



Can Bringing Older and Younger People Together Renew Religious Communities?

YouGov survey shows that intergenerational connection and collaboration may increase engagement in faith spaces



About this study

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In fall 2024, CoGenerate worked with YouGov to conduct a national survey of 1,500 adults (ages 18 and older) in the U.S. about their religious / spiritual communities, their interaction with older and younger people, and their views on building connections across different age groups. The survey was nationally representative by gender, age, race, education and political affiliation.

Our findings reveal considerable age segregation in people’s lives and a strong appetite for intergenerational connection and collaboration – or “cogeneration” – to counter it. They also identify challenges and opportunities for harnessing cogeneration to support spiritual growth and transform religious life.

We have been reaching out to a group of religious leaders, practitioners, innovators and influencers to discuss the insights in this report and will synthesize what we learn, producing a report later this year on the potential of cogeneration within faith communities.

We hope this work will inspire and equip faith leaders to help generations join forces in new ways – to solve shared problems, combat isolation and polarization, strengthen congregations, and provide a vision for thriving in our new era of age diversity.

If you have thoughts or feedback on this project, please reach out to Eddie Gonzalez, CoGen Impact Fellow, at egonzalez@cogenerate.org.

We thank the Templeton Religion Trust for generously supporting this work and Cal Halvorsen, Senior Research Fellow at CoGenerate and Associate Professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, for serving as the research advisor for this study. We are also grateful for input from a group of advisors, including Serena Bian, Jeremy Fricke, Laura Geller, Danielle Gladstone, Lofton Holder, Raymond Jetson, Daniel Pryfogle, and Ruth Wooden.

Five Key Insights

Faith communities can be powerful spaces for intergenerational engagement, but there are challenges to address and, with them, new opportunities. This survey shows that:

1. Religiously engaged respondents value cogeneration – and are doing it in all aspects of life.
2. Cogeneration is an incentive for religiously engaged adults to participate in their faith communities.
3. Most religiously engaged adults think their communities need to do more to bring generations together but struggle to envision new approaches to connecting the generations.
4. Cross-generational mentoring is an appealing approach but often falls short in execution.
5. Cogenerational opportunities are unlikely to draw non-religious people *into* faith spaces, but they could draw religiously engaged people *out* to the wider community as a force for good.

Opportunities and Challenges

Each key insight is discussed below. More complete survey data can be found in the Appendix on page 12.

1. Religiously engaged respondents value cogeneration – and are doing it in all aspects of life.

Creating opportunities to connect across generations is a top priority for religiously engaged respondents, along with helping others, creating a welcoming community, and deepening their spiritual practice.

Compared to non-religiously engaged adults, religiously engaged adults are significantly more likely in a given week to interact with different age groups outside of the family, including considerably older or younger people in their volunteer activities, work, exercise, hobbies, time with friends and family, and educational pursuits.

A large majority of religiously engaged adults have had positive experiences working within their religious communities with people from other generations. Both older and younger generations report that those activities are improved by the presence of younger and older people.

Religiously engaged adults strongly agree on the benefits of cogenerational relationship-building, mentorship and community engagement. These benefits include shared learning and growth, collaboration, understanding, connection, and respect.

Top priorities for religiously engaged respondents



Source: YouGov survey, slide 26. Percentage of religiously engaged respondents who replied "one of the most important priorities" or "an important priority."

Presence of elders and younger improves experience

Say the presence of younger people improves their experience in religious activities



Say the presence of older people improves their experience in religious activities



Source: YouGov survey, slide 10. Percentages are averages of responses from religiously engaged adults who reported experiences with people considerably younger, or considerably older, than themselves across 11 activities.

Religiously engaged respondents rate experience with cogeneration highly

Rate the collaboration with someone younger as positive



Rate the collaboration with someone older as positive



Source: YouGov survey, slides 11-12



Intergenerational friendships are often what keep people connected to faith communities – not just doctrine or tradition, but real relationships that ground them.

— Katie Gordon

2. Cogeneration is an incentive for religiously engaged adults to participate in their faith communities.

Nearly half of the religiously engaged adults surveyed say that cogenerational opportunities would increase their interest in participation in their faith community. They are drawn to these opportunities as a way to enrich perspectives, build community, and pursue personal growth and goals.

Asked which intergenerational activities they are most interested in, respondents list social gatherings, spiritual activities, and community engagement.

Cogenerational opportunities are an incentive to engage

More likely to participate if offered chance to build relationships with
olders/youngers



More likely to participate if offered chance to join forces with older/younger to
address community problems



Source: YouGov survey, slide 23. Replies from religiously engaged respondents.



One of the only places where you actually run into people who are younger or older is in a faith community. We used to have more third spaces – libraries, community centers – but now, religious spaces are one of the last places where generations naturally mix.

— Rabbi Laura Geller

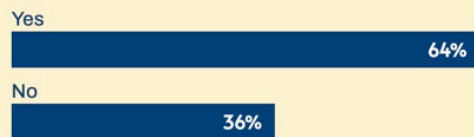
3. Most religiously engaged adults think their communities need to do more to bring generations together but struggle to envision new approaches to connecting the generations.

Survey results reveal a disconnect between the potential of cogeneration in faith spaces and the outreach efforts that make it possible.

Religiously engaged respondents varied significantly in their assessment of their faith community's effectiveness in bringing generations together. Those ages 30-49 are the most likely, and those ages 50-69 were the least likely, to say their religious or spiritual communities are effective at connecting older and younger people. The most frequently cited obstacles to connecting across age are differences in lifestyle, divisive generational perspectives, and intergenerational tensions.

More than one third of religiously engaged respondents say their communities make no effort to connect older and younger members. A majority say that greater outreach is needed but are unable to come up with specific ideas for ways to improve their religious community's approach to making intergenerational connections.

Does your religious community make efforts to connect older and younger members?



Source: YouGov survey, slide 15. Replies from religiously engaged adults.



Mentorship seems like an obvious solution, but it's not just about placing an elder with a younger person. It's about mutual engagement, shared learning – not just 'let me give you advice' but 'let's walk through this together.'

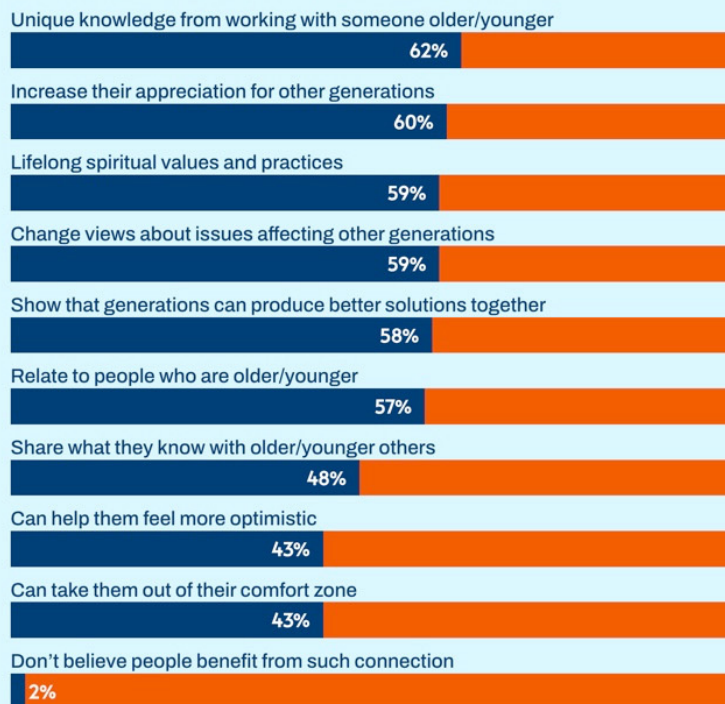
— Ben Katt

4. Cross-generational mentoring is an appealing approach but often falls short in execution.

The survey results reveal clear areas of opportunity for faith communities to innovate and improve upon their cross-generational approaches and offerings. Respondents identify mentoring and knowledge-sharing, for example, as promising activities for cross-generational engagement.

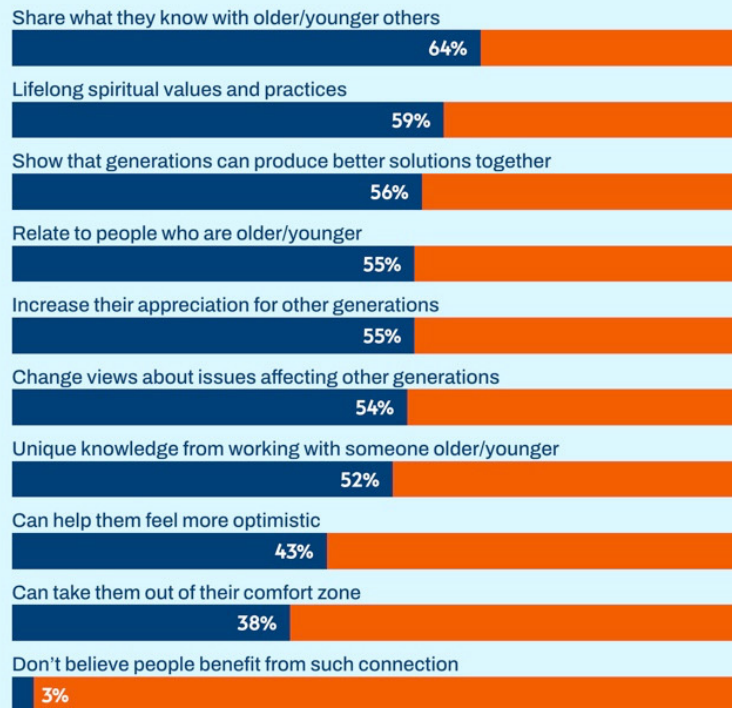
But most respondents do not believe their religious or spiritual communities do a good job connecting generations. Just a quarter of respondents say their communities do a good job with intergenerational social gatherings, spiritual activities, and community engagement. Even fewer say their communities do a good job with mentoring programs.

Benefits of cogeneration for YOUNGER people



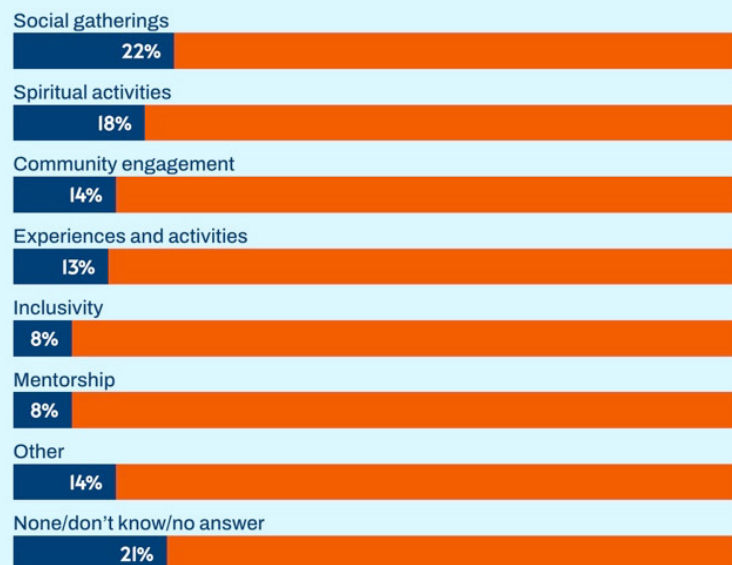
Source: YouGov survey, slide 27. Replies from religiously engaged respondents.

Benefits of cogeneration for OLDER people



Source: YouGov survey, slide 27. Replies from religiously engaged adults.

Cogenerational activities religious communities are doing well



Source: YouGov survey, slide 18.

5. Cogenerational opportunities are unlikely to draw non-religious people *into* faith spaces, but they could draw religiously engaged people *out* to the wider community as a force for good.

Nonreligious adults overwhelmingly say the chance to connect or collaborate with older and younger people would not change their level of interest in participating in religious or spiritual communities. Many say a distrust of organized religion keeps them away.

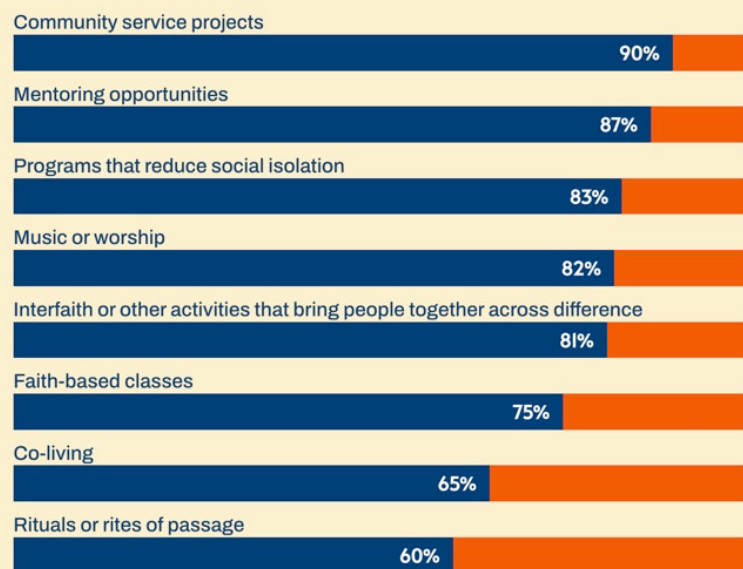
But cogenerational volunteerism and social activities could encourage religiously engaged people to become more deeply involved in their broader community. Religiously engaged respondents cite community service projects, mentoring opportunities, and programs that reduce social isolation and loneliness as particularly effective at building or strengthening connections between older and younger people. Music and activities that bring people together across differences are also top answers. Each of these activities has the potential to create a pathway for religiously engaged people to bridge divides and harness cogeneration as a force for good in the wider community.

Cogenerational opportunities do not increase interest in participation for non-religious adults.



Source: YouGov survey, slide 21. Replies from non-religiously engaged respondents. Percentages represent the average of two questions asking respondents if they would be more, less, or equally likely to participate in religious or spiritual communities that offer opportunities to connect with people significantly older or younger than themselves, or to address community problems together.

Effective ways for religiously engaged adults to strengthen connections across generations



Source: YouGov survey, slide 29. Percentage of religiously engaged respondents who rated these activities as “very effective” or “somewhat effective.”

Reflection and Discussion Questions

Whether you are a faith leader, a spiritual innovator, a member of a religious community, or simply interested in the implications of these findings, we invite you to reflect on the following questions.

About the survey

- Does anything in the survey findings resonate with your own experiences?
- Does anything surprise you?
- Is there one insight from the data that you're eager to share with your community? Why?
- What else do you wish this survey had explored or uncovered? What's missing?

In your spiritual community

- How does your spiritual community foster relationships between older and younger members? Where do you see success, and where do you see gaps or challenges?
- What kind of outreach has been successful in attracting cross-generational engagement?
- What obstacles prevent deeper intergenerational connection?
- How might younger and older members support each other's spiritual development?
- Is there a gap between people's interest in intergenerational mentorship and their experience of it in your community? If so, why? How might mentoring be strengthened or reimagined cogenerationally, from one-directional to mutually beneficial?
- How might initiatives that foster intergenerational connection and collaboration help lower distrust of organized religion or religion in general and strengthen your impact in the wider community?

Looking forward

- What might get in the way of making those possibilities real?
- What support or resources might you need to make progress?

Share Your Reflections

We would love to hear your reflections on this data and on any of the questions above, along with suggestions for individuals (or organizations) we should connect with, including media professionals. Please provide your insights [here](#).

For any direct inquiries, further questions, or to simply reach a member of our team directly as this project moves forward, please reach out to Eddie Gonzalez, CoGen Impact Fellow, at egonzalez@cogenerate.org.

Share your reflections →

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On the institutional front, I don't know what makes people think it's too hard to integrate intergenerational dynamics. Maybe it's just that you're dealing with individuals – real people, not abstract ideas. You have to work with the actual relationships in the building.

— Lucas Johnson

Appendix: The Survey Data

Readers who want to explore the data in more detail will find key statistics from the survey below. Alternatively, explore the full [YouGov Survey report here](#).

1. Religiously engaged respondents value cogeneration – and are doing it in all aspects of life.

- When asked, “Thinking now about the religious or spiritual community that you participate in, how important are each of the following to you...,” religiously engaged adults responded with the following (Slide 26):
 - 82% – Helping others or improving your community
 - 81% – Creating a welcoming and inclusive community
 - 79% – Deepening your spiritual practice
 - 78% – Creating opportunities for older and younger members to connect
- Religiously engaged adults are significantly more likely than non-religious adults to interact with different age groups (beyond family) in a given week, and are more likely to interact with other generations in nearly every category of activity surveyed, including volunteer work, exercise and sports, hobbies, time with friends, time with family, and education/school. This finding holds true even after controlling for age, education, race and gender. (Slides 7-8)
- Respondents report that the wide variety of religious activities they engage in are improved by the presence of younger and older people. (Slide 10)
 - On average, 60.1% of respondents say the presence of younger people improved their experiences in religious activities. Similarly, 65.3% of respondents say the presence of older people improved their experiences in religious activities. Most of the remaining respondents gave a neutral opinion, and very few expressed negative opinions.
- Of people who have worked/volunteered within their religious communities with someone significantly younger, 80% report the collaboration as positive. And of people who have worked/volunteered within their religious communities with someone significantly older, 90% report the collaboration as positive. (Slides 11-12)
- For religiously engaged respondents, there’s universal agreement on the benefits of cogenerational connection for both older and younger people. Respondents said the top benefit for older adults is sharing what they know with other generations, and the top benefit for younger adults is gaining unique knowledge from working with older generations. Less than 4% said they don’t believe people benefit from those connections. (Slide 27)
- Respondents spend the majority of their time with individuals from their own age group, with cogenerational interactions reaching the highest levels between 30-69 years old. (Slide 6)

2. Cogeneration is an incentive for religiously engaged adults to participate in their faith communities.

- When asked the question, “If a religious or spiritual community offered opportunities to build relationships with people who are considerably older and younger than you, would you be more or less likely to participate with that group?” 45% of religiously engaged adults responded they were more likely to participate. (Slide 23)
- When asked the question, “If a religious or spiritual community offered opportunities to join forces with people considerably older or younger than you to address community problems, would you be more or less likely to participate with that group?” 44% of religiously engaged adults responded they were more likely to participate (Slide 23)
- While nearly 50% of religiously engaged adults feel that cogenerational opportunities increase their interest in participation, 8% said they were actually less likely to participate in cogenerational opportunities, noting the inevitability of not seeing eye to eye among their reasons. (Slide 23)
- When religiously engaged respondents were asked why cogenerational opportunities would or would not increase their participation in religious communities, the following reasons were the most popular answers given by those who were more likely to participate (Slide 24):
 - 34% – enriching perspectives (diverse viewpoints, intergenerational learning, broadened understanding, appreciation for diversity, mentorship and guidance)
 - 26% – community building (sense of belonging, strengthened bonds, collaborative problem-solving, collective responsibility, bridging gaps)
- When asked what activities would help connect older and younger community members, the most common suggestions were social gatherings (19%), spiritual activities (16%), community engagement (11%) (Slide 30)
- Nearly half of religiously engaged adults say that cogenerational activities with their religious or spiritual communities would make no difference in their decisions to participate. But their reasoning was often due to their abilities to participate (e.g., limited time or mobility), while others had a more neutral perspective to age diversity or noted that they would participate regardless. (Slide 24)
- For those who said that cogenerational activities increased their chances of participating, as well as those who said it does not, 25% of each couldn’t explain their reasoning (checked “don’t know” or “no answer”). (Slide 24)

3. Most religiously engaged adults think their communities need to do more to bring generations together but struggle to envision new approaches to connecting the generations.

- When asked, “Do you feel like the religious or spiritual community that you participate in is effective at connecting older and younger people?” two-thirds of religiously engaged respondents said “very or somewhat effective.” But this perception varies significantly with age. Ages 30-49 had the highest score of all age groups on perceived outreach effectiveness in their communities (76%), while ages 50-69 had the lowest (56%). (Slide 16)
- Among the most frequently cited obstacles to connecting across age, 22% said differences in lifestyle (lack of common interests, scheduling conflicts, technological barriers, mobility challenges). 17% said divisive perspectives among generations (generational divide/gap, age difference, knowledge discrepancies, young people undervalue interactions with older people, value and traditional differences, communication gaps). 12% said intergenerational tensions (unwillingness to listen, differing views, lack of respect, misunderstanding). 11% said attitude or outlook (apathy, pride, stubbornness). Politics, social media, and lack of resources were also mentioned as contributors to this divide (Slide 28)
- 36% of religiously engaged respondents said their community makes no effort to connect older and younger members. (Slide 15)
- Averaging across all age groups, a majority of respondents think greater outreach is needed across ages. (Slide 17)
- Religiously engaged respondents most often cite mentoring opportunities and community service as effective ways to strengthen connections across generations. (Slide 29)
- 21% of religiously engaged adults said “no,” “don’t know” or “no response” when asked about the things religious communities are doing well to connect generations. (Slide 18)
- 35% said “none,” “don’t know,” or “no answer” when asked, “What are some of the things the religious or spiritual community that you participate in could do better making connections between older and younger people?” (slide 19)

4. Cross-generational mentoring is an appealing approach but often falls short in execution.

- For religiously engaged respondents, there's universal agreement on the benefits of cogenerational connection for both older and younger people, and mentoring scored high among the imagined benefits. In particular, 64% of respondents said the top benefit for older adults is sharing what they know with other generations. And the top benefit for younger adults (62%) was gaining unique knowledge from working with other generations. (Slide 27)
- When religiously engaged adults were asked about the benefits younger and older generations might get from having opportunities to connect across generations in their faith communities, the benefits with the highest responses involved sharing knowledge, increasing appreciation, changing views, producing better solutions, and simply relating. (Slides 27 and 29)
- Social gatherings (22%), spiritual activities (18%), community engagement (14%), and experiences (13%) were rated as the activities already happening that they think are succeeding. (Slide 18)
- Asked which activities are particularly effective at building or strengthening connections between older and younger people, responses of "very effective" were highest for mentorship opportunities (44%), community service projects (43%), music or worship (41%), and programs that reduce social isolation (39%). (Slide 29)
- Mentoring scored low (8%) when respondents were asked which cogenerational activities they think their religious communities are doing well. (Slide 18)

5. Cogenerational opportunities are unlikely to draw non-religious people *into* faith spaces, but they could draw religiously engaged people *out* to the wider community as a force for good.

- 90% of nonreligious adults said cogenerational opportunities do not increase their interest in participating in religious or spiritual communities. They most frequently cited their attitude toward religion (dislike/distrust of organized religion) as the primary reason for this response (31%), although many also said they don't know why (33%). (Slides 21-22)
- When asked what activities are particularly effective at building or strengthening connections between older and younger people, religiously engaged respondents most often cited activities that have natural touchpoints with the wider world, including community service projects (90%), mentoring opportunities (87%), programs that reduce social isolation (83%), music or worship (82%) and interfaith or other activities that bring people together across difference (81%). (Slide 29)
- Faith-based classes (75%), co-living (65%), and cogenerational rites of passage (60%) are also mentioned as effective ways to strengthen intergenerational connections. (Slide 29)