



Young Adult Panel on Intergenerational Solidarity

Metro Vancouver Unitarian Gathering - April 7, 2018

Unitarian Church of Vancouver

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It is becoming increasingly clear that “Millennials” (born between about 1981 and 1995) face unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Inspired by our Canadian Unitarian vision of interdependence, love and justice, how can we support young people in our congregations and beyond? What can our multigenerational communities offer Millennials, and how can they be enriched by greater age diversity?

Who better to start exploring these issues than Millennials themselves? An hour long panel of four local Unitarian young adults was convened at the Metro Vancouver Unitarian Gathering to weigh in on generational issues, and discuss how our congregations can foster solidarity between generations. The panel was convened and introduced by Rev. Stephen Epperson and moderated by Canadian Unitarian Council Staff Asha Philar. After the panel, small group discussions gave participants time to explore how to take insights from the panel back to their congregations.

Below is a transcript of the panel discussion. The introduction and panelist responses have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

About the panelists

Lindsay Hindle is a member of the North Shore Unitarian Congregation in North Vancouver, and is a multi-passionate entrepreneur. She lives with her husband and 7 year old son in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Casey Stainsby is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, raised at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. She recently moved back to the West coast after a few years in Montreal and is working on building community in her new home in Victoria.



Dani Cooper was also raised Unitarian Universalist, and is a 23 year old social justice activist. They love painting, swimming and dancing, and they currently live in Victoria, B.C.

Douglas Ennenberg was born in Vancouver and is a lifelong Unitarian, committed to fostering a rich community via his congregation - the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. He is working on the kinds of accessibility projects that can grow radical hospitality.

About the moderator: Asha Philar works for the Canadian Unitarian Council as the Youth and Young Adult Ministry Development staff person. She supports congregations to become more inclusive of younger people and provide programs to meet the needs of youth and young adults. She also coordinates regional and national events that help youth and young adults build community and explore their spirituality. Asha lives in Kitchener, Ontario.

Introduction to the panel and Millennial issues

Asha Philar, moderator:

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker writes: "All our lives we need others and others need us." To fulfill those needs, she says, we need to create "multigenerational communities where all our members are welcome, where all contribute, where all give and receive."

I'm proud to say that it's my job to help Unitarian congregations across Canada become just those kinds of communities. It's a lofty goal, and we still have a long way to go. We know that the makeup of our churches does not reflect the society around us. Young adults are still underrepresented in our congregations, with 18-35 year olds as our smallest demographic.

We have long known that this age gap exists, but it's been hard to know how to tackle such a big issue. In early 2017, the Canadian Unitarian Council started a national initiative - the Young Adult Welcoming and Inclusion Project - to provide a road map for congregations who wanted to improve their ministry to and with young adults. The project was supported by the UU Ministers of Canada and the Unitarian Church of Vancouver (UCV).

Over the past year, seven congregations, including UCV, have participated in the project - which included a self-assessment, webinars, mentoring and resources. Each congregation chose specific actions to work on, and many of them are carrying their initiatives forward.

I have been inspired by the progress that is happening across the country, but I've also witnessed the challenges of creating communities where many different generations work and worship together.

Although there are limits to generalizing based on age, I think that generational research can help us understand more about what makes each generation unique, and how they relate to each other. There are 5 main generations in our congregations, roughly grouped by year of birth. On the borders of each of these groups are people who show traits of both generations, sometimes called "cuspers".

1. Traditionalists - born before 1945
2. Baby boomers - born between about 1946 and 1964



3. Generation X - born between about 1965 and 1980
4. Millennials - born between about 1981 and 1995
5. Generation Z - born after 1995

This morning's panel focuses on the experiences of young adults, or those in the Millennial generation. Millennials are often vilified in the media - they've been described as entitled, selfish, reluctant to take on adult responsibilities, coddled by their parents, and unreliable at work. The way that Millennials are changing society and shaking up the world of work, relationships and social values can be challenging to other generations, and has earned Millennials their share of criticism.

I came across a Buzzfeed article entitled "Here are 28 things Millennials are killing in cold blood". The list of real life, media headlines proclaims that Millennials are responsible for killing: the golf industry, the napkin industry, manners, bar soap, the work day, their bosses, fashion, the wine cork, and to top it off: relationships and democracy - just to name a few.

On a more serious note, though, Millennials as a generation are facing unprecedented challenges. Rev. Epperson pointed out that Millennials might be the first generation to have lower quality of life than their parents.

Here are just a few examples of challenges faced by the Millennial generation:

- Highest levels of personal and student debt in history
- Earnings have been stagnant or dropped over time
- Prevalence of precarious work - contract, part time, unpaid internships
- Unaffordable housing - high income to house price or rent ratio
- Rising costs of living, including childcare, electricity and groceries
- High rates of anxiety, depression and other mood disorders - also goes along with greater awareness and ability to talk about it and get treatment
- Uncertain economic and environmental future, with climate change the defining issue this generation will face and need to address

Why is it important to understand Millennials?

a) Everyone who is currently in the young adult age range is a Millennial. If we are to better serve that demographic, we need to start with understanding.

b) Our church model is well suited to the lifestyles, needs and financial capacity of Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, (and to some extent, Gen Xers) but Millennials are living in a new reality and our institutions need to be able to adapt to stay relevant and viable.

c) This generation also presents us with a great opportunity:

A growing number of young people identify as "spiritual but not religious" and are unaffiliated with any religion. But they are still looking for (and finding) meaning and connection through secular communities - and that's something that Unitarians might provide if our faith is able to become truly inclusive of all our generations.



Can our UU communities and congregations be places where people of all ages can support others and feel supported? Are we able to provide a spiritual home that meets the needs of Millennials the way it has for other generations? And what would that look like in our institutions?

These are big questions that can't be solved in an hour, but we'll start exploring them through the panel and small group discussions that follow.

A small disclaimer before we begin: The panelists are all young adults in the Millennial generation, so they may have some common experiences, but they can't speak for or represent everyone their age. It's important to remember that young adults are a diverse group with a huge variety of experiences, life stages, needs and interests, and that we really love being treated as individuals.

Questions and answers with the panelists

Question 1: About your generation

Moderator: What would you like people to know about you and your generation that you think people might not understand?

Lindsay Hindle: My experience at the moment is being a mom and a wife, and an entrepreneur. And so this brings certain challenges to life. As far as how Millennials are coping with parenthood and with responsibilities - we're trying to create a life of balance. We're trying to not step into our parents' shoes where we experienced them in careers that left them exhausted and coming home stressed out, and not having a lot of time with their kids.

What I'm trying to do is provide more time with my child, and avoid those career and employment stressors that would make me a stressed out parent. That's why I've chosen entrepreneurship, and why a lot of Millennials are choosing to remove themselves from the normal workforce and find ways to create their own source of income. What we really want is not necessarily to shirk responsibility, or to have this freedom to sit on a beach and drink margaritas all day. It's about having balance and wellness, because we've seen how much of an impact stress has had on our parents. We don't want that for ourselves, and we don't want that for our kids.

Casey Stainsby: The thing that I've been thinking about in response to this question is the level of existential dread that we live with on a daily basis. I know in my own life I've gone from being in elementary school and being told that climate change is real, but we still have some time to turn it around, to being a young adult now and that time has passed. It's a certainty that we've messed everything up and that, if not in our own lifetimes, then definitely in our children's and our grandchildren's life times, the world is going to go through some really massive turmoil and upheaval. That's very real and very imminent, and it's something I think about on a daily basis. I try to make choices in my life around that.



I think that it ties into what Lindsay was saying about that awareness that the ways that things are going and the way that society is running is not working, and is collapsing. It has to. I think a lot of the distrust of institutions and authority leads to us trying to live in different and new ways that are actually healthy, which is something I prioritize and try to think about. These ways of living might give us some tools to get through the next 100 years, but that doesn't look like a lot of the things that older generations expect us to be doing at this phase in our lives.

I think that we're always questioning institutions and wondering "is that institution something that is going to sustain through this great turning, or is it going to be something that is just dead weight and is going to hold us back from really getting to where we need to be?".

I think that for a lot of people, church falls into that category. We wonder "Is this relevant?", "Is this going to last?". There are some reasons that young people are wary of churches. We're not totally sure if this is something that will be as relevant to us as it was to our parents and grandparents.

Doug Ennenberg: The great turning that you talked about is central in a way to what I was thinking about too. Our generation has seen so many big changes in the world: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission happened within our lifetime, Black Lives Matter and the current movement against gun ownership.

Our generation is passionate, and we're poor, and we're over-educated. And we do have this existential dread. And I think out of that, identity politics have really become important within our generation. We're the generation of intersectionality - the ideas of feminism have grown to start to align with understanding racism as white supremacy, and sexism as patriarchy, and we're understanding classism and imperialism in new ways. The ideas that are being born in our generation are building off of the ideas that were developed in generations before us. And there is a grand movement toward justice and equality and understanding as well.

Dani Cooper: What I want people to know about me and my generation is that we're really big dreamers. I think we're at this time where we're trying to figure out this balance between civility, peace, love, happiness, and this great desire for justice, criticism, complete upheaval and major change.

And I think that it's tough to balance those things - to figure out how we care for each other and love each other, and also hold each other accountable. How can we rise up and change things while still maintaining some level of stability and community and care? I see that as a major question for us, because we're trying so hard to achieve justice and achieve social upheaval, but I see how the type of intense criticism that's come up in this generation has affected individual people.

We're also at a time where a lot of people are really isolated. With new technologies, it's easier and easier to just read a lot, educate yourself a lot, and connect with people online, but people may not have as much connection to their family or community. I think that young people really want to be connected to people who are older than them, and people who are younger than them. They are really starving for these communities where we can come together and be spiritual, accountable, care for one another, love each other; where we can work through some of these issues. It can be really tough to find those communities right now.

What I love about people in this generation is that we're big dreamers - not only do we believe it's possible; we believe it's necessary. We don't really back down. I think that has benefits, and it has downsides too. Sometimes people in this generation can be seen as intensely critical, very impatient,



and that's kind of where that entitlement idea comes from. But I think it comes from a deep belief that we're capable of change. Not only is it possible, but it's a lot easier than what people have made it out to be. And we're kind of seeing through those institutional lies - like why are we still building pipelines when we've been talking about this for 30, 40 years?

But I love this generation. I think they're really interesting and I have a good time just watching them exist.

Question 2: What intergenerational solidarity means to you

Moderator: Our panel is called "Intergenerational Solidarity", so I'm wondering what intergenerational solidarity means to you. Is that something that you experience, or that you have experienced, in the world or in one of our congregations?

Doug: I think that intergenerational solidarity has come up in good ways for me in this congregation (UCV). I'm working with the kids these days, which is fantastic. They're really great and smart. I've formed relationships with older people as well, and that's been fantastic.

I want this space to be for everyone. And I think that a good place for everyone is a good place for young adults. That's kind of the heart of my answer to this question. This can be a place for rich community and deep spirits and just actions, where everyone - of all demographics - is welcome to engage in those things. And not just welcomed, but celebrated and sought out, then I think that it's a place that young adults can flourish. I'm really interested in everyone having a place here.

Lindsay: I was thinking the other day about our very young people, through the program where 13 year olds have a mentorship relationship with an adult, and I wondered why it stops at 13. Because young adults have so many things they're trying to hold in their life, and figure out. I remember being 20, and that was probably the most anxiety-inducing, most confusing time of my life. I feel like it would have been really great to have[a mentor] just slightly ahead of me, who wasn't my parent.

I was wondering what those relationships are like within our congregations. What is that path beyond 13 where you can have a coffee or a more face-to-face touchpoint with somebody? I know that some differences in life stages can make it difficult for people to think too far ahead, or to plan, and I've been thinking about how to fit different lifestyles and stages into our programs.

You may have tried different programs and been disappointed that no one showed up, and thought that it wouldn't work. Maybe we can get creative with how we can be a presence and connect people together, but do it a bit more flexibly, since so many young people are often in transit, hopping around from school or other commitments, but still want to maintain that connection. How do we keep that relationship, even if it's bare minimum?

Casey: My mind first goes to thinking really concretely about physical, material ways of supporting young adults. As we've heard, we face a lot of debt and uncertain employment, and there are really serious housing crises going on in the Vancouver area and in Victoria. And these things are real, huge stressors in our lives that are holding us back from being able to build toward those dreams that we



have. So wherever possible, making housing available if you have it, supporting the projects of young people financially, feeding them, offering dinners - those things are really concrete and actually super helpful.

Congregations can also offer jobs and pay us for the work that you're asking us to do. Honestly, that's probably one of the reasons I'm still involved in Unitarian community in such an active way - because I've been paid to stick around and do things.

(Dani and Doug also voice agreement on this point)

It's just a reality of our lives. If it's something that we want to do but there's no money towards it, we may not have the time or the resources to put into volunteering the way that a lot of our churches are structured around.

I've had a real craving in my life for the types of mentorship relationships that Lindsay mentioned - real, intentional, formalized partnerships of being paired with somebody who has a lot of experience in the area of life that I want to get experience in. Being able to work with that person and have that knowledge passed down in a human way that's not just in a book or on the internet. Our generation is really good at finding information - we can definitely look something up and figure out how to do it by ourselves. But there's an element of real, lived experience that I crave.

I don't know how to do that or where that's going to come from, but I think that churches are one of the very few places left in our societies where we actually have intergenerational community, or the potential for it. So there's a lot of potential here.

Lindsay: Speaking on a larger, societal level of intergenerational relationships - I think we really want to have each others' backs. Two areas where I see older generations struggling just as much as younger generations are housing and caregiving. For the younger generation, housing is a real challenge, but it's also something that elderly people will be struggling with as well. So I think we both need to be showing up to push the government for social and subsidized housing. And for young adults, there is the caregiving of young children and the high cost of childcare. But when you're older, there's the high cost of elder care and the impact on people who need to take it on themselves.

So I think that both generations can show up to the same kinds of events and movements to pressure the government to support and fund those things better.

Dani: Solidarity is something I think about a lot. I'm involved in church and in an organization called Alliance Against Displacement that works with the tent cities in Vancouver and Victoria. It's also a very intergenerational organization - our oldest members are in their 80s and our youngest members are in high school.

The number one thing that I've learned is that nothing beats leading with relationships - building strong, genuine friendships with people that are different than you. I think the relationships where you have differences (in age, gender, incomes or other identities) are where you're challenged to grow the most. If you're always around people that believe the same things that you do, and think the same ways as you, you don't benefit from that - it takes challenge in order to grow.

I think we would benefit if we spent more time forming real relationships and friendships, inviting people over for lunch, hanging out, being treated as full people rather than being called up on when something's relevant to your identity. Young people are seeking connections with older



generations, and seniors could benefit from being around young people - younger people could offer care and support, and older people might be able to offer more stable housing options.

If we lead with caring for and getting to know each other, everything else will follow - you're better able to rise to the occasion when they say they need help, or when they're in a bad situation. I think a lot of young people are finding themselves in a bad situation - they need housing, and employment - and a lot of older people are finding themselves in a bad situation too, in which family connections have dissolved a bit, there's a bit less money, housing is a bit more expensive. We could really benefit from coming together and taking the time to get to know each other.

I've valued many things in UUism - like how I've been able to meet people of all ages. The mentorship program when I was 13 connected me with the first gay adult that I'd ever met, who was a successful university professor who had accomplished amazing things. It made me feel that maybe I could accomplish something cool too - because I'd never met people like that before. When I was in grade 3, I got to write letters and connect with someone who was in their 80s through the pen pal program. I always thought that they were really cool and they were a person that I talked to for years and years afterwards.

That's another thing that I appreciate about the activism that I'm doing - seeing older people who are leaders and interested in younger people, who are doing social justice activism and have so much to teach me. And I feel like I have a lot to teach them too. I think we could together on so many social problems and things that we're facing. If we just took time to sit down at a table together and try and work out some of these issues, we'd get a lot farther than we think we would.

Question 3: Intergenerational solidarity in our congregations

Moderator: I want to bring it home to the context of this gathering, which is our Unitarian Universalist faith, and UU communities - whether they're found within congregations, online, through gatherings and events, or other ways of being together.

How can our UU congregations and communities foster that type of intergenerational solidarity? How can they support young adults? What are the ways that we're falling short? What are the growing points that we have in our faith homes right now?

Casey: I don't have a checklist of to-do items. [She mentions existing CUC resources, with tips for inclusive multigenerational communities and young adult ministry - [see the CUC website](#)]. But one piece I've been thinking about is that we've known for a long time that intergenerational relationships are really important, and something that we all need - no matter what age we are. And we need to work on them, and we need to get better at them. But we don't seem to know how to do that, or what those skills we need to be able to reach across generations.

So I want to invite us to be compassionate with ourselves around that. It's not because we're unable to, or that we're bad people, but I think that we've been raised in such age-segregated ways. For most of us, from the time that we were little, we were with our own age cohort without having a lot of opportunity to mix in a way that other cultures around the world do. And that's just a facet and a



poverty of our culture. So we're all learning together about this, and it's not like we're going to get it all at once, or completely fail at it either. But it's going to take some time to get those skills back.

Lindsay: It's by no means an easy thing. I think there's a very interesting story that we can create together that really communicates why a religious community like ours is beneficial. Maybe we haven't figured out a way to really communicate that cultural story - what kind of culture are we creating and inviting people into that they would want to be part of, that they would recognize as something needed, or didn't know they needed until they've found it.

It's definitely a challenge with the lives that a lot of us have - the need to keep up with communications, be aware of what's happening and actually write things down in a calendar to show up for them.

I think there are social issues that affect both generations that we can come together on, and there's also this internal search for purpose and meaning. A lot of young people are looking for someone to tell us the future is going to be ok, looking for a culture of hopeful solidarity that we're all in this together. Those two things could be really effective.

If you were going to reach out to a young person that you know, who is not part of our community, what would be that story of hope that you might give to that person? How could you show them that there is a light and there is a group of people in the world that aren't split apart by religious differences or by hate or racism. There are people who have [similar] core values of wanting the world to be a peaceful place - what would your story be to that person?

I have reached out to friends of mine to invite them to my congregation (NSUC), and I think I had to reach out 8 times or so before one of my friends actually came. Now she's a member, so that was a success. With another friend of mine, I reached out 9 times over the course of 2 years to encourage him to come, and he finally came with me. But it took that persistence to keep putting it out there until finally they gave it a chance.

I think that's really what it takes, because 1) we're so distracted by so much stuff going on, and 2) the idea that this kind of community actually exists can be a hard concept for people outside of this religion to fathom. Because what we see out there in the media, which has such a huge influence on us, is the constant story of discord and people fighting each other.

It almost becomes this central belief that there is no one out there [like us]. So breaking through that story with our own story takes persistence. I think once we have that down, we might see a lot more connection with younger generations.

Doug: Understanding who this church and this faith caters to is really important. For example, there used to be a youth room downstairs with fun furniture and colourful things, and at some point those things were thrown away and it looks like a board room again. I think we need a space dedicated to youth - a place where youth can walk in and instantly feel recognized and welcome, and happy to be there. At our church, the children's program will soon be getting a permanent children's room, and I hope we're able to paint the walls!

I think it's important to understand how and why this church caters mostly to white folks, and to people of a certain generation. There are white supremacy teach ins happening in [UU churches across] the U.S. and in Canada, created by Black Lives of UU [[learn more about the teach-ins here](#)]. I think we



should run teach ins in our congregations to help us understand how white supremacy shows up. Because it's here - it is.

Free lunches would also bring a lot more young adults and other people in. And the bathrooms are exclusive to people who identify as men and women. There are many people who can't go to the bathroom here. So change the signs. There are people I can't invite here because they don't identify as men or women.

Something I've seen in our congregation is that our organizational structure is tricky to pin down and understand. In order for the organizational structure to change and be accessed by people who can change our community just by their presence and their ideas, we need to be clear on how to access these programs and committees. I saw that [another congregation] had these simple and beautiful documents that clearly show what's happening there, what committees are active, and what work they can do, who they can join in this movement.

Dani: I really love UUism, and I want to start out by saying that. UUism has a lot of strengths. I am healthier when I consider and ask deeper questions about life. I'm healthier when I take time to sit and contemplate. I'm healthier and happier when I approach life's trials and tribulations with a sense of hope and joy. And I do that with a community of people.

But I've had a lot of frustrations with UUism over the years as a person that's been really active, and I took a bit of space away from the faith for a little while.

I think we could get a lot better at action. UUs have these great principles, these great ideas, they are so good at making these very personal connections with other people and connecting with themselves. But with the larger community, we only seem to do outreach individually. I know individual Unitarians that are on Burnaby Mountain protesting pipelines, or who are involved doing anti-racism workshops. But it's been tough to mobilize all of us, or for the whole congregation to get involved with things that are in line with our principles.

We seem to get bogged down making even simple changes, like changing the signs on the bathrooms. At my church that change took about 4 years of discussion, with me trying to talk to them about why it was important. Once it happened, no one complained.

The things that I've really admired in UUism, like the work of the UU Black Lives Matter movement that raised hundreds of thousands of dollars at one conference make me think "wow - I'm proud to be a part of that faith!". If we took the time to do more work in the community as Unitarians together, and decided to be key players in anti-pipeline movements, made sure that we had Unitarians on the ground at Burnaby Mountain every day.

We could decide to talk about our faith and the reasons that we have our principles, and be open about that. I think that UUs have what it takes. But we've spent so long doing things individually that we've kind of forgotten the larger level of inspiration for our hope and dreams for the future. We could become not just people who talk about social justice issues, but leaders in social justice movements who are working for change. I think a lot of young people will be attracted to that. We could turn into more community centres where we welcome young people who are outside of our faith, and lend our space so that young people could use it.

I know that a lot of young UUs were raised to be pretty amazing - they turn out to be great activists, great speakers, they know themselves and how to respect other people, they know how to



work through conflicts. UUism gave me a lot. I was pretty isolated as a younger youth and it allowed me to connect with other youth. The only out, gay youth I knew were UUs, which says a lot.

Casey: Dani mentioned that a lot of us who were raised UU are pretty awesome and I wanted to raise here that the overwhelming majority of people who were raised UU don't stick around. I think it's over 90% that leave the faith and don't come back.

There are conversations going on [on Facebook] between people of all ages who were raised UU who don't necessarily find that our congregations reflect the UUism that they were raised in, and know and love and identify with. And that's a slightly different conversation than what we're having today, but it's related, so I wanted to keep that in our minds.

The other thing I wanted to mention was about bringing in friends, as Lindsay was saying. That feels like a very high risk thing to do for a lot of us. I'm nervous to even talk about going to church among a lot of my friends. It's not cool. People are very suspicious of churches. There's a reason that I'm still here, and there's a lot of value to being here. But it's difficult to communicate that with others. And if we take that step and we manage to convince them to come with us to church, we want to be sure that it's going to be a good experience for them, and that there is a space for them here. That's a risky business these days. It's not guaranteed that they're going to get a good reception or see something other than what they expect of the same-old, same-old church institutions.

Articulating what we're about is important, but more important than the words is just doing the things. Like taking action. We can talk about how great our ideas are, but what are we actually doing? That's really going to connect with people, and it's what a lot of what me and my communities are looking for.

Closing Words

Asha: Wow - I feel like we could talk for another hour, at least, and I wish we could. Thank you all very much for bringing your own experiences to this, and speaking a lot of truths - some hard truths, but truths that we need to hear as a faith and as a movement. So, thank you!

I want to close on a hopeful note, though I know we have a lot of challenges. These are the words of Wayne Arnason that are inspiring to me and many others. He says:

"Take courage, friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high. Take courage, for deep down there is another truth: you are not alone."

The panel was followed by small group discussions, with one young adult panelist in each group. Participants were encouraged to discuss what they heard in the panel, and how they might bring these ideas into their own congregations and their own intergenerational work.



If you feel called to make your congregation more welcoming and inclusive of young adults and people of all ages, visit [the CUC's Young Adult Ministry Resources page](#) for extensive materials to guide you in this work.