

**Generations Dance!**  
**February 11, 2018**  
**Rev. Otto O'Connor**

Today we are kicking off our stewardship campaign. The fundraising campaign of this church and the way that we raise money to do all the awesome things that are happening here at First Parish.

And I thought that a cool way to start that would be to honor and celebrate all the generations that we have here at church - the ones that have come before and the ones that are yet to come!

Church is a place where many different generations come together. I don't really know of a lot of other places that that happens.

So, what exactly IS a generation?

Well, generational theory is the idea that certain cohorts of individuals are deeply shaped by their experiences in the world, and that those groups comprise "generations" that have certain characteristics and similarities to each other. They are influenced by the world and culture, and in turn exert influence themselves on our culture.

Currently, there are roughly five "generations" in North American society and represented in our church.

This is, of course, an imperfect system - just like any kind of stereotyping, you cannot get full picture of someone just from knowing their generation. And oftentimes there are mini-generations in one.

This morning, I want to do a little activity that will help us to see the differences and learn who we have in our congregation.

As I describe each generation, we will play a small segment from a song that was popular during this generation's youth. You are invited to dance, maybe even get up, as you are willing and able, if that is the generation you belong to.

Now, this is UU church, and I know dancing can sometimes be a challenge for us, and so, of course, you are welcome to do as you choose. But church is where we come to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, so I encourage you to get a little out of your comfort zone and dance a little when your song comes on. It will only be for a few seconds.

And, as a disclaimer, generations are huge - between 15 and 20 years most of the time. So some people are kind of smushed at the beginning of one and the end of another. That means that these songs might not fully resonate with you. That's ok! It's all part of the learning experience - just like any categories we use for people, we know that they don't always fit neatly and nicely.

Ok, are you ready to get started?

First, we will start with, our dear elders, the oldest generation, we have the Silent Generation - also known as the Greatest Generation, because, let's be real, they are pretty great.

These are folks who were born before 1945 and they make up about 12% of the current US population, which means that they are currently the smallest of the generations represented.

These folks were shaped by several key events, most notably the Second World War and the Great Depression.

They were the generation where people started moving from farms into cities. A huge shift in how we interacted with each other and with culture. For this reason they are sometimes called the "Builders" - they literally built the world we live in today.

And, as far as music comes, they are also known as the Radio Generation, because most of their popular culture in their formative years was consumed via radio. Broadcast television wasn't sent throughout the whole of the US until 1951 - and many folks from this generation were adults by then.

Also, Traditionalist, Silent Generation folks, if you are here and if you are willing, let's see your moves.

*Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* - The Andrews Sisters

That was Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy by the Andrews Sisters, which came out in 1941

Ok, so we don't have a lot of folks from that generation here. Even though not a lot of people got up to dance, there are some folks from that generation who are a part of this church, even if they are not here today.

Next up, we have the Baby Boomers, named for the post World War II increase in Babies. US Society wasn't ready for it. Hospitals, school, colleges and the workforce were overcrowded when they came through. Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 ish (remember, these are not precise categories). Baby Boomers make up roughly 26% of the US population. Some major life events for Baby Boomers include the Television, the Civil Rights movement, the space race and the start of the Cold War.

They are, by and large, also shaped by an affluence that hadn't been seen in American society before. For the first time, many folks from the Baby Boomer generation were able to see beyond the need for simply food and shelter, in a way that generations before them couldn't.

So, Boomers, ready for a coming of age song from your youth? I'm gonna encourage you to show us how it's done!

*Dancing in the Streets* - Martha and the Vendells

That was “Dancing in the Street” by Martha and The Vendells, which was released in 1964.

Ok, next up, born between 1965 and 1980ish, we have Generation X, as I like to call ‘em the Gen Xers. Also known as the slackers. Gen Xers make up roughly 20% of the population, squished between the much larger Baby Boomer and Millennial generations.

MTV, the Walkman, Tattoos, grunge, and not caring about anything, are pretty much the icons of this generation that saw the rise of the AIDS crisis and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Gen X is looked at as being more cynical than their idealistic Baby Boomer predecessors. Gen Xers were the first generation in the US where a whole bunch of them experienced parents getting divorced. In the workplace, the Baby Boomers are hanging on to positions of power, and when they are getting pushed on, it’s often to the younger, energetic seeming Millennials, leaving a lot of Gen X wondering where their place is?

Alright, Gen X, I know there are quite a few of you here. Let’s see how anyone could even dance to this?

*Smells Like Teen Spirit* - Nirvana

That was Smells Like Teen Spirit by Nirvana, which was released in 1991.

Next up, the Millennials. Fair warning, this is my generation, and though I work hard to be a minister to all generations, I will report my own bias in that I will report more accurately on this one because I experienced all the things the Millennials have experienced.

So, Millennials. Born between 1981 and 2001, make up about 28% of the population - which makes them the largest group in the US right now. That’s what happens when the Baby Boomers have kids.

9/11 is a huge coming of age moment for these folks (I was 16 when it happened), but other things happened too. This generation saw gay marriage legalized, entered the workforce during the Great Recession, and helped elect the first Black President.

Millennials are known for being “technological natives,” meaning that they were born into a world where learning how to use technology was necessary.

Millennials are known for their helicopter parents (who are Baby Boomers, after all) and participation trophies, and for the fact that they are drowning in student debt like no other generation.

Alright, fellow Millennials, let’s show ‘em what we got.

*Hey Ya* - Outkast

That is “Hey Ya” by Outkast, which came out in 2003.

Ok, so that bring us to now, the current generation, whatever it is that comes after the Millennials. There are people born after 2000. Names that have been proposed and used for this generation are Generation Z, the iGeneration, and Homeland Generation. And of course, they are the most rapidly growing generation.

They have been growing up in a world with smartphones and tablets and Facebook accounts. They have no knowledge of the days when you could walk your loved one to the gate at an airport. I keep thinking things like “These kids will never have to search for their home videos, because they are literally everywhere!” Social media is a constant force for this generation in a way that it’s never been before.

Much is to be seen about what gifts this generation brings to our world. So, kids, since pretty much everyone in this new generation is a kid, let’s see what you’ve got!

*Happy* - Pharell

That was Happy by Pharell, which came out in 2013.

Ok, so now that we’ve all sufficiently embarrassed ourselves listening to and dancing to the music of our generation, you might ask why I made you go through this exercise.

I’m reminded of my friends’ weddings - now I love weddings because you often get to see people of all different generations on the dance floor, enjoying music from all different time periods.

I love them, and I specifically remember them because I know how quickly I run to the dance floor when the Spice Girls are on, and how all my age-mates run too. And then something older comes on, something I don’t know, and we flow in and out, and some people stay, but others leave.

As much as I love these other songs we’ve listened to, Dancing in the Street is just not going to get me excited the way Hey Ya is. And if Smells Like Teen Spirit is your jam, well, Happy by Pharell is kind of bland.

Because that’s the way it is in multigenerational community, our music tastes are different because our experiences of growing up in the world are so vastly different.

Hadyn Shaw, author of “Sticking Points” a book about getting the generations to work together in the workplace, says that generational differences should be approached much in the same way cultural difference are. And it makes good sense, folks from the Silent Generation literally grew up in a totally different world than Millennials have. And so, no matter how much cultural competency we might have in another generation, we’re never going to understand it like a true native.

Now, of course, age intersects with all our other identities. My experience of being a Millennial is shaped, for example, by the cultural experiences I had growing up in

Canada, where 9/11 was close, but it was in another country, and the fact that the province of Quebec wanted to separate did more for my separation anxiety than most anything else. So it's important for us to recognize the ways in which our other cultural experiences impact these differences.

But still, the greatest diversity we have in this church is in age. So if we have at least five generations represented, that's five distinct and different cultures that are all interacting and wondering why people in the other generations are behaving in such mysterious and strange ways.

Sometimes tension can increase when we focus on the what of these differences rather than taking the time to consider why someone might feel a certain way. The different generations have different motivations - and it even impacts churches! Younger generations, for example, are more likely to pick up and leave if they don't like what's happening at their church, whereas folks from older generations tend to stick it out.

So what does this mean for us, here at the church?

Well, as you heard Brian, who gave a testimonial today to kick off our stewardship drive, he's a Gen Xer (right, Brian?), but a pretty young one. He made a relationship with an elder, Eloise Wellington, whom he otherwise would never have connected with, and with the children in his spirit place classes.

When we talk about the message of this church, we believe, I believe, that it's a compelling message for people of all ages. Yet, more and more, we have younger people coming in the door. Which, trust me, is something more UU churches would give anything for.

But we must not forget the ways in which we are still a multigenerational community, a five generations community, and that our interactions and connections must be in understanding of those differences.

I love this church in part because it has a diversity of age that is not found in most congregations. At other churches that I looked at while searching for a church, I would have by far been the youngest person in the room almost every Sunday. Here, I sit in the average age in thirties, which a good proportion of the congregation being in their twenties, forties, fifties, and sixties.

But this comes with its own challenges. How do those of us in the largest group, and yes, I count myself among them, us cuspers between Generation X and Millennial Generation not take over without making space for those who are older and younger than us?

Fundamentally, generational theory can help us to realize that sometimes, we have to make compromise for the sake of a wider welcome. Sometimes we have to realize the gifts that other generations bring, the ways of seeing things, we have to learn to see that our differences can be places for us to find new common ground and to learn from each other.

So, I have a little homework for you.

During coffee hours today, I want you to have a conversation with someone from a different generation. Find out what it was like for them growing up, how these events of their lives shaped them, and how they related - or don't - to others in their age cohort. And share! If the music played today doesn't capture that generational feeling for you, share what music does!

Here at First Parish in Malden, we have the gift of learning from each other. I can stand up here and tell you all sorts of research about all the different generations, but it doesn't change what it is to actually know someone from a different generation.

This is a strength and gift of our church. So let's keep it going, for generations to come.

And let us say together, Amen.

Amen.