

HONEST CONVERSATIONS

Faith Leaders on the Real Work of Intergenerational Collaboration



Conversation Guide

*T*he path toward intergenerational connection and collaboration – what we call cogeneration – isn't about replicating successful models from other contexts but about discerning which principles and practices can take root in your community's particular soil. This conversation guide invites you to explore cogeneration not as a program but as a spiritual practice – to tend to it in your own spiritual life and faith community with renewed intention.

The questions and case studies below draw on our report's four core insights on culture, conflict, power, and relationship. We invite you to bring these questions into conversations with older and younger people in your life and community, surfacing stories and possibilities of what might work in your setting.

May those conversations inspire imagination, honesty, joyful experiments and deeper relationships across generations.



Questions for Reflection & Conversation



CULTURE. *There are no universal models.*

INSIGHT 1

“Intergenerational work isn’t a rigid program – it’s a culture, a shared orientation. At our church, many people have been pushed or pulled here – from places of origin they had to leave, for work, for safety, for family. They’re not just building households. They’re building chosen family.”

REV. MARJORIE WILKES MATTHEWS,
PLYMOUTH JAZZ & JUSTICE CHURCH

“You don’t need to change subjects or create a new committee on intergenerational relationships. Integrate intergenerational awareness into your current subject, into all of your community’s work. That’s how you reach culture change.”

LUCAS JOHNSON, ON BEING

1. Which sacred texts, values, or spiritual practices from your particular faith tradition offer wisdom for cultivating authentic cross-generational, cross-cultural community?
2. What cultural backgrounds, family structures, or life experiences shape how generations connect or collaborate in your spiritual community? What generational issue or conflict is most paralyzing?
3. How could worship, learning, service, and spiritual formation be designed so that cogeneration isn’t an add-on but becomes integral to community life?

CONFLICT. *It’s essential for growth.*

INSIGHT 2

“Creating new pathways for age inclusion is awkward at first. That doesn’t mean it’s failing – it means it’s forming. There’s something powerful in naming and witnessing that.”

SERENA BIAN, NUNS & NONES

“If intergenerational work is going to thrive, we have to be willing to talk to one another and figure out how to rebuild trust, how to create safe, meaningful ways to relate. This work rests in vulnerability.”

DEEPA PATEL, INAYATIYYA INTERNATIONAL BOARD

1. Where does intergenerational tension show up (big or small) in your spiritual community? Provide concrete examples.
2. What steps could leaders in your spiritual community take to make it safe and normal to name intergenerational conflict, work through disagreement, acknowledge harm, and orient toward repair?
3. What would it look like for intergenerational repair work to become a regular part of your spiritual practice?

POWER. *Moving beyond symbolic inclusion.*

INSIGHT 3

“Just because you're older doesn't make you an elder.”

BEN KATT, TRANSFORMATION COACH
& MEDITATION TEACHER

“A change has to be made in how the generations see church decisions being made – a paradigm shift from power *over* to power *with*.”

REV. DR. YOUNG LEE HERTIG, INNOVATIVE SPACE
FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

1. How do seniority, authority, and "length of practice" determine who leads and who exerts influence in your spiritual community? What gifts might be overlooked in this system?
2. Rather than molding young people to your programs and institution, how might you involve them in building something together? If young people are leading mission-aligned work outside your faith community, how might joining them spark spiritual renewal?
3. Within the next three months, what is one decision or leadership position you can redesign so younger and older people share agenda-setting and decision-making power, not just voice? What's a good first step toward making that a reality?

RELATIONSHIP. *Everything else depends on it.*

INSIGHT 4

“Intergenerational work is not rocket science. It's relational. How do we put love into action?”

DR. PAMELA AYO YETUNDE,
PASTORAL COUNSELOR AND AUTHOR

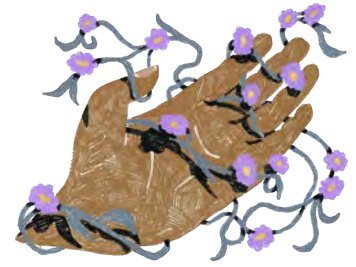
“Developing compassion from the older toward the younger, and respect from the younger toward the older is a loop that perpetuates itself. Those ties are priceless.”

IMAM EMERITUS SHPENDIM NADZAKU,
ISLAMIC ASSOCIATION OF NORTH TEXAS

1. What examples of mutual support across generations do you see in your community?
How could these be nurtured and expanded?
2. Name an older and a younger person in your community who do intergenerational relationships well.
How might you learn from and build alongside them?
3. Identify one recurring practice or rhythm you could start that would reliably put generations in relationship with one another and nurture an atmosphere of mutual listening and care.
Who might steward it?



Case Studies: Embedding cogeneration in daily life



Case Study #1

TRANSFORM YOUR EXISTING GATHERINGS



The challenge

Faith communities already host gatherings that are, or could easily be, intergenerational, but they often happen without intentional design for cross-generational connection.



Something tried

A rabbi reimagined a traditional Tu BiShvat (Birthday of the Trees) celebration. Instead of the usual programming, he moved the event to a seltzer brewery and asked a young synagogue president to invite his friends, even the ones who aren't Jewish.



How it worked

Thirty-five people gathered (half under 40, half over 60) around a beautiful "char-fruiterie" board pairing different fruits with craft seltzers. After a brief spiritual teaching (under 10 minutes), reflecting on how the fruit and seltzers related back to the holiday's meaning and mysticism, participants were paired across generations for structured conversations about spiritual themes. All participants, including introverts, physically moved around the space and changed partners between rounds, creating unexpected connections. "We're all beginners here," the rabbi told the group.



What happened

People didn't want to stop talking. Older and younger generations alike said they specifically appreciated the cross-age conversation. Young participants later told the rabbi: "If religion had been like this growing up, we could imagine staying connected to spiritual community."



What made it work

Clear purpose, personal invitations through existing relationships, conversation-centered design, attention to all the senses, and framing that put everyone on equal footing regardless of age or religious experience.

FOR REFLECTION

- ◆ What existing celebration or gathering could you redesign?
- ◆ How might you structure it so conversation between generations becomes the heart of the experience?

Case Study #2

CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR HARD CONVERSATIONS.

*The challenge*

In many faith communities, cultural norms and age-based hierarchies can prevent honest communication across generations, leaving youngers and elders feeling isolated, underappreciated and misunderstood.

*Something tried*

A Muslim congregational leader serving a diverse, immigrant community began hosting intentional, cross-generational dialogues. These conversations were "almost taboo" in the ways they invited comments that may have never been said across ages before.

*How it worked*

The dialogues brought together community members across ages (including parents, children and extended family) to share experiences and express feelings that were under the surface, oftentimes related to displacement and cultural adaptation. Older adults could express feelings of sacrifice and stress, having started over in a new country without the support networks they'd left behind – for example, fathers who were doctors back home now driving for Uber, and mothers feeling “under house arrest” without support from neighbors or family. Youngers could share experiences growing up in a different culture, including identity struggles and microaggressions at school. The leader facilitated space for each age group to share and listen, creating opportunities for genuine recognition of different hardships.

*What happened*

Elders were initially challenged when youngers shared so openly, but breakthrough moments came when people listened deeply and learned about each other's experiences. Heads nodded in recognition. Sometimes tears were shed and apologies given. All ages remembered their deep care for one another and realized they'd been “so caught up in their own suffering” that they were “oblivious” to others' struggles or had “downgraded” them.

*What made it work*

Creating optional spaces for vulnerability, experimenting with new communication norms across cultural hierarchies, facilitating sharing that honored different experiences rather than comparing them, and building trust through compassionate listening.

FOR REFLECTION

- ➡ What difficult cross-generational conversations in your community might need a safe space to surface?
- ➡ What would be needed to facilitate that kind of safe space?

Case Study #3

INSTEAD OF “JOIN US,” ASK “HOW CAN WE JOIN YOU?”

*The challenge*

Faith communities often focus more on trying to recruit people into existing programming rather than supporting what people are already passionate about. This happens both across generations and with neighbors. Communities ask "How can we get you to join our youth group?" instead of "What are you working on that we could support?"

*Something tried*

A pastor serving a church across from a university noticed a disconnect: The church had empty rooms while students lacked space for their social ventures. When the pastor introduced a graduate student to long-time members passing out water bottles on a hot day, an older church member asked, "So Madison, are you going to join our team?" The pastor interrupted, "No, we're going to join Madison's team."

*How it worked*

The church began seeing empty space not as rooms to fill with their own activities, but as resources to offer students and community members pursuing work that aligned with their values. Instead of trying to recruit Madison and other students into church programming, they asked what she was studying, discerning and yearning for, and how they could travel with her in that work.

*What happened*

Where the church had felt insulated and disconnected from their surrounding community, they discovered student groups across the street that could use their space, plus numerous community ventures already underway that aligned with their mission. Rather than asking, "How do we invite people in?" the question became, "How do we make ourselves useful?"

*What made it work*

Shifting from inward-focused recruitment to outward-focused partnership, recognizing that meaningful work is already happening in the community that could be supported with resources and collaboration, and asking what people are passionate about rather than inviting them into existing structures.

FOR REFLECTION

- ➔ What are the young people, older adults and neighbors in your area already working on?
- ➔ How could your community's resources – space, time, networks – support their efforts instead of asking them to join yours?

Case Study #4

START WITH FRIENDSHIP, GROW INTO COMMUNITY.

*The challenge*

Mentoring programs in faith communities often struggle because they're designed as hierarchical teaching relationships rather than relationships that address our spiritual longing for mutual learning and authentic connection across generations.

*Something tried*

A retired Dominican nun reached out to a young, interfaith organizer after hearing about her work. What began with an invitation to appear on the sister's public access TV show – to “uplift the wisdom of young people” – grew into a deep friendship built on mutual respect and genuine curiosity about each other's perspectives.

*How it worked*

Their relationship developed through vulnerability and reciprocal learning. The elder recognized important things to learn from younger generations; the younger drew out what the elder knew. When they decided to create an encounter between nuns and young millennials (several religiously unaffiliated), the sister insisted on slower, relational preparation so the sisters would understand this wasn't about recruiting people into religious vocations. The younger participants also met separately to build friendships before the encounter.

*What happened*

That single friendship became a foundation for a national “Nuns and Nones” movement. “It wasn't an idea I had,” the young organizer reflected. “It was grounded in my friendship with Sister Barbara and grew out of my real relationships with people.” Asked about a replicable model, she said, “Step one, create a friendship. That's as far as I can tell you to go, because it's all going to grow out of that.”

*What made it work*

Mutual recognition of wisdom, vulnerability about limitations, honoring different generational rhythms, preparing each age group for an intergenerational encounter, and authentic relationship before programming.

FOR REFLECTION

- ↔ Thinking across generational lines, who in your spiritual community do you already know?
- ↔ What would it take to try something new together?

Case Study #5

BREAK DOWN AGE SILOS AND EXPAND ENTRY POINTS.

*The challenge*

Faith communities often separate children and adults into their own programs. At the same time, distrust of organized religion can prevent people from joining religious spaces.

*Something tried*

A Sufi camp for adults had a children's tent so that parents could attend, but adults and children were always in separate tracks. The camp gradually evolved into a living lab, both integrating activities across ages and expanding entry points to draw people from outside the community into the camp's shared life.

*How it worked*

Organizers increased the integration of age-based programs. Youngers and elders engaged in informal activities together, like washing dishes in the kitchen or setting up and taking down camp, which became as important as formal services. Friends and family across generations were invited in a variety of ways. Some volunteered together, some attended spiritual activities as they felt called. Others simply shared meals and community life. Programs shifted over the years to welcome and nurture all those present, expanding and contracting with the rhythms of time and age, sometimes pausing, but always adapting.

*What happened*

The camp became a multigenerational "living lab" where experimenting with integration across ages, spiritual backgrounds, and life circumstances was the norm. People from outside the tradition found themselves spiritually moved. Those who attended as children later came back as adults and brought their own families. Parents returned because they trusted their kids would be cared for by the whole community, while experiencing people from all over the world.

*What made it work*

A willingness to test, adapt and learn. Shifting programs to integrate children and adults into shared spiritual spaces. Welcoming friends and family with varied backgrounds and spiritual interests. Creating multiple pathways for participation. Valuing informal encounters as much as formal practices.

FOR REFLECTION

- Imagining your community as a living lab, what experiments might you try to integrate more fully across age?
- How might designing for young and old together create greater belonging across other areas of difference?

FOR MORE

- ➔ *Dive into the data and additional reflection questions at cogenerate.org/religionsurvey*
- ➔ *Get in touch with us at faith@cogenerate.org*



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ABOUT COGENERATE

As one of the nation's leading social-impact organizations dedicated to making the most of our increasingly multigenerational society, CoGenerate brings older and younger people together to solve problems, bridge divides and co-create the future. We are working toward the day when generations come together for mutual benefit and social impact in every area of our lives — at work, in school, in faith-based settings, in social-change efforts, and in the communities where we live.

