

**Book Review:**  
***One Church Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church***  
**by Gary McIntosh**

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DR33263 Contextualized Strategic Planning and for Revitalization  
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Gary McIntosh, *One Church Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002. 233 pages. Reviewed by Phillip Shuford.

One of the most perplexing challenges facing church leaders today is how to minister effectively to people of different generations. This may be even truer for pastors of plateaued and declining churches. With *One Church Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church*, Gary McIntosh offers valuable insights into the unique characteristics of the generations in our churches. The book is a useful and practical guide for pastors and other church leaders who are seeking to navigate the often turbulent waters of cross-generational ministry.

McIntosh is professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot School of Theology. He has served as president of Great Commission Research Network that networks professors, denominational leaders, and pastors interested in fulfilling the Great Commission. McIntosh is the vice-president of the Society for Church Consulting, and is a popular speaker on topics such as outreach, assimilation, generational change, breaking growth barriers and church revitalization. His ministry with the Church Growth Network has enabled him to study over 1,000 churches across denominational lines. Thus, he is well qualified to speak authoritatively about church life.

McIntosh's hope is that the reader will gain a better understanding of the issues involved in ministering to multiple generational groups in our church. A key idea of the book is that a lack of understanding between the generations not only negatively affects society, but our churches as well. In chapter one, "Waves of Change," he states his conviction that "Working together in love is a key aspect of a healthy church." (15)

The bulk of the book is a description of what the author calls "four generational waves" in the church: the Builders, the Boomers, the Busters and the Bridgers. McIntosh cautions that churches may be negatively impacted as the influence of the older generations wane and that of

the younger generations grow. He cites five possible results: (1) there will be a slow decline in many local churches and related denominations, (2) fewer recruits for missions, (3) decreasing financial resources to fund ministries, (4) a continued trend toward social liberalism in the United States, and (5) a resultant inability to fulfill Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations." (22) The reviewer notes that *One Church Four Generations* was written in 2002. Looking back through the lens of the past 15 years, it is clear that McIntosh was prescient in his predictions.

The information contained in the author's descriptions of the four generations is not new material. McIntosh's treatment is helpful, though, for two reasons. First, he provides a helpful outline of his material at the conclusion of each section. Most importantly, he discusses how generational characteristics have an impact on church life, and how a church can best disciple people from the different generations.

An example of this is McIntosh's discussion of "Builders and the Church" in chapter two. After observing that Builders tend to have a high sense of obligation to serve the church and tend to be strong supporters of missionary efforts, he notes that while some churches tend to ignore Builders, "They are due our honor and respect." (47) He then gives suggestions for how Builders can be made to feel part of the church.

McIntosh makes similar observations throughout the book. Regarding Boomers, he states that "To effectively reach Boomers with the gospel we need to correct our tunnel vision that has never allowed us to change our method of sharing the gospel." (116) Busters, he writes, are "already a generation removed from the church...They don't understand it [the church] and don't think it's relevant." (156) McIntosh believes that winning Bridgers (also known as the millennials) to Christ "may be the greatest challenge for the church in the twenty-first century."

(192) Church leaders should keep in mind that the Bridger generation will respond better to personal faith stories more than to old-school “Four Spiritual Laws.” (188)

Part Five of the book, “Riding the Waves of Change,” attempts to filter all the information in the previous four sections into a framework that church leaders can use to evaluate their ministries and make changes to effectively minister to all four generational groups. He gives an interesting description of the six primary approaches used for cross-generational ministry: seeker-centered, seeker-sensitive, multiple-track, satellite, rebirthed and blended.

McIntosh believes that blended worship is best able to permit all generations worship together. “Blending generational styles in one service has proved a practical way to go, allowing a church to demonstrate unity, meet different needs, provide diverse ministry opportunities, honor the past and future, and give people time to change.” (222) He is not oblivious of the difficulties of the blended approach, but believes that “the call of Christ to make disciples makes the risks worthwhile.” (223)

McIntosh’s suggestions for how to minister to the four generations are very helpful, and in some cases challenging. For example, his description of the sea change in how “making disciples” done, especially with the Bridgers, is right on target (“Postmodern discipling is about connection, holism and dialogue”), as is his observation that “The Great Commission involves all aspects of salvation, assimilation and maturation.” (181)

The book’s primary weakness is related to the fact that it is dated; when the book was published, smart phones had not been invented, and the accompanying revolution in 24/7 electronic connectedness was a few years away. The reviewer smiled when he read “Bridgers have always had VCRs, cable, answering machines and CDs.” (179)

Some pastors will take issue with McIntosh's suggestions on how to best preach to people of the Bridger generation. The author writes that Bridges are "looking for messages that tell them how to be successful in life" and that sermons "should relate to one of the following three areas: relationships, purpose in life and healing emotional scars." (151) Many would object, saying that expository, book-by-book, verse-by-verse preaching is best suited for making disciples, no matter what the generation. Nevertheless, the author's suggestion for preachers that "You should be able to give the 'take away' in one sentence" is good homiletical advice, regardless one's preaching style. (151)

In spite of these few weaknesses, this book is worthy of being a part of every pastor's library. In *One Church Four Generations* Gary McIntosh effectively makes his case for doing whatever it takes to make our churches places where people of all generations can be discipled in the ways of Jesus.

Recommended.