington.[23] Russell's ecclesiology serves as a source which is built upon by postmodern, postcolonial theologians, including Episcopal theologian Kwok Pui-Lan.[24]

Postmodern ecclesiological notions reflected in the focus group conversations are identified and reflected upon in dialogue with Kwok Pui-Lan's postcolonial theology, which emphasizes Christian humility and radical openness to a contemporary global context. Many older adults had little experience of global contexts as their belief systems formed in their youth and young adulthood. However, globalization has fundamentally shaped the consciousness of many young adults today.[25] Bringing the work of Russell and Kwok Pui-lan into dialogue with each other may facilitate insight into the role, meaning and potential of relationships of churchgoers who approach relationships with differing experiences of the world.

Further explication of these ecclesiological resources is undertaken in Chapter Four.

Gerontology

As discussed above, engagement with resources from the social sciences is an essential part of pastoral theological method. In this project, data from focus groups is brought into dialogue not only with theological resources in the sub-field of ecclesiology, but also with resources from the social sciences, particularly in the sub-field of gerontology. Since the role,

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[23] Peter Strimer, "Church in the Round," *Vital Practices*, Episcopal Church Foundation, accessed May 1, 2018, http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/157/church-in-the-round.

[24] Kwok Pui-Lan, "Church in the Round," sermon preached at St. John's Memorial Chapel at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, December 6, 2012, http://kwokpuilan.blogspot.com/2012/12/church-in-round.html.

[25] Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,* The Bible and Liberation Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). Also, Kwok Pui-lan, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World,* ed. Ursula King (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994).

meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in the context of the congregation is the subject of this project, it is helpful to draw on resources regarding aging and generational studies. Data gleaned in focus group conversations are analyzed in relationship with the work of W. Andrew Achenbaum on the interplay between religious institutions and social compacts.[26] Nancy Henkin's exploration of how intergenerational relationships function in a re-visioned Community for All Ages also serves as a resource in engaging and understanding the lived experiences of focus group participants.[27]

The concept of intergenerational relationships rises from the notion that there is meaning in measuring "years lived" and from the notion that groups of people who have lived through a particular set of experiences form a "generation" of people who, in a particular context, may share some characteristics and perspectives.[28] A commonly understood definition of intergenerational relationships is relationship between persons of significantly disparate ages, usually with a difference of at least a fifteen to twenty year span between them. However, stories and ideas voiced by participants in the focus groups call attention their lived reality: definition of intergenerational relationships is much more complex than this statement reflects.

The importance and efficacy of intergenerational relationships for transmission of belief and practice have long been acknowledged in the Christian tradition. A resurgence of interest in intergenerational relationships in The Episcopal Church and other mainline Protestant churches occurred following World War II. The Sunday School movement rose out of a desire to raise children in contexts of safety and meaning. Not only were Sunday School classrooms typically

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[26] W. Andrew Achenbaum, "The Social Compact in American History," *Generations* 22, no. 4 (1998-1999): 15-18.

[27] Matthew Kaplan, Nancy Henkin and Atsuko Kusano, *Linking Lifetimes: A Global View of Intergenerational Exchange* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2002).

[28] Bill Bytheway, *Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research* (Portland, Oregon: The Policy Press, 2011).

led by adults a generation or two older than the children and youth involved, but churchgoers also spent time together across age groups in worship and fellowship. Since the era of the 1950s and 1960s, church activities have often become segregated by age. For example, in many congregations, children attend 'children's church' or Sunday School during worship rather than worshipping with their parents and grandparents. Youth and young adults are provided with activities aimed at their perceived needs rather than incorporating them into adult activities or adapting adult activities to be appealing to and inclusive of youth/young adults. Focus groups for this research study provide significant insight into the role intergenerational relationships are currently playing, as well as insight into the role(s) they might play into the future.

With the theoretical foundation of this paper now articulated, we turn to definitions of key terms before moving on to explication of the qualitative research design and methods.

Definitions of Key Concepts and Terms

Churchgoer

For the purpose of clarity, the word churchgoer is used in this research study to indicate a person who actively participates in the life of the congregation, as differentiated from a "member." In The Episcopal Church, the word "member" is used to indicate people who, by virtue of their baptism and confirmation, are considered members of the congregation. However, the word member does not indicate whether the person regularly participates in worship or in any other activity of the congregation. In this study, all focus group participants were churchgoers, though not necessarily members.

Congregation

A congregation is a community of Christians that gathers together regularly for the purposes of worship, fellowship and study. Episcopal congregations that are self-supporting and

elect their own rector are known as parishes. Episcopal congregations that are not self-supporting, typically smaller, and partner with the bishop to call their priest-in-charge are known as missions. Since the word parish can also refer to a larger geographic area, not just a specific church community, the word congregation is used in this project to describe the four Christian communities in which focus groups were held.

Diocese

A geographically defined district under the pastoral care and leadership of a bishop. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Episcopal denominations all use the word diocese to refer to their regional districts.

Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the doctrine of the Christian church, the theological underpinnings of the meaning and purpose of the church. The church is the community of those whose faith is grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus. The beginnings of the church are typically traced back to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. In the New Testament, the three images most often frequently used to explicate the meaning and purpose of the church are (1) the people of God, (2) the body of Christ, and (3) the temple of the Holy Spirit.[29]

Though fundamental understandings of the church were articulated in the writings of the early church Fathers and in the ancient creeds, ecclesiology began to take shape as a topic within systematic theology after the Reformation. As Christianity continued to spread around the globe and as many new Protestant denominations and independent congregations were formed, the theological subfield of ecclesiology has gained attention and importance.

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[29] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Ecclesiology," in *Global Dictionary of Theology,* eds. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), https://search-credoreference-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/content/entry/ivpacat/ecclesiology/0.

Intergenerational Relationship

The term intergenerational relationship refers to relational connections between people of different ages, whether inside an extended biological family or in a wider community context. For the purposes of this research study, the intergenerational relationships being explored are relationships between persons in different chronological age groups. While there exist definitions of "generations" as groups of people who have lived at roughly the same time and experienced similar cultural phenomena (e.g. - The Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, etc.), for the purposes of this research study, neither those distinctions nor the general definition of a "generation" - 20 to 30 years - are defining. For the purposes of this study, intergenerational relationships are understood to be relationships that a study participant would identify as being with someone in an older or younger age group. Participants in this study identified people of a different generation as being about 20 years older or younger than them. They also stated that a variety of things can impact the perception of whether or not someone is perceived to be "older" or "younger" than they are, including role in an organization or similarity or difference in life experiences.

Parish

A parish is a self-sustaining local unit of a denomination, a congregation. In The Episcopal Church, congregations which are not self-sustaining or are otherwise under the direct care of the diocesan bishop are called missions or mission stations. Thus, in the Episcopal Church, all parishes are congregations, but not all congregations are parishes.

The Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church is the shortened and most commonly used name for the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America (PECUSA). According to annual reports submitted by congregations for the year 2019, The Episcopal Church had 1,637,945 members in the United States.[30] In 2011, the National Council of Churches reported that The Episcopal Church is the 14th largest denomination in the United States and Canada.[31]

The Episcopal denomination was founded in the United States by people who had been Anglicans (members of the Church of England) prior to the Revolutionary War. During the Revolutionary War, most Anglican clergy were persecuted, killed or fled to England. Following the war, in order to maintain the apostolic succession, Anglicans in the United States appealed to the Church of England to ordain bishops to facilitate the continuation of the Anglican tradition in the United States. However, the Church of England refused to ordain any bishops for service in the newly formed United States. Anglicans in the United States then turned to the Church of Scotland, which agreed to ordain bishops to oversee the new Episcopal church, under the condition that the Eucharistic prayers used by the new Episcopal denomination follow the liturgy and theology of Church of Scotland rather than the Church of England.

In The Episcopal Church, local congregations are known as parishes or missions based on their size and ability to be financially sustainable. The congregations participating in the study all have parish status. In this study, the words parish and congregation are used interchangeably.

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[30] The Episcopal Church, "Statistical Totals for The Episcopal Church by Province and Diocese: 2018-2019," The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, The Episcopal Church (2020): https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/28631.

[31] National Council of Churches, "Trends continue in church membership growth or decline, reports 2011 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches," National Council of Churches News Service, February 14, 2011, http://www.ncccusa.org/news/110210yearbook2011.html.

These methods and methodology, theory and resources from ecclesiology and gerontology serve as the underpinnings of the framework for the interpretation and analysis of the qualitative data collected in this research study. In the next chapter, the research design, context and delimitations for the collection, interpretation and analysis are described.

CHAPTER 2 - QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN, CONTEXT, AND DELIMITATIONS

Introduction

This chapter offers information and reflection on the design and execution of the qualitative research process. Because the choice of the researcher regarding each aspect of the research design and execution shapes the process and outcomes of the research study, careful consideration was given to each component part - from when, where and how the data was collected to methods of coding, analysis and interpretation. The explication of the design and execution of this research study presented here provides accountability for the researcher. It also provides opportunity for future readers of the study to continue, challenge, affirm, and/or adapt the findings presented here.

Qualitative Research Approach

There are countless professional pastors, ecclesiologists, and theologians opining about the state of the Church in North America. Ecclesiastical governing bodies often make decisions about how to nurture the vitality of congregations and about current and future resource allocation based on the advice and counsel of these professionals. However, it is the experience of churchgoers participating in the lives of congregations that most accurately reflects what is - and what is not - happening "on the ground" in congregations. While people may take their operative theology into consideration when initially determining which congregation to attend, people make decisions about ongoing participation in a congregation based largely on their experiences in that congregation. Therefore, the best way to explore the role, meaning and potential of relationships in congregations is to ground this exploration in the experiences of the churchgoers themselves.

Stepping back to a 10,000-foot view of decision-making regarding qualitative research, it is important to identify the guiding conceptual framework that has been adopted for this research project. In order to maintain a consistent approach, each aspect of research method should be consistent with this overarching framework. If an aspect of method deviates from this approach, an explanation is in order.

For the purposes of this research project, Maxwell's approach to qualitative research has been adopted. Maxwell's research approach is informed by a balance of two perspectives: ontological realism and epistemological constructivism.[32] Drawing on the philosophical position of ontological realism, Maxwell affirms that "there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions and theories."[33] Drawing on the philosophical position of epistemological constructivism, Maxwell affirms that "this world is inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and no such construction can claim absolute truth."[34] While at first glance these positions may seem contrary to one another, Maxwell argues that the dialectical interplay between these two positions expands and deepens understanding of the complex nature of all aspects of human dynamics that impact the processes and results of qualitative research, from the subconscious assumptions of the researcher which shape choices about research methods to the conscious and subconscious decisions of focus group participants regarding they share and what they withhold in focus group conversations.

Context, Culture and Selection of Congregations and Focus Group Participants

The research for this project was carried out in the context of The Episcopal Church, a mainline Protestant denomination based in the United States. While this research project might

[32] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design,* 43.
[33] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design,* 43.
[34] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design,* 43.

appropriately have been conducted in any number of mainline Protestant denominations, or even across a number of mainline Protestant denominations, this research was conducted in congregations of The Episcopal Church for two reasons.

First, The Episcopal Church is demographically in the "middle of the pack" of the mainline Protestant churches in America regarding the median age of its members – 56.[35] In other words, compared to other denominations of its kind, The Episcopal Church has neither an over-representation of younger persons nor an over-representation of older persons. Therefore, stories and reflections from Episcopal churchgoers on intergenerational relationships might have some resonance across denominations.

Second, The Episcopal Church is also the context in which I fulfill my professional duties as a priest and diocesan official. Familiarity with the denominational context may make it easier for me to apprehend meanings and/or to identify findings which reflect bias, stray from what might be expected in the denomination, or are of other significance. Conversely, familiarity with the context might lead to assumptions or to misapprehensions. Throughout the research and analysis in this project, care has been taken to identify and address any context- or relationship-based conflicts of interest and/or other issues that may arise. The advisor of this research project is a member of a mainline Christian denomination other than The Episcopal Church, and her understanding of a range of Christian traditions informs her guidance regarding this research, interpretation, and analysis. The additional reader and coder of the qualitative data is an insightful and experienced Episcopal clergyperson who, as the rector of a congregation, is alert to evidence of biases and conflicts of interest in parish life and clerical practice.

[35] Michael Lipka, "Which religious groups are oldest and youngest?" *FactTank News in the Numbers,* Pew Research Center, July 16, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/11/which-u-s-religious-groups-are-oldest-and-youngest/.

The focus groups were hosted by congregations in dioceses other than the one in which I serve as the Canon to the Ordinary,[36] as significant conflict of interest is possible in the Episcopal Church in North Texas, due to the power dynamics inherent in this role, which includes assisting the bishop with oversight of clergy and congregations. After serving in diocesan leadership for seven years, I have power and influence in the lives of individuals and congregations in the diocese where I continue to serve, making it difficult to ensure that focus group conversations would remain free of positivity bias.

Congregations in which focus groups were held were selected from among those whose rectors identified their congregations as "stable," with no recent or imminent leadership transitions, minimal current conflict in the congregation, and no recent major division in the congregation related to theology, political stance, etc. The researcher engaged with rectors in potentially participating congregations on a first-come, first-served basis in response to notices about the research that were distributed to diocesan leaders around The Episcopal Church.

One congregation was selected in each of four different geographic regions of the United States. Regional cultures often impact how relationships are conducted. Selection of congregations from different regions counters regional homogeneity that might be operative in any single region.

Purposeful selection of congregations also included consideration of congregations with which the researcher might have the most productive relationships. Participant congregations had rectors that, upon notification of the study, quickly signaled interested in the study and were able to certify that their congregation met the criteria for the study: a congregation that is not in recent

[36] A Canon to the Ordinary is a diocesan official who assists the diocesan bishop in pastoral care of the clergy, support for congregations, and oversight of the operations of the diocese. In some dioceses, the Canon has additional duties, including transition ministries or serving as chief of staff for the diocese.

or imminent leadership transition, is currently free of significant interpersonal conflict, and is financially self-sustaining. The rationale for these delimitations: they are circumstances which can result in increased levels of anxiety among parishioners, possibly skewing research results.[37] In each geographical region, the first interested congregation meeting the criteria for the study was selected to participate.

In order to ease the burden on hosting congregations and individual focus group participants, the researcher travelled to each congregation to facilitate the focus group conversations. The rector of each hosting congregation asked for volunteers for two focus groups - one group of young adults ages 20-45, and one group of older adults ages 60-85. The purpose of requesting two focus groups with participants selected by age was to establish possible opportunities for comparisons which might illuminate differences in perspectives based on age.[38]

Because a relaxed and familiar atmosphere sets the stage for ease of connection and participation, focus groups were held on-site at the churches where churchgoers regularly attend worship and other congregational activities. Focus groups were held in classrooms or conference rooms selected by the rectors of the hosting congregations based on size of the group and other activity happening in the building. The rooms used for the focus groups were selected and signage was posted to ensure that the focus group conversations remained confidential.

The individual churchgoers who participated in the focus group conversations were volunteers who responded to a written or verbal invitation from the researcher presented through their rector to participate in a guided conversation about intergenerational relationships. The

[37] Anxiety impacts behavior and social decision-making in ways that may potentially skew the results of a research study. Some ways in which anxiety impacts behavior are summarized in the introduction of the following research study: Tingting Wu, Yi Luo, Lucas S. Broster, Ruolei Gu and Yue-jia Luo, "The impact of anxiety on social decision-making: behavioral and electrodermal findings," *Social neuroscience* 8, no. 1 (2013): 11–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2012.694372.

[38] This rationale for purposeful selection is discussed by Maxwell in Maxwell, *Qualitative Research,* 98.

guided conversation approach provided a combination of structure and freedom: structure which ensured attention to questions fundamental to the research study and latitude which allowed focus group participants to pursue stories and lines of thought that were important to them.

The individual churchgoers who participated in the focus groups responded to an invitation presented through their rector to the congregation. Volunteers who participated in the focus groups did not represent the full cross-section of churchgoers in the congregation. For example, churchgoers new to the hosting congregations within the last six to nine months were not represented among the focus group volunteers. Also unrepresented were "Chr-easters" (churchgoers who participate in worship only once or twice a year, typically Christmas and Easter) and shut-ins unable to get to the church for worship, etc. The research study design did not indicate how frequently study participants should attend worship, etc., but it appears that rectors and/or volunteers interpreted in the invitation to participate as most suitable for those regularly attending worship, study and/or fellowship.

Rationale for Data Gathering in Focus Groups

There are a number of potential ways to engage with churchgoers about their experiences of intergenerational relationships in their congregation. Among these are literature reviews, paper surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and larger forums or group discussions. Each of these research methods has its own particular advantages and disadvantages.

A guiding principle of qualitative research is to give careful attention to the context in which the research occurs. Context shapes all aspects of human interaction. Therefore, if human interaction *in the congregation* is the subject of the study, holding the focus groups in that context may enhance participants' ability to reflect on interactions that have occurred in that context.

Focus groups, as opposed to individual interviews, give participants an opportunity to engage with one another, sharing experiences and memories. If participants would have shared their experiences in one-on-one interviews with the researcher or via paper surveys, there would have been no opportunity for participants to recall information based on the comments of other participants or for dialogue to help participants to clarify their impressions and ideas.

Focus groups do have some disadvantages, however. Focus group participants can influence the responses of other participants. Peer pressure can cause participants to omit or enhance particular aspects of their stories in ways participants otherwise might not have done. Extroverts may feel more willing and able to participate in a group setting, while introverts may withdraw in a group context, leaving important things unsaid. Skilled group facilitation can mitigate some of these disadvantages. For example, the facilitator can invite an alternative perspective, ask for more information or clarification, and draw introverts into the conversation by specific invitation to those who have not yet spoken. However, it is recognized that these interventions impact the group dynamic.

Focus groups for this research study were designed to facilitate as much honesty as possible. Therefore, since the topic was intergenerational relationships, two age-based focus groups were held in each participating congregation - one focus group of adults ages 20-45 and one focus group of adults ages 60-85. Because the culture of congregations is typically such that being “nice” is prized, it was hoped that age-based focus groups would facilitate the sharing of negative experiences of intergenerational relationships, as well as positive experiences.

Guided conversation, as opposed to adherence to a strict list of questions, was the style of focus group selected, in order to promote interaction and a relaxed group atmosphere in which the conversation might flow in directions that might be more likely to reflect the natural interplay

between churchgoers of the congregation. Focus group questions were kept to a minimum and closely reflected the original research question so as to collect as much data as possible on the topic in the limited period of time (60-90 minutes) for which each focus group convened. See Appendix A for the list of guiding focus group questions.

Preserving Anonymity and Maintaining Integrity

Focus group participants were assured that neither the identity of their congregation nor their individual identities would be revealed. This assurance was given for a number of reasons. First, a goal of this study is to stir interest in and ongoing conversation about intergenerational relationships in Episcopal congregations. This goal is thwarted if people look at specific descriptions of individuals and/or congregations in order to determine whether or not the research results "apply" to them. Second, emphasis on themes and ideas revealed in participants' stories is preserved by removing identifiers which might tempt readers to associate specific comments with specific persons, in an attempt to assess the response in relationship to characteristics of the person who made the response.

Though the identity of participating congregations and individuals is protected, the research design carefully accounted for some aspects of congregational life which might result in regionally contextual or otherwise skewed responses of focus group participants. For example, because parish culture is significantly shaped by the wider cultural context in which the parish resides, this research was conducted at four congregations, each in a different region of the United States: the Southeast, the Midwest, the Southwest, and the West Coast.

Stress and relational tension can skew responses of focus group participants asked to reflect on relational dynamics in their congregation. Therefore, the research design required participating congregations to have three characteristics. First, congregations needed to have an

average Sunday attendance of 100-200. More than half of Episcopal congregations are smaller than this, which means that participating congregations are non-normative in terms of size. However, congregations of this size were selected because relational and financial stability makes it more likely that the self-reporting of focus group participants will not be skewed by systemic tensions related to survival of the congregation. Congregations were also excluded from participation in this research study if there was recent (within the last two years) or immanent (within the next two years) transition of the rector. Finally, congregations were excluded from participation in this research study if there was a significant leadership crisis in the congregation in the past five years. Examples of such crises are a major split in the congregation, embezzlement of funds, sexual misconduct by a clergy or lay leader, or a clergy person being placed under discipline by her/his bishop.

Finally, appropriate relational boundaries for research were maintained between the researcher and the focus group participants before, during and after the focus group conversations. The researcher was not personal friends with or related to any of the focus group participants. Communication between the researcher and the focus group participants occurred only at the time of the gathering, guided conversation, and dismissal of the focus groups.

Adaptations from Proposed Research Plan

There were no deviations from the proposed research plan that appeared to skew the results of the guided conversations. However, in order to maintain the integrity of the research, deviations from the original plan are noted here. The original proposal for this research indicated that focus group conversations would be held in one to three Episcopal congregations. However, in the third congregation where focus groups were held, none of the volunteers who had agreed to participate in the younger adult focus group showed up. Therefore, because data

from two focus groups in each participating congregation was not available, focus groups were held in a fourth congregation to ensure that sufficient data was gathered, data which allowed for comparison of perspectives of older and younger participants in the same congregation. Data from the congregation where only one focus group occurred was included in analysis and reporting of the results of this research because the data gathered from that focus group was otherwise valid and contributes to the overall findings.

Another deviation from the original research plan was that, in two focus groups - one focus group in each of two different congregations - the focus group of adults ages 60-85 had a young adult (ages 20-45) in attendance. In one congregation, the older adult focus group was held following a bible study, and one of the persons attending the bible study was a young adult. The purpose of having focus groups based on age was to create a comfortable context for candid conversation about experiences of intergenerational relationships in the congregation. By inviting the younger adult to participate in the focus group, it seemed that the older adults were demonstrating their level of comfort with the younger adult, and the researcher did not intervene.

In the other congregation in which a younger adult participated in the focus group of older adults, the younger adult arrived early for a church activity and, in spite of the posted signs, came into the room where the focus group was just about to begin. The members of the older adult focus group invited the young adult to participate. Once again, by inviting the younger adult to participate in the focus group, it seemed that the older adults were demonstrating their level of comfort with the young adult, and the researcher did not intervene. In both cases, the researcher informed the young adult of the purpose of the focus group, invited the young adult to read and complete the Consent to Participate, and responded to any questions asked by the young adult prior to the beginning of the focus group.

Data Gathering, Coding, Analysis and Interpretation

In the interest of research project integrity, it is important to begin these reflections about data gathering, analysis and interpretation with two overarching observations. First, data gathering, analysis and interpretation are mutually informing from before the beginning of this research project. Although the processes of determining the parameters for the research and methods, data gathering, data analysis and data interpretation are often articulated as distinct processes, these processes are interconnected, overlapping, mutually influencing and impossible to completely tease apart. Second, this researcher comes to this research project with experience in and ideas about the context, topics and relationships explored in this research. Taking care to engage in first, second and third order reflection throughout the phases of research, analysis and interpretation is crucial in maintaining awareness of conscious and subconscious choices, biases, and intentions.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the qualitative research component of this research study was carried out through focus groups in four congregations. Focus groups were chosen as the vehicle for collecting qualitative data in congregations because focus group conversation has the potential not only to glean self-understandings and opinions of individuals, but also to glean the clarifications, nuances, and deepened understandings that come from synergistic conversation between people in a group setting. Comparison and contrast of the perspectives of individuals, as well as observation of any trends or anomalies in the narrative data, may aid in analysis.

After consideration of a variety of narrative methods for data gathering, guided conversation in focus groups was selected as the primary data collection process for this project. Focus groups were selected over written surveys and individual interviews, among other interview approaches. Focus groups allowed for generative conversation in which participants

discovered not only the beliefs and ideas of other churchgoers, but also surfaced their own beliefs and ideas, some of which they might not have been previously aware.

Two focus groups, each approximately 60-90 minutes in length, were conducted in each participating congregation. One focus group was comprised of three to eight churchgoers ranging in age from 20 to 45 years of age. The second focus group was comprised of three to eight churchgoers ranging in age from 60 to 85 years of age. The purpose of holding two focus groups in each congregation was to allow persons of disparate ages to share freely their perceptions of the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships without running the risk of offending persons of another generation.

Data gleaned in guided focus group conversations was analyzed through a process of coding and thematic analysis. After thorough familiarization with the data through listening to recordings of the focus group conversations, transcribing the focus group conversations, and repeated reading of the transcriptions, words and phrases that might be relevant in answering the key research question were labeled (coded) and classified into themes by the researcher and an additional reader studying the data independently. Then, the researcher and reader compared and discussed their emerging codes and determined a set of codes that seemed of particular importance because there was a pattern surfacing, because there was an area of disagreement or slippage, or because there was a silence in the data, something that was notably absent.[39] Finally, the researcher and reader returned to the data to confirm all codes and note data that appeared to be relevant.

As Maxwell points out in his explication of qualitative data analysis methods, "there is no cookbook or single correct way for doing qualitative data analysis."[40] The best test of the use of

[39] Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 197.
[40] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design,* 105.

analysis strategies is whether the strategies "fit the data you have, . . . answer your research questions, and . . . address any potentially serious validity threats to your conclusions."[41]

For this research study, data analysis commenced with transcription of the recordings of the focus group conversations and continued through multiple readings of the transcripts, along with collection of a number of memos on process and content. These transcriptions, readings and memos formed the foundation of this project report and the descriptions of context, process, and analysis herein, as well as the meaningful engagement of the experience-based data with theology and social science theory in the pattern of Neuger's correlational spiral.

In qualitative and quantitative research, a primary categorizing strategy is coding. In quantitative research, data is typically coded into predetermined categories established by the specific goals and rules of the study. In qualitative research, data is coded through careful observation and questioning that breaks open the data in ways that facilitate comparison, contrast, rearrangement and realignment, though always in ways that respect the integrity of the narrative as presented by the participants in the study.

In this research study, the process of breaking open the data was engaged through a combination of two approaches suggested by Mary Clark Moschella and Tim Sensing. The first is an interpretive approach suggested by Moschella in her book *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Here Moschella suggests that there are three ways to read qualitative data: a literal reading, an interpretive reading, and a reflexive reading.[42] A combination of these three ways of reading are needed in order to identify and acknowledge the various dimensions of stories and how those stories are encountered and engaged. Literal reading of the narrative data

[41] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design,* 105.

[42] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 172-173.

invites attention to specific words, phrases and ideas, as well as to the flow of the conversation and interaction between focus group members - pauses, inflections, interruptions, use of language, gestures and silences. Interpretive reading of the narrative data engages the implied and inferred meanings of that data, as understood by the focus group participants and researcher. Reflexive reading of the data brings the personal emotions, associations and understandings of the researcher into consideration or, more accurately, accounts for the reflexive aspects of reading and interpretation that are present whether or not they are acknowledged.

The second approach to breaking open the qualitative data is recommended by Tim Sensing in his book, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. Sensing's approach is "a multi-methods approach of evaluation which allows triangulation."[43] What Sensing's approach attempts to "triangulate" is the frames of reference present in engagement with data, that of "the insider's, the outsider's, and yours,"[44] in an analysis that accounts not only for the points of convergence and divergence in the narrative data, but then thickens the analysis through identification of themes (patterns and categories), slippage (areas of disagreement or lack of congruence), and silences ("'realities' not represented in your findings").[45]

A combination of these two approaches allows for a multi-level and complex analysis of the narrative data, going beneath a surface-level analysis while carefully avoiding an over-complexification of the data that might obscure clear meanings or ascribes meanings not actually reflected in the narratives. For this research project, data gleaned in focus groups was coded by both a researcher and an additional reader, each of whom understood the data analysis

[43] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 197.
[44] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 197.
[45] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 197.

framework described above. The data coded by the researcher and the reader was then compared, contrasted and again reviewed by each reader for themes, slippage, and silences in the data.

Interweaving of Interpretation

Interpretation of narrative data is not a single step along the way between data collection to analysis. Interpretation of stories and experiences shared by study participants is a process that starts even before the actual research project begins, with the background and experience of the researcher and with the context and culture in which the research occurs.[46] Though this point will not be further explicated here, it is important to note that interpretation occurs from before the beginning of the research process and continues long beyond the end of the focus groups or even the writing of this research paper. The framework for interpretation of the data gleaned through narrative research is established in part by the rationale for the research question, the research question itself, and the methodology selected by the researcher. For this study, the researcher endeavored to fashion a research question that was narrow enough to have a meaningful focus and multi-dimensional enough to invite fulsome engagement with ideas around the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in congregations.

As Sensing notes, essential to narrative research is the exploration of not only the stories shared by study participants, but also of the observations and interpretations that study participants suggest in the course of conversation together. Churchgoers' interpretations and understandings of their own lived experiences offer important insight into the meaning that they are making of their own experiences.[47] Focus groups were selected as the method for data collection in large part because conversation between study participants raises other ideas and experiences that might not otherwise be shared, connections between ideas and experiences that

[46] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 194.
[47] Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 157.

might not otherwise be made. In addition, churchgoers' experiences occurred in the group context of their congregation, so it seems possible that the focus group context might assist folks consciously and/or subconsciously with interpretation of their experiences.

Interpretation also occurs at various points in the process of collecting and coding the data. The researcher engages in interpretation even in the course of the focus groups themselves by guiding the conversation, sometimes consciously and sometimes subconsciously, in the direction of some themes and away from others. The focus group participants interpret each others' ideas and stories, engaging each other in the conversation based on their own interpretation of what other people are saying. Even in the process of transcribing the focus group conversation, interpretation occurs as the researcher records what is "heard" in the transcription, acknowledging that what was actually said and what was actually intended by the speaker may be impossible to know. Interpretation continues in all the remaining steps of coding the data, categorizing the data, and analyzing the data. Indeed, the process of interpretation continues beyond the completion of this research thesis, in the interpretation of the readers when they engage the data and analysis herein.

Initial Reflections on the Scope and Limitations of this Research

Every decision that established parameters and a framework for this research project defined its scope and, simultaneously, created limitations. Here, a few important points regarding the scope and limitations of this project are briefly discussed.

Focus groups were held in four medium-large Episcopal congregations. Over half of Episcopal congregations typically have less than 70 people in attendance on Sunday morning. All of the congregations in which focus groups were held have average Sunday attendance of between 85-200. There is a danger that conducting this research in larger-than-average

congregations will skew the results in some unanticipated way. However, for the way this project was structured, it was important that participating congregations had enough volunteers in two different age groups to gather focus groups of 3-8 people.

One of the most challenging aspects of doing any interview-based research in churches is response bias, also known as positivity bias. Many churchgoers, particularly those who are very involved in their church, have close attachments to their congregation, and they want it to look good. They might also be prone to the desire to please the researcher. In order to combat response bias, the focus group questions included a question that explicitly asked focus group participants to reflect on negative aspects of their experiences with their fellow parishioners. This proved difficult for them to do, but in most focus groups (perhaps in order to please the researcher!) participants were able to report negative experiences as least to some degree.

Another potential but avoidable limitation involves generalization of the data. The data collected in this study represents the experiences of a limited number of churchgoers in four Episcopal congregations. The experiences of these churchgoers cannot be generalized. It cannot be assumed that the experiences of churchgoers in these congregations reflect the experiences of any other churchgoers in their congregations and/or Episcopalians in other congregations. However, in keeping with the repeating pattern of Neuger's correlational spiral, the narrative data from these focus groups may be used as a starting point for continued conversation, inviting other churchgoers to name their experiences, bring their experiences into dialogue with resources from theology and social science, and try new relational practices in their own contexts.

CHAPTER 3 - STORIES OF LIVED EXPERIENCES: REFLECTIONS OF CHURCHGOERS

This chapter presents the qualitative data collected from conversations with churchgoers in focus groups in four Episcopal congregations. As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of these focus groups was to glean churchgoers' perspectives on the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships. The lived experiences shared by churchgoers offer unique perspectives and insights into how and why they participate in congregations in the ways that they do. Understanding behavior, rationale and motivations of churchgoers is essential for establishing and deepening intergenerational relationships in congregations.

Tone and Context of Focus Group Conversations

The seven focus group conversations held in a total of four Episcopal congregations were remarkable for the easy flow of the conversations and for the apparent lack of guardedness or defensiveness among the participants. Participants engaged readily in the guided conversations, and transcripts of these conversations revealed balance between direct response to the questions presented by the researcher and movement away from direct response for discussion among the group members regarding a topic or issue of importance or interest.

The following sections contain summaries of responses voiced within the focus group conversations. All focus group participants are de-identified, not only with regard to congregation, but also with regard to race and gender. Individuals are identified with regard to age only as they are associated with "younger adults" or "older adults." For the purpose of having two distinct age groups of adult participants, "younger adult" focus group participants range in age from 20-45. "Older adult" focus group participants range in age from 60-85. Focus

group participants are also referred to as churchgoers rather than members, because some of them may not technically be members of the Episcopal congregation they attend.[48]

Defining Intergenerational Relationships

Churchgoers in the focus groups identified intergenerational relationships as relationships in which there is "an age gap."[49] Many expressed awareness that the standard definition of a "generation" is twenty years, but in the church context the experience intergenerational relationships in a less clear form. One churchgoer said that, in her experience, "generational lines get blurrier as people get older." Several others in various groups concurred with this assessment.

A number of churchgoers expressed that with regard to intergenerational relationships, a difference in role or context can shift perceptions of whether or not a relationship is intergenerational. For example, if someone around the age of 45 is a mother of young children and someone else around the age of 45 is a grandmother, people in the congregation might perceive them to be of different generations, even though they are close to the same chronological age. If an array of younger adults and older adults are all on the vestry together, people in the congregation might perceive the younger adults to be older than they are because they are leaders in the congregation. Similarly, someone who is eighty or ninety years old and still in active leadership in the congregation may be perceived to be a generation younger than they are. If a younger person expresses perspectives similar to those of elders in the

[48] According to the Canons of The Episcopal Church, a member is someone who is baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in an Episcopal or other Christian Church received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Canon I.17.1). An active member is someone who is baptized and "contributes to or participates in the worship and communal life of the congregation . . ." Source: "Workbook for Page 2: Membership, Attendance and Services," *2016 Parochial Report: Report of Episcopal Congregations and Missions*, The Episcopal Church (2016) https://episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/pr_2016_workbook_page_2.pdf. For the purposes of this project, volunteers were not asked whether or not they are baptized, so membership cannot technically be ascertained.

[49] In reporting the qualitative data from focus groups, quotation marks indicate exact words spoken by at least one churchgoer. Identities of all churchgoers are protected as part of research protocol.

congregation, or if elders express perspective similar to those of young adults in the congregation, this can also impact not only perceptions of how old they are but also whether an older adult or younger adult will feel comfortable inviting the person to join them at their table at coffee hour.

In summary, while most focus group participants said that they did not think age is a "clear category," they still had a sense of their own age is as it relates to the ages of those around them. This sense of their own age impacts the choices they make regarding who they "hang out with" in the congregation; often, churchgoers gravitate toward people they perceive to be "about my age."

The vast majority of focus group participants indicated that interaction with another person is the thing that opens up the possibility of relationship. However, interaction alone does not constitute or create a relationship. A relationship unfolds when there is "give and take" between two people. Other things that signal the building of a relationship between people are learning, mutual respect and the reshaping of previously held assumptions about the other person.

As a relationship grows and deepens through multiple interactions over time, a sense of intimacy may develop. This sense of intimacy can cause people to articulate their relationship in terms typically related to biologically connected family members. A number of focus group participants referred to the church as their "family." This was especially true with churchgoers who lived far away from their biological families. However, focus group participants who live with multiple generations of their biological family also expressed that some people in their church felt like family. A few churchgoers said that they felt like they had been adopted by

someone in the congregation. Other focus group participants stated that they had "church moms," an "honorary grandfather" or "courtesy aunts" in the congregation.

Churchgoers overwhelmingly agreed that commitment is the thing that leads to depth in relationships. "It takes more than just and activity or event" to deepen a relationship, though an activity or event can serve as an opportunity for a relationship to deepen. Regularity of interaction - e.g. meeting every week for a Bible study or other activity - often deepens relationships between people. Connecting with fellow churchgoers outside of Sunday mornings and mentoring are two other things that often deepen relationships.

Stories of Transformational Intergenerational Relationships

Focus group participants universally acknowledged that they have participated in church activities which resulted in positive intergenerational experiences and deepening relationships with others in the congregation. Singing in the choir and participating in or leading Sunday School were the two activities most often mentioned as creating positive intergenerational relationships. Fellowship groups, Cursillo,[50] and going out after church for coffee or a beer were the next most frequently mentioned intergenerational relationship-developing activities. An array of other activities were mentioned. These activities fall into the following categories: art projects, justice advocacy, needlework and craft projects, cooking and baking, and leading church activities or serving on church committees.

As stories of positive intergenerational experiences poured forth from the focus group participants, a pattern emerged. A vast majority of their intergenerational relationships in congregations began in or around Sunday morning worship.

[50] Cursillo is a three-day retreat which offers opportunities for personal spiritual growth, group activities, and fellowship.

- A young adult churchgoer shared that they arrived at church late, and there were few places left to sit. An older woman reached out and beckoned the young adult to “come sit with me.”
- A young adult churchgoer reported that they decided to make a commitment to regularly attend a congregation when “small kindnesses” were extended multiple times in the same worship service. They dropped a leaflet and an elderly churchgoer picked it up. Later in the service, they dropped something else and the same elderly churchgoer picked it and handed it back.
- Several young adult churchgoers shared stories in which “active welcome” from an older parishioner was the thing that caused them to choose to come back again. In one case, at the exchange of the peace, they stuck their hand out intending to shake the hand of the older woman next to them. The older women offered a hug rather than a handshake, and the young adult felt genuinely welcomed and accepted by the embrace. In another case, a younger adult shared that an older adult “expressed interest in me,” by asking questions about who they were and what they liked to do.
- An older adult offered the observation that incorporating children into the liturgy increases their engagement in worship and engages the adults (of all ages) more deeply in worship, as well.
- An older adult expressed that they feel most at home in a congregation where the children, when at church, freely engage with adults other than their own parents, asking other adults for help and sitting in worship with adults other than their parents.

- A young adult stated that when, after regularly attending worship for a while, they missed worship on Sunday morning, an older adult in the congregation reached out to see if they were OK and to express a desire to see them again soon.

A number of younger adult and older adult churchgoers expressed that they were actually surprised at how much impact these "little things" had on their decision to continue participating in that particular congregation.

Focus group participants expressed their belief that an overall congregational emphasis on developing relationships increases the number and depth of all kinds of relationships among people in the congregation. A number of churchgoers reflected that they thought it might be strange for the leadership of the congregation to focus on any one type of relationship - e.g. relationships between younger adults and older adults. Rather, the important thing is general encouragement from the leadership to get to know one another and, most importantly, the leadership demonstrating by example and getting to know the parishioners themselves.

Relationships in congregations develop in a wide variety of ways and churchgoers were eager to share stories of their positive experiences of deepening intergenerational relationships. According to younger and older adults, examples of activities that deepened their relationship with an adult from another generation include:

- Intentional effort made by greeters and other church leaders to remember not only names, but also birthdays, pets' names, and other details about people that are important to them.
- An older adult "reaching out and making an active attempt to be part of my life."
- An older adult in a church committee meeting noticing that a younger adult is distressed by a decision of the group and offering pastoral care.

- A older churchgoing neighbor who sought her younger neighbor out and extended interest and care.
- An elder inviting a younger churchgoer to get a beer or coffee together after the service.
- Older and younger adults connecting with each other through Facebook outside of church.
- Multiple small, positive interactions that take place over time.
- Responding to a prayer request with practical assistance.
- Welcome extended "with open arms" - literally and figuratively.
- Elders intentionally "holding some space" for younger adults to participate and to lead; for younger adults, relationships deepen when "church is a place where my voice is heard."
- Experiences of help being asked for and received: "People are there to support you; sometimes you just need to ask."
- An older adult inviting a younger adult to step out of their comfort zone to do something that they believed in.
- Older and younger adults choosing to prioritize their relationships over "a particular outcome or event."

Quite a number of younger adult churchgoers expressed that what did *not* contribute to development of intergenerational relationships is asking young adults to do things without getting to know them first. One young adult put it this way: they want older adults to "not just see how we can use you" but to find out first "what are you good at?"

Many older and younger focus group participants agreed that church is one of the few places left in United States culture to develop intergenerational relationships. One churchgoer

reflected that "recognizing wisdom in others is not an active practice outside of this [church] community." Another stated that in the wider culture there is often a lack of trust between teens and adults and that church offers opportunities for this trust to develop through shared activities and Christian education.

Stories of Negative Experiences in Intergenerational Relationships

When the researcher extended the opportunity to share stories of negative experiences in intergenerational relationships, neither younger adults nor older adults rushed to get their stories out. In almost every focus group, participants looked at each other, making eye contact with at least one other churchgoer in the room before responding. In part, this is possibly the result of social desirability bias, the desire to respond in ways which they believe will be accepted or liked by other people in the group. However, in every focus group, someone risked speaking up and sharing a negative experience. Then other negative experiences were shared, as well.

In the process of coding the data, stories of negative experiences fell pretty easily into one or more of five categories:

- Situations in which assumptions were made about someone or in which someone demonstrated a lack of awareness about another person.
- Complaints about the behavior of children and the parents' failures to oversee and/or to correct their children.
- Situations in which there was a conscious or subconscious attempt to exert control or to shift or manipulate group dynamics.
- Stories of missed relational connections and opportunities.
- Situations in which there was a "generational clash," situations in which people in different generations had (or appeared to have) different values.

The first category involves stories of negative experiences that younger adults had with older adults. Younger adults in all three of the young adult focus groups shared stories in which their feelings were hurt or they were offended by older adults who made incorrect assumptions or who showed a notable lack of awareness about them.

- A younger adult shared that they were in a meeting regarding a topic about which the younger adult felt strongly. The younger adult was the only person of their age-group in the room. The younger adult spoke in opposition to the topic under consideration, but the older adults carried on as if the younger adult has not spoken and demonstrated no awareness that the young adult might be frustrated or sad about the decision.
- A number of stories were told in which older adults seemed to be trying to make life easier for parents of young children. However, the older adults failed to consult the younger adults about what they wanted or needed. The older adults did things "for" rather than "with" younger adults and their children.
- A younger adult of mixed race recounted a situation in which an older adult who was Caucasian approached them and asked them to speak a different language during a church service, clearly making the assumption that someone with darker skin would speak a language in addition to English.
- In several situations, older adults signaled that younger adults should arrange church activities for themselves. The older adults did not observe or learn that a key reason the younger adults were not arranging activities for themselves is that they were "overwhelmed."
- A number of younger adults shared stories in which an older adult could have made a connection with them by being curious. Instead, however, the older adults weren't

curious and made decisions about their engagement with younger adults based on assumptions rather than on any input from the younger adults.

- A couple of younger adults described situations in which older men and women commented inappropriately on their bodies and/or clothing.
- Several younger adults described "getting cornered" by older adults in conversation at coffee hour or in some other parish setting. It appeared to the younger adults that the older adults were failing to read the social cues which they attempted to give, letting the older adults know that they needed to leave the conversation.

Concerns regarding the behavior of children at church and/or critiques of parents of those children was the second category of negative experiences described by churchgoers. All of the stories in this category were shared by older adults.

- An older adult expressed concern about young children being allowed to climb trees, apparently unsupervised, on church grounds during social time following Sunday services.
- Several older adults described situations in worship and other contexts at church where young children were noisy, "causing a ruckus," or otherwise disruptive. In most stories that were shared, the concern was expressed that the children were not silenced, reprimanded or disciplined.
- Another older adult stated that young kids in the congregation have "a lot of energy," and that something needs to be done to "deal with the energy of those kids."
- Several older adults described occasions when "kids run rampant" at church activities. In one focus group, several older adults described situations at church when kids were running or pushing through the crowd after worship and they felt worried that the kids

might knock them down. They asserted that the kids' behavior needed to be addressed for the sake of safety of the elderly, if for no other reason.

- An older adult described a shift made in their congregation. Kids in the congregation used to have Christian education activities provided for them during worship. Recently, however, the leadership of the congregation decided to make a change. A nursery is still provided for babies and very young toddlers but all other children worship with the adults. The churchgoer shared that some older adults "couldn't adapt" and left the congregation.
- In one focus group, several older adults shared their frustration that most of the attention is given to kids and families and the needs of older adults are overlooked.
- A couple of older adults in another focus group described a time when kids regularly rushed out of the church at the end of the worship service to get to coffee hour first. The kids ate all of the food before the adults arrived at coffee hour. This situation was not addressed directly; older adults mostly responded by "standing back and pouting." Eventually the situation got better, but those relating this story didn't know why; they surmised that the kids outgrew the behavior or their families left the church.

A third category of stories relating negative experiences were told primarily by younger adults. These stories describe apparent attempts by older adults to exert control and impact group dynamics through use of power.

- Several younger adults reflected on situations in which elders were "very critical" of their ideas. One younger adult described a meeting at which an older adult challenged them to the point of discomfort with "too many questions." Another younger adult shared their story about feeling demeaned by an older adult sharing unsolicited opinions about them.

- One younger adult offered a reflection on the "lack of acceptance" that older churchgoers sometimes expressed when things in the congregation change.
- An older churchgoer shared her observation that "all the attention is on the children," leaving the elders feeling "pushed down, pushed aside."
- Another older churchgoer expressed that they felt disrespected when changes are made in the church schedule or when furniture is moved around the church without consulting the older adults.
- A younger adult spoke of older adults expressing things like "we've paid our dues," asserting that since they have given a lot to the church over time elders should be able to do what they like - or not do anything at all.
- In one congregation, a young adult overheard older adults saying that they felt that there were too many "young people" standing for election to the Vestry.
- One younger adult shared an incident when there was a tie vote between an older candidate and a younger candidate for president of a church board. The younger adult was shocked and felt wounded when the older adult declared themselves to be the president of the board. The younger adult was also shocked that no one else in the room challenged the older adult's self-declaration.

A fourth category of stories of negative intergenerational experiences were stories of missed connections. Younger adults and older adults both described experiences of missed connections that "sometimes aren't neutral; they're negative."

- A younger adult described an encounter with an older adult that occurred when the younger adult extended a warm welcome to another younger adult. Seeing the warm

greeting, the older adult expressed frustration with the younger adult for doing something for someone else that wasn't done for them.

- A younger adult shared a couple of stories in which church events were scheduled by older people in the congregation apparently without consideration for the schedules of the younger adults with children. The younger adult expressed a wish that older adults would ask younger adults about convenient times for church events rather than scheduling things based on their own assumptions about young adults' lives and schedules.
- A younger adult identified a couple of instances in which older adults asked, "how are you?" during coffee hour or fellowship time but didn't stick around for a response.
- A younger adult and an older adult each shared stories of asking for help but not receiving the kind of response they had specifically requested. Rather, the response that was offered was what the churchgoer wanted to give rather than what was requested/needed.

A fifth and final category of negative intergenerational experiences might best be characterized as situations in which there is a difference in values. One younger adult said that they experienced such situations as "a generational clash"

- Younger adults and older adults in more than half of the focus groups shared about situations in which it became clear that the individuals involved had shared values but a different approach. For example, older adults and younger adults in one congregation shared a commitment to having Sunday School for elementary school-aged children. However, they couldn't come agreement regarding the curriculum to be used. Some people who had been willing to volunteer said that they were no longer interested in helping out.

- A younger adult described a situation in which younger adults and older adults volunteered to serve together on a committee focused on evangelism and bringing new people into the church. Younger and older adults expressed that it was great to have a variety of perspectives "in the room." However, when it came time to make decisions about things like signage, the group couldn't come to agreement on how prominent the signs should be and where the signs should be located.
- In several focus groups, stories were shared about tensions over "conservative vs. liberal" values. In every case, it seemed that the younger adult or older adult sharing the story perceived there to be a connection between age and whether or not a person is conservative or liberal. One younger adult shared their opinion that the tensions between conservatives and liberals is "generational." However, another younger adult attributed the tensions not to an older/younger conservative/liberal dynamic, but to the fact that in discussing such issues "hurtful things were said."

It is worth noting that while churchgoers told stories of negative intergenerational experiences, no one in any focus group stated that there is anything wrong with intergenerational relationships in and of themselves. On the contrary, younger adults and older adults alike expressed that intergenerational relationships in and of themselves are natural and beneficial in a variety of ways.

The Potential of Intergenerational Relationships

When asked about the potential of intergenerational relationships in their congregation, younger adults and older adults in all focus groups described the potential in glowing terms, using words like "excellent" and "awesome" and "staggering." Churchgoers of all ages spoke of the importance of balancing older traditions and newer ideas. An older adult articulated their

belief that the congregation needs to consider what each generation wants and needs out of the church community, and to be responsive to those needs.

A number of focus group participants shared that having a mix of generations at church is "more stimulating" than having a congregation comprised of only "old folks" or "young families." One older adult observed that without volunteers of a variety of ages, the congregation cannot continue certain activities - or if they do continue the activities, without "everyone" there, the activity feels different. For example, it may be that Advent wreath-making has long been an intergenerational activity, with everyone working together in the parish hall on the first Sunday of Advent. However, if there are no young families in the congregation, the older adults may feel less enthusiastic about the activity. Another older adult stated that "young people bring energy." A number of focus group participants shared their views that the congregation does a better job of "connecting with the wider community" when a range of people of different generations are present. Several churchgoers offered reflections that without the children, "we would miss a lot of laughter and fun."

Stories and ideas shared about the potential of intergenerational relationships fell into two categories: potential regarding what the congregation does and potential regarding how the congregation connects, both within the congregation itself and with the wider community.

Younger adults and older adults shared that, when a congregation has people of a variety of ages engaged in ministry, the congregation is better equipped to do a variety of things, including providing practical help in emergency situations. Several older adults in different focus groups mentioned that older adults did not grow up with technology and often need help with their phones and computers. One older adult said that they thought teens could teach elders about technology, and elders could teach teens skills in a variety of things, like yardwork and how to

use hand-tools. Several older and younger adults reflected that, in their experience, doing outreach and social justice activities is easier when the group of volunteers is intergenerational.

Younger adults and older adults offered ideas about how having intergenerational relationships in the congregation might enable the congregation to make connections within the congregation and beyond its doors, into the wider community.

- An older adult commented that they like the fact that there are enough young families in the congregation that there is this underlying assumption that kids "will be around and involved in things."
- Another older adult reflected that the intergenerational relationships in the congregation cause them to believe that, in this time when many mainline congregations are declining, "there's potential for longevity in this church."
- A younger adult stated that, "when people feel supported, they are able to do things that are risky or let their voice be heard." One example of this was shared by an older adult who stated their view that intergenerational relationships increase the ability for the congregation to face tough issues, like suicide. Another example was shared by a younger adult, who stated their belief that intergenerational relationships in the congregation lead to survival and growth of the congregation. The same younger adult stated their belief that having people from a range of ages working together helped the congregation recover from the trauma of a split.
- An older adult shared that they like "a quiet, contemplative service and a higher choral tradition," but they attend their current congregation (which has neither of these things) because "there's genuine community" here.

- One older adult reflected that, "Age is everything in popular culture," where "people are appealed to by their age group." That older adult stated their belief that these artificial barriers need to be broken through with real relationships across age groups.

Notably, no one in any of the focus groups stated that they think intergenerational relationships are ineffective or a waste of time. On the contrary, intergenerational relationships were clearly seen as a good thing in church and in society. Several older and younger adults noted that church is one of the only contexts in the contemporary culture of the United States in which intergenerational relationships are facilitated and enjoyed, in spite of the fact that people seem to experience intergenerational relationships as beneficial. One younger adult stated that, if they want to be with all people their age, they can do social things with the people with whom they work.

As reflection on the potential of intergenerational relationships drew to a close in one focus group, one younger adult summed up their perspective on the potential of intergenerational relationships this way: together, they said, "we will ultimately be able to change the world."

Seeding Hope Across Generations

As noted in Chapter 1, Bob Johansen, a sociologist and futurist, asserted that the greatest adaptive challenge facing The Episcopal Church today is "seeding hope across generations." Johansen believes that what will help declining Episcopal congregations to revive and thrive is to pass down faith from one generation to another. Across the Episcopal denomination, 31% of Episcopal members are age 65 or older; in the US population, only 14% of people are age 65 or older.[51] In order for congregations to survive, churchgoers will have reach across generations, to young adults and children, to pass on the theology and practices of their tradition. Deeper than

[51] Hadaway, "Episcopal Congregations Overview," 2-3

that, though, people will remain in faith communities only if doing so enhances their lives and gives them, as the prophet Jeremiah said, "a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11 [NIV]).

Younger adults and older adults reflected on the idea of seeding hope across generations. Did they see seeding hope across generations as possible? Did they see it as important? Five overarching themes ran through their reflections.

The first theme was about engagement and involvement in the congregation. Younger adults and older adults spoke enthusiastically about working to involve young adults more deeply in the life of the congregation. Younger adults said that their peers often need a reason to be present at church. In hectic lives filled with the demands of work and child-rearing, many young adults make time to attend worship and participate in church activities only if they're getting something out of it. Some older adults stated that their belief that younger adults "need something meaty" to work toward, but at least a couple of younger adults stated that they come to church because they "need to be filled up." Younger adults and older adults expressed a desire that their church be a place of hope for people.

Older adults mentioned that people are more likely to stay engaged in the congregation over time if they have a role of some sort. Studies show that integrating people into a group in this way often has this effect.[52] Older adults in more than one focus group also stated that, if their congregation is going to survive over time, younger adults are needed to fulfill leadership roles in the church. However, a number of younger adult churchgoers were very clear that they want others in the congregation to get to know them before asking them to fulfill a role. They hope to be asked to do something that fits with their talents, interests, and/or personality.

[52] Hadaway, "Episcopal Congregations Overview," 2.

A second theme rose out of expressions of concern. A number of younger adults and older adults in the focus groups observed that younger adults are already absent from churches, which makes seeding hope across generations difficult. Two older adults stated that most congregations in the Episcopal church "didn't catch" millennials as children or very young adults, so these folks who are now young adults aren't "coming back" to church, because they didn't attend church when they were younger. Several older adults reflected that, in spite of this, we've "got to get them into the church," though there was very little sense about exactly how this would happen.

A couple of older adults mentioned that their peers aren't participating in church as much these days, either. In the past, older adults often increased their participation in church activities after their retirement, because they had additional time to offer. In the present, some retirees travel a lot or spend time with their families on the weekends, when their kids and grandkids are more available. Other retirees feel like they've "paid their dues" by giving time, energy and money to the church in the past and now it should be the responsibility of younger adults to keep the church going.

A third theme that surfaced is in some ways an extension of the theme of engagement and involvement in the congregation. Younger adults and older adults recognized how crucial it is for elders in the congregation to be actively "building up, lifting up, the people behind them." A number of older adults commented that they were aware of their responsibility to do this; one even described this as *the* leadership challenge in their congregation. Several younger adults concurred with this assessment and expressed their concerns about whether older adults are willing and able to raise up younger adults as future leaders in their congregation.

Younger adults recognized some of the challenges of older adults raising and training younger adults for various ministries in the Church. Several younger adults stated that, in order for this to happen, elders must "hold space" and resist being in charge. Younger adults also recognized that this can be scary for elders who have put so much time, energy and money into their congregation. Several older adults stated that they understand that "engendering hope" is part of their responsibility. However, in order to develop hope, one younger adult reflected, there needs to be trust between older adults and younger adults in the congregation, otherwise older adults can feel threatened. One younger adult reported that they overheard older adults in their congregation saying that there were too many younger adults standing for election to the vestry. Reports of similar tensions regarding older adults failing to respect and making space for the leadership of younger adults were shared in other focus groups, as well.

A fourth theme regarding seeding hope across generations was the importance of continuing to tend relationships within the congregation while engaging people who are not yet part of the congregation. This topic arose in all four of the older adult focus groups. An older adult offered that it is an ongoing challenge to maintain connection with elderly parishioners who are homebound. Another older adult suggested renewing efforts to accommodate the needs of young adults and their families. Returning to having monthly or bi-monthly supper groups was offered by an older adult as a possible way to maintain connection within the congregation.

A number of older adults mentioned, either directly or by inference, that the world is more challenging today than it was when they were young. Several older adults mentioned that it seems to them that it is more difficult for young people to have hope these days, though young people make mention of this themselves. The challenges in their lives that younger adults mentioned were primarily around being too busy and feeling stressed by all of the demands on

their time. This was voiced by younger adults who are married and younger adults who are single.

The fifth theme that arose from conversations in focus groups was the importance of congregations being willing to take risks in their efforts to seed hope across generations. One younger adult shared that their congregation has tried a lot of different activities and approaches to ministry and that some things work, and some things don't. An older adult mentioned that it is difficult but important to "just keep trying stuff." A younger adult noted that it is important to keep things moving forward; "we can form a commission on this," they said, "is a death-knell." Another thing that thwarts risk-taking, according to an older adult, is someone saying, "we tried it and it didn't work." Several younger adults and older adults acknowledged that they know that they - and other members of their congregation - are imperfect and that things don't always go as they hope; "we're human," one younger adult said.

In a variety of ways, older adult and younger adult participants in the focus groups made clear that they believe seeding hope across generations is essential to the future of their congregation, as well as to other Episcopal congregations. This is a challenging task, however, and neither younger adults nor older adults readily offered suggestions regarding how their congregation might "seed hope" in the future.

Incongruities and Notable Absences

In the process of coding and analyzing the data, the data appeared to fall into some clear themes. Therefore, in the initial presentation of the data above, patterns are identified and themes are named. Presentation of the data is not yet complete, however. Incongruities and inconsistencies in the data have not been noted and discussed. Missing elements, things left unsaid, have not been identified and pondered. In this section, observations about incongruities

and missing elements will be named and briefly reflected upon before moving on to consideration of a framework of interpretation and analysis.

Incongruities in the Data

In a qualitative research study, there are inevitably incongruities in the data. Participants have different experiences, as well as different interpretations of the same or similar experiences. Participants may offer reflections that are internally inconsistent and/or which contradict things that the participant may have said at another point in the focus group conversation. Sensing points out that different approaches to thematic analysis might illuminate different points of tension.[53] Researchers with different perspectives on the data might surface alternative or additional points of incongruity. Given the approach to thematic analysis taken by this researcher, four noteworthy points of incongruity were identified.[54]

First, a number of churchgoers observed that generational lines seem to get blurrier with age. In other words, the older people get, the less differences in age seem to matter. However, churchgoers also clearly expressed that contextual norms are different for each generation. People who were raised in similar times and contexts seem to have some of the same understandings and ways of making meaning. Can it be true that generational lines blur with age *and* that norms clearly differ in different generations? Perhaps engagement with gerontology will offer insight in the apparent tension between these observations from churchgoers.

Second, another point of incongruity centered around activities hosted by the congregation. Several older churchgoers expressed pride in the fact that their congregation hosts a variety of activities that might be attractive to families with young children. A younger churchgoer with children noted that often, group activities are done *for* families with children but

[53] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 199-200.
[54] These items are in no particular order.

not planned *with* families with children. The younger churchgoer stated that this approach often results in activities that are planned at a time or in a manner which is inconvenient for young families - but the younger churchgoers do not want to point out the difficulty because it seems clear that the older churchgoers who planned the activities are hoping that the younger churchgoers with children will be grateful for what they have done.

Third, another apparent tension in the data collected in the focus groups is around the acceptance and enjoyment of young children in worship. A number of churchgoers expressed that seeing children in worship contributes to their experience of church in a positive way. A number of other churchgoers spoke at some length about children in worship being noisy during worship and running around unsafely after worship services were over. One churchgoer even expressed their awareness that someone had left their congregation because of the behavior of the children. Based on my own personal experience in congregations, both of these sentiments - the enjoyment of children and the complaints about children - are present in most congregations where a number of young children are present. What might this tension mean for the meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in the congregations?

Finally, churchgoers in several different focus groups mentioned that church is one of the few places where there is potential to develop intergenerational relationships. Churchgoers also stated their beliefs that intergenerational relationships had huge potential not only to create transformation within their congregation, but also to "change the world." However, churchgoers from only one of the four congregations identified overt and persistent efforts to emphasize and build intergenerational relationships in their congregation. In addition, a number of older and younger churchgoers stated that they never directly addressed the troubling behaviors by people of other generations which they mentioned in the focus groups. In an American culture that is

giving serious attention to exploring the role and power of difference, how can older and younger churchgoers raise observations and concerns? Are there any clues in the experiences and reflections of the churchgoers that might explain why there is tension between belief or knowledge, and action? Is there anything in the field of gerontology that might shed light on these dynamics?

Notable Absences in the Data

As with the incongruities noted above, different approaches to the analysis of the data might surface different results. However, the very existence of notable themes, incongruities and absences in the data affirms the validity of the data in at least some measure. And, indeed, there are some notable absences in the data. Again, researchers with different perspectives on the data might surface alternative or additional identifiable absences in the data. Given the approach to analysis taken by this researcher, five noteworthy absences were noted in the data.

Several younger churchgoers in three of the focus groups told stories of their experiences of negative power dynamics with older churchgoers in their congregation. There were several notable omissions or silences related to this. Perhaps most startling silence was that younger churchgoers did not share any stories of when they spoke out about or pushed back against the thoughtless or offensive behaviors or assertions of older churchgoers. Why did the younger churchgoers not speak out or push back? How might this relate to the fact that a number of younger and older churchgoers described a level of comfort, and even intimacy, with other people of all ages in their congregation?

Consonant with this is another glaring silence: though many younger and older churchgoers easily identified and spoke about an array of negative experiences with churchgoers of other ages in their congregation, few if any stories were told about attempts at relational repair

and forgiveness across generations. In a faith context, what does this signal, if anything? What assumptions and relational dynamics might be operative in congregational life that support this persistent lack of repair and forgiveness?

Another absence observed in the data is that, in spite of the fact that this is a church context, the responses of the participants in the focus groups were largely free of references to the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer*. Why might this be? What might this mean? The answers to these questions, if actively pursued, will certainly take us beyond the scope of this research study. However, it might prove illuminative to engage in a future study of the relationship between overtly religious language and relationships in congregations.

There were a number of references in various focus groups to the theological struggles currently occurring in The Episcopal Church and in other mainline denominations about full inclusion of people who are LGBTQ. One younger churchgoer made comments reflecting their belief that conservative/liberal divides often followed generational divides. Based on the focus group discussions, it was unclear whether or not other people agreed with this sentiment. Have these disagreements over theology and practice impacted intergenerational relationships in congregations? If so, how? Again, full-throated answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this study. However, because perception often becomes reality is there a way to approach this theological conundrum that is inclusive across generations?

A final observation about absences in the data: The Episcopal Church and many mainline denominations are currently wrestling deeply and broadly with considerations around difference and justice. In several of the focus group conversations between younger adults, the issue of power dynamics between the generations came up. However, there were no suggestions

regarding how lessons learned about racial difference and justice might (or might not) cross-apply to other kinds of difference, including generational differences.

Interpreting and Analyzing Data Gathered from Focus Groups

Neuger's Spiral as a Pattern for Deepening Engagement

As stated above, the process of interpretation begins even before data is gathered. As qualitative data is collected, interpretation continues and data analysis begins. According to Swinton and Mowat, "Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the complicated mass of qualitative data that the researcher generates during the research process."[55] For the purposes of this research study, basic data analysis beings when data from focus groups is read carefully, with attention to literal, interpretive, and reflexive readings of the data as "text."[56] Then, interpretation and analysis unfolds in the process of coding the data, as attention is given to themes, slippages, and silences observed by the researcher and a co-reader.[57]

For the purposes of pastoral theology, data analysis is not complete when the data is interpreted and analyzed using basic coding, thematic and reflective approaches. Because human beings, their contexts, and the ways in which they make meaning are complex, a fulsome process of data analysis for the purposes of pastoral theology requires engagement across disciplines. This multi-disciplinary approach calls researchers and readers to deeper participation in rigorous engagement with the data. The goal is not simply to avoid 'missing things' in the process of data analysis although, of course, basic thoroughness in examination of the data is important. Rather, the goal of a multi-disciplinary approach is to break the data open further than is possible when considered on its own, in order to gain a "thick description" of the data through analysis that

[55] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 57.

[56] Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 194.

[57] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 197.

"explores the deeper and often hidden meanings behind the words, gestures, actions and practices observed" during the research study."[58] This is the deep exploration that Christie Cozad Neuger's correlational spiral facilitates.

As noted in Chapter 1, Neuger's spiral offers a pattern, showing how the process of interpretation and analysis deepens as data and the initial interpretation and analysis of that data is brought into dialogue "with resources from the social sciences and technology, using these disciplines to better understand the experience of individuals"[59] and to hone the theory and practice of Christian ministry. For the purposes of this study, the goal is to follow Neuger's spiral, bringing resources from ecclesiology and gerontology into dialogue with the experiences of younger and older adults in congregations for the purpose of expanding and deepening the initial interpretations and analyses of the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in four Episcopal congregations.

While it is tempting at this point to speculate about what might be learned from the dialogue between the experiences described in the focus groups and the resources from the disciplines of ecclesiology and gerontology, the prudent course is to demonstrate learnings by engagement between experiences and these disciplines, to which we now turn.

[58] For further explication of the term "thick description," see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Description of the purpose of gaining a thick description provided by Sensing in *Qualitative Research*, 195.

[59] Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 33.

CHAPTER 4 - REFLECTIONS ON ECCLESIOLOGY

Introduction

The qualitative data collected in the focus groups indicate that there are a variety of intergenerational relationships occurring in Episcopal congregations. Focus group participants shared stories of positive experiences and/or relationships with people outside their own generation. They also shared stories of negative experiences and/or relationships with people outside their own generation. These negative experiences do not, however, prevent churchgoers from believing that intergenerational relationships have both value and potential. Therefore, it is worth noting that churchgoers reported very few efforts within their congregations to articulate the importance of intergenerational relationships and to make intentional efforts to cultivate them.

Whether they are aware of it or not, Episcopal churchgoers have an operative theology, a set of beliefs about who God is and what God is up to in the world. They also have an operative *ecclesiology*, a set of beliefs about the church and its purpose, about what their congregation should be and do in the world. Psychologists tell us that in every part of their days, in every aspect of their lives, people behave in the ways that they do for reasons. Behavior is not random or disconnected; it is in dialogue with past beliefs and experiences, and with current and future intentions, needs, context, desires and goals. However, in order for a person's behavior to be closely aligned with one's deepest values and highest priorities, it is important for a person to have articulated - at least to themselves - what those beliefs and values are, so that choices and actions can be aligned with those beliefs and values.[60]

[60] Further explication of the relationship between behavior, motivation, belief and values is beyond the scope of this project. Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud addressed this in their work, as have an array of psychologists and family systems theorists, e.g. Edwin Friedman. Two contemporary texts which offer theory and praxis related to human behavior and values are *Behave: The Biology of Humans at our Best and Worst* by Robert M. Sapolsky and

This chapter will explore possible connections between current themes in Episcopal ecclesiology and the operative ecclesiology that appears to be reflected in the experiences and ideas shared by the focus group participants in four Episcopal congregations. The first section of this chapter will offer a basic description of Christian ecclesiology, with an emphasis on Episcopal ecclesiology. Next, some key modern, modern-postmodern, and postcolonial themes in the writings of theologians of influence in The Episcopal Church will be explicated. Then, these themes will be brought into dialogue with the experiences and ideas of focus group participants. Finally, a summary section will capture the themes, dissonances, and silences that emerge from the dialogue between the ecclesiological themes the experiences and ideas of focus group participants.

Basic Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology gained a foothold in the academic field of Christian systematic theology around the time of the Reformation. As a Protestant Christian tradition rose out of the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, it became essential to continue the process, initiated in the decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, of further articulating what the church is and how it is to operate in the lives of Christians. In Roman Catholicism and the unfolding Protestant reform, the Church was understood to be the community of the followers of Jesus Christ, those saved by grace through faith. Each congregation was understood to be the local expression of, and connected to, a wider Christian church. The Anglican Communion, of which The Episcopal Church is a part, evolved to include elements of Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies. In the Anglican tradition, the images most commonly used for the Church are ones articulated in the

Why You Behave in Ways You Hate: And What You Can Do About It by Irwin Gootnick. See complete citation in bibliography.

New Testament: the people of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ, images which invoke community, transformation and/or holiness, and unity, respectively.

Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic who sought major reform in the church in the mid-1500s, emphasized the importance of communal worship and, in particular, two aspects of that worship: the Word and the sacraments. Or, in other words, the Bible and the rituals. In a significant shift away from the traditions of Roman Catholicism, Luther sought to dispense with the distance that privileging the authority of the clergy had created between these essential resources for nurturance of faith and the faithful themselves. Luther focused on the priesthood of all believers, asserting that, by virtue of their baptism, believers were eligible to preach the Word and provide leadership among the faithful.

John Calvin, another mid-16th century reformer, focused on the notion of the people of God as a covenantal community, connected by God through God's initiation and by individual acceptance of God's invitation into relationship. In Episcopal congregations to this day, the baptismal covenant is said regularly in worship, inviting the baptized to rehearse again and again their most basic understandings of their connection to God and to each other.

In terms of church structure and governance, three models dominate mainline Protestant denominations in the United States today: congregationalist, presbyterian and episcopal. In the congregationalist model, Christ's authority for saving and transforming, comes to the people not through a bishop or appointed elders but directly. In the presbyterian model, clergy have authority delegated by the congregation. The episcopal (small "e") model is the oldest model and frames church life in the Anglican tradition, of which The Episcopal Church is a part. Churches in this model hold that the bishop and other clergy have God-given hierarchical authority that is passed down through laying on of hands.

Ecclesiological considerations are also important because the foundational assumptions of a community shape, at both conscious and subconscious levels, how individuals and groups relate to each other. In this cursory outline of some of the most basic aspects of Episcopal ecclesiology, it is easy to identify a central tension in community life: every Christian is baptized into a community of the faithful in which the "ministry of all the baptized" is central. And yet, "authority," including presiding over the Sacraments, is strictly reserved for ordained persons through the laying on of hands.[61]

Current Themes in Episcopal Ecclesiology

Over the course of the past sixty years, the ecclesiology of The Episcopal Church has undergone dramatic evolution. The identity of many Episcopal congregations has shifted as clergy-centric sacramentalism has been displaced by an emphasis on the ministry of all the baptized. Revisions in the baptismal covenant in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* articulated a strong emphasis on "striving for justice and peace among all people," and "respecting the dignity of every human being."

Though it has taken some time, the vast majority of Episcopalians now embrace the leadership of women and those who are LGBTQ. Since the 1940s, the ubiquitous white signs with the Episcopal shield and the invitation "All are Welcome" have dotted the roadways throughout the United States. Increasingly, Episcopal congregations endeavor to embody the fullness of this invitation across race, gender, sexuality, class, and other cultural stratifications.

The operative ecclesiology underlying these shifts in belief and practice are both articulated and advanced by the writings of theologians which have played a significant role in the developing faith and practice of Episcopalians. Due to the limited scope of this project, the

[61] Until 1976, The Episcopal Church allowed only men to be ordained and to preside over the sacraments.

work of three theologians of influence in The Episcopal Church will be engaged and brought into dialogue with the data from focus group conversations. The work of these three theologians, Paul Marshall, Letty Russell and Kwok Pui-lan, has contributed to the shape of the arc of Episcopal ecclesiology from modern to postmodern to postcolonial lines of thought.

Exploration of the work of Marshall, Russell and Kwok reveals the great shift that has occurred in theological and ecclesiological thought over the past sixty years. To be clear, modern ecclesiology has not been completely supplanted by postmodern ecclesiology, nor has postmodern ecclesiology been completely supplanted by postcolonial ecclesiology. However, each of these trends in theology continue to shape the ecclesiology that is operative in Episcopal congregations.

Unity and Dignity: Paul Marshall

Paul Marshall was a convert to Episcopalianism in middle age, having formerly been a pastor of the Missouri Synod branch of the Lutheran Church for about 20 years. As a chaplain in the US Army and long-time pastor, Marshall brought an intensely pastoral perspective to his vocations in later life as a professor of liturgics and a diocesan bishop. Marshall has written only a few books over the course of his life, all focused on shaping life in Episcopal congregations in healthy, inspiring and true ways. His most "academic" book, *One, Catholic and Apostolic*, is an attempt to set the record straight about Samuel Seabury, a founder of the Episcopal Church.

Marshall asserts that, although Seabury has long been viewed as a curmudgeonly and somewhat divisive figure in the early establishment of the Episcopal Church, Seabury is actually a very complex figure whose leadership, like Marshall's, sprang out of many years serving as a pastor/priest of local congregations. However, perhaps because Seabury was not of the aristocratic class like the other early leaders of the Episcopal Church, Seabury was an easy target

for blame when the process of establishment of a new denomination in America became difficult.

Seabury was Marshall's hero in part because Seabury sought "both union and unity, but not at the cost of his beliefs about the nature and constitution of the church."[62] Though Marshall was a long-time member and pastor of the theologically very conservative Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition, Marshall found himself moving to the center and then to the liberal side of theological discussions because his regular and close encounters with people, listening to and responding to their stories.

Marshall is perhaps most well-known in The Episcopal Church today as a bishop who took seriously "the promise made at the 1998 Lambeth Conference [to] listen carefully and fraternally to the stories of gay and lesbian believers, honestly and without judgment - to understand their life and witness on their terms."[63] Marshall became a leader in the Episcopal Church's conversation about whether or not and, if so, how to shape rites for blessing same sex unions.[64] At the Episcopal Church's governing General Convention in summer 2003, Marshall was "the sole author of the resolution language indicating that those who work with or celebrate unions in this time of study and exploration are operating 'within the bounds of our

[62] Paul V. Marshall, *One, Catholic and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church*, (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 264.

[63] Paul V. Marshall, *Same Sex Unions: Stories and Rites* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 8.

[64] Marshall's book refers to rites for same sex unions rather than same sex marriages because at that point in time, neither the Episcopal Church or federal law in the United States had evolved to recognize same sex marriage. IN the summer of 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States legalized same sex marriage in all fifty states and the Episcopal Church expanded marriage rites for same sex couples to all dioceses.

communion'."[65] Marshall states that he did this "both to moderate the entirely negative language of the [original] resolution and to allow room for the Holy Spirit to teach the church."[66]

Two key ecclesiological themes reflected in the work of Paul Marshall are unity and dignity. These themes reflect core concerns of Marshall's intellectual curiosity and pastoral ministry and are interwoven in his life and ministry.

From the time of early Christian communities to the present, the issue of unity has been central to the Christian faith. Jesus prays for his disciples "that they all may be one," united to one another and to God as closely as Jesus and his Father are united.[67] The apostle Paul (and/or those writing in his name) continues this theme in early evangelistic letters to the Romans, the Corinthians and the Ephesians, letters which shape the ecclesiology of those developing communities.[68] Marshall holds, however, that "the great liturgical principle of the [sig] Episcopal Church's first century in America" was not unity, but rather uniformity, a conformity made possible and undergirded by the wealth and privilege of the aristocracy in the United States, many of whom shaped not only the government of the country but also the polity of The Episcopal Church.[69]

In the face of this inclination toward uniformity, however, Marshall asserts that an ecclesiology of true unity in The Episcopal Church never completely dissolves. For Marshall, true unity is a fully inclusive rule of life and practice of community that is grounded in the value

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[65] Marshall, *Same Sex Unions*, 8. The resolution to which Marshall refers is General Convention 2003 Resolution C051. The final text of the resolution affirmed that General Convention recognized "that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions." In Liturgical Resources 1 "I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing," Revised and Expanded Edition, as authorized by the 78th General Convention, 2015. https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/15668

[66] Marshall, *Same Sex Unions,* 8.

[67] John 17:21 (NRSV).

[68] Romans 12:5, Galatians 3:26-28, Ephesians 4:1-6 (NRSV)

[69] Paul Marshall, "William Augustus Muhlenberg's Quiet Defection from Liturgical Uniformity," *Anglican and Episcopal History*, vol. LXIV, no. 2, (1995): 148.

and dignity of every human being as a beloved child of God. Marshall offers as an example the work of William Augustus Muhlenberg (1796-1877). Muhlenberg was from a devout Episcopal family whose fortune built Church of the Holy Communion on Manhattan, yet "Muhlenberg was aware that the church's disinclination to mission among the urban poor was not unrelated to endemic class prejudice."[70] Evidence of this, Marshall says, is found not only in the prayers Muhlenberg wrote and used, but also in Muhlenberg's constant pressure on key leaders like William Reed Huntington to "unite with Christians whose traditions of ministry are different" than those maintained in The Episcopal Church.[71]

The other ecclesiological theme that Marshall highlights is the church's role in upholding the dignity of every human being. In a world where injustice and inequality are too often the norm, Marshall, like Muhlenberg, calls Episcopal congregations to be places of justice and peace, where everyone can "meet on a footing of equality with equal access to the church's ministrations and equal responsibility for its life."[72] Marshall observes that the church gathers and worships always with a focus beyond itself. In fact, Marshall asserts, the word liturgy (*leitourgia*),often mis-translated as "work of the people," actually it means "done for the public good." The difference being that with the former, worship is an end in itself, whereas with the latter, worship is a means from which public good then springs, for individuals and for the wider community.[73]

Marshall cared deeply about upholding the dignity of every human being, in word and in practice. One of the ways in which he demonstrated this was through his writings and actions as

[70] Marshall, "Muhlenberg's Quiet Defection," 152.
[71] Marshall, "Muhlenberg's Quiet Defection," 170. William Reed Huntington was an Episcopal priest and author who played a key role not only in the leadership of The Episcopal Church but also in the development of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral and the 1892 *Book of Common Prayer.*
[72] Marshall, "Muhlenberg's Quiet Defection," 149.
[73] Marshall, *Same Sex Unions*, 58.

Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem (PA). In the midst of often rancorous debates over sexuality in the House of Bishops in the early-mid 2000s, Marshall strove to follow the example of Samuel Seabury who represented "a model of vigorous disagreement that stops short of breaking charity."[74] While many were focused only on the outcome of the theological debates over same sex unions and the ordination of people who are openly LGBTQ, Marshall held that how people treated one another during the course of the debate was equally important.

Marshall consistently called the Church beyond what it is, to what it should be. Marshall does this because "theological . . . questions are not abstract. They are pastoral and communal."[75] Episcopalians recite the Baptismal Covenant together any time there is a baptism. When they do, each individual renews their pledge to "respect the dignity of every human being," and they do this in unison. In this, they acknowledge their individual responsibility to others and their communal need to encourage and support one another in order to keep their commitments.

Hospitality and Inclusion: Letty Russell

Though Letty Russell was not an Episcopalian, her book *Church in the Round* circulated widely in The Episcopal Church and in other mainline denominations in the mid-to-late1990s. This book and her many other articles and books, the courses she taught in her 30 years as a professor at Yale Divinity School, and the lectures she gave around the world, shaped two generations of church leaders (lay and ordained), as well as the theology and practice of hospitality and inclusion in mainline congregations throughout the world.

From her early years as a young laywoman in the Presbyterian Church, Russell was Christian Educator. Russell intentionally uses this term rather than "Religious Educator,' because "as a Christian theologian and educator from the Reformed tradition, my particular starting point

[74] Marshall, *One, Catholic and Apostolic*, 265.
[75] Marshall, *Same Sex Unions,* 12.

is biblical and Christological."[76] While some assert that the Christian faith is exclusionary and that the Bible is sexist, Russell observes that Christianity is a journey open to all persons, a journey of participating in "God's saving and liberating action."[77] Russell further observes that though the Bible does include some biased and oppressive texts, these reflect not the heart of God but cultural norms and mores in the ancient cultural contexts in which the texts were written.[78] At the core of the Bible, Russell argues, "is a message of radical freedom and human transformation."[79]

In the 1970s, Russell's faith commitments led her to embrace the feminist movement and its focus on equal rights issues. Russell reimagines a central symbol of the Christian faith, the altar, as a round table at which all experience God's welcome in an egalitarian way. Russell observes that the traditional altar is rectangular - as are many kitchen tables - with a place of honor at the head of the table and prioritized seating for those considered to be more important. A round table, Russell observes, has no inherent hierarchical seating and encourages dialogue between and among the guests. Russell encourages the full inclusion of people traditionally on the margins of society, recognizing that the differences among persons will inevitably create "a community of faith and struggle working to anticipate God's New Creation."[80]

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[76] Letty Russell, "Changing my mind about religious education", *Religious Education*, 79, no.1, (1984):5-10. As quoted in Barbara Anne Keely, "Letty Russell," Christian Educators of the 20th Century, Biola University, https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/letty-russell, accessed January 31, 2021.

[77] Russell, "Changing my mind about religious education," 6.

[78] Feminist theologian Phyllis Tribble identified a number of these texts in her book, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives.* While Tribble's book does not address every objectionable text in the Bible, it identifies some particularly oppressive texts and makes a case for continuing to read the Bible, but in an informed way.

[79] Mary Rourke, "Letty Russell, 77; one of the first women to join faculty of Yale Divinity School," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2007, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-jul-27-me-russell27-story.html.

[80] Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 12.

The themes of hospitality and inclusion are the warp in the tapestry of Russell's theology, and the action-reflection model of theological development is the woof. Russell said, "My intellectual, social, personal and political biography is full of margins and centers. . . . Margins are places of connection for those who are willing to move from center to margin," as Russell did herself.[81] Because God stands with the oppressed, margins are often the place where "God's New Creation is breaking in."[82] When margin and center begin to blur, true community is happening "as all share in God's hospitality."[83]

Russell warns against communities of faith becoming too self-absorbed and complacent: "[A Christian community] is not to be turned in on itself, but opened out to all who need refuge, following the example of Christ himself."[84] If this kind of welcome is not happening in a congregation, it is evidence that something vital is missing. The remedy: becoming open anew to the presence of Christ's Spirit . . . "by listening to the voices of marginal and refugee people."[85] Russell explicates this assertion, saying,

> "Studies of communities of renewal in the church such as feminist communities, basic Christian communities, and renewed Christian communities reveal that they have not so much a new ecclesiology or a new structure, but rather understand the basic gifts of Christ to the church in ways that make the church a place of welcome for women and for many different marginal groups."[86]

Russell further explains that hospitality does not bring people into the community with a goal of everyone "fitting in" but, rather, hospitality welcomes and "provides safe space for us to grow in

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[81] Letty Russell, "Moving to the Margin," *Dialog* 36 (305-310), 305 as quoted in Barbara Anne Keely, "Letty Russell," Christian Educators of the 20th Century, Biola University, https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/letty-russell.

[82] Russell, "Moving to the Margin," 305.

[83] Russell, "Moving to the Margin," 305.

[84] Letty Russell, "Hot-house ecclesiology: A feminist interpretation of the church," *The Ecumenical Review* 51, no.1 (January 2001):48.

[85] Russell, "Hot-house ecclesiology," 51.

[86] Russell, "Hot-house ecclesiology," 51.

Christ and to share our gifts and struggles on behalf of others."[87] The result, Russell explains, is a community that has unity but not uniformity, a diverse community where "salvation is a story and not an idea, a word that describes God's mending and reconciling action in our lives and in the whole of creation."[88]

Russell was aware that some people in mainline Christian congregations were afraid of feminism. Indeed, I remember the word feminism being spoken with contempt in the 1970s and 1980s in both evangelical and mainline congregations. Russell observes that many Christians are afraid of feminism because it has the potential of driving supporters of full equality and inclusion "out of the institutional church and beyond [its] traditions . . . [and into] the risk of growth and new knowledge . . . [into] the kind of cognitive dissonance that drives us to shift our beliefs so that they correspond more clearly with our experiences and actions."[89] Russell believed that this call to risk and righteousness was fully in line with the Gospel.

Global Perspectives on Liberation and Justice: Kwok Pui-lan

Born in Hong Kong, Kwok Pui-lan was raised by her Chinese parents in a household where Chinese folk religion was practiced. In her teen years, Kwok converted to Anglican Christianity. After earning a BA at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and an MTh at Southeast Asia Graduate School of Theology, Kwok completed her ThD at Harvard Divinity School with the doctoral dissertation, "Chinese Women and Christianity." Kwok had a nearly 20-year teaching career at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 2011, she was elected President of the American Academy of Religion. Kwok stated that she stood for

[87] Russell, "Hot-house ecclesiology," 55.
[88] Russell, *Church in the Round*, 105.
[89] Russell, *Church in the Round*, 199.

election with two goals in mind: first, to make the presence of Asian women in the Academy more visible, and second, to "open the door a little wider for others to come."[90]

Kwok found traditional feminist theory wanting, due to its lack of attention to the plight of non-white women and its lack of attention to the impact of colonialism, so Kwok's early work in the areas of feminist theology and biblical hermeneutics shifted in the direction of postcolonial theology. Kwok, in her unique and integrative theological voice, examines the construction of Christology using an organic model that explores the many nature references that Jesus employs in description of his relationship with his disciples. Kwok's work incorporates the experiences of women through a variety of methods of storytelling, including poems, dance, ritual and drama. Kwok holds that, "Biblical interpretation must be democratized so that more voices are welcome to enrich our understanding of God's word in building true human society and living harmoniously in creation."[91]

In development of her ecclesiology, Kwok builds on Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation,* noting her concurrence with his articulation of "God's preferential option for the poor, Christ as liberator, and the poor as the subjects of history," as well as his understanding that "salvation is not only restoring our communion with God, but also involves social, economic, and political liberation from oppression."[92] With this in mind, Kwok asserts that, "The church should be a beacon of hope witnessing God's shalom and a place in which people have a foretaste of God's reign."[93] Noting that over the course of the past four to five years the United States has become increasingly influenced by "populist and conservative voices," Kwok

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[90] Kwok Pui-lan, "Running for the President of the American Academy of Religion, Monday, November 28, 2011. kwokpuilan.blogspot.com. Retrieved February 2, 2021.

[91] Kwok Pui-lan, "Reformation Unfinished: Economy, Inclusivity, Authority," *The Ecumenical Review,* World Council of Churches (2017), 248. DOI: 10.1111/erev.12285.

[92] Kwok Pui-lan, "Reformation Unfinished," 240.

[93] Kwok, "Reformation Unfinished," 241.

expresses her hope that "the church will stand firm on the side of the poor and continue the prophetic ministry the gospel demands."[94]

According to Kwok, the church is not fulfilling God's mission unless it is not only helping people to grow spiritually but also helping them to become stronger and healthier in other aspects of their lives. This is a wide range of issues to attend to, however, and it is easy for the church to lose its focus. The church is only fully equipped to do the full range of ministry to which it is called if it understands its own identity. Unfortunately, there is currently a crisis in the Anglican tradition, resulting from the fact that it is not a confessional church and is therefore tossed about by doctrinal disputes and distracted from its attention to the real needs of the people. Kwok asserts that these real needs are liberation and justice, and that the identity of the Christian church should follow the pattern of the life of Jesus, whose chief interest was not theology and doctrine but loving neighbor through active care, acts of healing and truth-telling.

Drawing on the work Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, Kwok calls the Anglican Church to an *Ecclesiogenesis*, a renewing of itself and its mission "characterized by the absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by communality of gospel ideals, [and] by equality among its members."[95] This focus on liberation and justice is essential if the Anglican Church is to avoid falling prey to simply adopting expedient measures to avoid schism rather than engaging in a process of deep consideration of what the Church is called to become at this point in history.[96]

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[94] Kwok, "Reformation Unfinished," 241.

[95] Kwok Pui-lan, "From a Colonial Church to a Global Communion," in *Anglican Women on Church and Mission*, edited by Kwok Pui-lan, Judith A. Berling, and Jenny Te Paa (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), 5.

[96] Kwok, "From a Colonial Church to a Global Communion," 17-18.

Mutually Reinforcing Ecclesiological Themes

A vast array of theologians have penned reflections on Episcopal ecclesiology over the past century. What is the assurance that the themes identified in the writings of Marshall, Russell and Kwok are actually significant themes in the life of Episcopal congregations today? A fulsome response to this question is beyond the scope of this project. However, arguments in support of the importance of these three themes are outlined below.

First, these themes are mutually reinforcing. In spite of the fact that Marshall, Russell, and Kwok are of different cultural and denominational backgrounds, did not work in the same institutions, and draw on some different resources in the formation of their ecclesiology, they have written works the themes of which move easily in dialogue with each other. One can easily imagine that if these three theologians were tasked with discussing the ecclesiology of The Episcopal Church today, the themes articulated here would be featured in their discussion.

Second, comparison of these themes with theological themes present in the "new" 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* reveals that the themes the mirror each other, particularly in the newly expanded Baptismal Covenant. Further explication of this assertion appears below. In short, the Baptismal Covenant is designed to summarize the essentials of the Christian faith and of what it means to be an Episcopalian. If the themes in these ecclesiological writings and the Baptismal Covenant were not mutually reinforcing, it might signal a failing in the assessment of the importance of these ecclesiological themes.

Third, texts by other ecclesiologists who are contemporaries of Marshall, Russell, and/or Kwok, also reflect these themes. Broadly stated, the movement in Episcopal ecclesiology today is toward greater love - what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls "The Way of Love" - as manifest through greater oneness in the body of Christ as sought through wider liberation and

deeper justice for all. Whether picking up a book by Barbara Brown Taylor or Barbara Harris, Ellen Davis or Patrick Cheng, these themes are in evidence.

Ecclesiological Themes Reflected in Churchgoers' Experiences and Ideas

In summary, then, key ecclesiological themes that are threaded through contemporary Episcopalianism are unity, diversity, hospitality, inclusion, liberation and justice. This section will focus on the question of whether or not and, if so, how, these themes are reflected in the operational theology of the churchgoers who participated in focus groups as revealed in their comments. It is worth noting that the churchgoers were not asked to articulate their theology in the focus groups. This was intentional for two reasons. First, because the focus group context is one in which positivity bias might be at play, if asked directly about their ecclesiology, they might say what they think is the right answer rather than speaking frankly based on their own experiences. Second, a more fulsome exploration of the theology that is operative in these congregations is beyond the scope of this project.

The goal of bringing the comments of churchgoers into dialogue with these ecclesiological themes is to more deeply understand the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in four Episcopal congregations. Are some of these themes reflected more in the comments of younger focus group participants than in the comments of older focus group participants? Which of these themes, if any, are emphasized in comments regarding the potential of intergenerational relationships?

Due to the small number of participants in the focus groups, it is inappropriate to assume and/or assert that the comments of the churchgoers in the focus groups characterize the operative ecclesiology of entire congregations. However, the comments of churchgoers in the focus groups can point toward the ecclesiology operative in the lives of these specific churchgoers. In further

studies, researchers might investigate and assess the ecclesiology operative in entire congregations and whether or not, and if so, how that ecclesiology is reflected in the experiences and ideas of churchgoers in the congregation.

The six themes raised by Marshall, Russell and Kwok have a single thread running through them. The six themes are about relationships between people. Jesus said that the two core commandments his followers were to focus on were loving God and loving their neighbor. These two commandments, as well as the rest of Jesus' ministry were focused on relationships between people. Jesus could have been spent most of his time talking about religious law and household codes, but he didn't. Jesus spent his days caring for people and teaching them to care for one another. Jesus always teaching and healing people, mentoring disciples and performing miracles, caring for not only the 'chosen ones', the Jews, but also for the "outcasts", the Gentiles.

When examining ecclesiology across Christian denominations, it is clear that the ecclesiology of some denominations focuses on rules for the Christian life as individuals and in groups, while the ecclesiology of other denominations focuses on the shape of the relationships between people in the Church, the body of Christ. The Episcopal Church does the latter, emphasizing beliefs and practices that enhance relationships between people and God and between followers of Christ and other people, both Christians and non-Christians.

How are the ecclesiological themes identified by Marshall, Russell and Kwok reflected in the comments of churchgoers who participated in focus groups for this study? Focus group participants were asked to define an intergenerational relationship, share stories of positive and negative intergenerational experiences, and talk about the meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in their congregation. These descriptive questions do not lend themselves to analysis that would lead to use of conceptual words like diversity, inclusion and

liberation and, indeed, examination of the transcripts of the focus group conversations reveals that the specific nouns unity, diversity, hospitality, inclusion, liberation and justice are seldom if ever used by participants in the focus group conversations. However, a more in-depth examination of the focus group conversations reveals that the themes reflected by these nouns are threaded throughout the comments of the churchgoers who participated in the focus groups. The presence of these six theological themes will be further discussed in the three sections that follow.

Unity and Diversity

When defining intergenerational relationships, the thing most commonly expressed by the churchgoers in the focus groups was that intergenerational relationships involve differences between people that are not just measured in years. Intergenerational relationships often involve differences in perspectives, contextual norms, and life stages. Churchgoers also stated that people of different ages who have the same role can feel closer to one another in age than they really are. Discussions about what intergenerational relationships are and how they function also unearthed reflections regarding what brings people together in shared activities and beliefs, even when they there are differences between them in age and other forms of diversity.

Experiences of deep unity in relationships in the congregations were reflected in the way people adopted one another relationally. Churchgoers from all congregations commented in one way or another that they had relationships within the congregation with “honorary grandfathers,” “courtesy aunts,” “church moms” and the like. Churchgoers also spoke about fellow churchgoers as friends, adopted family, or family.

The favorite intergenerational activity in one congregation was a giant art project which brought everyone in the congregation together. When asked what was special about this project,

the responses all pointed toward relationships, particularly across generations and abilities. One churchgoer noted the power of "passing down" knowledge orally from one generation to another. Another spoke of "feeding that goes both ways" and the person was not speaking of food but, rather, figuratively of encouragement and skills. Yet another churchgoer spoke of the power of everyone working together as "one large family" with many generations.

Churchgoers in the focus groups noted that tight bonds were often created across generations in the face of adversity. Over the course of the past fifteen to twenty years, The Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations have been deeply divided about the ordination of women and the full inclusion of people who are LGBTQIA. Thought The Episcopal Church has taken increasingly stronger stands in support of women's ordination and full inclusion of all, many who have more conservative stances on these issues have left congregations. Churchgoers in focus groups recognized that shared beliefs and experiences "can throw people together," people who are of different backgrounds, ages, etc.

Many of the negative intergenerational experiences described by churchgoers had something to do with not being able to see things from the perspective of someone of a different age group. Several older churchgoers criticized children who were noisy and/or rambunctious in church, as well as their parents who allowed them to act in those ways. A younger churchgoer mentioned that the older churchgoers planning church activities at the dinner hour are not taking into account the process of getting dinner on the table for the family and then cleaning up and getting the kids to bed. Several younger churchgoers mentioned that older churchgoers sometimes put a damper on unity in the congregation by being too controlling about how many younger people are allowed to participate in church governance and/or by expressions of "lack of acceptance" when things change.

In focus group conversations, there was also recognition that church is one of the few places in our society where intergenerational relationships can be enjoyed and developed. One churchgoer shared her observation that in the wider community, there is often a lack of trust between teens and adults. Church, however, can be a place where people of different ages can recognize the wisdom in others who are of different ages. Yet, there was recognition in a couple of the focus groups that generational diversity in congregations is already waning. Young adults are absent from most congregations, which makes cultivating intergenerational relationships difficult.

Hospitality and Inclusion

Almost universally, Episcopal congregations believe themselves to be welcoming and inclusive. In the midst of the intense and challenging conversations about race and gender in our wider culture right now, congregations are *beginning* to take a deeper look at how they are actually hospitable and inclusive - and how they are failing.

Focus group conversations revealed that younger and older adults believe that the number one thing that causes intergenerational relationships in these congregations to fail is lack of hospitality and inclusion. Make no mistake, people of all ages - and particularly older churchgoers - believe they are being hospitable and inclusive. In actuality, they are often failing. Perhaps the most fundamental failure of hospitality is to see the congregation as "our congregation." Often, older adults have indeed participated in a congregation for decades. Their presence has formed part of the backbone of the congregation, and they believe they have "paid their dues." However, what starts out as loving commitment can unwittingly become possessiveness and control. When other adults, particularly younger adults, see this dynamic at

work, they rightly sense that there is room for them in the congregation to the degree that they are willing to conform to the way things are or to ask for only very small changes

While ageism is prevalent in wider United States culture, congregations are places where elders are often very much respected, have significant leadership roles, and maintain most of the power. Elders are often unaware of how their position of power shapes their perspectives, assumptions, and behaviors. When younger adults shared about their negative intergenerational experiences in congregations, the majority of these had something to do with older adults making decisions in the congregation based on conscious or subconscious assumptions rather than simply asking younger adults for their input. One example of this occurred when older adults invited younger adults with kids to a book group but then scheduled the group at family dinner hour. Another example occurred when older adults in one congregation were overheard complaining that there were too many young adults standing for election to Vestry when, in fact, the election would not result in age diversity on the Vestry even if all of the young adults were elected.

Based on the comments of churchgoers in the focus groups, it seems that some of the most consequential expressions of hospitality and inclusion are "small" ones that often occur during worship. One younger adult shared a story about arriving for worship and finding most of the seats taken, but an older woman scooted over and invited the younger adult to "come sit with me." This act of hospitality caused the young adult to return the following week - and regularly ever since. Another younger adult shared a story about older people in the congregation noticing that she was absent and reaching out to find out if she was ok. An older adult spoke about kids from other families asking to sit with her in church. Before they asked to sit with her, she felt

lonely because her children and grandchildren lived far away, and she was sitting alone. The older adult felt happier and more a part of the community when the kids came to sit with her.

Liberation and Justice

Over the past two to three generations, American Episcopalians have increasingly seen themselves as people who "strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being. In the 1960s and 1970s, The Episcopal Church found itself at a crossroads. Long known as a denomination of ritual and tradition, The Episcopal Church found itself in a theological and ecclesiological crisis over issues of inclusion. While women in other Christian denominations allowed women to be ordained, the Episcopal Church did not. The AIDS crisis pressed Christians in all denominations to wrestle with whether or not they were fully inclusive of people who are LGBTQ. Episcopal congregations - like most other mainline Christian denominations in the United States - were segregated by race. Additionally, many Episcopal congregations were also segregated by class, with the "big steeple" Episcopal congregations being populated predominately by upper-middle-class and upper-class Anglos.

The 1979 revision of *The Book of Common Prayer* includes an expanded Baptismal Covenant that "has come to be seen as the iconic statement of the Episcopal Church's commitment to social action and 'inclusion.'"[97] The Apostles Creed continues to be used as core of the Baptismal Covenant. In addition, those baptized and those renewing their baptismal vows make five promises which the authors of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* believe to sum up the ministries to which all baptized persons are called:

- To "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers,"

[97] Colin Podmore, "The Baptismal Revolution in the American Episcopal Church: Baptismal Ecclesiology and the Baptismal Covenant," *Ecclesiology* 6, no. 1 (2010): 8. https://doi.org/10.1163/174413609X12549868039767.

- To "persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord,"
- To "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,"
- To "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself," and
- To "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."[98]

Through their theological and ecclesiological writings, theologians like Marshall, Russell and Kwok have further advanced the knowledge and practice of liberation and justice. Increasingly, the themes of liberation and justice are interwoven in the communal life of Episcopal congregations. Focus group conversations reflected these themes.

In defining intergenerational relationships, at least one person in every focus group of younger adults and in every focus group of older adults described intergenerational relationships as relationships of 'give and take." When further defining what they meant by this, churchgoers in the focus groups said that intergenerational relationships are one in which there is learning, the reshaping of assumptions, and mutual respect. Churchgoers were careful to know that the learning, reshaping of assumptions, and mutual respect should flow "both ways."

When describing positive intergenerational relationships, several churchgoers mentioned that people of a different generation than themselves sometimes nudge them to step out of their comfort zone. An older adult mentioned participating with younger adults in the gay pride parade. Older adults and younger adults mentioned participating in discussions in their congregation about how to connect the church and the world, as well as how to become more aware of the needs of their neighbors and to expand the welcome they extend to others.

The stories of negative intergenerational interactions sometimes exposed situations where injustice and/or oppression has occurred in congregations. These kinds of stories were primarily

[98] Episcopal Church, *The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 304-305.

told by younger adults, although there was at least on occasion when an older adult described feeling "pushed aside" and "underutilized." One younger adult described older adult leaders in the church making the assumption that he speaks a language other than English, apparently because of the color of his skin. Another younger adult described older adults in the congregation making comments about her body like, "you're looking slim this week." These comments shocked her and, she said, caused her to feel less safe in the congregation.

Several older adults and younger adults made comments that reflected an awareness that their congregation has work to do in the area of social justice, but also has a desire to engage this work. When commenting on the potential of intergenerational relationships in the congregation, one younger adult expressed desire to do outreach and social justice together with older adults, because if they do so "ultimately we'll be able to change the world." Several younger adults identified a big leadership challenge that must be addressed in order for older adults and younger adults to work together successfully: elders must hold space for younger adults to step into leadership roles in the congregation. Younger adults acknowledged that it must be "scary" for older adults to "not be in charge." However, the younger adults were very clear that they could not help change the world without transformation first happening in their congregations.

Unity, diversity, hospitality, inclusion, liberation and justice: these themes drawn from the ecclesiological studies of Marshall, Russell and Clark reflect themes in the new Baptismal Covenant in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. They also show up in the operative theology - the on-the-ground believing and doing - of younger and older adults who participated in focus groups in four Episcopal congregations.

At this juncture in our examination of churchgoers' experiences of intergenerational relationships, it will be beneficial to move further along on Neuger's correlational spiral. The

next group of resources to be brought into dialogue with churchgoers' experiences and ecclesiological reflections are resources from a specific area of the social sciences: gerontology.

CHAPTER 5 - INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND RESOURCES FROM GERONTOLOGY

Thus far, the overarching framework and rationale for this project has been outlined, research methodology and methods have been described, and data gathered in focus groups has been reported, partially analyzed, and brought into dialogue with theology operative in The Episcopal Church today. Engagement with resources from the social sciences is the next essential part of the pastoral theological methodology outlined by Neuger.[99]

Social science is a mind-bogglingly wide field of study. In order to establish a meaningful dialogue with the study data, resources will be drawn from the sub-field of gerontology and, more specifically, from the writings of W. Andrew (Andy) Achenbaum and Nancy Henkin, who have been leaders in the field in the United States for the better part of the past half-century.

As a historian and expert on relationships and aging, Achenbaum has written extensively on the history of conceptions of age in the United States, as well as the rise of the longevity revolution and the problem of ageism. An Episcopalian, Achenbaum has addressed the intersection of religious institutions and intergenerational relationships in a number of his writings and has summarized his reflections on this topic in his book *Older Americans, Vital Communities: A Bold Vision for Societal Aging.*

Henkin's earliest graduate work was on relationships with the aging; her dissertation was "An Exploratory Study of the Self-Disclosure Patterns of Older Adults." Henkin's life work been to examine and understand the how intergenerational relationships can undergird and shape healthy community, specifically her wider vision of Community for All Ages.

[99] Neuger, *Counseling Women,* 33.

The following chapter has four parts. First, a framework is set for reflections on aging in the United States through brief explorations of the history of conceptions of age, the longevity revolution, and ageism. Then, definition of intergenerational relationships from a social science perspective is offered. Next, gerontologists Achenbaum and Henkin reflect on the longevity revolution and the role of intergenerational relationships in the midst of societal change. Finally, the chapter concludes with observations about the beliefs and practices of churchgoers as they are brought into dialogue with the work of Achenbaum and Henkin, and possible implications regarding the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in these Episcopal congregations will be suggested.

Framing the Conversation: History of Age, the "Longevity Revolution," and Ageism

History of Age in the United States

In order to understand how intergenerational relationships operate in the United States, it is important to know how aging has been understood in US culture over time. The notion of age has developed differently in different cultures around the world. In the United States, "old age" has long been understood as a clear and unique phase in the life cycle.[100] Physiologically, this phase is understood to have two parts: "green old age" and "decrepitude."[101] In other cultures, the elderly sometimes have been automatically granted positions of authority or special regard/respect. In Western Civilization, however, this has not been the case.[102]

In the years following the revolutionary war, it was commonly understood that the success of the newly established US democracy would depend on the combined efforts of people

[100] W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1.
[101] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 3.
[102] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 4.

of all ages working together.[103] The Puritan religious influence in American culture drew people to believe that virtue and righteousness were essential to the success of the fledgling colonies. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, it was generally believed that "[the aged] are the most effective *preventives of vice* and promoters of *virtue* and *good conduct* that nature affords."[104] With this in mind, it is not surprising that Uncle Sam, a "sinewy old man with long white hair and chin whiskers," was chosen around the year 1810 to personify the US federal government.[105]

Following the Civil War, general regard for the elderly began to fade, as youth was more often championed as the ideal. In 1862, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*,

> Youth is everywhere in place. Age, like woman, requires fit surroundings. Age is comely in coaches, in churches, in chambers of State and ceremony, in council chambers, in courts of justice, and historical societies . . . But in the rush and uproar of Broadway. . . [few] envy the consideration enjoyed by the oldest inhabitant. We do not count a man's years, until he has nothing else to count. . . In short, the creed of the street is, Old Age is not disgraceful, but immensely disadvantageous.[106]

Whether Emerson's words reflected a growing sentiment or was part of what ignited this feeling among the general public is unclear. However, an important transition occurred between 1865 and 1914.[107] Referring back to past beliefs that elders were important for their influence in compelling virtue and preventing vice, a commentator in 1906 said, "Not all centenarians are paragons of all the virtues."[108]

A variety of cultural shifts likely contributed to changing perspectives on aging in the US. As the United States was recovering from World War I, there was great appreciation for the young men who had fought and died in the war. As an increasing number of people moved from

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[103] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 9.

[104] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 15-16. Italics present in the original. Here, Achenbaum is quoting Dr. Charles Caldwell, an early 19th century physician who founded what would become the University of Louisville School of Medicine.

[105] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land,* 25.

[106] As quoted in Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 36.

[107] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land,* 36.

[108] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 47.

small towns and farms to urban environments, perceptions of the contributions of the elderly to home life also shifted. In manufacturing, a new trend emerged: discharging older employees, whose usefulness was believed to have diminished with age.[109] Achenbaum summarizes the changing perspectives this way: "Americans gradually discounted the value of old people's insights and claimed that young people were in the best position to understand the meaning of life."[110]

Fortunately, the last word on the notion of age in this country is not a negative one. As animus against old age grew after World War I, so did groups seeking to improve the status of older persons.[111] It was discovered that negative views of the elderly were linked to poverty and dependency that developed when older workers were unable to find jobs or were no longer able to work. In 1935, the Social Security Act established "the first nationwide institutional structure to assist older Americans."[112]

Research in the social sciences since the mid-to-late 1940s has revealed that notions of inevitable physical and mental declines with age are unfounded. A variety of studies have shown that there is no empirical basis for believing that older people generally are physically or mentally diminished or incapacitated.[113] Research has also shown that aging people share a majority of personality and emotional characteristics with younger people; they also have the same sorts of values, needs, fears, and goals as younger people do.[114] In other words, perceptions of the differences between younger and older persons are often unfounded.

The Longevity Revolution

[109] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 48, 63.
[110] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land,* 51.
[111] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 117.
[112] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 141.
[113] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 154.
[114] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land,* 154.

People in the United States are living longer. At the turn of the 20th century, life expectancy was 46 years for men and 48 years for women. In 2021, life expectancy is now 76 years for men and 81 years for women. Primarily because people are living longer, the absolute number of older people in the US grown over the years; the relative number of Americans considered "old" is on the rise, as well.[115]

This reality has a wide range of implications. Indeed, as Achenbaum notes, "many of our economic, political, ethical, health, and other institutions, such as education and work life, have been *rendered obsolete* by the added years of life for so many citizens."[116] In light of this, there is a growing need for renewal of the social compacts in US society, the implicit and explicit agreements people share for mutual benefit.

Achenbaum identified three trends which have changed the shape of the social compacts in US society. First, social compacts need to be extended to accommodate increased life expectancies. Second, social compacts need to be reshaped to allow for changes in domestic ties due to new marriage and divorce patterns. Third, social compacts need to be re-visioned to take into account new relational separations and solidarities resulting from new and different alliances within and across generations.[117] The renegotiation of all of these relationships is referred to by many gerontologists and other social scientists as the "longevity revolution." The first step in dealing with the seismic change brought by this revolution: an awareness of the challenges and resources related to the change that is occurring.

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[115] Achenbaum, *Old Age in a New Land*, 58-59.

[116] W. Andrew Achenbaum, "Robert N. Butler, MD (January 21, 1927 - July 4, 2010): Visionary Leader, *The Gerontologist* 54, no. 1 (2013): 10.

[117] W. Andrew Achenbaum, "The Social Compact in American History," *Generations* 22, no.4 (Winter 1998/1999): 18.

Fear and anxiety may draw people to focus on the possible down-sides of the new reality of longevity: more housing needed for low-income seniors, the potential that the coffers of Social Security may be emptied before younger generations can benefit, etc. However, untapped and/or underutilized resources are available to help navigate the changes resulting from increased longevity. Many of these resources are found in intergenerational relationships. As sociologists Timothy and Ellie Brubaker point out, this is not a difficult resource to access because as people live longer, "opportunities for multiple generational contact increases."[118] Achenbaum asserts that raising awareness about the potential of intergenerational relationships may create a bridge to a more positive future for all generations.

Ageism

Robert N. Butler, M.D., was the first person to use the word "age-ism" to describe "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old."[119] Butler saw ageism manifested "in a wide range of phenomena, on both individual and institutional levels - stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, simple subtle avoidance of contact, and discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and services of all kinds."[120]

Though biases against aged and elderly persons are seen in cultures as far back as the Neolithic age, Butler believed that ageism in the US had developed in particularly complex ways, and that "long-standing racial prejudices and palpable class biases fueled an animus against age."[121] He also believed that age bigotry in the United States was likely to expand as life expectancy in the US increased.

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[118] Timothy H. Brubaker and Ellie Brubaker, "The Four Rs of Intergenerational Relationships: Implications for Practice," *Michigan Family Review* 4, no.1 (January 1999): 5.

[119] W. Andrew Achenbaum, "A History of Ageism Since 1969," *Journal of the American Society on Aging* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 8.

[120] Achenbaum, "A History of Ageism Since 1969," 8.

[121] Achenbaum, "A History of Ageism Since 1969," 12.

Considering the persistence of ageism over time, it is not surprising that, although the United States is perhaps less ageist now than it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ageism in the US continues to be operative in daily life in a variety of ways. Explicitly, ageism is revealed in videos on Tik Tok mimicking "old people," people in conversation making fun of how elderly people drive, and intentionally overloud communication with elderly people, a sign of assumed disability or of inability to understand what is being said. Implicit ageism shows up in thoughts, behaviors and feelings that exist without conscious awareness and result in biased words and actions toward older people. Just as with other forms of oppression, both explicit and implicit forms are damaging. For example, scholars Michael North and Susan Fiske state that older people may internalize negative stereotypes, "becoming more forgetful, sickly, and depressed, simply because they anticipate adopting such characteristics in their later life."[122] Studies by researcher and sociologist Barbara Levy have shown that implicit ageism causes adverse health effects in older people.[123]

The history of age, the longevity revolution and ageism shape intergenerational relationships within the culture of the United States. Therefore, it is crucial to articulate this context within which intergenerational relationships are developed, enacted, halted, broken, and re-engaged. Consciously and subconsciously, people think, speak and act in ways informed by history, change and bias. Awareness enables people to make decisions that better align with their purposes, goals, and values.

[122] Michael S. North and Susan T. Fiske, "An Inconvenienced Youth? Ageism and Its Potential Intergenerational Roots," *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no.5 (2012): 982.

[123] Achenbaum, "A History of Ageism Since 1969," 12.

Against this backdrop of historical and contemporary information, intergenerational relationships are now defined and relevant themes from the work of Achenbaum and Henkin are discussed.

Defining Intergenerational Relationships

A relationship is a process or state of being connected. An intergenerational relationship is a connection between two or more people of significantly different ages or generations. Though the concept of "generation" originally referred specifically to family members within households, the word is now "widely used to refer to an age cohort within a society that experiences the same set of historical conditions over the life course."[124]

For better and worse, the concept of a "generation" has been increasingly fixed in the American imagination, cohorts of approximately twenty-year spans: Boomers, GenXers, Millennials, etc. An up-side of identifying with an age cohort includes having a sense of shared experience and empowerment. A down-side of classifying people in age cohorts is that people outside that cohort are easily deemed to be "other." Indeed, in the US, reference is often made to 'a generational divide,' indicating perceived tensions between people of different generations.

Intergenerational relationships are a way of connecting across differences in age and experience. This connection can be incidental, casual, functional, and/or intentional, depending on the context. Intergenerational relationships can be naturally forming or purposefully created. Social scientists in a variety of subfields have researched intergenerational relationships with an eye toward how these relationships might be transformative in various contexts. Intergenerational programs - purposeful activities designed for learning, growth, skill-building and/or encouragement/inspiration - have been found by multiple researchers to have positive

[124] Linda Hantrais, Julia Brannen and Fran Bennett, "Family change, intergenerational relations and policy implications, *Contemporary Social Science* 15, no.3 (2020): 278.

outcomes for participants of all ages.[125] Gerontology researchers Anita Glee Bertram, Brandon Burr and their team offer a vision of what intergenerational relationships might accomplish: "different generations mutually and dynamically influencing one another, and . . . through these interactions 'reciprocal transformation' and 'ongoing reciprocity' can be achieved."[126]

One thing that Achenbaum and Henkin have in common is that they see the demographic shifts caused by increased longevity as a tidal wave that will transform the landscape, not a high tide that moves a little sand around on the beach. And they both propose big solutions for these potentially overwhelming challenges. Their solutions presume the presence and importance of intergenerational relationships, which they believe will serve as an increasingly important bridge for societal connection as the number of generations increases.

Achenbaum and Henkin offer specific and substantive proposals for meeting the challenges that lie ahead. Achenbaum asserts that key societal institutions will have to change their perspectives and practices and that enhancement of intergenerational relationships must be an integral part of these institutional changes. Henkin asserts that while some small-scale intergenerational programs have been useful in the past, visioning and enacting a Community for All Ages is the comprehensive approach needed for societal cohesion in the mist of the longevity revolution.

Achenbaum and Henkin: Intergenerational Relationships and Societal Change

Andrew Achenbaum: Intergenerational Relationships and Religious Institutions

[125] An important note of clarification: the success of intergenerational programs is often dependent upon design and execution informed by carefully researched theory and practices such as those commended in Shannon E. Jarrott, Andrew J. Stremmel, and Jill J. Naar's article, "Practice that Transforms Intergenerational Programs: A Model of Theory- and Evidence Informed Principles," *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 17, no.4 (2019): 488-504.

[126] Anita Glee Bertram, Brandon K. Burr, Kaye Sears, Melissa Powers, LaDonna Atkins, Tawni Holmes, Tina Kambour and J. Brooke Kuns, "Generations learning together: pilot study for a multigenerational program," *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 16, no.3 (2018): 253.

Achenbaum had a career of over 40 years teaching and writing, bringing into dialogue resources from the humanities, history, and gerontology. He published extensively, authoring 6 books, editing 15 volumes, and writing over 200 articles, which appeared in an array of academic journals. [127]Achenbaum also served as Chair of the National Council on Aging. Though he retired from full-time teaching and research in 2017, Achenbaum continues his life's work in a variety of ways, including as Scholar in Residence at the Institute for Spirituality and Health at the Texas Health Center in Houston.

In 2005, Achenbaum published a text for students of gerontology entitled *Older Americans, Vital Communities.* In this book, Achenbaum argues that meeting the challenges posed by the longevity revolution in the United States will require essential institutions to adapt to a new context. Achenbaum believes that education, health care, religion and civic engagements are the four institutions which can make the most pivotal difference *if* they are willing to change *themselves* first.

Achenbaum offers three reasons for his belief that religious institutions can provide leadership in the longevity revolution. First, religious institutions are places where trust can be built between people of different generations. Trust is built in relationships where there is meaningful engagement, including conversations about their values, needs, goals and aspirations. These conversations are not as prevalent in other kinds of institutions like schools and colleges, health care institutions, financial institutions, etc. Religious institutions are also places where people intentionally put feet to their articulations of faith, translating words into actions.[128] Acting together on shared values can deepen trust between people.

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[127] Institute for Spirituality and Health. "Andy Achenbaum." Texas Medical Center. https://www.spiritualityandhealth.org/andy-achenbaum. Accessed September 19, 2020.

[128] W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Older Americans, Vital Communities: A Bold Vision for Societal Aging* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 128.

Second, solving challenges posed by the longevity revolution will require people of different generations to accomplish things together. Achenbaum observes that many religious institutions are already practiced at bringing people together to "engage in civic affairs to bring about change."[129] For the older generations, Achenbaum notes, most of their volunteer efforts are carried out in and through religious institutions.[130] For younger adults, teen and children who are looking to make meaning in their own lives and/or to make a difference in their community, they can often find mentors from older generations in religious institutions.

Third, religious institutions are often practiced at networking with other institutions. To meet the challenges of the longevity revolution, not only individuals and families, but also institutions, themselves, will need to build relationships with each other. The commitment of religious communities to love and care for their neighbors has traditionally led them to network with hospitals, nursing homes, counseling centers, social service agencies, and other institutions.

Achenbaum acknowledges that religious institutions will be less able to build bridges across generations if current trends continue and fewer and fewer younger adults and children participate in religious institutions. Achenbaum says pointedly that "institutionalized religion may lose some of its luster in the decades ahead, . . . if young people do not join mainline faith communities in order to provide their children religious education and age-based rites of passage."[131] Thus, it may benefit both religious institutions and the wider society for religious institutions to take a leadership role in building bridges of understanding and action across more generations.

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[129] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 128.
[130] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 18.
[131] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 104.

Failure to focus on nurturing the faith of older adults often leaves them feeling burned out and disempowered. Achenbaum finds it ironic that religious institutions often "provide little instruction or age-based religious rituals" for older members, in spite of the fact that "most Christian denominations emphasize the ideal of its congregants to attain 'maturity,' to [grow into] 'the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4:13, NRSV)."[132] Achenbaum recommends that faith communities focus on four things to nurture the faith of older members: (1) Expanding the usage of religious texts and practices that sustain physical and mental well-being; (2) Stressing the value of prayer, for oneself and for others, late in life; (3) Healing services as a more regular and more visible religious ritual; and (4) Paying more attention to the spiritual health of older members.[133] Intentional efforts to provide spiritual nurture to elders may re-energize them to engage in relationships within and beyond their religious institution.

A final word from Achenbaum regarding how religious institutions should engage the challenges of the longevity revolution: religious institutions should focus on what they do best - relational ministry. "Spiritually and religiously inclined elders do not have to be movers and shakers to make a difference," Achenbaum says.[134] "They can begin in their own family circle and in their neighborhoods by bridging the gap that presently exists in too many instances between the activities of organized religion and [individual] spirituality."[135]

Nancy Henkin: Intergenerational Vision and Renegotiating the Social Compact

Henkin, a leading authority in "intergenerational programming, intergenerational community building, and lifelong civic engagement," received her Bachelor of Science from Simmons College and her Ph.D. from Temple University, where she later became the founder

[132] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 19.
[133] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 115-117.
[134] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 128.
[135] Achenbaum, *Older Americans*, 128.

and Executive Director of the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.[136] She created model intergenerational programs and produced A/V and written materials to facilitate the use of those programs across disciplines. Henkin co-authored *Connecting Generations, Strengthening Communities: A Toolkit for Intergenerational Program Planners* (2005) and co-edited *Linking Lifetimes: A Global View of Intergenerational Exchange.* Henkin has received numerous awards for her work in the field of intergenerational relations. Currently, Henkin is a Senior Fellow at Generations United, an organization that seeks to improve the lives of people of all ages through "intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all."[137]

Henkin asserts that, because of the longevity revolution, the social compact - "the giving and receiving of resources over time" in families and communities - must be renegotiated.[138] The new reality that there are now two generations of older people depending on fewer young adults up-ends the traditional family resource pyramid.[139] Resourcing patterns for families and communities no longer work (e.g., "one breadwinner and a full-time homemaker").[140] Already wide, Henkin and Kingson observe, "the gap between the haves and have-nots" is widening."[141] The sense of isolation for many - elders, youth and even families themselves - is growing.[142] And as people scramble for adequate resources of time, energy and money, relationships between people of different races and ethnicities are becoming more strained.[143] In many lower and

[136] "Nancy Henkin," Generations United, accessed May 1, 2021, https://www.gu.org/people/nancy-henkin/.
[137] "Who We Are," Generations United, accessed May 1, 2021, https://www.gu.org/who-we-are/.
[138] Nancy Z. Henkin, "Communities for All Ages: A Practical Model," *International programmes: Towards a society for all ages*, Social Studies Collection no. 23 (Barcelona: The "La Caixa" Foundation, 2007), 150-151.
[139] Henkin, "Communities for All Ages," 147.
[140] Nancy Henkin and Eric Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda for the Twenty-First Century," *Generations* 22, no.4 (Winter 1998/1999), 100.
[141] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 103.
[142] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 103.
[143] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 103.

lower-middle class communities, the "web of reciprocal dependencies" that once brought people together in community for mutual support and aid, has been weakened by mistrust and increasing individualism.[144]

This grocery-list of societal ills in the United States is all too familiar. The confluence of these challenges is not caused by the longevity revolution alone, and no single solution will resolve them. However, Henkin, Kingson and other gerontologists assert that acknowledging the powerful impact of the longevity revolution is essential if society is to develop an "intergenerational vision." Intergenerational vision, they assert, promotes "interdependence across the life course and a recognition of the contributions of all ages," which can do much "to strengthen the nation's social compact and help us face the challenges ahead."[145]

Henkin offers her concept of Community for All Ages (CFAA) as a comprehensive response to the longevity revolution. More than a program, CFAA is a new way of understanding society itself, which Henkin believes will be necessary as the nature of the family changes. Long understood to be the cornerstone of American society, the three-generation family - children, parents, and grandparents - must evolve to include a network of non-biological 'kin' in order "to support the growing number of older adults."[146] A new definition of family is the foundation of a CFAA. According to Henkin and Kingson, this new family will be a "group of interdependent people with shared values, goals and responsibilities and a long-term commitment to one another and their community."[147]

In order for CFAAs to emerge, Henkin and Kingson assert that four vital practices must be embraced in local communities. First, community leaders must "think expansively," and

[144] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 103.
[145] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 100.
[146] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 100.
[147] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 100-101.

"rather than creating boundaries to determine who is or who is not part of community . . .[They must] widen the circle of 'we.'"[148] Second, older people must heed the call of Maggie Kuhn, former convenor of the Gray Panthers, to "act as elders of the tribe, looking out for the best interests of the future and preserving the precious compact between the generations."[149] The third vital practice is that younger adults and children must eschew their independent streak and show older adults that their skills, knowledge and experience are needed, as studies show that "the willingness of people to participate in civic life depends on whether they believe that their participation matters and that they are connected to the community."[150] Fourth, and finally, diversity must increase - generational diversity, racial diversity, gender diversity, class diversity, etc. Because cultural biases in the United States perpetuate racist, sexist, white supremacist, classist norms, diversity is likely to increase only through intentionality and long-term commitment. Without diversity, CFAAs, like other communities, reinforce stereotypes and fall back into we-they ways of thinking and operating that break the social compact and fail to meet the needs of its people.[151]

Henkin is convinced that US society can meet the challenges of the longevity revolution, if citizens of all ages are willing to renegotiate the social compact and come together in diverse relationships and communities.

Age and Generation-Related Themes in Churchgoers' Experiences and Ideas

In summary, key themes rising in this chapter include 'generation' as a category, the role of ageism, generation as a form of difference, the role of religious institutions in the longevity

[148] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 103.
[149] Henkin and Kingson, "Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda," 101-102.
[150] Nancy Henkin and Jenny Zapf, "How Communities Can Promote Civic Engagement of People Age 50-Plus," *Generations* 30, no.4 (Winter 2006/2007): 72.
[151] Corita Brown and Nancy Henkin, "Building Communities for All Ages: Lessons Learned from an Intergenerational Community-building Initiative," *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 24 (2014): 63, DOI: 10.1002/casp.2172.

revolution, and renegotiation of the social compact. This final section of the chapter will focus on the presence and/or absence of these themes in the reflections of churchgoers who participated in focus groups. While the churchgoers were asked to reflect on their understanding of the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in their congregation, they were not asked to articulate how their perspectives on intergenerational relationships relate to wider cultural or sociological themes. These more extended reflections may be relevant, but they are beyond the scope of this project. For successful exercise of the pastoral theological method outlined by Neuger, it is sufficient to glean from the experiences and ideas expressed in the line of inquiry pursued in the focus groups.

The purpose of exploring how and where themes related to gerontology surface in the focus group conversations is to understand the implicit and explicit ideas churchgoers have about relationships between people of different generations. How do churchgoers understand the notion of generations? Are they influenced by bias for or against people of other generations? What are they observing, if anything, about how changing demographics might be impacting their congregation? The experiences and ideas churchgoers have about relationships and age shape their assumptions, beliefs, and actions in the relationships they have in their congregations.

'Generation' as a Category

As the above discussion of the history of age revealed, people in the United States have a relationship with the concepts of age and aging that is complex and has changed over time. At points, older adults have been respected and relied upon by people in younger generations. At points, older adults have suffered the de-valuing of their work and concerns that their increasing dependency on younger generations will become a burden.[152] Younger adults have been seen as

[152] Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land,* 51 and 115.

ignorant and in need of moral guidance by older adults and, in other circumstances, as agile and capable.[153]

In the midst of such varying perceptions of age, attempts have been made to define generations in age groups: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, etc., and research suggests that a majority of adults in the US identify with these groups.[154] Though focus group participants reflected that they recognized these designations and the group with which they identified, they stated that the notion of a "generation" is not understood by them to be fixed and that generational lines get blurrier as people get older. However, older and younger adults made reference to "young old" adults and "old old" adults, or to "active" and "elderly" adults, acknowledgement that they think of older adults in more than one category, even though no one directly referenced the fact that older adults are a growing percentage of the population.

At least three older adults and one younger adult expressed pride and a sense of satisfaction that their congregation has the full spectrum of generations present. One older adult beamed as she described a project in which all generations of the congregation participated and in which "we made a lot of friends" across generations. Churchgoers from another congregation acknowledged with sadness that a generation - typically understood to be Millennials or 20-something adults - is missing from their congregation. Two churchgoers noted that they were one of only two or three 20-something adults in their congregation and that "the hole in the fabric" of the congregation is disturbing to them.

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[153] Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land*, 15-16, and Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick, *Vital Involvement*, 301.

[154] Sean T. Lyons, Linda Schweitzer, Michael J. Urick and Lisa Kuron, "A dynamic social-ecological model of generational identity in the workplace," *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 17, no.1 (2019): 4.

Perceptions that particular beliefs are held by specific generations appear to shape expectations and assumptions regarding what older or younger adults might do. Older and younger adults referred to older adults as being more theologically and politically conservative, and they all expressed concern about potential "generational clashes." A younger adult expressed frustration that older adults seem to resist the idea of the congregation becoming more inclusive. Several older adults expressed frustration that younger parents are too permissive in their parenting and that "someone needs to deal with the energy of those kids."

In spite of concerns over potentially significant differences between "the generations," younger and older adults overwhelmingly agreed that even though people of different generations "are in the world differently," having an age-diverse congregation is essential. A younger adult said, "Without [elders and kids], I don't know if church is really a thing for me anymore." Younger and older adults commented that a mix of ages is preferable because it is "more stimulating" and because without people of other age groups they would "miss a lot of laughter and fun."

The Role of Ageism

The word ageism could refer to bias against persons of any age. However, in contemporary culture in the United States, the word is typically used to refer to bias against older adults. Though "age is the only social category [of difference] that everyone may eventually join," age-based prejudice persists.[155] Because Episcopalians tend to be older, on average, than the general population, it might seem that ageism would be less prevalent in Episcopal congregations.[156] There is no evidence that this is the case. In fact, some research has even

[155] North and Fiske, "An Inconvenienced Youth?", 982.
[156] Hadaway, "Episcopal Congregations Overview," 2.

suggested “that older people themselves are the greater culprits” in commission of ageist comments and actions.[157]

As noted above, both younger and older adult churchgoers expressed a desire for their congregations to be age-diverse. Some younger adults not only appreciate having older adults in their congregation, but also express their affection by calling some of them, “church moms,” “honorary grandfathers,” or “courtesy aunts.” A number of young adult churchgoers stated that it was an older adult who initiated connection with them, saying “come sit with me” in worship or wrapping them in a bear hug during the passing of the peace. Older adult churchgoers recall “feeling valued” by children and young adults when they served as Sunday School teachers or “feeling heard” when younger adults listened to their stories or asked for advice at fellowship events.

In spite of these reports of good relations between people of different ages, older adults reported a number of ageist incidents. In the focus group conversations, several older adults reported feeling “pushed down,” “pushed aside,” or “underutilized” by younger adults in the congregation. One older adult stated that they felt that all of the attention is on the children and none is on the elders, then shared an experience in which a room used by older adults was repurposed for use by children of the congregation without consulting the older adults. Another older adult opined that younger adults were not appropriately appreciative of all that the older adults have done, noting that, “we’ve paid our dues.”

The existence of ageism in Episcopal congregations may also reflected in frustrations expressed by younger adults. One younger adult noted that elders can be overly critical, asking too many questions and sharing too many unsolicited opinions. Several younger adults shared

[157] North and Fiske, “An Inconvenienced Youth?”, 986.

experiences in which older adults were manipulatively controlling in group situations, attempting to force the group to follow their agenda. Younger adults also reported being invited to "help out," with and event or activity, only to discover that their suggestions were not wanted only their assistance carrying and arranging things. It is impossible to know the extent of the influence of ageism in these situations, but one thing is clear: older adults were much more complimentary of younger adults than younger adults were of older adults.

In comments about who to invite to church, older adults and younger adults emphasized wanting and needing "young families" to join the church. At least three older adults said wistfully that they "love to see the kids" at church. Tone and contents of comments revealed a bit of desperation about getting families involved in the church. Several older adults mentioned that there seems to be a "sense of hopefulness in the younger generations." Young families seemed to be the simplest way to resolve concerns about the longevity of the congregations and continuity of its ministries. An older adult feared that if the congregation became a group of only older adults, "it will die off real quick."

Generation as a Form of Difference

The Episcopal Church and its congregations are committing significant time, attention, and money to fulfillment of the baptismal promise "to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of very human being."[158] The focus of these endeavors is to raise awareness about Episcopalians' sins of white supremacy, racism, sexism, and cisgenderism. Ageism and classism are rarely mentioned, though both are prevalent in Episcopal congregations. There is a fledgling movement to raise awareness in Episcopal congregations about these forms of bias and

[158] Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer 1979*, 305.

oppression, but resources like Ashton Applewhite's *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* are not yet making the rounds of book clubs and discussion groups in the denomination.

Older adults and younger adults agree: age-diversity is crucial for congregations. At least eight older and younger adults stated that church is one of the few places to develop intergenerational relationships. However, there is a reluctance among some churchgoers to emphasize intergenerational relationships. Several younger adults shared that they felt it was better "not to make a big deal" of age. One younger adult stated that they didn't want intergenerational relationships to be a focus because that might make the relationships more awkward or uncomfortable. There is cognitive dissonance reflected in these statements, the kind of dissonance that is often present when people are talking about a topic about which they have unresolved internal tension.

Though younger adults and older adults express a desire to engage in intergenerational relationships in their congregations, they also expressed their awareness that differences in theology, assumptions about life, expectations around behavior in church, leadership styles, and a host of other things are a frustrating but normal and natural part of intergenerational relationships in their congregations. They also reported that, by and large, nothing was said or done in their congregations to name, explore or resolve these tensions. A young adult churchgoer shared an experience in which "hurtful things were said" by an older adult churchgoer in a conversation about same sex marriage, but the younger adult never followed up with the older adult about the comment. An older adult churchgoer expressed frustration over children grabbing up the food at coffee hour before older adults could get there. When the older adult was asked what they did about the situation, the older adult reported "standing back and pouting."

Churchgoers participating in focus groups said they desire age-diversity in their congregations, and they are proud of having an array of generations present. They are also often aware of situations in their congregation where there are tensions due to diversity and differences in age. The formation and duration of intergenerational relationships in the congregation will be shaped by the ways in which the congregation learns to meaningfully engage the challenges that arise in contexts where diversity is present.

The Role of Religious Institutions in the Longevity Revolution

The work of scholars and theorists is typically accurate and often worthy of note, but their ideas and concerns sometimes do not wend their way into the awareness of people in day-to-day life. Such appears to be the case with the notion of the Longevity Revolution. A variety of sources, from newspaper articles to lengthy books, concur with the assessments of Achenbaum and Henkin. Shifting demographics are already impacting the way families operate. An increasingly large percentage of Americans are over the age of 55, and there are now two generations of "older" people in the United States. No one in the focus groups spoke directly about the fact that the population of the United States is aging and family dynamics are changing.

Churchgoers in the focus groups offered only indirect references to the role their congregation plays as an institution among other institutions, and there were only a few of these. A few churchgoers compared their congregation with their work and other institutions, commenting that they believe that intergenerational relationships are more likely to occur in their congregation than in other contexts.

The comments of older and younger adult churchgoers revealed that they believe their congregation - not just the individuals within it - has a role to play in a contemporary world

which they perceive to be "more challenging today than in the past." They expressed their desire for the church to become "meaningful" in the wider community, though they did not specify how this might happen.

Renegotiating the Social Compact

When Henkin speaks of renegotiating the social compact, she is speaking of communities changing so that they can thrive in a changed world, a world that now has an increasing number of older adults and relatively fewer younger adults and children. A May 23, 2021 front-page-above-the-fold article in the Sunday *New York Times* described the world-wide challenges posed by increasing longevity and decreasing fertility rates. The following day, the *New York Times* reported that this article was the most-read article of the day and garnered over 1,600 comments online.

What does the attention currently turning toward this topic mean? Does it mean that people are just now learning about the changes in demographics which have already begun to occur? Possibly. How long will it take for communities and congregations to adapt to these new realities? Unknown. Because change is difficult, institutions like religious congregations typically do not adapt quickly to new realities, especially when the institution is already struggling in the midst of decline.

There was no mention in the focus group conversations about congregations making changes to anticipate or to respond to the new demographic realities associated with the longevity revolution. There was also no mention of these congregations changing in response to the decline in membership that is occurring in most congregations. Churchgoers participating in the focus groups did express concern about not "catching the Millennials" and the need to get young adults and children "into the church." This glancing awareness that there are people in

certain demographics missing from church activities may be a gateway into broader discussions about the longevity revolution, its impact on congregations, and how congregations might respond.

Conclusion: Reflection on Intergenerational Relationships

What can be learned about the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships from the dialogue between these sociological resources and the experiences and ideas shared by churchgoers in focus groups in four Episcopal congregations?

Churchgoers participating in focus groups and gerontologists agree that intergenerational relationships can play a significant role in realignment of communities. Churchgoers in focus groups stated that they believe there is staggering potential in intergenerational relationships for bridgebuilding in a variety of ways. Several churchgoers noted that when people feel supported they are able to "do things that are risky" and "to let their voice be heard." Achenbaum and Henkin see the need for generations to work together in to address the huge demographic changes that are already underway.

For a congregation to be a "fully engaged community," there has to be engagement "across age," according to older adults and younger adults participating in focus groups. Thus, another role of intergenerational relationships is that they are a bridge that needs to be in place for congregations and communities to thrive. The fact that "age is everything in popular culture," and that "people are appealed to by their age group," is something over which any single congregation or community has no control. What congregations and communities can do is to build bridges between generations - one-on-one and in small groups - to reduce the sense of powerlessness that comes with walls that are created by assumptions about others and labels

assigned to them out of ignorance or fear. Henkin's concept of "Community for All Ages," presumes exactly this kind of intergenerational bridges.

According to churchgoers participating in the focus groups, the meaning of intergenerational relationships is *hope*. While this will be more fully explored in the next chapter, the core idea expressed by churchgoers is that people of all ages are not only desired, but also needed, to create healthy community. As people of all ages see others unlike themselves committed with them to a shared goal, they have increasing hope for the future. When Achenbaum speaks of religious institutions making a difference in the longevity revolution, it is because he believes that healthy, multi-generational religious institutions can be agents of change in the wider community.

The potential of intergenerational relationships, according to focus group participants, is "staggering." Many focus group participants concurred with one younger adult who stated that with strong intergenerational relationships, "ultimately we'll be able to change the world." This is an extraordinary claim, but one with which sociologists concur. Achenbaum and Henkin do not suggest that there is some sort of program or process that will be sufficient to meet the challenges of the longevity revolution. Rather, they believe that relationships between people who are different from one another will serve as the warp and woof of a fabric strong enough to hold people together as the society itself changes from an orientation of nuclear families to families of choice.

In the following chapter of this project report, these preliminary findings will be brought into dialogue with the theological resources. Some constructive theological proposals will be made, and the potential impact of the findings of this project will be discussed. A summary of the implications and significance of this study will be proffered. In conclusion, some potential

challenges to this study will be identified and discussed as will some opportunities for further research and analysis.

CHAPTER 6 - KEY FINDINGS, CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL PROPOSALS, AND CONCLUSION

"What has been learned about the role, meaning, and potential of intergenerational relationships in the four Episcopal congregations which hosted focus groups?" "What does it matter?" "How might beliefs and practices change as a result of what has been learned?" These are some of the questions which are engaged in this chapter. Work with the components of Neuger's spiral now comes to completion. The narrative data from the focus groups is further analyzed as it is brought into dialogue with resources from ecclesiology and gerontology. Interpretations of the data are proffered, and proposals are made for constructive moves - redefinitions, ministry foci, etc. - in Episcopal ecclesiology, gerontology, and congregational belief and practice.

This chapter wraps up as it addresses challenges to this project, its methodologies, and its conclusions. Opportunities for further research and analysis are identified, as well. Based on the learnings of this project and the questions that remain unanswered, the guiding questions of this project are evaluated and reframed, inviting further engagement with this topic.

Summary of Key Findings

The Role of Intergenerational Relationships

What differentiates this research study from most articles and books about intergenerational relationships in congregations is that it is grounded in a practical theological approach which relies on the lived experiences of churchgoers themselves. What difference does this make? Change in the lives of individuals and groups begins where they actually are - physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically and relationally. If constructive proposals for better theology and practice are to be efficacious, then these proposals must resonate with churchgoers as things that will make a difference in their lives.

A review of literature in the field of congregational development and intergenerational relationships reveals that most of the literature on intergenerational ministry is "how to" literature. Some of this literature is almost purely anecdotal, though much of it is grounded in some sociologically-sound concepts. For example, in his book, *Faithful Generations: Effective Ministry Across Generational Lines*, John Mabry draws on the work of sociologists William Strauss and Neil Howe on generational theory to support his hypotheses and conclusions about relationships between generations in congregations.[159] Some of the literature in the field of congregational development and intergenerational relationships, including some of the chapters in *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating, and Serving Faithfully,* are grounded in qualitative studies that evaluate intergenerational Christian education programs.[160]

The qualitative research carried out for this doctoral project includes not only unique conversation partners in ecclesiology and gerontology, but also fills an apparent gap in the literature of the fields of Episcopal ecclesiology, gerontology, and congregational development. Very few of the articles and books on building intergenerational relationships in congregation incorporate any qualitative data gleaned from conversations with lay people in congregations. In this research study, churchgoers were asked to share their personal experiences and perceptions of intergenerational relationships in their congregations. In bringing this narrative data into dialogue with resources from ecclesiology and gerontology, three key findings about the role of intergenerational relationships in participating congregations have been identified.

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[159] John R. Mabry. *Faithful Generations: Effective Ministry Across Generational Lines* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013).

[160] Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto, *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating, and Serving Faithfully*, edited by Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto (Naugatuck: CT: Lifelong Faith Associates, 2014), Kindle.

First, intergenerational relationships make a congregation sustainable and desirable. In an era of church decline, congregations need to be sustainable and desirable, and churchgoers identify engagement in intergenerational relationships as having these affects on their faith community.

Younger adult churchgoers shared that people of different generations "just are in the world differently," and so they need older adult churchgoers in their lives for "guidance," "encouragement," "perspective," "patience" and to remind them that if older adults have "lived through it," they can, too. Older adult churchgoers said that not only are younger adults often "energetic," "full of hope," and "fun," but also younger adults are needed if the congregation is to survive the thrive over time. As one older adult said, if there are only older adults in the congregation, "it will die off real quick."

When describing intergenerational relationships, the phrase most often used by younger adult and older adult churchgoers is "give and take." A younger adult acknowledged that, "historically, . . . intergenerational relationships could be oppressive." The kind of intergenerational relationships sought by both older and younger adults are characterized by "mutual respect," shared traditions, and "connections down through time."

From an ecclesiological perspective, the work of Letty Russell signals the likelihood that one of the reasons intergenerational relationships make a congregation sustainable and desirable is that the presence of relationships across age difference signals that the congregation is an inclusive, hospitable one. An inclusive community is a place where people feel safe being who they are and safe taking risks getting to know others. A congregation where people get to know each other is a congregation that is an enjoyable, desirable place to be, and likely a community that is dynamic and sustainable.

If Achenbaum and Henkin are correct in their assessment of the demographic shifts happening in the US and around the world, intergenerational communities of choice are increasingly essential for the thriving of society. Congregations are a place where intergenerational relationships can be practiced. To enhance the intergenerational relationships in congregations, Achenbaum suggests something that might be perceived as counterintuitive: nurturing the faith of the older adults in the congregation. The current focus in many mainline congregations is wooing young adults and young families to attend church, but Achenbaum encourages congregations to take the long view. Building community is about relationships, and people invest in relationships when they have been nurtured themselves. When spiritually nurtured, older adults can then extend welcome and care to others and mentor them in the faith.

Second, the development and nurture of intergenerational relationships should serve as a goal in congregations. Older and younger adults identified intergenerational relationships as essential in their congregation, yet there is little or no intentionality about developing them. They languish and their great potential goes unrealized. Churchgoers described a wide range of intergenerational encounters, conversations, and activities in their congregations. Churchgoers also readily identified the aspects of these activities or events that enhanced development of relationships within and between generations. However, no churchgoers identified intergenerational relationships as a stated goal of their congregation.

Several older adult and younger adult churchgoers commented on how vitally important it is to them to be a part of a congregation with people of other generations. One younger adult focus group participant stated that without people of other generations, the congregation would seem "monotonous." Another younger adult churchgoer stated that without a diversity of age-groups, the congregation would become "an echo chamber," where there would likely be little or

no space for dissent. Older adults stated that church would be "boring" and "terrible" without a diversity of age-groups; another older adult commented that with only older adults, the congregation might seem like "a private club." Churchgoers were so clear and vociferous about their desire and need for a diversity of age-groups at church that it is curious that intergenerational relationships were not a goal in any of their congregations.

In an era of efforts to intentionally include people of all races, genders, classes, etc., it is intriguing that intentional inclusion of people of all ages is not a part of those efforts. Perhaps this is because congregations assume that they already have intergenerational diversity. Or perhaps this is because they think other kinds of diversity are more important. Or perhaps this is because congregations have given up reaching out to all generations because they don't think young adults are interested in church. As the old adage says, what you pay attention to grows. If congregations are intentional about cultivating intergenerational relationships, they will grow - and begin to fulfill their vast potential.

Resources from ecclesiology and gerontology support the notion that intergenerational relationships are important enough in the life of the congregation to appropriately be a goal of ministry. Core ecclesiological concepts described by Marshall, Russell, and Kwok - unity, diversity, hospitality, inclusion, liberation and justice - all presume relationships with people different than themselves. Achenbaum's proposals for an enhanced role for religious institutions and Henkin's ideas about Community for All Ages rely on people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, abilities, skills, interests, and personalities for community to be strong and sustainable in the midst of the tremendous demographic change, the beginnings of which are already under way.

Third, intergenerational relationships are a place where misunderstandings can be bridged and mistakes can be mended. In focus group conversations, churchgoers were asked to describe positive experiences of intergenerational relationships in their congregation. Then they were asked to describe negative experiences of intergenerational relationships in their congregation. The two original purposes of this were to attempt to expose positivity bias and to allow any ageist biases or assumptions to surface. A noteworthy discovery was made. Younger adult and older adult churchgoers reported an array of negative experiences, the vast majority of which they identified as 'no big deal.' They also reported that almost all of these negative experiences have not been named, discussed or addressed in any way.

Do these unresolved minor misunderstandings and mistakes have an ongoing impact on intergenerational relationships? If so, what is that impact? And what might be the impact of repentance and forgiveness in intergenerational relationships, in particular?

When younger adults and older adults reported hurts suffered as a result of things said or done by people of another generation, there often appeared to be pain, sadness, and/or regret. However, though some issues had gone unaddressed for months, years or decades, those sharing about these issues were not making judgmental remarks or demonizing those who were involved in the misunderstandings or mistakes. Might this be an indication that these relationships are ones in which small risks might be taken with a potential for large reward - in the form of healed and strengthened relationships? What if intergenerational relationships came to be known as a good context in which to practice repentance, forgiveness, and healing?

Both the Episcopal ecclesiologists and the gerontologists whose work informs this project are certain of one thing: health in one-on-one and small group intergenerational relationships is an essential part of mutual support and care for one another in an era of dramatic societal change.

According to Achenbaum, religious institutions are a natural place for people of all ages to practice working together and building trust. Raising awareness of what has gone wrong and seeking to mend it is a fundamental exercise in respect for self and others. Older and younger adults stated that intergenerational relationships have great value to them. Perhaps this makes them a context in which it is safer to engage the challenges of repairing relationships.

The Meaning of Intergenerational Relationships

An array of meanings might be assigned to the data gathered in focus group conversations. However, the relevant question for the purposes of this research study is, "what meaning(s) are *the churchgoers who participated in the focus groups* attaching to intergenerational relationships in their congregation. The answer to this question must rise from the data, from the experiences and ideas shared by focus group participants.

First, churchgoers believe that the presence of intergenerational relationships means that there is health and wholeness in the congregation. No one wants to be a part of a floundering, failing community. Yet congregations have been labeled as "declining" and "dying" and "decreasingly significant" in recent years, not only in the media, but also in their own denominations, and sometimes by their parish leadership, as well. Many - perhaps most - congregations have looked for a life raft in the midst of the choppy waters of membership decline, and they have come to believe that young families can keep them afloat. Indeed, this appears to be a commonsense approach to solving an obvious problem. Unfortunately, looking at young adults and families this way instrumentalizes them. It values them primarily for their usefulness.

The presence of intergenerational relationships in a congregation is a true sign of health and wholeness when people know they are loved, known and accepted for who they are. Once

they know they are valued by the community, then they are willing to participate in and support the community. As one younger churchgoer stated, "get to know me first, then ask me to do stuff."

Building relationships is time- and labor-intensive work. But according to older and younger adults, this investment is worth it. Older adults stated that relationships with younger adults keep them "vibrant and thinking." Younger adults spoke of their experiences of intergenerational relationships in their congregations as relationships in which "feeding goes both ways." Younger adults also identified the mutuality in intergenerational relationships as something that makes their congregations strong and makes church enjoyable.

Ecclesiologist Paul Marshall might remind churchgoers that inclusion is a *practice*, part of a communal pattern of life grounded in a belief in the dignity of every human being as a beloved child of God. In a congregation where everyone is valued, people are more likely to risk reaching out to others because they are more confident in their own value and belovedness. Differences of all sorts can pose challenges in relationships. However, none of the churchgoers thought their congregation would be improved by having only people of their age group present.

Second, the presence of intergenerational relationships signals hope for the present and future of the congregation. Churchgoers need this hope in the face of the reality that being a part of a Christian congregation in today's secular society is countercultural. As the reflections at the end of Chapter 4 show, both older adult and younger adult churchgoers believe that intergenerational relationships mean hope for their congregation. Churchgoers stated that they believe intergenerational relationships signal stability and the potential for longevity in their congregations. Possibly because many older adult and younger adult churchgoers have had the experience of having more than one generation of their own family participate in church

together, they see intergenerational relationships as a sign that multiple generations of families might continue to be present in the congregation. Older adult and younger adult churchgoers who do not have extended family nearby stated that, “church has become family.”

It is possible that some older adult Episcopal churchgoers subconsciously see intergenerational relationships in their congregations as a hopeful sign that congregations are once again becoming the growing, energetic communities they were post-World War II, when families were hungering for the rhythms of family and community and Sunday schools were bursting at the seams with neighborhood children. Recalling past glories can be a negative thing if these memories result in attempts to return to the past. However, recalling past glories can be a positive thing if such recollections energize congregations to learn about how current cultural and demographic dynamics might be impacting congregations - and about what can be done to minister to older adults, the demographic rapidly on the rise in the US.

Achenbaum and Henkin see intergenerational relationships as key resources in meeting the challenges that lie ahead. Congregations which have invested energy in the development of intergenerational relationships, and which have weathered the challenges inherent in relationships in which difference plays a role, may be well-positioned to help the wider community face the challenges of change - and to bear witness to the benefits of developing and sustaining intergenerational relationships.

The Potential of Intergenerational Relationships

Many older adult and younger adult churchgoers agreed: the potential of intergenerational relationships in their congregations is “staggering.” Several younger adult churchgoers signaled their agreement with a statement made by one of their peers: through increasing development of intergenerational relationships in their congregations, “ultimately,

we'll be able to change the world." How will this potential be realized? Several older adult churchgoers suggested that this potential will be reached through balancing older traditions and newer ideas. A younger adult churchgoer stated their belief that the potential of intergenerational relationships will be realized by taking into consideration what each generation wants and needs out of the community.

It might be tempting to believe that these statements about the potential of intergenerational relationships were made by churchgoers whose perceptions were increasingly rose-colored by the end of generative focus group conversations. However, their upbeat views of the potential of intergenerational relationships were tempered by their sober-sided expressions of ideas about what it would take to realize this potential.

First, the potential of intergenerational relationships in congregations will be realized as church becomes "more meaningful." What, exactly, was meant by the young adult who made this comment? The focus group conversation turned in another direction and neither the young adult who made this comment nor anyone else answered the question directly. However, examination of the stories from focus group participants yields information about what is meaningful to the churchgoers in their church community: relationships - relationships with others in which they are loved and accepted, worshipping together with people of all ages not only in the pews but also taking on leadership roles in worship, and working together across generations to serve others.

Before anyone in the focus groups talked about the importance of relationships for their own sake, there was a clue that foreshadowed the importance of relationships-for-their-own-sake in the conversations regarding positive intergenerational relationships. The list of activities in which churchgoers experienced positive intergenerational relationships included almost every

imaginable activity - from worship to bread-baking to men's breakfasts to yardwork to social service activities. Clearly, the common denominator was not the activity but, rather, something else. And that "something else" is the relationship that develops during the course of the activity. In many cases this relationship was, churchgoers noted, with someone they otherwise would not have known or would have "hung out with."

A commonly identified problem with building relationships in congregations is lack of time spent together. Fifty years ago, "going to church" was four to seven hour affair every Sunday, with people coming to church for Sunday School, socializing with others in the transition between Sunday School and worship, and then worshipping together. In many cases, people then invited friends and/or newcomers to the congregation home for Sunday dinner. Today, families often say that they cannot find even two hours of their Sunday to attend worship and to grab a donut on their way through coffee hour to attend their child's dance recital or soccer practice.

It seems that "more meaningful" church evolves from a combination of intention and time. Intention to be present and to love the other person(s) present. Time to get to know each other and to engage in activities grounded in shared values.

Younger adult and older adult churchgoers from one congregation shared about their experiences going to coffee with other churchgoers in the congregation. Their congregation seeks to help churchgoers build deeper relationships with each other through "coffee conversations." Based on a community organizing model, volunteers in the congregation are trained to host one-on-one conversations within specific boundaries and very intentional, with a goal of getting to know each other better. Older adult and younger adult churchgoers commented extensively on the good experiences they have had in these conversations. Focus group

participants talked more about these coffee conversations than about any other congregational activity or event.

Researchers from the Pew Research Center would express no surprise at all that these "coffee conversation" experiences would be seen as transformational. In 2018, Pew published research findings from a study regarding "where Americans find meaning in life." The study revealed that, by more than double, the thing that gives people the greatest sense of meaning is connection: connection with family, connection with God/faith, and connection with friends.[161] According to the research, these three "connections" give people a greater sense of meaning than career, money, hobbies/activities, health, home and learning combined.[162]

In summary, then, it seems that an essential thing that makes church meaningful is *relationships*. Congregations would apparently be well-advised to articulate the relational aspects of the activities they are already doing, and/or to shape additional events/activities/worship, with the development and enhancement of relationships in mind.

Second, in order to realize the potential of intergenerational relationships in congregations, clergy and lay leaders must facilitate the passing of leadership from one generation to the next. In the focus group conversations, significant attention was given to consideration of where power lies in congregations: who has it and how it can/should be managed. Power dynamics was the topic about which focus group participants shared the most incidents of tension and frustration between the generations.

Younger adults indicated that full inclusion and joyful participation in the life of the congregation means taking on leadership responsibilities that fit their skills, talents, and interests.

[161] Pew Research Center, "Where Americans Find Meaning in Life," November 20, 2018, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/.

[162] Pew Research Center, "Where Americans Find Meaning in Life."

Younger adults stated that they do not want to assume responsibilities just because something needs to be done. They want older adults in the congregation to get to know them and to find out "what are you good at?" or "what do you like to do?" Younger adults expressed a desire to respond to compelling, specific requests that are in alignment with their values. Younger adults expressed willingness to "step out of their comfort zone" in response to requests of this sort. Younger adults want older adults to "hold some space" for them and invite them to take on leadership responsibilities. They expressed frustration at older adults' "conscious and subconscious attempts to control" leadership roles and decisions, as well as older adults' apparent desire to do things for younger families without asking the younger adults what they need.

Older adults indicated that they enjoy congregational life when "everyone is working together." Several older adults expressed pride in their congregations and in the contributions older adults have made to grow and sustain their congregations. Older adults seemed keenly aware of the hard work that it takes to keep a congregation functioning. Several said that they felt they had "done their duty" and wanted to "pass on" responsibility, though a few made comments indicating that they were not going to "check out." Several older adults expressed their desire to see young people assume leadership roles in the congregation. A couple of these same older adults expressed a need to maintain influence in leadership of the congregation even when younger adults step forward to serve.

Several older adults expressed that they sometimes feel "pushed down," "pushed aside," and/or "underutilized. These older adults expressed strong feelings about the needs of young families and children being prioritized over their own needs and the needs of older adults who are homebound or less active than they used to be. Older adults expressed a desire not to be

"forgotten," and commented that there is often a lot of loneliness among older adults that goes unnoticed and unaddressed.

Stepping back from these expressions of specific needs, concerns and hopes, three observations surface based the comments made in focus group conversations. First, older adults and younger adults share tremendous concern about the ongoing life of the congregation. Second, there appears to be common understanding between younger adults and older adults that transitions in congregational life need to happen, or at least that they *will* happen whether or not they are desired. Third, while the tone of each focus group conversation was predominantly light-hearted, when the conversation turned toward issues of leadership the conversations became more serious. While the reasons for this seriousness were not explored in the focus group conversations, further investigation into this pattern might prove useful.

Comments from younger adult and older adult churchgoers on the topic of leadership appear to be grounded in one assumption that no older adult or younger adult said explicitly: 'this congregation is important to me, and I care passionately about what happens to it.' Perhaps overt expression of this apparent underlying reality would in some way shift the tone and content of the conversation about power dynamics in the congregation.

Proposals for Constructive Moves in Episcopal Ecclesiology and the Beliefs and Practices of Congregations

Navigating all the way around Neuger's pastoral theological spiral involved hearing the narratives of churchgoers in focus groups in four congregations, engaging with contemporary Episcopal ecclesiology as expressed by theologians Marshall, Russell, and Kwok, and exploring the work of two gerontologists, Achenbaum and Henkin, on aging, the longevity revolution, and

intergenerational relationships.[163] Together, these resources provide a basis on which to make the following proposals for constructive moves in Episcopal ecclesiology and in the beliefs and practices of congregations. The following constructive pastoral theological proposals emphasize transforming practices that congregations may adopt to enhance relationships and spiritual dynamism in congregations:

- Cultivate a congregational culture of caring curiosity,
- Embrace difference and challenge biases, and
- Engage in repentance and promote healing where oppression and injustice have occurred.

The first constructive pastoral theological proposal that rises from this research study is to cultivate a congregational culture of caring curiosity. After the extensive exploration of intergenerational relationships in this research project, readers might find it curious that this proposal does not specifically advocate curiosity about people of other ages. I believe that congregations too often limit their potential for personal and corporation transformation by focusing on one approach or aspect of difference to the exclusion of others. If caring curiosity about others is a key ministry emphasis, then relationships of all kinds will grow and blossom, including intergenerational relationships. Following are four brief reflections on this constructive proposal.

First, caring curiosity about others is rooted in a posture of humility, of confessing that there are many things that one does know and needs to learn. Russell points to the vital importance of this posture of humility when she articulates how and why it is that "church in the round" is not complete without people who differ from us.

[163] Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 33.

Second, people are often reluctant to be curious about building relationships with others and even more reluctant to be curious about building relationships with people who appear to differ from them. This is true for an array of reasons, ranging from people feeling like they do not know what to talk about to people being afraid that they will offend someone without being aware of it. Therefore, it is important for the leadership of the congregation not only to encourage people to be curious about each other, but also to emphasize the value and importance of relationships across difference in race, gender, age, ability, etc.

Third, churchgoers who participated in focus groups for this research study identified intergenerational relationships as having tremendous potential. They also identified intergenerational relationships as enjoyable and non-threatening. When intentionally engaging in relationships across difference, it might be helpful for people to begin their practice of caring curiosity by engaging with people of different ages, then anxiety might more easily give way to curiosity in relationships where differences seem more pronounced.

Fourth, encountering the image of God in people of different classes, races, abilities, ages, genders, etc. thickens our theology of the incarnation and creation. As theologian Marilyn McCord Adams, one of my seminary professors, used to say, "God is very, very big, and we are very, very small." Our theological imagination is expanded as we encounter people who differ from us, yet in whom, through caring curiosity, we discover aspects of the Divine which are new to us. Even in attempts understand more of God and of human nature, it is crucial that people are not instrumentalized, are not "used to get to God." As Marshall reminds us, it is respect for the dignity of every human being that draws us back again and again to appreciation and enjoyment of each individual for their own sake.

The second constructive pastoral theological proposal that rises out of this research study is to embrace difference and challenge biases as awareness of these realities increases. Too often, difference between people is minimized rather than being lifted up and honored. As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to challenge white people across the United States to value all people equally and to seek justice for Black Americans who have been murdered, the response from many white Americans is to say that "all lives matter." There are a number of significant problems with this response; perhaps chief among them is the reality that this statement belies the reality of the horrific oppression and injustice that Black Americans have suffered at the hands of white Americans.

The comments of younger adult and older adult churchgoers in all participating congregations reveal an array of misunderstandings, missteps, and mistakes made between people of different generations. But no one in any of the focus groups connected these difficulties with the ageism so prevalent in US culture. Marginalized people who have suffered various forms of oppression are currently bearing witness in the public arena that similar patterns of misunderstandings and mistakes exist in other kinds of relationships where differences in race, gender, class, etc.

The focus groups for this research study were conducted in Fall 2018 through Winter 2020. Though the Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 following the murder of Travon Martin, it was not until after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 that heightened awareness of racism stirred in many Episcopal congregations. While most Episcopalians have a long way to go in understanding and eschewing racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression, many congregations are providing book studies, panel discussions, and immersion opportunities

through which Episcopalians can begin to come to terms with their white supremacy and to engage in repentance and reparations.

Unfortunately, the presence of white supremacy and racism in American culture has become politicized, and many white Americans are struggling to articulate their own role in these forms of oppression. Ageism is typically not included in the oppressive ideas and behaviors which many Episcopal churchgoers are currently working to identify, eschew and diminish in their contexts. However, identifying and challenging ageism would benefit Episcopal congregations in at least three ways.

First, many white people of privilege feel threatened when asked to engage their white supremacist and racist tendencies. Since most Episcopalians are over the age of 55 and have likely experienced ageism, an invitation to reflect on the ageist oppression they have suffered might stir empathy in them and open their eyes to age-related oppression. Once their eyes are opened to one form of oppression, it may prove less difficult for them to name and challenge other forms of oppression.

Second, discussions about ageism and the longevity revolution might heighten awareness about the demographic realities currently reshaping their communities, the lives of families in their congregation, and their congregation itself. Most Episcopal congregations are unaware of the significant ways the longevity revolution is already straining the resources of families and communities. Learning about the profound changes occurring family and community dynamics will equip congregations to provide better pastoral care to families. It will also help the congregation understand its potential new role(s) in the lives of individuals, families, and the wider community.

Third, crucial activities for the health and longevity of the congregation rely on the health of interpersonal relationships within the congregation. Important transitions like the transfer of responsibility and power from one generation to another are unlikely to be successful if biases like ageism are in play and are going unacknowledged and unaddressed. The complexity of relationships is remarkable, and the chances of successfully navigating them is minimal without healthy, grace-full interpersonal practices being practiced as a regular part of life in a congregation.

The third constructive pastoral theological proposal that rises out of this research study is to engage in repentance and to promote healing. Confession is one of the core practices of a faithful Christian life. For Episcopalians, corporate confession is prescribed as preparation for receiving communion. Personal confession is encouraged as part of even the simplest prayer rituals in the Episcopal tradition. In the focus group conversations, churchgoers shared quite a number of stories about negative experiences they had in intergenerational relationships. A few churchgoers shared stories of where they had hurt or trespassed against someone else.

No one in any of the focus groups shared about being encouraged by their priest or friends in the congregation to approach someone who had hurt them and try to discuss the issue. How are relationships, especially relationships bridging across differences in race, gender, class, age, etc., to grow and deepen without regular practices of truth-telling, confession, repentance and healing?

Many white Americans are resisting what they hear to be a call to repent for their complicity in slavery, oppressing and murdering Native Americans, etc. They resist this call because they believe that they, personally, did not do these things. As a result the entire discussion about liberation and justice often grinds to a screeching halt. What might happen if

white Episcopalians begin regularly acknowledging and confessing the oppressive attitudes and actions they are believing and doing in the present? As hearts are softened through a regular pattern of heightened awareness and repentance, might there be more openness to engaging past wrongs on which present privilege rests?

There is no shortage of excellent resources regarding the why-to, when-to, how-to considerations regarding confession, repentance, forgiveness and healing. There appears, however, to be a shortage of utilization of these resources. Churchgoers participating in the focus groups did not mention knowledge or utilization of any such resources. Nervous laughter often accompanied their stories of occasions on which they suffered because of something hurtful that they experienced in relationships with people of other generations.

Renewing practices of interpersonal healing might have another important impact on congregations: focus group participants indicated that for the potential of intergenerational relationships in congregations to be realized, church needed to become more "meaningful." Certainly, if practices of truth-telling, confession, etc. are a regular part of interpersonal relationships in congregations, churchgoers would be actively participating in meaning-making for themselves and with others.

Reflection upon these interlocking, mutually reinforcing constructive pastoral theological proposals illuminates a common barrier to the implementation of transforming practices in congregations. This barrier is change. Transforming practices change things. They transform the lives of individuals and the interpersonal dynamics of the congregation. This is wonderful, powerful, amazing - and difficult. In a US culture that prizes bold action and quick success, transforming practices require bold action - and result in something countercultural: slowing down to more deeply engage in relationships with God and with one another. Cory Seibel, author

of the article *From MultiGenerational to InterGenerational*, says this about the change that comes to congregations as a result of new and renewing intergenerational practices:

> "Much of modern literature on organizational change would have us to believe that change processes are about moving as efficiently as possible to reach the Promised Land. Once we have formulated a clear, compelling, and comprehensive vision, 'change is merely a matter of spanning the distance between present reality and envisioned future, between present behaviours and desired behaviours.' However, this 'straight-line' conception of change rarely rings true to experience; for example, the people of Israel managed to extend their 240-mile journey to forty years and two generations."[164]

If congregational leaders seek to build intergenerational relationships as a quick fix for congregational decline, they are destined to be sorely disappointed. Relationship building of any kind takes time. A LOT of time. And energy. And intensity. And vulnerability.

The challenge congregations are currently facing is to become places of meaning and transformation in the lives of individuals and in the wider community. This is an *adaptive* challenge - a "situation where the existing systems and structures cannot offer sufficient answers."[165] Only transforming practices like building and deepening relationships will take congregations where they are called to go.

Challenges to This Project

Challenges to This Project and Project Proposal

There are many ways in which a study of intergenerational relationships in Episcopal congregations can be designed, and each unique design yields different outcomes. Rationale for the project design choices for this project is in Chapter 1. Stepping back from those specifics, several of which are addressed in the section below on project methods and methodology, challenges to this project center on scope of the project and clarity of the research question.

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[164] Cory Seibel, "From *Multi*generational to *Inter*Generational," in *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*, ed. Holly Catteron Allen (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), 88.

[165] Seibel, "From *Multi*generational to *Inter*Generational," 89.

Though attempts were made to limit the scope of the project with a focused research question and participant congregations of approximately the same size and demographic texture (predominantly white [like, unfortunately, most Episcopal congregations], small-to-medium sized cities), the project would have been more focused if qualitative research was done in only one or two congregations. The project would also have been smaller in scope if the research question had a single focus rather than a tri-partite focus, investigating the role, meaning, and potential of intergenerational relationships.

When the research project was designed, extensive experimentation in the crafting of the research question was undertaken. The words in the question were carefully selected for their clear, specific meanings. In the focus group conversations, however, focus group participants appeared to understand these terms less clearly and less specifically than anticipated. In fact, several focus group participants asked what these terms meant. A few focus group participants offered responses which lead the researcher to believe they understood the terms differently than other people in the group. Were the study to be conducted again, providing focus group participants with definitions of key terms might provide clarity in the conversation.

Stepping back from these considerations, a broader challenge to the project involves evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of conducting this research project in congregations in a single denomination. What might be learned from conducting focus groups in congregations in a number of different denominations?

Challenges to Project Methods and Methodology

Effort was made at the opening of this project report to clearly articulate the choices that were made regarding methods and methodology. There are always other choices that can be made. In some cases, alternate choices would mean an entirely different project. It is minimally

efficacious to focus on how this research project could have been an altogether different project with an overhaul in methods or completely different methodology.

What might be efficacious to readers and to other researchers is to identify how this project, with its particular goals, could have been done better. For example, the project might be improved by holding focus groups in churches of a wider array of sizes, particularly smaller congregations, since the majority of congregations are smaller than those in which these focus groups were held. Larger congregations were chosen to help ensure that there would be a group of older adults and a group of younger adults who would be willing to participate. Might perceptions of intergenerational relationships differ in congregations where only one or two generations are present?

Another aspect of project methods which could be challenged is holding focus groups in individual congregations, as opposed to holding focus groups of younger adults and older adults that draw participants from a number of congregations. Might responses from focus group participants be more candid if each focus group participant was from a different Episcopal congregation? What comparisons and contrasts might focus group participants have drawn attention to as experiences and ideas from a number of congregations were proffered and discussed?

If a research goal were to have been deeper exploration of the meaning made by individual focus group participants of their experiences and ideas, then perhaps a better method of data collection might have been individual interviews with churchgoers rather than focus group conversations. With the methods utilized in this research project, abundant room for interpretation - and misinterpretation - is left to the researcher and to future readers.

The question of actual vs. perceived generational differences between the generations is difficult, but important to address. Researchers like Rhetta L. Standifer and Scott W. Lester have devoted extensive research to actual vs. perceived differences.[166] For the purposes of this study, it seemed appropriate to take what focus group participants had to say at face value.[167] However, a future study might engage the question of what, if any, difference it makes in the data if focus group participants are provided with information about actual vs. perceived differences between the generations before the focus group conversations begin.

Regarding the selection of pastoral theological methodology and, specifically Neuger's correlational spiral, for bringing focus group data into conversation with resources from ecclesiology and gerontology, a brief comment is in order. Theodore W. Jennings comments in his article on pastoral theological methodology, "A useful test of the seriousness and fruitfulness of such a dialogue is whether the conceptuality and vocabulary of both sides is altered and enriched through the process."[168] Indeed, particularly in the sections above on key findings of the research study, potential impact of these findings, and constructive proposals, stories from churchgoers, ecclesiology, and gerontology inform each other in such a way that new ideas and considerations surface.

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[166] Rhetta L. Standifer and Scott W. Lester, "Actual Versus Perceived Generational Differences in the Preferred Working Context: An Empirical Study," *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 18, no.1 (2020): 48.

[167] Note that the moment someone speaks, listeners are beginning to interpret what the speaker is saying, attaching meanings from context and experience to what has been said. There is no "interpretation free" qualitative data. However, attempts have been made in this study to include specific quotes from focus group participants as much as possible, understanding that the reader of this project report will also be interpreting what they comments made in the focus groups.

[168] Jennings, "Pastoral Theological Methodology," 864.

Challenges to Project Conclusions

From Literature in the Subfield of Gerontology

The research for this project barely scratched the surface of the issue of ageism in contemporary culture in the United States. Gerontologists and other social theorists might appropriately challenge the level of engagement of this project with the array of ageist issues prevalent in The Episcopal Church and in the wider culture. Further investigation of how ageism operates in the lives of individuals and communities would almost certainly yield additional insight into the narratives shared by focus group participants.

Similarly, the depth of research for this project regarding the impact of the longevity revolution was, perhaps, sufficient for the purposes of this project and its focus on intergenerational relationships. However, deeper engagement with the dramatic impact of demographic shifts on group dynamics in families, congregations and wider communities might point to additional needs of individuals and families, as well as identification of resources to meet those needs.

Regarding gerontology, this research project might have been well served by delving into intergenerational relationship theory, which would have taken the analysis in this project in the direction of family systems theory. Family systems theory has proven its usefulness to congregations in myriad ways, not only with regard to resources for pastoral counseling and care for family but also with regard to resources for understanding the relational dynamics often at work in church "families." Engagement with family systems theory and the more focused area of intergenerational relationship theory might prove fruitful for future projects seeking insight into how intergenerational relationships in congregations might contribute to parish life in ways that are enhance other relational dynamics in the congregation. Of course, as with any consideration

of contributions made by intergenerational relationships, it is important to ensure that relationships are not being instrumentalized, but are being created, valued and upheld for the sake of the relationships themselves and the persons engage in those relationships.

From Literature in the Field of Episcopal Ecclesiology

Contemporary literature in Episcopal ecclesiology is likely to reflect the common, core values outlined in the work of Marshall, Russell, and Kwok. If differences in thematic foci between their work and the work of other Episcopal ecclesiologists were to be identified, they would likely be differences in tone or approach rather than content. Of course, this is the perspective of an Episcopalian who has been thoroughly indoctrinated in Episcopal ecclesiology through engagement in church life at the parish, diocesan and churchwide levels of the institution. In relationship any institution, it is essential to have a range of perspectives from inside, near, and outside to evaluate aspects of its belief system with reasonable clarity.

Currently, white supremacy and racial justice are the foci of much of the change-of-heart work Episcopalians are being called to do by God, their bishops and the communities their congregations inhabit. While working toward age justice is important, it is likely that many Episcopalians would not deem ageism to be a current priority. However, particularly for congregations which are predominantly white and which lean toward theological and biblical conservatism, engagement with personal experiences of ageism may enable white people of privilege to find a way into the essential contemporary conversations about the white supremacy and racism so prevalent in The Episcopal Church and in the wider US society.

Opportunities for Further Research and Analysis

Encouragement for Further Engagement with This Topic

Key Learnings that Need Refinement

It can justifiably be said that all seven of the key learnings presented above could use refinement. In particular, it would ~be interesting and useful to explore what makes congregational life meaningful to churchgoers. The Pew Research study executed in 2017-2018 stated that faith and spirituality make life meaningful for at least 20 percent of adults responding to an open-ended question.[169] However, whether - and for whom - engagement in congregational life is meaningful deserves exploration.

The other key learning which could most use refinement is the claim that intergenerational relationships are a place in congregational life where misunderstandings occur and where mistakes are made. Misunderstandings occur and mistakes are made in *all* relationships. Therefore, what, if anything, makes intergenerational relationships different from other relationships? Another salient question: in what way - if any - do intergenerational relationships in congregations differ from intergenerational relationships in families or other communal contexts?

Due to the limited scope of this research project, all of the key findings could be further defined and explicated. Significant refinement would most appropriately come through further qualitative research in Episcopal congregations. To explore whether the research results gleaned in Episcopal congregations reflect only Episcopal congregations or are reflective more broadly of

[169] "Where Americans Find Meaning in Life," Pew Research Center Report, published November 20, 2018, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/.

congregations in other mainline traditions, qualitative research in congregations in other mainline traditions would be required.

Questions that Remain Unanswered

An important question which remains unanswered is whether the results of this study are reflective of a few, some, or most Episcopal congregations. The way in which this would most effectively be determined is through further qualitative research in a much wider range of Episcopal congregations, including congregations significantly smaller than the congregations in which focus groups were held for this study. The focus group method of data gathering, which for this research study involved focus groups of three to eight people in each of two categories: older adults and younger adults, might have to be changed for qualitative research conducted in small congregations. Many small congregations do not have three to eight younger adults present among them, much less three to eight younger adult volunteers who might be willing and able to participate in focus group conversations.

There are an array of questions about intergenerational relationships in congregations which remain not only unanswered in this research study, but also unasked. Based on the responses of the focus group participants, questions about the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships were more ambiguous and difficult than the questions inviting to share positive and negative experiences of intergenerational relationships in their congregation. How would the responses of focus group participants have been different if focus group participants had received the questions in advance and had time to reflect more carefully - or at least at more length - about their answers? How would responses have been different if the focus group questions were more open-ended, inquiring about what they feel or what they think about intergenerational relationships?

This research study considered intergenerational relationships specifically. What might have surfaced if the questions focused not on intergenerational relationships but, rather, on the different kinds of relationships they have in their congregation, and then asked participants to describe those relationships and their level of meaning in their lives?

Evaluation/Reframing of Guiding Assumptions/Questions

Though it was beyond the scope of this research project, it would have been extremely informative to return to the participating congregations and ask an array of questions about the results as they were identified, interpreted, and analyzed. This conversation would have provided a certain kind of evaluation of the research process, questions, and analysis. It might also have provided an opportunity for follow-up questions about participants' perceptions of relationships in their congregation and about their intergenerational relationships, in specific. No researcher engages in a context and leaves the context "the way it was." It is likely that focus group participants have developed further thoughts and reflections on the relationships they have in their congregation, how those relationships are shaped, and what purpose(s) they serve.

A guiding assumption of this research project is that intergenerational relationships in Episcopal congregations (1) exist, (2) play a role, and (3) are in some way(s) different from other interpersonal relationships in congregations. While no focus group participants challenged those assumptions, it would likely prove both interesting and helpful to step back from these particulars and, as described above, explore interpersonal relationships in congregations more generally. This could be accomplished in a few huge research studies or in a significant number of much smaller ones. As always, however, it is worth inquiring how many resources should be expended to evaluate and assess congregational life, and how many resources should be expended to do the work of ministry.

Ideas for Further Research and Analysis

In addition to the ideas mentioned above, it would be interesting, and perhaps useful, to compare how intergenerational relationships are experienced in more than one institutional context. How are intergenerational relationships experienced in other contexts in which families are involved - hospice centers, schools, cruise vacations? Gathering data in other contexts would shed new light on how intergenerational relationships are experienced and perceived in church contexts.

In this research study, data was gathered from two groups of adults. How might the research process and data be impacted if representatives of the full array of different generations provided reflections for a research study about intergenerational relationships?

This research study invited focus group participants to reflect on their own experiences and to share their own perspectives. A completely different dynamic would develop if focus group participants were asked to reflect on how they perceive others to be in relationships one another in their congregation. Bringing self-reported reflections into dialogue with the reflections of people about one another would require different levels and types of analysis but might also mitigate the positivity bias that naturally exists when people share their own stories. This idea, like the other ideas mentioned above, complexify aspects of the project, from framing the questions, to gathering the data, to data analysis, to the drawing of conclusions. The benefit of research efforts circumscribed by time, number of researchers involved, topic, etc. is that there is no question about the fact that they are indeed limited samples, which often yield good questions to inspire future exploration.

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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP – QUESTIONS FOR A GUIDED CONVERSATION

The focus group conversation will be a guided conversation designed to engage participants around various aspects of the guiding research question of this project:

> *What can be learned about the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in Episcopal congregations through focus groups in three to four Episcopal congregations?*

By definition, guided conversation does not follow a tight script but, rather, allows narratives of lived experience to surface and meanings to arise and gain definition in the context of interaction within the group. The work of narrative therapists and theorists Michael White and David Epston inform this methodological choice. The goal of these focus group conversations is not to arrive at a particular answer; the goal is to capture stories of lived experience, as well as any meaning assigned to those experiences, from focus group participants who have had and/or are having those experiences.

The following questions indicate the type and style of questions which may be used in a guided conversation designed to consider the role, meaning and potential of intergenerational relationships in a congregation:

- How would you define an intergenerational relationship?
    - How might that be different from an intergenerational experience?
- What can you share about a positive intergenerational relationship that you have in this congregation?
- What can you share about a negative intergenerational relationship that you have in this congregation?
- Based on these and other intergenerational relationships in this congregation, what is the meaning of intergenerational relationships here, for you?
- When you imagine your future in this congregation, what potential do you imagine will unfold from/within intergenerational relationships?
- What might this congregation be like if only persons within your age group were present?
    - When you imagine that there are only persons within your age group present, what are the images, ideas, feelings that come to you?
- If I told you that a reputable scholar [sociologist Bob Johansen] says that the most important leadership challenge for The Episcopal Church right now is *seeding hope across generations*, how does that resonate with you?
    - What difference would it make if people in your congregation believed this statement and acted on it?