

Igniting Intergenerational Mission in a Japanese Context

Micaela Braithwaite

INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational mission has gained popularity in mission strategy, as leaders in mission increasingly recognise the value of younger generations serving alongside older, more experienced leaders. Not only does intergenerational leadership create the opportunity for integrating younger generations into existing leadership teams, and facilitate healthy leadership structures in this way, but it also strengthens the decision making process and shapes all leaders involved. Furthermore, it is a principle embedded in the Holy Scriptures that creates healthy interdependence across the church body and allows members of all ages to utilise their spiritual gifting for leadership. The principles of intergenerational mission are worth integrating into any leadership team, but are especially critical in populations with uneven age distributions such as that of Japan's rapidly ageing population.

DEFINING 'INTERGENERATIONAL'

In a Christian context, 'intergenerational' describes two or more age groups of people in community together engaging in parallel learning, mutual edification and contribution through interactive sharing.¹ Allan Harkness says that 'intentional intergenerational strategies are those in which an integral part of the process of faith communities encourages interpersonal interactions across generational boundaries, and in which a sense of mutuality and equality is encouraged between participants.'² 'Intergenerational' is the intentional bringing together of generations for the mutual benefit of those involved and for the mission at hand.

Bambang Budijanto draws a distinction between the terms multi-generational and intergenerational in a Christian context observing that many organisations, churches and teams are multi-generational in that they may have youth, young adults, middle-aged, and seniors, however intergenerational is unique in that it requires intentional engagement between the generations.³

Intergenerational leadership involves different generations in the leadership team making decisions together. This is not just assigning tasks to each member of the team, rather together they engage

one another in the decision-making process. This both shapes and grows the leadership team, and encourages the leadership to include different perspectives when making decisions.

INTERGENERATIONAL MISSION IN AGEING POPULATIONS

The motivation for intergenerational mission is especially critical in ageing populations such as that of Japan. Japan has the highest worldwide percentage of its population aged 65 and above, with more than 10 percent of the population aged 80 or older, according to the latest available data.

Furthermore, less than one percent of the population is Christian, making the country one of the largest unreached nations in the world. The ageing population also affects the church with the average age of pastors around 72 years old, and only 200-300 pastors under age 40.

Japanese Christianity is statistically in a dangerous position. Up to half of existing churches may close in a few decades due to ageing churches and lack of younger leaders. This means that an intergenerational approach to mission and local church ministry in Japan is particularly essential in ensuring that younger leaders are raised up and the church remains relevant in reaching all generations.

JAPANESE CASE STUDY

It was against this backdrop that Kohei Takeda, Pastor of Faith Bible Church, together with a steering team, began to plan a 'younger leaders' mission conference, called Japan YLG 2024. Japan YLG is a local expression of the Lausanne Movement, who hosted an intergenerational conversation in 2023 for leaders in mission comprised of participants from five generations and all seven continents to engage in dialogue regarding intergenerational mission and leadership.

The goal that motivated the team was to initiate a transformation in Japanese leadership 'culture', by connecting diverse younger leaders who are serving in mission in Japan, mutually seeking humility in Christ, and building genuine friendships that will lay a foundation for mission collaboration.

Kohei Takeda and the planning team wanted the conference to be an opportunity for leaders across generations to come together, connect, encourage each other, and collaborate. He noticed a lack of collaboration between churches in Japan, when there is a need for resource sharing, building community,

1. Allen, Holly and Ross, Christine. (2012). *Intergenerational Christian Formation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

2. Ibid.

3. Budijanto, Bambang. (2021, February 28). *Intergenerational Leadership* [Webinar]. Asia Evangelical Alliance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9UM2FmqhNs>

and being unified in their call to make disciples, 'We wanted to build up the community of leaders so that we can accelerate mission in Japan,' shared Takeda.

A lot of gatherings focus on 'doing mission' but the Japan YLG team wanted to focus on character-building and developing Christlike leaders. They wanted to facilitate a space where intergenerational friendships could develop and grow and foster a leadership culture of humility through mutual sharing and listening to each other.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO FOSTER INTERGENERATIONAL MISSION?

Planning for Japan YLG 2024 began some years prior when it was initially organised to be hosted in 2019 but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This delay, while discouraging at the time, attracted a significant number of participants to form an online community of around 250 people. The online community facilitated deeper engagement through small groups meeting regularly online and laid the groundwork for building relationships that could lead to collaboration. It offered younger leaders the opportunity to hear from more senior leaders who opened up about their past failures, something which was countercultural to Japanese culture. This opened the door to engage in dialogue around mission and form new paradigms around leadership in the church. It also allowed the planning team to further refine the structure of the conference, positioning it as a launchpad for a movement of mission in Japan, and less a stand alone event.

One way the planning team sought to foster intergenerational mission was through inviting whole families to attend. Over the four days of the conference they had around 370 participants attend, including 70 children. This meant that both parents had the opportunity to be a part of the activities which was one of the main successes of the event—no one needed to be excluded.

While the conference was diverse age-wise, with children, teenagers, young adults, working professionals, and senior mentors participating, it was also diverse vocationally and denominationally, with over 30 denominations represented. Some senior leaders each represented a few hundred churches, placing the gathering in a strategic position to influence the wider Japanese church.

CHANGING THE CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP

To create a paradigm shift in the culture there needs to be a process or journey that people go on that shifts not only their thinking and attitudes, but also their actions. Japan YLG aims to implement what happened at the event by forming diverse, intergenerational small groups within the network, where participants will meet regularly to share experiences, discuss mission practices, and pray together. The small

groups will be led by both younger and senior leaders and will emphasise the importance of fostering relationships and provide support to those who attended the conference. They also hope to extend participation beyond the initial group of participants to create a broader impact.

One of the largest groups to be formed as a result of Japan YLG 2024 is a group tailored to mothers and another towards female leaders. This is viewed as a huge success by the Japan YLG group, who recognise mothers as primary disciplers of the next generation.

The team plans to host more events in the future that can draw more people in and begin a movement of Christlike leaders, rooted in the gospel as they seek to work together for the sake of God's kingdom and the future of the church in Japan.

CULTIVATING HUMILITY IN DIVERSITY

Kohei Takeda says that their focus for the conference was not intergenerational as an end in itself, but on character development. As they focused on character they saw a strong need in pursuing humility. Humility is the posture with which we listen to others, hear different opinions and perspectives, and admit our own blind spots. That is where genuine collaboration happens across generations and diverse backgrounds. It cannot be artificially manufactured.

The church needs to return to the basics of nurturing Christlike leaders, and this includes fostering intergenerational connections and focusing on character development and 'being the church' rather than just 'doing church' on a Sunday.

He points out that the mission of God is not one generation's call, but a call to the global body of Christ to reach the whole world. We are called to God's mission as a global body—some the hands and some the feet, but each with a unique and complementary role to play. This does not make sense in the business world, because many times it is less effective and means a slow and complex process, but when we trace the biblical narrative it is how God expands the gospel. Some plant, others water, but it is God who brings the growth, and when we are not careful to include all members of the body of Christ we are 'cutting off our nose to spite our own face'.

When we begin to see God reflected in diverse people coming together united by a biblical calling and vision, it is a beautiful thing and God's glory is revealed. New things are birthed and we cannot expect to remain comfortable as God shapes us in the process.

A HOPEFUL FUTURE FOR THE JAPANESE CHURCH

There is concern that half of the churches in Japan might close within the next 20 years due to an ageing population and the lack of young people coming to faith. This dire situation presents a significant challenge, yet the gospel remains powerful to bring change to those statistics as the Japanese church remains steadfast in the gospel, focusing not just on receiving but also on spreading and living out its teachings. The church needs to return to the basics of nurturing Christlike leaders, and this includes fostering intergenerational connections and focusing on character development and 'being the church' rather than just 'doing church' on a Sunday.

Kohei sums up the heart of their vision, 'first, your heart needs to be transformed and your character needs to be built upon your faith and commitment to Christ. And then your actions, your decisions, your relationship with others will be transformed as well.' This is essential, not just in a Japanese context, but in the church across Asia and the same is for the global church too. Effective teams are formed when leaders across generations embrace this vision and acknowledge gaps in their leadership and show a willingness to grow. The Japan YLG 2024 gathering demonstrated God's glory through the willingness of different generations to work together and mutually support each other in mission, a reminder that God does his work when we are not trying to build our

own kingdom.

It is only when we cultivate hearts of humility in our leadership that we will be able to see beyond building our own kingdoms, listen to others, and truly discern where we can learn and grow. This approach allows us to begin building the kind of Christian community that God calls us to, achieving true kingdom impact in every sphere of society.



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