

2020 - The Generations

By Gemma Neill

Way back when in 20xx Pastor Tom penned a document called 'The Church I See' in which he outlined his vision for the church God was calling him to build here in Norwich. I was a newlyish wed 20 something graduate starting out in her career and phrases Pastor Tom wrote like:

*'I see a remarkable and original church stirred to **touch a generation**; laying foundations for the next.*

*The church I see is a church that beckons 'WELCOME HOME' to **every man, woman and child** that walks through its open doors.*

*...groundbreakers and inventive people who will stir the **hearts and minds of a generation** inspiring people to fulfil their destiny.*

*I see an accessible church that is **committed to reaching our generation** providing them with a helpful source of meaningful direction and service. The church I see teaches and empowers people to live confident and authentic lives in Jesus Christ.'*

They sounded exciting and inspiring. This vision for reaching a generation that echoes throughout the document was something that was compelling and history making. Pastor Tom has always said he wants our church to be a place *'where young and old come together and find common purpose in God'* - that heart to reach the generations is in the DNA of Proclaimers.

And here, 15 odd years later I can see evidence of this around this room. I remember Angus and Rose McCrum announcing that they were expecting baby number 3 and now that little baby Rachel stands up on this stage and leads us in worship. The babies are our worship leaders. I see Ann Herbert, who was my youth leader when I was 16/17 years old - who put such a powerful foundation in my life of what it means to be a follower of Jesus - Ann who is now doing the same for my 4 year old son in Explorers. I see the impact down through the generations.

But it's funny now, 15 years later, how when I re-read those words about building a church that impacts the generations, a church that reaches every man woman and child, the excitement and inspiration it gave me as a young newly wed 20 something is still there, but it is heavily underscored with a sense of importance, gravity and priority for this nearly 40 year old mother of 2.

Yes we can see evidence of this within our church but this is just the beginning. There is so much more for us to do, so many more children and young people to reach, there are our own children and young people in our church community now who we want to see grow into confident, Jesus loving, passionate, innovative, biblically literate men and women of God. There were over 30 children make a decision to become a follower of Jesus at our Christmas services last month. We want to see a generation of children and young people who stand strong in their identity in Jesus, who know their value, who walk through life with a sense of purpose and calling, filled with the Holy Spirit, who don't compromise their faith, who become leaders across the professions from politics to the sciences to education to arts and entertainment. History makers, planetshakers, ground breakers.

Yet reports suggest that 'The Church of England is facing a generational catastrophe with only 2% of young adults identifying with it, while seven out of 10 under-24s say they have

no religion, research reveals.’ (The Guardian Sept 2018). We find ourselves living in a city that researchers have dubbed ‘the most Godless city in the UK’.

1 in 5 young people aged 16-24 experience a common mental illness such as depression or anxiety. 22% of 15 year olds have self harmed.

The battle for the next generation is on. The question is, what’s our game plan?

Is it having a church which is relevant, contemporary and engaging for young people?
Absolutely yes

Is it having a children’s programme which is fun and engaging and transitions them well into a youth programme? Yes 100%

Is it having a community for families where they can get the support and encouragement they need and find other families to do life with? Of course yes.

But all though these things are all important I believe there is something that we all need to action if we are to win the next generation. Something that underlines all the cool programs and funky worship, something that can forever shift the life of a young person or child, something without which, rather than winning the next generation we may find ourselves waving goodbye to them.

The heartfelt *and* persistent prayer of a righteous man (believer) can accomplish much [when put into action and made effective by God—it is dynamic and can have tremendous power]. James 5:16 AMP

There is a common theme that runs throughout scripture whenever some kind of breakthrough happens - someone calls out to God in prayer. There is a common theme that runs through Christian history whenever some kind of breakthrough happens - someone calls out to God in prayer. One of the single most important and valuable things we can do for the next generation is to pray for them. We have much to accomplish in regards to the next generation and James outlines for us here that its our prayers that will do the accomplishing. Our prayers are powerful. Our prayers are the means.

I think sometimes we can read a scripture like this: “The heartfelt *and* persistent prayer of a righteous man (believer) can (tone of a doubtful can) accomplish much”. No wonder we don’t always prioritise prayer in our lives!! If we read it as the heartfelt and persistent prayer of a righteous man can ‘possibly, maybe, perhaps, at times, has been known to’ accomplish much prayer isn’t going to get much of our time is it? And we can begin to devalue the significance of prayer in our lives. What James actually wrote down was that the ‘heartfelt *and* persistent prayer of a righteous man (believer) ischuó (is.khoo.O) can (tone: strong and confident) accomplish much’. There is a confidence and strength to it.

It’s time to take seriously our responsibility, our prayers can shape the destiny of the next generation.

It can be so easy to focus on all our concerns for the next generation - we can look at all the statistics about self harm and mental health issues in children and young people, we can worry about the state of the world and climate change, what’s Brexit going to mean for them, what’s the job market going to be like, how about the county drug lines, how will they cope with their student debt. I worry sometimes that they are a generation having fear and stress and disaster spoken over them more than they are having life and hope and blessing and favour spoken over them. Isn’t it time for the church to stand up and to begin to speak the promises and hopes of heaven over our children and young people? What

does Paul teach us in his great letter to the **Phillipians 4:6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. (NLT)**

Rather than worrying for a generation, let's pray for a generation. Parents, rather than worrying for your kids - am I too strict, too laid back? am I giving them enough independence, do they need more of my help? have I played with them enough? Have I shouted too much? Am I messing them up? Are they safe enough? Rather than allowing worry and fear to determine our parenting let's allow hope in Jesus and faith in God and wisdom from heaven and discernment by the Holy Spirit to determine our parenting. Don't worry about anything; instead pray about everything.

So as we draw to a close I want to get super practical with you all.

1) First one especially for the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Let's bring some intentionality into praying for our children and young people. This is something I started doing last year for my boys. Get a note pad and bible and begin to document the prayers for those children in them. Highlight in the bible promises from the word for them. Write down your prayers for them. Pray into their strengths and their weaknesses, their friendships, their health and studies. Paul taught us to pray about EVERYTHING. Not only will it help you become focused and intentional in your prayers for them but its something you can give to them at some point in their future. **“Prayers are deathless. They outlive the lives of those who uttered them.” E. M. Bounds.** Try and find a rhythm in your week about when you pray for them. Maybe it's when you are ironing their school uniform, or waiting for them at gymnastics, perhaps it's part of your own prayer time, or when you go in to kiss them goodnight when they are asleep. Let's leave a prayer legacy for them.

2) Second application: something we can all do.

We can all impact the next generation with our prayers and encouragements. For the month of January mark every Friday on your calendar/phone as **'future Friday'**. On those days choose a young person or child and pray for them. Find a way to encourage them by letting them know of your prayer. Send it in a message or contact their parent to let them know so they can pass it on. I would love it if you would do this forever but for now, let's just stick with January.

And may I just address all the men in the room for a brief moment. Guys, of the 1.8million single parent families 90% of them are headed by women leading researchers and charities and think tanks to dub the generation rising a fatherless generation. I don't know what else to say except please, step in, be a man of prayer for your children and for the next generation.

3) Even if your are not a christian I am certain you have young people in your world who you care about and you want to see them thrive in life. You may feel uncomfortable praying for them (although I encourage you to at least give it a go) but you can absolutely join in with future Friday by sharing an encouragement with them and letting them know you believe in them.

We stand at the start of a whole new decade. How old with the children and young people in your world be 10 years from now. I will have a 14 year old and 11 year old. How old will the young people you know be? Imagine what 10 years of consistent prayer can do for them. 10 years of speaking God's promises over their lives. 10 years of believing for them

and offering focused and deliberate prayer. Imagine if all our other teams in church - band, production, welcome team and the rest decided, every time we pray, we will pray for our kids and youth work. Never underestimate the power of prayer it CAN change everything.