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the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Volume 7.3

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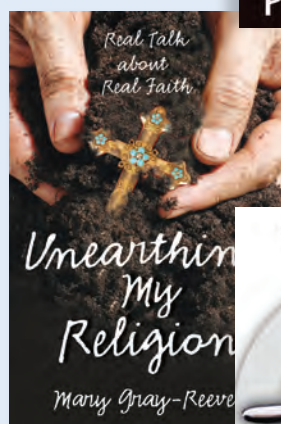
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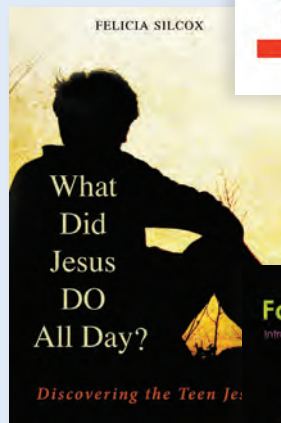
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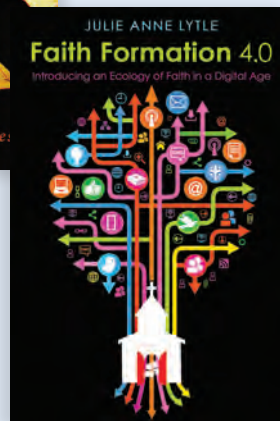
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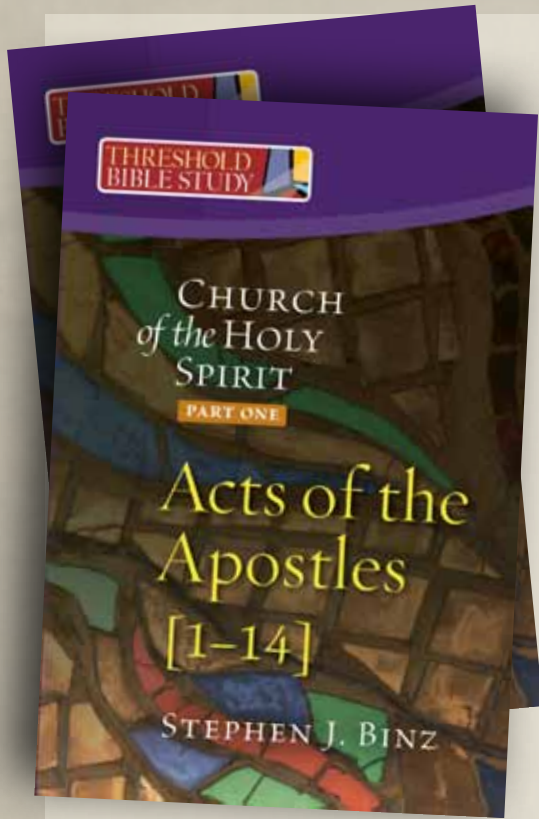
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# Lifelong Faith

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Volume 7.3

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Fall 2013

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## Lifelong Faith Volume 7.3 – Fall 2013

**W**elcome to the Fall 2013 issue of **Lifelong Faith** on the theme of “Generations Together.” This issue presents research about and practical application of intergenerational ministries. In the first article, **From Generation to Generation: A Case Study on Factors in the Family and Faith Community Impacting Faith Development**, Kathie Amidei offers a generous summary of a unique research study she did with a large Catholic church that has both a Catholic school and a family faith formation program. Her research explores the perceptions of parents about the factors that impact their own and their families’ faith formation. The results are sometimes affirming of what we already know and other times quite surprising.

The following three articles by Jim Merhaut walk us through the movement from being a church that offers intergenerational programs to being an intergenerational church. First he reports on a very recent survey completed by experienced intergenerational practitioners in churches around the country. The survey reveals the most important practices that churches do in order to sustain intergenerational faith formation over time. The survey also identified the significant challenges for the future of intergenerational ministries.

Jim’s second article, **Planning for Intergenerality: Moving Beyond the Program**, provides a roadmap for building a culture of intergenerationality in a church that currently offers sporadic intergenerational programming. This represents the next key step for churches that want to forge ahead into creating churches that unleash the full power of the Body of Christ.

Jim’s final contribution, **Emerging Models for Intergenerational Ministries**, provides an abundance of practical ideas for building the culture of intergenerationality in your church. Most of the ideas are being implemented in churches today, but some are offered as theoretical opportunities just waiting for that innovative faith formation leader to take the leap into something new and wonderful. Perhaps you are that leader!

I hope this issue provides new insights and practices to strengthen your efforts in intergenerational ministry and faith formation and begin new initiatives to bring the generations together for learning, prayer, celebrating, service, and caring.

**Jim Merhaut, Guest Editor**

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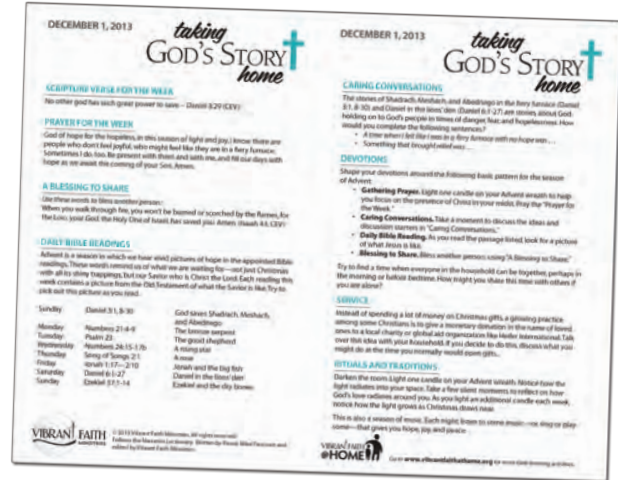


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## From Generation to Generation: A Case Study on Factors in the Family and Faith Community Impacting Faith Development

Kathie Amidei

**L**earning faith, developing faith, living faith, and sharing faith is multidimensional, multifaceted, and sometimes a mysterious process. How faith is handed down from one generation to the next is an inexact and sometimes elusive and unclear process. How does faith develop? How is the gift of faith passed on from one generation to another generation within the context of the family and of the faith community? What roles should the family and the faith community play in socializing children in the ways of faith?

This article describes a single site case study of a Catholic parish in the mid-western United States having a Catholic grade school as well as a family faith formation program for families with children who do not attend the parish school. The study empirically examined factors occurring in the family and faith community which are perceived to impact faith development. The focus was on parents' perceptions of factors affecting family faith formation. Also included in the study were the perceptions and observations of the parish staff and of young adults who had grown up in the parish.

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**Kathie Amidei** is Pastoral Associate for Lifelong Faith Formation at St. Anthony Parish in Wisconsin. She was formerly the Associate Director for Child Ministry and Catechetics for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. She has served in parishes and schools as a teacher and director of religious education. She has an MA in theology and Ph.D. in Education and Leadership from Cardinal Stritch University. This article is drawn from her dissertation.

## Part 1. Introduction

### The Role of the Parish Community in Faith Formation

In past generations the parish community was the social, moral and spiritual center, the heart of faith life for Catholics in this country. The process of enculturation of faith (catechesis) was championed by the parish and began early through religious instruction occurring most often in the context of Catholic schools. Parishioners were also extensively involved in the local parish church community life which provided a strong dimension of religious formation for the family.

### The Role of Parents in Catholic Faith Formation

A sentiment which is echoed in virtually every catechetical document of the Catholic Church holds that “Parents are the primary educators in the faith” (General Directory for Catechesis #255). Today’s parents often are challenged to be effective at this, sometimes due to lack of their own depth of religious education and faith formation or lack of time or possibly a lack of a sense of commitment to the Catholic Church. The American family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is often highly scheduled and stretched by time commitments related to work and other activities. The time it takes to cultivate a religious tradition is often in competition with the many activities and pursuits children, teens, and families are engaged in. In past generations, the culture of faith was passed on through time spent in the milieu of the extended family. Today this opportunity for involving extended family as faith educators may be weakened because of physical distance, lack of time or lack of established shared traditions.

### The Growing Issues and Challenges of Catechetical Formation

The Catholic Church began to experience a significant challenge to faith formation as the number of students educated in Catholic schools declined. There was an increased need for catechetical ministry for children in Catholic parishes not attending Catholic schools. The Roman Catholic Confraternity for Christian Doctrine (CCD), a movement that dates back to the 1920’s, was established to meet this need. These CCD programs, as well as other traditional religious education programs targeted at educating children apart from the family in the present system of faith formation, depend heavily on volunteers, who most often are well meaning but uneducated in religious content and do not have background or training in education or effective teaching strategies (Strommen & Hardel, 2008). The significance of the issues resulting from the shifts in Catholic education and after-school models of religious education have had a profound effect on the issues of passing on the Catholic faith tradition

As the Church culture has changed, and some might say has weakened, the challenges of those responsible for faith formation in Catholic schools and parish catechetical ministry have increased (D’Antonio et al., 2007). Catechetical approaches, intended to provide supplemental religious formation, rely heavily on strong family involvement. With the changes in American culture in general, and the culture of Catholic parishes specifically, as well as the changes in the contemporary American family the present system of faith formation does not meet current catechetical needs.

These historical and faith cultural developments in the community challenge the catechetical process of passing on faith through religious education and faith formation. And if the other prevailing pathway affecting the transmission of faith generationally is the family, then the shifts of family structures have further challenged the



traditional conduit of the transmission of faith. Instead of supporting the larger religious culture of the Church and being the heart of the stabilizing religious force of formation, the context of family structure does not always reflect or reinforce formation in the Catholic faith.

## Need for Further Study of Faith Formation Development

The present generation of catechetical leaders in the Catholic Christian tradition is pondering these circumstances today in light of the present culture and its specific challenges. They are aware the family's involvement in the faith community has declined and the centrality of community life lived out in the local Catholic parish has weakened. This has affected the context for faith formation in both subtle and significant ways.

A problem exists in the lack of actual study or evaluation of the effects of more current approaches that call for a partnership of family and parish community in context of a lifelong faith learning paradigm. While many initiatives are proposed, launched, and even implemented, little study is done in Catholic catechetical ministry to determine if these approaches are cultivating the critical factors that are necessary to exist in the home and in the faith community to foster faith development.

## Part 2. The Research Study

### Purpose of the Study

This study identified parent and parish staff members' perceptions of factors affecting faith development. The overall research question posited by the study was: *What factors, occurring in the family and in the faith community, are perceived to impact faith development?* This is a unique study because it examined factors affecting faith formation of

school aged children largely from parents' perspectives. The goal of the study was to provide empirical data to parents, religious educators, and parish staffs regarding information generated on the factors that nurture the process of faith formation. It is hoped that this information will assist parents in understanding the importance of their role in their children's faith formation, inform religious educators designing effective education programs, and encourage parish leadership to provide the necessary resources to support faith formation programs.

### The Study Site

The site of this study was chosen because of its dedication to lifelong faith formation and commitment to the intentional dedication of family in faith formation through the school and parish family-based catechesis. This faith community was intentional in philosophy, staffing, and budget, fostering faith development in families and a perspective of lifelong faith development. As evidence the parish mission statement cited the commitment of the parish "to lifelong faith formation" and stated in its vision statement this church is a "learning community." The combination of a strong traditional school setting as a context for faith development and the family faith formation model's longevity of over fifteen years (a relatively long period for implementation of this model) offered a unique opportunity for research.

A key element of the parish faith formation program is its school-based program with approximately 200 students in grades K-8. The parish also supports a family-based faith formation program referred to as the "Family Program" primarily for children of parish members who do not attend the school though it is open to all families in the parish. Parents who elect to participate in the family program are considered as primary catechists and partners in the catechetical process and make a greater commitment of their time than is traditionally expected of parents in most

Catholic parishes. The parish provides these families with programs targeted to the developmental age of the children as well as intergenerational catechesis. Children and parents who participate in the family program gather as families and also disperse in age-specific settings to classrooms and halls filling every nook and cranny of the church building for their faith formation sessions following the Sunday 9:00 am Mass or Monday evening sessions.

## Description of Faith Formation Programs

The parish had a parish grade school. The school staff consisted of a principal, ten fulltime classroom teachers, and six support staff. The teachers taught religion in the classroom as an academic subject. The school had one class each of 5-year old Kindergarten through Grade 8. There were 130 families in the school having 220 students in the school at the time of the study. This is referred to as the “school program.”

The parish also provided a family faith formation program to approximately 330 families who had over 450 children and adolescents who participated in the “Family Program” at the time of the study. Children participated in the program from age 2, in childcare and, age 3 through grades 11, in age-specific religious education classes as well as intergenerational family faith formation sessions. Parents participated in adult faith formation sessions and in intergenerational activities with their own children. The faith formation department had six fulltime staff and five part-time staff members in 2010 through 2011, the year the research was conducted.

## Research Approach

The study approach was a mixed methods case study. The study incorporated a two-phase design in which quantitative data was collected through a survey and analyzed for

dominant themes. These analyses were followed by confirmatory focus groups and individual interviews conducted concurrently. The data from these two methods were analyzed separately. Finally, the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data were compared to achieve greater insight regarding the research question than could be obtained by either type of data alone.

## The Faith Development Survey

Quantitative data was collected using a survey which was developed based on existing research of factors identified which impact faith development. The process of developing the survey involved four revisions. Changes were made to improve the format of the survey, clarify the directions and improve the Likert scale used in the survey. The revisions were made and the fourth survey was piloted in a nearby parish in the same geographic area implementing a similar family faith formation program.

The final version of the survey consisted of three parts. In Section One, “Perceptions Regarding Personal Faith Development,” parents were asked to rate, using a 6 point Likert scale, 32 factors that they believe impacted their personal faith development. In Section Two, “Perceptions Regarding Family’s Faith Development,” parents rated 31 factors they believed were impacting the faith development of their family. Of the 31 factors, one factor was rated only by school parents and two factors were only rated by family program parents as was applicable to their circumstance. In Section Three, parents responded to 15 questions regarding demographic information such as the parent’s age and the ages of their children and information regarding their children’s attendance in Catholic school and faith formation programs.

## Participants in the Survey

The population that participated in the survey consisted of two groups of parents from the parish. The “school program” group consisted of parents having children attending the parish grade school. The “family program” group included parents participating in the family faith formation program. For analysis purposes, a third group, the “combined population” was created which included the aggregated responses from both groups. Statistical analyses established the reliability and validity of the survey instrument with the school program, family program and combined population groups.

The survey was given online to the parents of children who attended the school program. The school program parents completed 158 surveys for an 85% response rate. Parents who participated in the family program completed the survey in paper and pencil form. Every parent in attendance at one of the faith formation programs on the dates the survey was given participated in the survey for a total of 405 surveys completed. The combined population of school program and family program group members who participated in the survey totaled 563.

## Survey Data and Qualitative Data Collection

The data from the surveys was organized into three data sets to facilitate comparison of differences between responses from parents of the school program, those in the family program population and a combined set of both populations. The survey results from these three groups were analyzed by descriptive statistics to learn more about the perceptions of this population.

The qualitative portion of the mixed methods research design incorporated the use of focus groups and interviews. The focus groups and individual interviews were confirmatory in nature and provided an opportunity to follow up on analysis of the

survey data and sought insight into the meaning of the survey results. There were 6 focus groups (5 of parents and 1 of young adults) and 11 individual interviews with parish staff members conducted.

## Parent Focus Groups

In this study focus groups were used to elicit confirmatory research regarding data previously collected in the parent surveys. The source material for the confirmatory focus groups was inquiry regarding the factors identified initially in development of the survey and further developed from the statistical data analysis from the survey research.

The focus group members were willing participants chosen from a random stratified selection of parents from the same populations who participated in the faith development survey. Groups consisted of 6 to 8 parents. Guided by a moderator, group members were asked follow up questions based on the information regarding perceptions of faith development derived from the survey phase of the study. The focus groups provided anecdotal data about parents’ perceptions regarding faith development of themselves and their families.

The data derived from the focus groups was recorded, transcribed, coded, and reviewed through a constant comparative method. It was additionally reviewed and by an independent researcher with 95-96% inter-rater agreement.

## Staff Interviews

Interviews were a second technique used to gather qualitative data in this study. One-on-one, face to face interviews of about 30 to 40 minutes in length were conducted with 11 parish staff members who minister to the these families. The staff was asked to reflect on their perception of what the parents report as to the significance of the factors from the Faith Development Survey. The information



acquired from staff responses was used to see if the information they expressed was consistent with the results of the parent survey and focus groups. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The comments made by staff members were then coded for common themes based on the original constructs.

## Part 3. The Research Findings

The study examined factors perceived to impact both parents' personal faith development and that of their family. However, this article focuses on reporting and discussing only those responses to survey factors related to parents' perceptions of factors affecting the family's faith development which were originally identified in Section Two of the Faith Development Survey.

Statistical analyses of the findings of the factors studied identified no significant differences between the school program and family program parent groups. School parents and family program parents were far more similar than different in their ratings of what factors had the greatest impact on the faith of their families. Therefore, responses from the school and family program parents were combined to form the "Combined Parent Sample."

## Survey Findings on Faith Development

### Finding #1. Factors Perceived to Affect Family Faith Development

Table 1 presents the top ranked factors from the combined parent group as having impact on family faith formation. These factors, ranked by both groups as impacting faith development, were further investigated in the confirmatory focus groups and interviews.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Combined School and Family Program Parent's Perceptions of Factors Impacting their Family's Faith Development**

	<b>Factors Perceived to Impact Family's Faith Development</b>	<b>Rating (6=highest)</b>
<b>1</b>	Warm loving environment of our home	5.43
<b>2</b>	Adhering to our moral beliefs	5.41
<b>3</b>	The faith of the mother in family	5.18
<b>4</b>	Reliance on faith in crisis or traumatic events	5.15
<b>5</b>	Warm welcoming environment of our church	4.86
<b>6</b>	The faith of the father in family	4.84
<b>7</b>	Attending Mass regularly.	4.83
<b>8</b>	Praying together as a family	4.82
<b>9</b>	Participation in the Sacraments	4.81
<b>10</b>	Sacramental preparation sessions	4.77
<b>11</b>	Sense of belonging to a faith community	4.73
<b>12</b>	Church's teachings about beliefs and morals	4.71
<b>13</b>	Family discussions about faith	4.70
<b>14</b>	Service opportunities	4.48
<b>15</b>	The faith of a grandparent or extended family member	4.40
<b>16</b>	Social relationships and friendships at church	4.38
<b>17</b>	Personal prayer or meditation of family members	4.34
<b>18</b>	Local spiritual leaders	4.30
<b>19</b>	Participation of a teen in youth ministry	4.15
<b>20</b>	Social opportunities at church like festivals	4.01
<b>21</b>	The physical building of the church	3.95
<b>22</b>	Faith development opportunities like retreats	3.82
<b>23</b>	Sacramentals and symbols in home and church	3.72
<b>24</b>	Music and art at church	3.70
<b>25</b>	Reading Scripture or spiritual or religious material	3.50

26	Spiritual examples such as saints	3.43
27	Private practice of religious devotions	3.11
28	Being a member of a church choir or music ministry	3.03

The ranking of these factors impacting faith development, especially the highest rated factors, were further investigated in the confirmatory focus groups and interviews. The low ranked factor of Scripture was also further explored in the qualitative phase of the data due to the importance that Catholicism places on Scripture and the low ranking it consistently received across all of the parent groups in the quantitative data.

## Finding #2. Gender Differences on Perceptions of Impact of Factors Affecting Faith Formation

To explore the question of whether men and women differed in their perceptions of the factors that impacted their personal and family's faith development, descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were conducted on the school parent, family program parent and the combined parent samples. It was revealed that women and men ranked factors similarly. When they differed, women rated factors higher than men. There was one exception, men rated their own impact that is, faith of the father, on family faith development higher than women.

## Finding #3. Functions of Age of Children on Family Faith

Analysis was conducted to explore whether parents' perceptions of factors impacting their family's faith development was affected by the age(s) of their children. Results revealed that age(s) of children did, in fact, affect parents' perceptions of certain factors that impacted their faith development. Parents emphasized certain factors statistically, more or less, than

others depending on the ages of their children. Parents of younger children regarded the building of the church, personal prayer, praying together as a family, music and art at church, and intergenerational sessions of family program as more significant. Parents of older children rated the role of service and faith development opportunities such as retreats, as more significant.

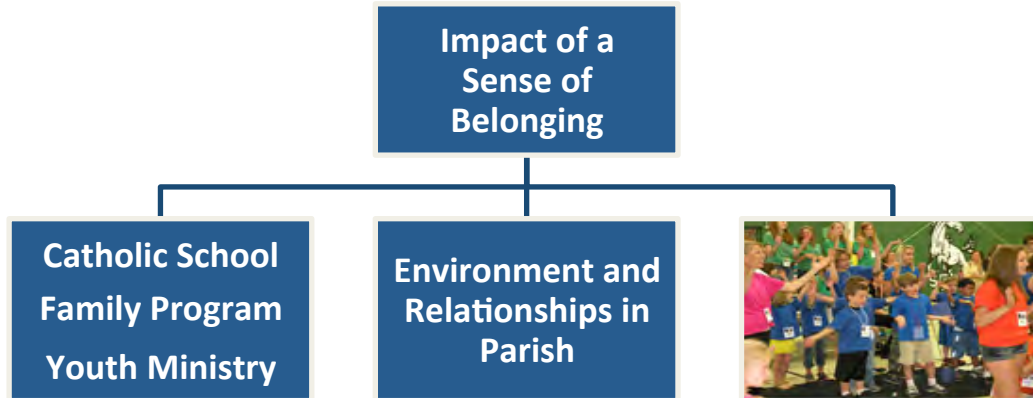
Parents of mixed-aged children (having younger and older children), as might be expected, fell between those of with exclusively older or younger children. However, family program parents with older and younger children rated local spiritual leaders in church higher than parents with older children.

## Focus Group Findings on Faith Development

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Certain findings from the survey data were brought to the confirmatory focus groups to gain more understanding and insight into the meaning of the results from the quantitative data. These discussions revealed more about the perspective of the parents as well as added insights from the young adult group. Responding to the research question, information from the focus group data was organized and five themes evolved, with several sub-themes in each area. The themes identified were related to the research question and offered more information into the inquiry about factors impacting faith development. The themes are identified in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The ages are indicated in quotations made by participants from the young adult focus group. Parent ages are not given.

**Figure 1: The Impact of a Sense of Belonging**



### Impact of Sense of Belonging

A dominant theme identified in the focus group data was a sense of belonging that came from the participants' being associated with a micro-community within the larger parish community. The micro-communities discussed were the sense of belonging that came from the school, the family program or the youth ministry community.

*We left the church that we were at because of that lack of connection. . . . feeling like you, that sense of belonging, going back to this place that I want to be at. . . . I think that's a huge part. (Joseph)*

*Don't you think Family Program has really attributed to that. . . ? I mean, I feel like for me and my kids, that really has been the huge factor, that in the summer they miss it, they talk about it. And I don't know if they would talk about missing CCD, or, you know, getting dropped off on a Tuesday night for that hour, I, I don't know. (Amy)*

*The Family Program. . . . where kids have to work with their parents, learn about certain things. . . . is really useful. It allows the kids to grow with their parents. . . . And I think that's really significant. The other part is of my picture. . . . is the Sunday School where the kids go to school but the parent doesn't get anything. To me, the Family Program, the parents also learn something I think is*

*very useful. . . . with all of the presentations, [the adult sessions of family program] I still learn something every time. To me, that is, it's good for both, for the kids and for the parents. (Kunta)*

*When we started Family Program, I fully admit. . . . when I found out that Family Program, meant that the whole family came, I was a little taken aback at first. I had gone to CCD, I had put my time in. . . . I had a little bit of a reservation. However, it's, been a wonderful experience and I wouldn't change it at all. And as a matter of fact, when August rolls around, we're like, "When's Family Program starting? We miss it." (Dan)*

*Comparing my public school upbringing, to my, children's Catholic school upbringing just brings me to tears. . . . It's just beautiful. They're so, so blessed to have that. . . . I need to pray, I need to thank God, I need to just sit back and think how great everything is. . . . And I don't think, that, if it was just me raising my kids at my public elementary school, that wouldn't be happening. (Mary Pat)*

*And I think it's kinda, like, at Breakfast Club [the name referred to the youth group of social and service opportunities] and all that it was kinda like, in a sneaky way, we didn't realize we were still practicing faith doing all those things, we thought we were*



*hanging out with friends. But looking back now, it really, I mean, we did all this stuff, and we were practicing our faith, and maybe didn't even realize it until now. (Emily, 26)*

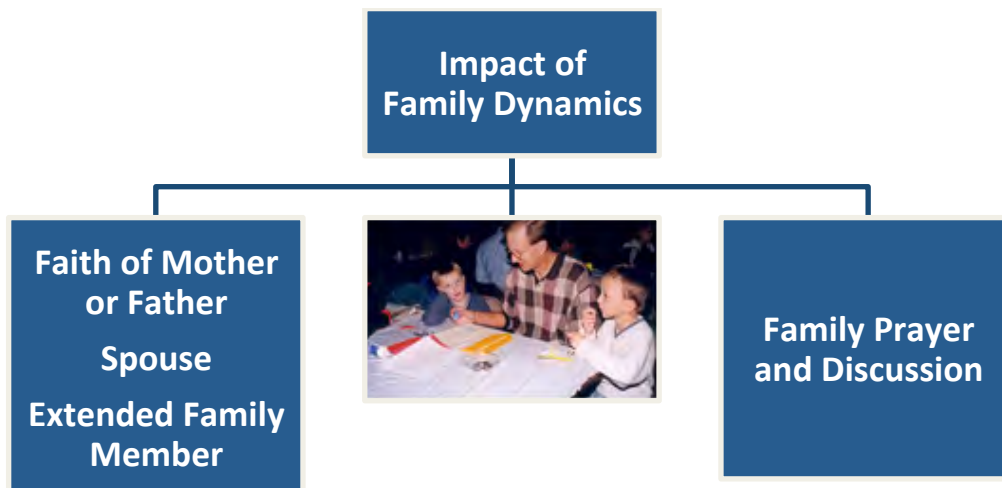
A sense of belonging also resulted from a combination of two related factors, the warm welcoming environment and the relationships that resulted from interaction with the larger parish community.

*My daughter said, "I love our church, Mom. It's so homey." I don't even know what it is,*

*but there's a sense of community, that she feels at home when she walks into this building. (Dawn)*

*I think, like, relationships at church. . . . you know, a strong church family or a strong parish it's, like, a good foundation to help you. . . . You kinda see how the leaders react in certain situations. And so I think that that helps you kind of look at how you should be reacting. (Betsy, 25)*

**Figure 2: The Impact of Family Dynamics**



## The Impact of Family Dynamics

The impact of family dynamics was a second dominant theme rising from the focus group discussions. Parents discussed their influence as parents, the extended family and the home environment on development of faith. Participants identified the family as a nurturing community of love and an originating source of the experience of faith. The family was also described in partnership with the impact the faith community had on their family's faith.

There was some discussion around the faith of the mother and the father and the impact of the faith of one spouse on another in the development of faith, the focus group discussions were more framed by the impact

parents, as an entity, had on faith development. The discussion explored not only the dynamic of relationships within the family on faith but also the dynamics of family activities impacting faith development such as family prayer and discussions of faith in the family. Parents expressed awareness that their example was a powerful factor in their children's faith formation. They also expressed in some cases that, a grandparent's or extended family member's faith had an impact on them personally or on their family.

*I think it is because our children learn about the warm and loving God through a warm and loving home. . . . My faith was deepened with each child but it was also that relationship of, wow, how much I love*

*this child is how much God loves me. And so I think, you know it is kind of related.*  
(Angie)

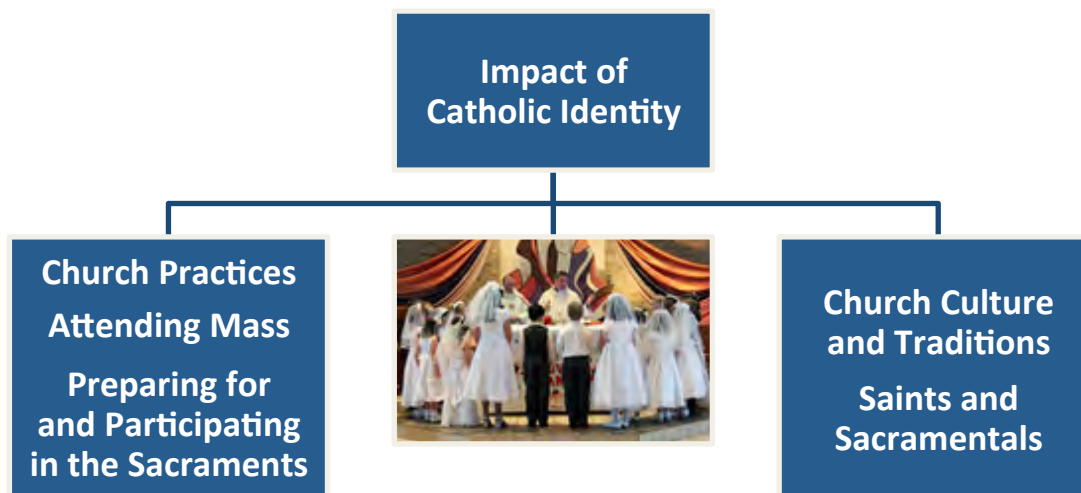
*My parents were my role models. . . . My mother is probably going to be a saint. She'll get up to the gates of heaven and Jesus will say, 'Millie!' My mother's a saint.* (Peggy)

*I think that the faith of a father or a mother, you've gotta walk the talk. And, I mean, if, if*

*you're faithful, I, I think they'll see that and they'll also follow. They may not know why to follow at first, but as they get older, they, they will realize, and say "Oh, I understand."*  
(Don)

*If you're not introduced to reading and writing, you're not going to know how to read and write. If you're not introduced to faith, you're not going to know what faith is.*  
(Joe)

**Figure 3: The Impact of Catholic Identity**



## Impact of Catholic Identity

Catholic identity was discussed as a dominant theme by the group participants. They focused mainly on areas of Catholic tradition that they held as significant in impacting their personal and their families' faith development. One dominant sub-theme identified as high in frequency and intensity, in the theme of Catholic identity, was how significantly regular "Mass attendance" was regarded in impacting faith. Apart from the themes of "belonging" and "family" the impact of no other single factor was given the same weight in significance as regular Mass attendance.

Related to this theme was general participation in all of the sacraments. This is consistent with Catholic teaching as the seven sacraments are the most sacred rituals in the Catholic Church. In the sacramental tradition,

the belief is held that through the Sacraments celebrated in the Church, a Catholic experiences God's presence in a significant, holy and real way. This understanding was reflected in some of the focus group discussions.

*I think we all agree, in the beginning attending Mass is the key, but it is so much more than that. . . . doing those things is what helps create you- your own relationship with Christ. . . . those things, like opportunities such as retreats and going to church, you see so much more about what the Catholic faith has to offer, that you can be involved in to enhance your relationship with God.* (Julie)

*If I had to reach out and grab one thing, it would be going to Sunday Mass because that has been such a big, strong part of my*

youth and, and the faith that I've passed on to my kids. (Mike)

*I think being involved in those things, Mass, prayer, participation in the Sacraments, fosters a sense of belonging. So the weekly Mass, attending Mass, to feel like your church home is another safe place. (a mom)*

*In the Catholic faith, tradition and ritual is so important. And so for me, number one, just attending Mass every single week, and not like an obligation. . . . to make it that this is what our family does together, you know? That is what helps our children build so when they get to be 20, and they get to decide for themselves whether they're going to go to church while they're at, in college, if they look back and say, well, is this what's familiar and comfortable. . . . that ritual, that tradition of going together as a family is really important as well, and for them to see that it's important to us. We don't go because we have to go, we go because we want to go. We want to all be together here and instill those traditions and values in our family. (Laura)*

*I don't know how to explain it. . . . it's just, when she [her daughter] said that she was excited to come, doesn't want to miss class,*

*the Wednesday night Confirmation preparation classes, she just absolutely loves it. (Lisa)*

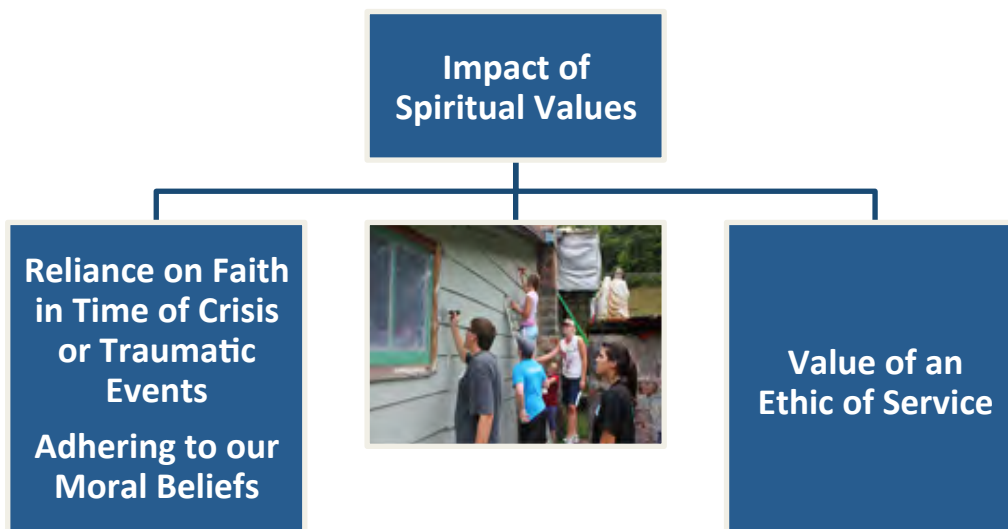
There were various other factors discussed relating to Catholic identity, yet, they were more marginal than central to the discussions. Two topics that seemed to be of interest to parents but they expressed being somewhat vague in their understanding of, were the teachings about saints and sacramentals. They hoped their children were experiencing them as part of the Catholic formation yet they were not totally clear about their place or meaning in the tradition.

*I'm wondering how. . . . our children learn kind of where some of our traditions come from. We've got the incense, and the oils, and those are all really cool Catholic things.*

*And I, I don't know how they got started, and, and, you know, how the tradition all came to be. (Amy)*

*I don't know much about saints, either. . . . but I would like to learn more about them, because they've – their life experience is amazing. And so I feel like I could learn so much from their hardships and how they encountered them. (Mary Pat)*

**Figure 4: The Impact of Spiritual Values**





## Impact of Spiritual Values

The quantitative data revealed the two highest rated factors impacting faith development as “reliance on faith in a traumatic crisis or event” and “adhering to our moral beliefs in important or difficult situations.” Inquiry about the meaning of this finding was followed up on in the focus groups and interviews.

The responses from the focus groups affirmed the value embraced in having faith to rely on, to sustain, and to strengthen them through life, especially in difficult times. The insight into the meaning this held for them was largely shared through storytelling about themselves or others and how faith had been important in certain life situations and circumstances. They did not have far-reaching explanations as to how or why this ability to rely on faith developed and they did not describe extensively how they cultivated this asset in their family values, but in the evaluation of the qualitative data this theme was clearly dominant in frequency of topic and high in their estimate of impact on faith.

Even people who don't think they have a faith, when they suffer a loss, want a faith.

*So I think that's one of the things, I mean, that, that's gotta be huge.” (Brenda)*

*You better have good faith developed before [laughs] or else you're kind of in trouble. . . . You better have worked on it [prayer and a relationship with God] all your life, or at least for a period of time, so when those things happen, you are prepared to deal with it. (a dad)*

*If you didn't have your faith, I don't think you'd go to God in a traumatic situation. You might go to other, not-so-good vehicles. (Peggy)*

*You need to practice it. (Sue)*

*I think not just the relationship with God, but the relationship that you've developed*

*with the other people in the community that share that relationship with God in their own way. And then in those times, you have those people to lift you up and support you, even if you, you know, because– there are gonna be times when you question and wonder, and if you've got someone backing you, that just helps keep you on the path for your own faith. (a dad)*

The second topic, of adhering to moral beliefs, was a second sub-theme of spiritual values. As parents raising children they perceived a clear and direct relationship between this factor of adhering to moral beliefs and cultivating faith in their families to establish a guide for their children in life. They viewed this as important and valuable in aiding them in raising their children.

*It's a classic, starting. . . . Well, what would Jesus do in that situation. . . .your kindness is part of your moral beliefs, right? (Brenda)*

*I would say that we have some people who took this [survey], then, have very strong Catholic moral beliefs and stand by them in a time of need, or decision-making. Which I think is fabulous. Looking at the big picture of our society. . . . when you consider our society, and how so many of our beliefs are not the norm of society. (Jen)*

*I think without that faith and that morality that you get here, it's hard to make the right choice, especially for kids. . . . the more they see it, the more they feel it in the faith community, the more they can live it, and when they're out in the real world. (Wendy)*

*We are their first teachers as their parents, and so we need to instill in our own family morals or values and priorities are what they're going to take with them as they grow into their own caring Christians and fully Catholic adults. (Laura)*

*I mentioned before adhering to the moral beliefs I think is a roadmap for our, our kids. I mean, if you, walk the talk [sic], and you show them how to act moral, you are not only a good example for them, but they understand how they need to behave, and really how they, they really should think and treat other people and how they should treat themselves. So I think it's a huge impact, I think, in our family. (Joel)*

Finally, the topic of service to others was initiated by the participants and evaluated as having a powerful impact on faith development for parents and their families. Service opportunities was not ranked high on the questionnaire but seemed to be a more significant factor in many interviews and focus groups. It was identified in the focus groups as a value lived in a Catholic Christian ethic. Repeatedly, parents and young adults praised the community for guiding and facilitating their participation in opportunities to serve as a way to live their faith.

*Service opportunities... Because I think it was through the mission trips here at St. Anthony's that as a youth, that really*

*opened my eyes to other cultures and other ways of life, that then in turn made me make my faith my own. It made me really internalize, what do I believe, and why do I believe that? Why, why are some people given the life that they're given, and why am I given this life? What, where does God fit into that? And I think that's what made me really question who I am and what I believe. (Sam, 23)*

*Service opportunities was always big in my family, and I notice that I do that a lot with my kids, and then family discussions about faith. . . . was something that we do to this day. (Kim)*

*I went to Catholic school my whole life, and the retreats that I went on in high school were more meaningful than almost anything. So I think, yeah, I think most of us have younger kids, so as our kids get older, I think, I, I know our family is really looking forward to them going on the mission trips. And we already do as much service as we are able at this point, but. . . . that's all tied in with family values, you know? (Laura)*

**Figure 5: The Impact of Obstacles and Impediments**



## The Impact of Obstacles and Impediments

The research question sought to learn more about what factors in the family and in the faith community impact faith development. While not stated explicitly, the study sought to learn more about factors that *positively* impacted faith development. However, in the first phase of the research a factor was identified and confirmed in the qualitative phase, to have unexpected results, that is the impact of Scripture on faith development. This was a significant finding because of the importance of Scripture within the Catholic tradition. Survey results revealed parents rated Scripture low in impact in regard to their personal as well as family's faith development. The low impact parents and young adults perceived Scripture had on their faith was confirmed in the focus groups. Thus, it was revealed as a barrier or impediment to faith development.

*My faith was learned by reciting. Tim's [husband] and my knowledge of the Bible is quite shallow because we never grew up reading the Bible. It just wasn't part of how we learned our faith. It was never stressed growing up. (Laura)*

*Reading your Bible and then talking about it. We don't certainly do that at home. . . . we get the little devotionals for the kids, and maybe a few nights we'll try that, but now it's been sitting on the shelf since First Communion. . . . so not that Scripture's not important, because that's obviously where everything is based off of. I don't know if that, as Catholics, you make it a daily practice. (Brenda)*

*I just wish we did have a Bible in our hand more as Catholics. I feel like we don't have, we have pieces of a Bible, kind of, in pamphlets or things, but to actually have a Bible and refer to it and have it readily*

*available, I find that's what I would like more. (Amy)*

*I think the Bible, to a lot of Catholics, is, intimidating. (Peggy)*

*For me it's just been a struggle for a long – long time. . . . never felt confident. . . . hard for me to comprehend. . . . Just my knowledge of the Bible, the stories, the teachings, are too. . . . hard for, for me to comprehend oftentimes. So when I looked at it, I felt, well, it would be hypocritical of me to rate this high, because I, you know, it's, it's something that I don't do regularly, and when I do, I struggle with it. I mean, I can read a passage over and over and over and over and it just, you know, so yeah, [I wish] Father Tony was there to help me. . . [laughs] ( Dan)*

*I could read it but. . . . I would never understand it unless somebody would explain it to me. Adam, 25)*

Additionally, an impediment or barrier to faith development, of a different nature but also revealed to have a powerful impact that conflicted with faith development, was the issue families faced in balancing schedules and determining priorities and the impact of limited availability of time due to extremely busy schedules. Parents described the stress and struggle they felt in regard to their time schedules and how the very crisis of time impacted the centrality of faith in their families. A high school parent summarized the dilemma many other parents expressed:

*There's just way too many competing factors... to try to participate and get the most out of all of the activities. . . . even with, with church, is just very, very difficult to be able to constantly prioritize. (a high school parent)*

*They [the factors] all stand out to me. . . . it's, it's hard to say one over the other. I don't want to discount any one of them. But*



*it's just I think the simple fact that we're so busy and caught up in so many other things, we don't have the time to really engage in these things. (Kevin)*

*And. . . all of these great things. . . in our lives, you get so busy, and it's balancing your. all your things with all these great opportunities. Because I'm sure the church says, well, we have this mission trip, and we provide all these service opportunities, and we have these classes and Bible studies. But where are you? So the church can only do so much. But then it, as a parent, it's balancing all their activities and all the other pulls that they have. I don't know, it's just a hard balance. . . . (Mary Pat)*

*One time he [Fr. Tony] did say something about how God is supposed to be first, God, then your, you know, he's like, it's a really hard thing to put God before everything else. (a mom)*

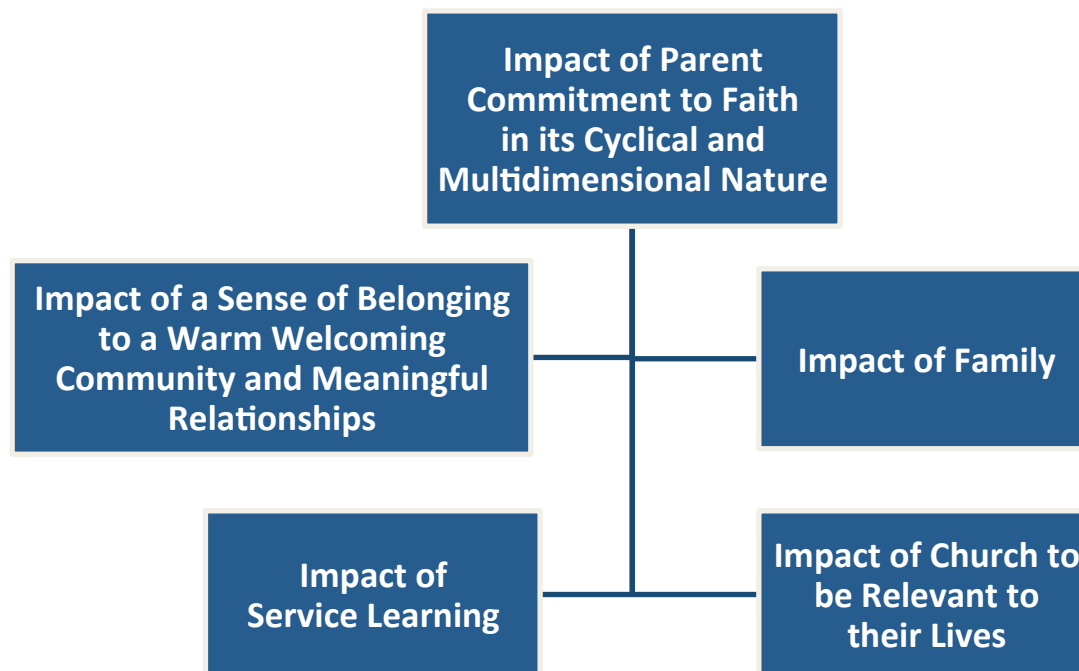
These two factors, in fact, did not cultivate faith but were depicted as barriers or impediments to faith development. They emerged from the discussions to be both high in the frequency and explicitly named as factors that impacted faith negatively.

## Summary of Findings on Faith Development from the Staff Interviews

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The individual staff interviews echoed the themes of the parents and young adults in the focus groups discussions. Each of the staff members interviewed had a specific responsibility for ministry in the parish and each staff member reflected his or her particular lens and viewpoint. The individual interview discussions identified 5 findings as impactful from the staff viewpoint. They are identified in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Staff Interview Theme**



## Staff Interview Themes

The staff interviews were conducted with the purpose of triangulating the information gathered in the survey data and the focus groups. The staff members had a unique perspective in their roles ministering to the families in the parish. They were given a list of the factors the parents rated in Section Two of the survey and asked to identify the factors they perceived as impacting the families' faith development.

The dominant theme identified by staff members was the impact of a sense of belonging to a warm welcoming community and meaningful relationships they experienced in that community. As with the focus group findings, they perceived several related factors coalescing into this theme including: the affiliation with the micro community, the warm welcome they felt being initiated into the community, and the continual support they felt from relationships within the community. A staff member described her perception of how the sense of belonging and the relationships in community impacted the families she worked with:

*They get that huge sense of community, that this is another family, another of their families that they can relate to. We see that because of how the teens and young adults try to stay connected (Lea)*

The second dominant theme identified by the staff was the impact of family on faith development. A perspective was held by a majority of the staff that family environment and the family relationships were a dominant theme impacting faith development. The staff identified the home as the initial place where faith was cultivated and where experiences of faith in practices, discussions, and atmosphere of love occurred.

From the staff perspective, "on the balcony" and in their role as religious educators, they noted the hunger people felt for faith to have a meaningful role in their lives. The impact of

the ability of church to be relevant in their lives was a third dominant theme identified by staff members. The staff recognized the people they ministered to were not motivated to develop faith out of fear or obligation but that they had a real need to find support, help, inspiration and meaning in the midst of the hectic busy lives they and their families were leading.

The staff also validated the focus group findings of the impact of service learning. They perceived families felt the opportunities the church offered them to learn to serve others, a way to "live faith" was valuable to their faith development, and that the staff felt this had been highly impactful in the lives of the families. The staff noted the parish had been deliberate in offering numerous opportunities for service and cultivated a religious education paradigm where service learning was prominent and intentional in faith development.

Finally, the staff reinforced the impact of parent commitment to faith in its cyclical and multidimensional nature. Father Tony emphasized the overlap of the faith formation factors. He said, "They are impactful when they build on one another in a meaningful way."

## Culture, Climate and Practices

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The purpose of this study was to answer the question: What factors, occurring in the family and in the faith community, are perceived to impact faith development? In an effort to bring clarity to this study and to provide increased relevancy for religious educators, catechetical leaders, and parents, the factors investigated were grouped within three major constructs. The constructs of *practices*, *culture*, and *climate* allows analysis of the categories of factors that may be more pertinent for those responsible for catechetical leadership and for parents.

## Culture

The term culture in reference to the Catholic Church is more often associated with the diversity of cultures around the world that make up the worldwide Catholic Church. In this discussion the term is being used more as a tool of analysis. The researcher considered the meaning of culture used in educational or organizational disciplines. In this sense the definition of culture refers to: "This invisible, taken for granted flow of beliefs and assumptions that gives meaning to what people say and do... Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time." (Deal and Peterson, 7)

In a parish, within a faith formation program or a Catholic school, the term culture reflects the pervading context of shared values and beliefs held and demonstrated by the leaders and members. It is being used in this case to indicate the larger connecting values, beliefs, morals that have endured historically and theologically and are mitigated, negotiated and define a local faith community and the larger Church to which it is connected. For purposes of this discussion the term culture tends to refer to the deep and more stable factors of the way a group or a person within the group does things and the values he or she holds and believes. A defining characteristic that distinguishes between culture and climate in this discussion is that culture connects to the larger faith tradition in a significant and deep way and is not easily changed. It is the ineffable beliefs and values that knit the fiber of a group, a family or faith community together. It is, as Geertz says, "the web of significance in which we are all suspended."  
(3)

## Climate

Climate is being used here to signify formal and informal feelings from both leaders and members of a church community. Climate

refers to the attitudes and feelings that characterize the environment or context of a group. It may denote a positive environment that is friendly, inviting and supportive or it may refer to a negative environment that is unwelcoming, exclusive or unsafe.

Like the term culture, the term climate is being used as a tool to organize the factors being studied that impact faith. Because climate is about more transient perceptions it can be easier to assess and also to change. The term generally refers to the tenor of relationships, the feeling of safety, and the external environment. Climate is a more general term referring to the feel, tone or milieu of a community. It characterizes the collective personality and perceptions or overall atmosphere.

The term faith development or faith formation has been deliberately used in this study to connote the multidimensional process faith encompasses. It is holistic in nature and indicates faith can develop and grow or mature in a person and occurs over the entire lifespan and has many facets. One way that faith continues to develop, to be "lifelong" is by a person engaging in practices of faith. Practices in this discussion refer to actions such as religious ritual, prayer, and serving in the example Jesus. This study identified some practices of faith parents and young adults perceived highly impacting faith.

## Practices

The construct of practices was used to indicate actions, patterns of behavior and rituals in the Catholic Christian faith. Terrence Tilley, in his article "Communication in Handing on the Faith" said, "Faith can be understood as a set of practices even a complex virtue. Faith is not something we first believe and then practice. Rather we practice the faith and in doing so come to understand it. God's gracious initiation makes this possible." (156)

To explore ways the results of this study can inform families and parishes, the individual factors identified as affecting faith



development were grouped into these three constructs: culture, climate and practices. Table 2 shows the results of the quantitative data weighted by the findings in the qualitative data on the question of the impact of factors in ranking order and organized into the constructs of practices, climate and culture.

Considering faith development in light of these three constructs; culture, climate and practices allows leaders to analyze the culture and climate of their community and the practices they encourage. They can evaluate the environment of the parish, school or faith formation programs and create a positive climate and encourage impactful practices. The significance in the findings of the impact of a sense of belonging resulting from affiliation of a primary or micro-community,

the warm welcoming environment, and cultivation of relationships and friendships all relate to the climate that initially and continually connects people to a community of faith.

The practices of faith, especially the significance revealed of regular participation in the ritual worship of the Eucharistic Celebration of the Mass and to some extent all of the Sacraments, reflect the value of encouraging the repetitive practice of worship and prayer as conduits of strengthening faith and allowing faith to mature. As service learning opportunities develop and are offered as an integrated dimension of faith development, the climate becomes more positive and meaningful and the ethos of service is internalized.

**Table 2. Factors Impacting Families’ Faith Development Related to the Constructs of Climate, Practices and Culture**

(\*Factors in **bold** indicate highest impact on perceptions of faith)

<b>Connecting Climate</b>	<b>Practices of Faith</b>	<b>Religious Identity and Culture</b>
<b>The sense of belonging and being part of a faith community such as this parish</b>	<b>Attending Mass on a regular basis</b>	<b>Reliance on faith in a traumatic crisis or event (such as loss)</b>
<b>The warm welcoming environment in our church</b>	<b>Participating in the Sacraments</b>	<b>Adhering to our moral beliefs</b>
<b>The warm loving environment of your home</b>	<b>Service opportunities (such as meal programs, mission trips, church volunteering)</b>	<b>The faith of the mother in our family</b>
Social experiences /opportunities at church (Such as parish picnics, festivals, donut Sunday)	<b>Family discussions about faith</b>	<b>The Church’s teaching about beliefs and morals</b>
Our social relationships and friendships at church	Praying together as a family (such as meal prayer, bedtime prayer)	The faith of the father in our family
Local spiritual leaders of your church	Faith development opportunities (such as Bible camp, retreats, faith sharing groups)	The faith of grandparents or extended family member
The physical building of the church (physically being in the church building)	Sacramental preparation sessions (such as for Baptism, First Communion, Reconciliation)	Spiritual examples (such as the saints, Mary, the Pope)
The music or art at church (sacred music or sacred art)	Personal prayer or meditation of family members; family discussions about faith	

Sacramentals and symbols in the home or church (such as holy water, crucifix, ashes or palms)	Private practice of religious devotions (such as rosary, stations of the cross, vespers, adoration)	
	Reading and reflection on Scripture or spiritual or religious material	
	Participation of a teen in church youth group or church youth activities	
	Being a member of a church choir or participating in some kind of music ministry	
Child or teen's attendance in Catholic schools		
Adult sessions of Family Program		
Intergenerational family activity of Family Program		

At some point climate and practices mature into a culture of something deeper, more profound, more personal, and more internal. This study revealed the profound impact of internalizing a sense of belonging and acceptance that could mature into a peace and strength found in the faith community. Lea, a staff member, expressed so beautifully this dynamic, "I think our community is welcoming enough that all those people feel like they can come into it, and we're going to hold onto them."

Other staff members especially expressed the awareness of the appreciation of those who felt the community had become a kind of home and also experienced a sense of loss when they had to leave it.

*That the experience in the faith community leads a person to become a person of faith and the hope is that that faith eventually is internalized. Ultimately, "my Catholic faith" needs to be more than just that warm welcoming parish; that if they went elsewhere, that strong faith is always with them and they would not or could not dismiss it because the environment doesn't suit them. (Cindi)*

This may be why a certain person in a family, often a mother, carries this culture from generation to generation. Without that

link within the family the parish community must work harder to connect. When there is a nurturing presence within the home and within the faith community the experience of faith is reinforced and strengthened. This exemplifies the cyclical nature of faith development. This maturing of the faith process may also relate to the interesting data that when parents differed as a function of the age of their children, it always pertained to items that are either practices or climate. Is it that practices and factors related to climate change as children get older? And as a person moves through these developmentally, is it ultimately the cultural factors (reliance on faith in crisis, faith of father, faith of mother, and adhering to moral beliefs) that parents identify as especially salient?

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study was the high ranking of reliance on faith in difficult times, crisis or traumatic events, such as loss and the equally high ranking of adhering to moral beliefs. With the insight provided from the focus groups and staff interviews this seems to point to a key understanding of what motivated families to engage in a faith community and in practices of faith. It also appeared that parents lacked conscious awareness of these deep desires, hungers, longings and fears. Ronald Rohlheiser discussed this in his book, *The Holy Longing*. He describes, ". . . a desire that

lies at the center of our lives, the marrow of our bones, and in the deep recesses of the soul” (3). We seek peace, the opposite of this restlessness, longing and loneliness that lies at the heart of the human experience and the true force that drives us. St. Augustine said, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Rohlheiser says the essence of spirituality is what we do with this unrest which is at the core of our being (5).

What picture emerges out of this information and these insights revealed by this community? The model being offered names the cyclical, developmental and multidimensional nature of forming faith. It is cyclical and developmental in the sense that forming faith for most human beings is not a dramatic onetime event in life. The experience of faith can have moments of dramatic revelation, beauty and insight. These often occur in high and low life events such as birthing and losing a loved one. Faith usually matures, however, over time and through multiple lived experiences and in the practice of relying on faith and in the faith that blesses a person when our human resources fail us.

It is multidimensional in that we come to spiritual faith through our social, emotional, intellectual and physical beings. Faith development exclusively associated with an

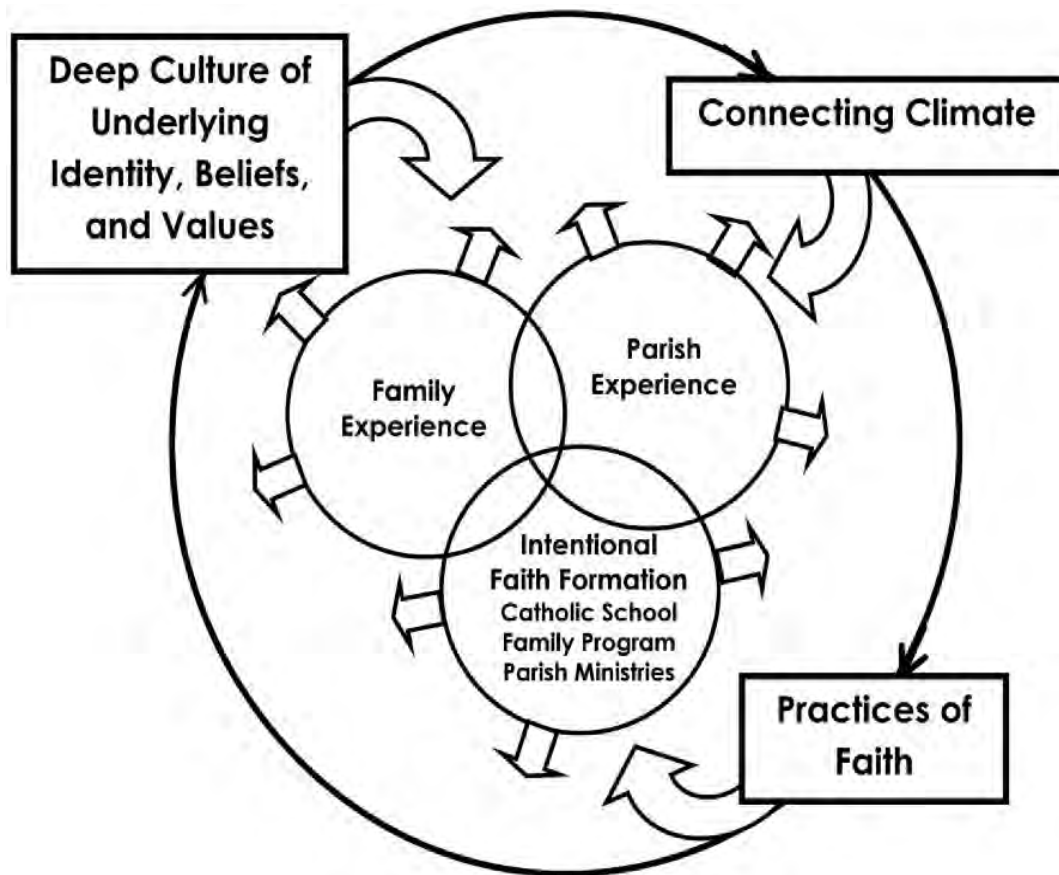
intellectual pursuit can be sterile. Too often this over-emphasis on learning faith through textbooks has stunted growth in faith. This is not to demean theological inquiry or scholarship which is a solid aspect in the Catholic tradition. To honor the multiple dimensions of the nature of faith formation in parish communities, schools, and faith formation programs engage in multiple models such as prayer, worship, and service learning; multiple methodologies such as music, art, drama, discussion, reading, writing, listening, and sharing. These may to a greater extent, in frequency and intensity, more often lead to the soul experience of “metanoia,” “a profound transformation of mind and heart” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 48).

It is ironic to note that the Bible which could be hoped to root, nourish, and nurture faith is not perceived as helpful to the majority of participants in this study. This is a serious issue that catechetical leaders may wish to ponder. To express it simply, the research revealed a “lack of big picture” when parents even thought about Scripture. They described having no frame of reference, no context for an understanding of the meaning of Scripture. They did not understand what constituted a way to even begin to make sense of what the Bible was saying to them on their own.



**Figure 7: Faith Development Cycle**

*The following model emerging from the study and attempts to represent the cyclical, developmental, and multidimensional nature of faith development.*



## Part 4. Implications of the Research

### Leadership

There are implications from this study for leaders interested in engaging families in faith formation. While the more multidimensional models of faith formation requires more creativity, energy, open-mindedness and perhaps financial commitment in staff and resources, this study evidences their potential effectiveness.

The study revealed that when a faith community invests in all families of the parish, the Catholic school families and the faith formation families in a similar way the outlay

is rewarded in involved, more committed families and catechesis that is more effective for all. Parents become lifelong learners when the door is opened by the love they have for their children and the faith community leaders insist on a partnership with them. This is a paradigm shift for generations of religious education leaders who have only explored the schoolhouse model where parents are not present. It is an adjustment for parents who have been lulled into a model of parental non-participation. Parents need the faith community to give their children the most meaningful opportunity to develop faith and faith communities need parents to be involved to be effective in catechetical ministry. Both the home and the faith community have to work diligently and consistently to be

successful in passing on the faith in a post-modern culture.

## Learning Research

The advances in education, especially the developments in new understandings of brain compatible learning and the multiple dimensions of intelligences, as well as the research into multiple intelligences, need to be incorporated into faith formation programs and religious education in Catholic schools. Active learning that engages the whole person needs to be integrated into formal faith formation programs. This requires catechetical leaders to be given opportunities to learn from educational research and encouraged to lead others into a broader understanding of ministry that is charged with passing on the faith to the next generation.

It has been said “Christianity is always one generation away from extinction.” That may be true. Faith must be learned and accepted anew by each generation. That most often occurs through a reinforcing cyclical process of practices of faith. Faith that is immature is vulnerable. Faith maturity is expressed by mature Christians who love and support each other and by their service to the lost, lonely and vulnerable to heal the world.

## Service

If there was one shining star in this study it was service learning. Service learning was valued and perceived as effective, and it enhanced all other aspects of faith development. This was especially evidenced in feedback from parents of adolescents and young adults. While parents and leaders may struggle with adolescent immature, rebellious or irresponsible behaviors, service is a language young people speak fluently and understand with their heart. Serving together is bonding within a family or community. It is acting and living the message and mission of Jesus in the world. Parishes, schools, and faith formation programs that can integrate service and

cultivate an ethic of service within the community and encourage it and offer opportunities to families increase their effectiveness, integrity and relevancy to those to whom they minister.

Engaging families in service opportunities may be the most powerful strategy and methodology for families to have a real dialogue about care for others and the need we all have for God’s protection. There is something about standing or helping someone more vulnerable than you that evokes a deeper understanding of our responsibility to others and the potential for God’s presence to be real in our lives. Congregations who understand the busy schedules that challenge families and create short achievable opportunities as well as extended more intensive experiences such as mission trips appear to be more effective in this mission.

This study indicated an enormous value in integrating service learning into the faith formation program. It was considered not an isolated project but a methodology. It was considered valuable and enhanced all other aspects of faith development. Serving together as a family resulted in increased bonding as a family as well as deepening ties to the community. Cultivating an ethic of service as an intentional dimension of faith formation increases the effectiveness, integrity and relevancy of faith to a person. It is a door into understanding what is intrinsic to living as a Christian.

## Welcoming Environment

While most leaders are aware of the importance of hospitality and welcome, its significance may not be fully appreciated. Over and over participants reported that it is the door by which they do or don’t enter. If drawn in by a welcoming, non-judgmental, and warm presence, a person enters the possibility of relationship. This initial welcome, followed by relevant conversation and dialogue, activates the relationship. There is little relating to a faith that is impersonal and whose initial

greeting is doctrinal. Many people are open and, in fact, often eager to learn creedal beliefs, traditions, tenants of a faith tradition, but this is a later step in the process. Without the welcoming environment and personal experience not much gets initiated for many people on a faith journey.

This suggestion is not to dismiss the importance of “knowing” the faith but of what creates the hospitable heart to open one’s mind to the “knowing”. It advises the faith formation leader and community about the importance of connecting emotionally and keeping the message grounded and understandable. It suggests the importance about what are leading strategies of parishes, congregations and schools.

The significance is not just an initial issue but an ongoing one. In the present age of rich personal communication and social networks individuals highly value the “being known” factor. In the fast pace of family life and perhaps lack of available extended family relationships many respond to the genuine effort to care about them and their children. They are open to the message if this important factor of climate is attended to. This cannot be dismissed as soft, a waste of time or superfluous. It is achieved through personal presence, electronic communication and easy access to relevant and meaningful resources.

## Families

Parents who engage in adult formation in intergenerational settings are more likely to become lifelong learners. The door is opened by the love they have for their children. Catechetical leaders must insist on a partnership with families. Both the home and the faith community have to work diligently and consistently to be successful in passing on the Catholic faith in a post-modern culture. Catholic school educators and parish staffs who work collaboratively act in exemplifying Christian love and simply have a greater likelihood of being effective. Invest in all families, and the results are more involvement,

more committed families, more effective catechesis

In the Catholic Bishops’ document on family, *Follow the Way of Love*, it states, “Wherever a family exist and love still moves through its members, grace is present. Nothing, not even divorce or death, can place limits on God’s gracious love.” There is a power in grace that flows through families that is at work most especially in the process of faith development. It does not depend on whether this is a highly functioning family or a wounded family, or as most are, somewhere in between. Faith formation leaders serve a valuable function in the message we have for parents to amplify this voice of God that flows through families. The leaders who has regard for this grace knows that the leadership of the congregation is in partnership with the family, and asks herself what are the ways I can encourage and enrich this movement of the Spirit? How can I help give it language and structure to intensify the meaning of what God already is at work doing within the family? Practical applications of this will focus on speaking to the capacity of family members to reveal God in their actions, language, worship and service.

## Intergenerational Learning

Active learning engages the whole person and should be integrated into formal catechetical programs. Strategies that incorporate brain compatible learning and multiple dimensions of intelligence need to be incorporated into faith formation programs. We learn or retain 10% of what we read, 50% of what we discuss, 75% of what we practice. Jesus used multiple methodologies. So should we!

Harness a parent’s love as a force in accomplishing catechetical learning and faith development. Intergenerational opportunities and programs, such as described in this study, that are relevant to family life are effective. Programs that are adequately staffed and funded potentially change families and faith communities.

## Faith and Life Today

We need to speak to the relevant concerns and challenges people face and why faith matters. The concepts of fear and obligation are not the language that is motivating to either parents or catechetical leaders. For parents as well as for religious educators these are perceived as shallow and missing the point of the awesome possibilities of a relationship with God. At the same time in a world where every national disaster, political uprising, and tragic human story is available with the click of a remote control or app on a phone, individuals are well aware that bad things happen to good people and that safety is not a guarantee. Life is complex and their deepest desire is to protect and care for their family members. They long for their children, as well as themselves, to have a north star to guide their moral decisions. It is a complex world that can be puzzling, frightening and challenging to negotiate.

Explicitly or implicitly parents long to situate their family in the care and protection of a God they know and trust. They do not always know how to form that bond or how to communicate this in language to their children. Framing this desire for parents is to be a conduit of faith for them. Speaking about this longing may resonate with parents. Practical applications include engaging parents in topics that might raise conscious awareness of these real concerns. Encourage faith that is cultivated through regular practices of prayer, worship and family discussion.

## Conclusions

This study originated out of interest in the mystery of faith and sought to learn more about the process of how faith develops. It focused on two communities: the home community and the faith community. This study sought to learn more about factors that nurture the faith process, much the way an educator would seek to learn more about

factors that nurture intelligence. Seeking to understand what impacts faith and how to nurture it is perhaps even a more challenging mission because of the complexity of what faith is.

Nurturing faith is a multifaceted complex process. It encompasses learning a tradition, participating in prayer and worship, developing a moral life, and allowing Scripture to guide, inspire and change our hearts. To nurture faith is to be dedicated to learn to trust God, to serve others, to help the poor and vulnerable, to forgive and accept forgiveness, to love others without judgment, to cherish peace, to have concern for justice and to value life. It involves opening ourselves as human beings to receive and give love. "And we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love" (Blake, 1789).

The study was able to isolate some factors that may impact faith to guide those who have interest in this topic. It revealed some insight into what might warrant awareness in planning, in making choices, in advocating and in determining a focus of priorities for parents and catechetical leaders. This study would suggest the value of paying attention to factors of *climate*. Do people feel a warm welcome? Do they feel there is a small group with whom they connect? Do people feel a sense of belonging? Do they know and feel the connection between the local community of faith and the larger community of faith? Do people experience friendships and meaningful relationships where they can be their authentic selves?

This study would suggest the value and power of encouraging *practices of faith* to root faith, to strengthen faith and to enter more deeply into the mystery of faith. For Catholics, participation in the Sacraments especially, the celebration of Eucharistic liturgy holds deep meaning and value and nurtures faith. This study reveals that learning to share our experiences of God through discussion, expressed through our own human stories, profoundly impacts faith.

This study suggests that the practice of serving others in need is a cultivated practice



that furthers God's Kingdom of peace, justice and love. Serving others makes faith come alive, connects us to each other, authenticates our Christian values, and is a language very meaningful, especially to young persons. Encouraging an ethic of service strengthens the faith of individuals, families and communities.

Finally, this study would suggest an invitation to know the deep longing in the heart is really a holy longing. A longing, a desire, a hunger is wired into our humanity. It is the Eros, the force, that calls us to live in a more creative, life-giving way and what holds us in the dark nights of our lives. This Eros, this force, when nurtured, drives us to love and serve, directs our moral decisions and sustains us in the dark times of trauma, difficulty and loss.

Reliance on faith and faith as a moral north star are the result of a **culture of faith** that is nurtured. It is most powerful when it is nurtured in a family and in a community of faithful others. This study revealed the struggle of abundance. Parents often expressed the abundance in their lives but often found choosing difficult. Jesus said he longed for us to have *life* in abundance (John 10:10). To develop a culture of faith, within a community, a family and an individual human heart is to cultivate the ability to choose what is life-giving and nurture the soul that energizes us and holds us together.

It is evident that there is more unknown about the factors that impact faith development than is known. This poem is a concluding thought that alludes to the fragility and resiliency of faith as it is passed from one generation to the next and why the process is a worthy pursuit and holds eternal meaning.

## The Way It Is

*There is a thread you follow.  
It goes among the things that change.  
But it does not change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.*

*While you hold on to it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die;  
And you suffer and grow old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.  
(Stafford)*

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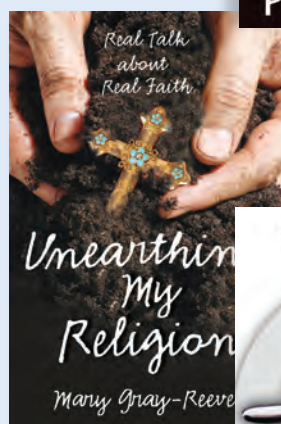
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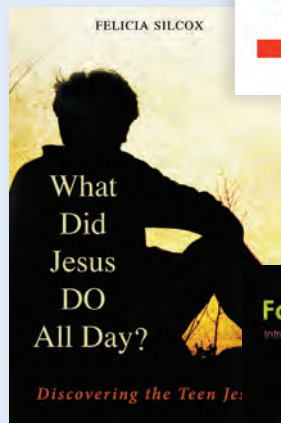
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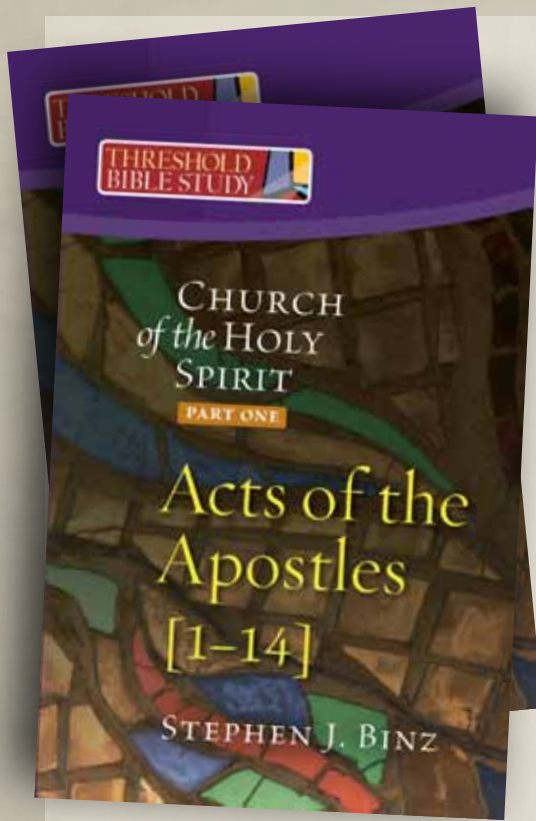
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## Intergenerational Faith Formation Today: Its Impact and Sustainability

Jim Merhaut

**I**t was 1988 when James White published his landmark book, *Intergenerational Religious Education*. White put into words what many people were beginning to sense in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: that there is something unnatural and unhealthy about forming children, youth, and adults in isolation from each other. Others have noted the risks of age segregation too. “This lack of intergenerational contact leads each generation to see itself as a separate subculture rather than as an integral part of an entire community, perspectives that often lead to conflict and competition rather than cooperation” (Martinson and Shallue, 4).

Until recently, the Church had always been fundamentally intergenerational both in its worship practices and in its learning practices. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did we witness the emergence of age segregation as the primary learning environment in churches. While the age segregation model’s efficiency made it possible for church educators to operate like a well-oiled machine, its deficiencies soon became apparent as the potential for making faith stick beyond adolescence dwindled with the decline of distinctive church culture in American communities. The close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left us wondering, in the words of John Westerhoff, “Will our children have faith?”

The first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the development of new models of faith formation that integrate age-specific and intergenerational learning in creative ways. Many churches that

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offer intergenerational faith formation got their start with the Generations of Faith project led by John Roberto and sponsored by the Center for Ministry Development. This project, funded by the Lily Foundation, offered intergenerational faith formation training to over 1,200 Catholic churches beginning in 2001 and continuing for five years.

New research about intergenerational learning is emerging in both Catholic and Protestant circles. The churches that have endured and thrived are the focus of this article. Most of them are Catholic churches that participated in the Generations of Faith training. LifelongFaith Associates has been surfacing churches throughout the United States that are offering some form of intergenerational faith formation. We will examine some key practices that are emerging consistently in the churches that are making intergenerational faith formation a part of their culture. For some churches, it has become the way they do things.

The dedication of these faith formation leaders is inspiring. Many churches, against significant odds, are changing the way we think about religious education. They are building their programs on what they believe to be the best practices in faith formation with limited resources and minimal institutional support. They fervently believe that the journey of faith is lifelong and that dedicated Christians seek learning from childhood through old age. These churches provide opportunities for faith formation to children, teens, young adults, and older adults. They work with families and single persons. They believe that the presence of children is essential for adult faith growth and the presence of adults, including those who are not parents, is essential for the faith growth of children and teens.

In this study, we surveyed and talked to Catholic faith formation leaders in suburban, rural, and urban settings. They were large, medium, and small-sized churches. Some were combined with, or in the process of combining

with, another church. We asked faith formation leaders in churches to tell us what they have learned over the past decade. They told us about content, methods, sustainability, and the impact that the intergenerational model has had on them and the congregations they serve.

## Effective Practices and Associated Outcomes

The fruits of our labor are significant indicators of whether or not we are on the right path. Results matter. Matching the positive outcomes of intergenerational faith formation with the common practices that produce them gives us a clear picture of where churches need to focus their efforts in order to be successful with intergenerational ministries. Some of the outcomes reported by faith formation leaders are:

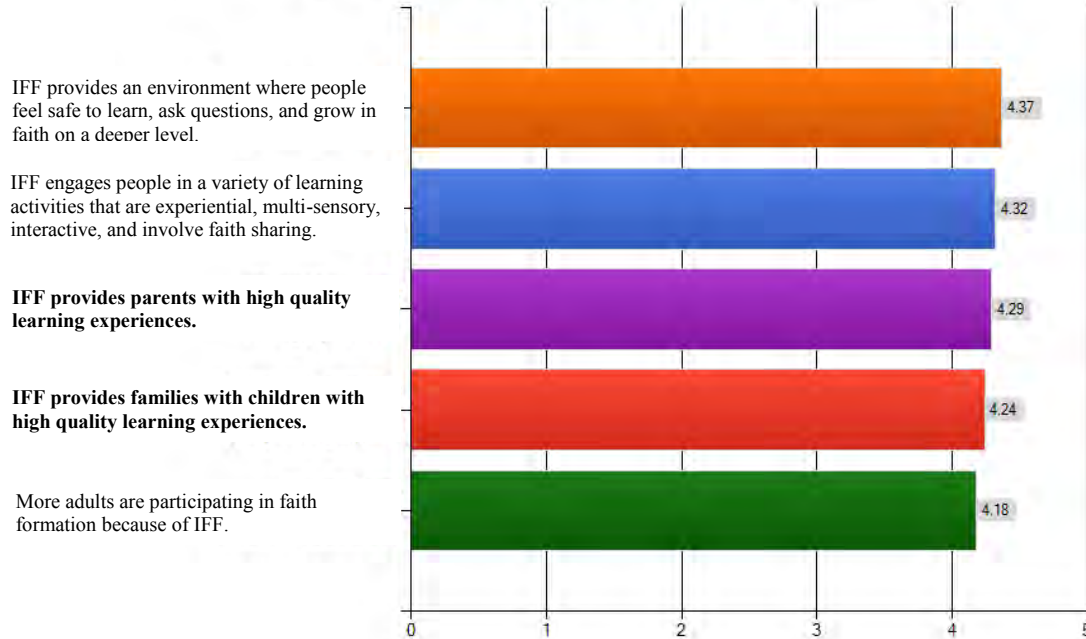
- Stronger families
- A greater sense of community
- A safe learning environment
- Motivated learners

### Stronger Families

*The future of humanity passes  
by way of the family.*  
(Pope John Paul II)

One could also say that the future of any church passes by way of the family. Faith formation leaders see tremendous benefits to families that participate in intergenerational faith formation. We asked leaders to rate seventeen impact statements related to intergenerational faith formation on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The five highest scoring impact statements are shown in the chart below. Two of the top five are family related (see bold items in chart).

The following statements describe the impact of intergenerational faith formation (IFF) on the participants. Please rate your degree of agreement with each statement.



This finding is consistent with the 2005 study by the Center for Ministry Development, *Generations of Faith Research Study*. Benefits to the family ranked among the highest outcomes in that study as well. Families that learn, pray, talk, and serve together are much more likely to experience the positive outcomes of church membership than families that experience these faith practices in age-specific settings. The importance of nurturing family faith with the whole family together was highlighted in the *Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry*. The results were reported in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (Martinson, Black, Roberto, 2010). They conclude, “Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are *three* times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and *twice* as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith.” The *Effective Christian Education Study* (Search Institute, 1990) found that family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity, even more

important than lifelong exposure to Christian education.

Intergenerational faith formation strengthens parental faith with high quality learning experiences. It also puts those same parents in a position to express their faith in the presence of their children. This dynamic helps to build stronger faith families, and these faithful families produce service-oriented children who are more likely to carry the practices of discipleship into their adult years than children and teens who participate in church faith formation experiences without their parents. Parental faith was cited by emerging adults who are connected to their faith as a key factor that sustained their faith through college. (*National Study of Youth & Religion*, Smith and Snell, 2003)

Strong churches are made up of strong families. Separating family members from each other for faith formation experiences is counterproductive for churches. Intergenerational faith formation builds family faith by providing opportunities for parents and children to talk about the mysteries of faith, to experience prayer and worship

together, and to serve those in need shoulder-to-shoulder. For the vast majority of the church's history, this is how children learned to be adult disciples. The evidence from a large body of research confirms that families remain our most powerful tool for raising faith-filled disciples.

## A Greater Sense of Community

Does intergenerational faith formation strengthen relationships in the parish

community? Yes, and 86.8% of the parish leaders in our survey agreed, with 26.3% of them strongly agreeing. This was the highest ranked impact statement of all statements relevant to intergenerational faith formation's impact on the community as a whole. People feel like they belong to a parish community when they participate in intergenerational programming.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating (out of 5)
<b>IFF is strengthening relationships among people in the parish community.</b>	0%	5.3%	7.9%	60.5%	26.3%	4.08

This is a highly significant finding in light of other research. Abraham Maslow famously demonstrated that belonging is a basic human need. Human beings cannot thrive unless they feel like they belong to a community. In some cases, this is even more basic than the need for safety or self-preservation as is the case with those who stay in abusive relationships. People place a very high value on a sense of community. What does this value mean for churches today?

In a fascinating study by James Kouzes and Barry Posner summarized in their book, *The Truth about Leadership*, commitment to a community is shown to be driven more by the personal values of the members than by the corporate values of the community. Kouzes and Posner discovered that people commit to organizations when organizations understand and honor what the people value most. If people value the feeling of belonging, then organizations like churches should be building communities that are hospitable and that create a warm sense of community if those churches want committed members.

We asked church leaders to list the three greatest benefits of intergenerational faith formation for their church. The most commonly mentioned benefit is that

intergenerational faith formation builds a stronger sense of community in the church. Hospitality emerged as the key to building this sense of community. A commitment to hospitality is the most important factor for sustaining and growing intergenerational faith formation in a church. It scored a remarkably high 4.63 on a scale of 5 as most important. Perhaps more than anything else, churches need to be places of hospitality in order to build commitment from members. Hospitality creates the sense of belonging that is desired so deeply by all people.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders can think about hospitality in two key ways:

1. Building a spirit of hospitality will strengthen intergenerational programming. It is the top sustaining factor.
2. Intergenerational programming will strengthen the sense of belonging that is at the heart of a strong, hospitable church community. A stronger sense of community is the highest rated impact of intergenerational faith formation on a church community.

Put more simply: build hospitality for stronger intergenerational programming; build strong intergenerational programming to become a more hospitable church. It really is two sides to one coin.

There are many reasons why intergenerational faith formation builds a strong sense of community. An obvious reason is that an intergenerational gathering is a rare treasure in our peer oriented culture. Any organization that promotes intergenerational experiences will be an organization in the culture where welcoming is a mark of distinction. True community is intergenerational, but there are other findings in our survey that point to practices in intergenerational churches that clearly enhance this sense of community.

## A Safe Place

Trust is a foundational building block for healthy growth and development. People need to work to create safe places where a sense of trust can thrive. Intergenerational gatherings are safe places where people can freely ask questions and engage in faith discussions without fear. Survey participants were presented with seventeen statements about the known impact of intergenerational faith formation on program participants. The safe learning environment was ranked #1 among all statements of impact. (See first chart.)

There can be no trust in a learning community without a safe and comfortable environment. Imagine some of the age-specific groups you have participated in over the years, especially in your adolescent years. Safety was not always a guarantee. Kindness does not always emerge in a peer group. Psychologist, Mary Pipher, once said, "A great deal of America's social sickness comes from age segregation. If ten fourteen-year-olds are grouped together, they will form a *Lord of the Flies* culture with its competitiveness and meanness. But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them

all." Adults in general, and churches in particular, have an obligation to provide safe places for children, teens, and other adults to gather and learn without fear. Bringing the generations together enhances safety.

Church sex abuse scandals in recent years highlight the importance of being more vigilant about safety for minors. Not only are intergenerational gatherings safer than peer gatherings in terms of the emotional climate of the learning environment, they are also sexually safer because of the presence of parents and multiple other adults. Intergenerational models ideally group multiple adults with multiple teens and multiple children in the same room at the same time. Clearly no learning environment can be completely safe, but intergenerational models offer the potential of remarkable benefits for children and teens in terms of safety. While this is true, it is also important not to relax the high standards that have been wisely implemented in age-specific settings such as school and parish religious education programs when a church shifts to intergenerational programming. During breakout sessions and free time, leaders need to consistently implement and clearly communicate strong boundaries for the protection of children and teens.

## Motivated Learners

Forcing people into faith formation is about as far away from the heart of Christian formation as one can get. Freedom is a predominant theme in the Scriptures and in the tradition of Christianity. When communities have to force people to participate, the battle for true community is already lost. Leaders of intergenerational faith formation note that the creative approach of the learning sessions has a high impact on participants.

The creative and diverse learning approaches used by intergenerational practitioners was ranked second highest among factors that impact participants (see the first chart). This approach to session



planning is based upon the belief that it is the responsibility of leaders to be inspirational. If we can't force faith learning, we have to find ways to motivate learners by connecting with what matters to them. We need to inspire the learners. Creative approaches and diverse teaching methodologies provide the best chance of capturing the attention and energy of learners.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders understand that there is no one approach to teaching that will work for everyone, especially when the learning community is age diverse. There is no publication that will be sufficient to meet the learning needs of the gathered intergenerational community. Successful practitioners rely upon a variety of faith formation resources, their own experience, the creative spark of community members, and the inspiration of prayer to guide their session planning.

St. Elizabeth Church in Acton, Massachusetts submitted this creative video as a way to introduce people to intergenerational learning:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2CBkYm37Cs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2CBkYm37Cs).

Other churches develop special music ministries that are used exclusively for intergenerational gatherings. Some write and produce their own dramatic presentations. Some build elaborate props to enhance the visual learning experience for all ages. Clearly, adults represent the portion of the community that will freely choose to participate or not to participate, to make room on the calendar for faith formation or find ways to pack the calendar with other pursuits as a means of escaping a meaningless faith formation experience. Adult participation is a key barometer. If adults are not showing up for faith formation sessions, then we need to discern whether or not we are effectively designing programs to meet their learning needs. Leaders report that adults come consistently to intergenerational learning sessions when those sessions are creative and engaging. Adults will perceive the programs as relevant when leaders take the time to learn about the needs of the adults in the

community and address those needs at every gathering while using diverse methodologies to address relevant content.

## The Leadership Question

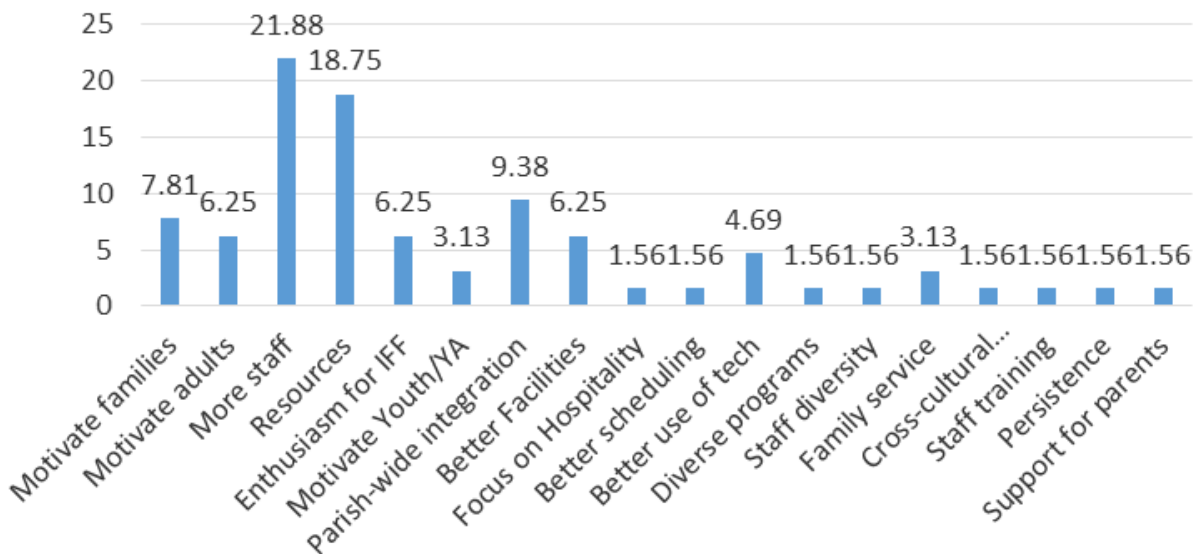
In the open-ended comments of our survey, leadership, in terms of more staff, was the top identified need of faith formation leaders.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders need help. They are looking for dedicated parish staff and volunteers to help them sustain the vision of lifelong faith formation. Resources for those leaders was the second highest identified need. Leadership training that features recruitment, training, and sustaining strategies is a growing need for faith formation leaders.

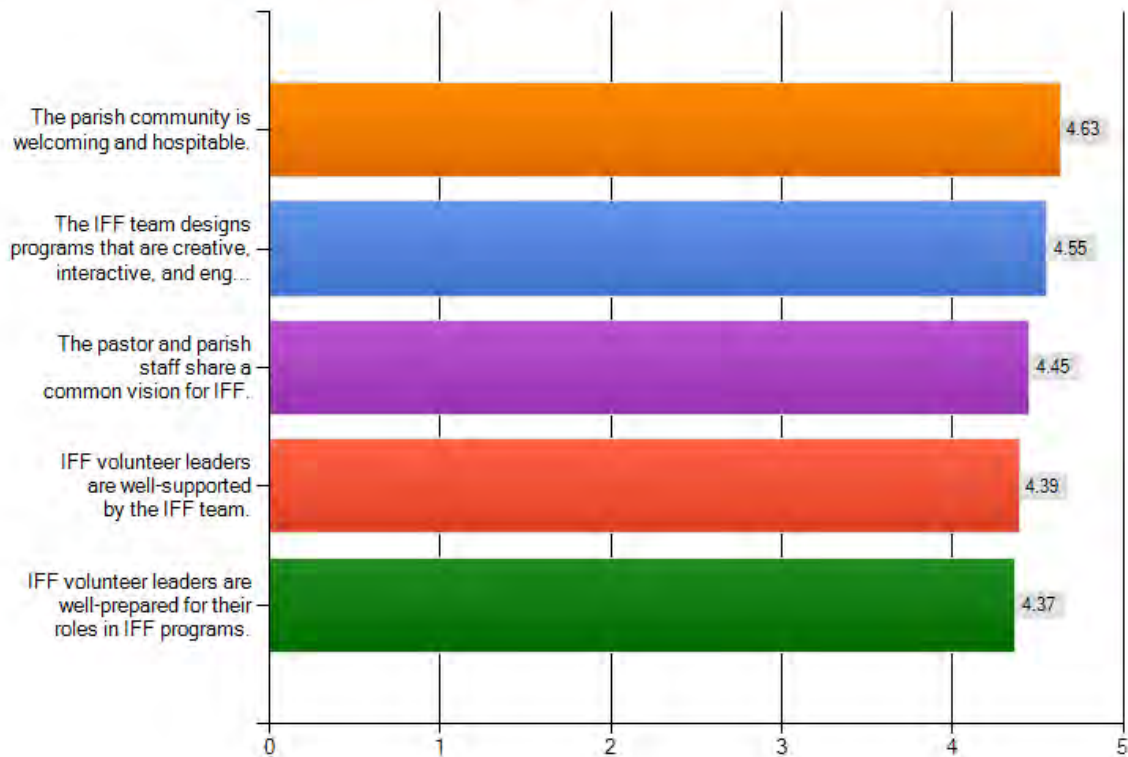
Leadership also made a strong showing in the quantitative portion of the survey. After hospitality, leadership factored in as the next four highest factors that sustain intergenerational faith formation in a church community. (See charts below.)

Dynamic and effective intergenerational faith formation is always a team leadership effort. Some parishes have more than one hundred people volunteering to put together a monthly intergenerational faith formation program. The volunteers are facilitating learning, planning and preparing meals, developing creative learning sessions, developing and preparing home materials, designing environment, creating and offering prayer experiences, developing warm and welcoming experiences for the opening of a session, and more.

## Key Needs for IFF Growth Percent of Total Responses



The following statements describe factors or characteristics that help your parish sustain and grow intergenerational faith formation (IFF). Please indicate how important each factor is for your parish.



Some key leadership traits include:

- The ability to inspire large numbers of church members with a compelling vision of faith formation for the whole community
- The insight to name the highest priorities and most important strategies to bring the vision to life
- The charisma to build a working and volunteering environment filled with joy, hope, and meaningful work/ministry opportunities
- The organization skills to develop a leadership system with clear oral and written communication channels
- The flexibility to create a wide variety of ways for people to contribute to the faith formation mission
- The willingness to be supportive by offering meaningful and relevant training and mentoring to staff and volunteers at all levels of the ministry
- The humility to step back and empower others to do what they are called and trained to do
- The wisdom to step in and help when needed
- The determination and commitment to stick to the mission when difficult challenges arise
- The generosity of saying thank you endlessly, specifically, and authentically

## Continuing Challenges

Leaders identified some areas of ongoing challenge for them in both the quantitative and the open-ended sections of the survey.

### 1. Youth Ministry

Even after decades of theoretical and research findings that promote integrating teens into the life of the whole community rather than segregating them exclusively or primarily into youth groups, there remains a significant challenge with integrating teens into

intergenerational programs. The reasons for this were not clarified in our survey, and they are likely many and complex. The influence of the broader culture and the experiences of adolescents in the educational system would seem to be significant.

Church growth movements in evangelical protestant churches also promote age segregation as a way to attract teens and young families to churches. There is a certain level of comfort in a peer group that is not present in an intergenerational group that makes age segregated ministry very tempting for shrinking churches that want to attract large numbers of new members. This has proven to be a short-sighted strategy. One of the challenges of intergenerational practitioners is to clearly articulate the vision of intergenerational faith formation in an inspiring way that matches the enthusiastic proselytizing of church growth practitioners.

Leaders also need to find new ways to integrate teens into intergenerational programs that address the needs and concerns of teens while incorporating their particular gifts for ministry. One insight that was expressed by youth leaders is that teens must be active participants in any program. They will not tolerate passive participation as much as other age groups will. Finding ways to let teens serve the program as they participate in it is helpful.

### 2. Faith Formation at Home

While faith formation leaders believe that faith in the home is being expressed and lived more effectively because of intergenerational faith formation opportunities offered at church, there is still a concern that faith practices in the home are far from what they could be. While 84.2% of leaders believe they are providing practical materials for families to use at home, only 65.8% of leaders believe these materials are having an impact in the homes of participants. This is an area with great promise for future growth. We know that the home is the place where faith is formed

foundationally. We also know what families need to do in order to become strong faith formers for each other at home, i.e. engage in caring conversations, develop rituals and traditions, pray and read the Bible together, and engage in service together. Now it is just a matter of developing strategies to get the job done. Intergenerational faith formation leaders will need to connect home faith formation strategies with the things that families value most. The only way to know what they value most is to ask them. Home faith formation will not become a regular practice for families until they find a way to integrate it into what they love to do. When

leaders know what families value and love, then they will unlock the key to successful home faith formation resources. The resources should be developed in light of what families value.

One thing that emerges very strongly in time studies of families is their love for television. Families spend more media time with television than with any other media device. Clearly this expresses a value that families have. They value watching television. The chart below expresses the time spent in hours per day that adults use media. Statistics for youth are similar with television as the top media form.

**Average Time Spent per Day with Major Media by US Adults, 2008-2011**  
minutes

	2008	2009	2010	2011
TV and video	254	267	264	274
Internet	137	146	155	167
Radio	102	98	96	94
Mobile	32	39	50	65
Newspapers	38	33	30	26
Magazines	25	22	20	18
Other	48	46	46	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>635</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>660</b>	<b>693</b>

*Note: time spent with each medium includes all time spent with that medium, regardless of multitasking; for example, 1 hour of multitasking on the internet and watching TV is counted as 1 hour for TV and 1 hour for internet; numbers may not add up to total due to rounding*  
Source: eMarketer, Dec 2011

134676 www.eMarketer.com

Given this information, it would seem that media literacy would be an ideal way to connect faith with what is going on in homes. Intergenerational program leaders ought to be watching lots of television to capture themes that are influencing the families in our churches. We can then connect our teaching more effectively to what is happening in families. We can develop home resources that help families spend these hundreds of hours of television viewing more actively and in light of faith values. And perhaps these viewing hours would drop a bit if families were given some assistance with developing a faith-filled way of using media in the home.

## Integration throughout the Church

While leaders have considerable success offering intergenerational programs, they experience a challenge with the creation of an intergenerational culture throughout the congregation. Leaders identified this as the third highest need for the future growth of intergenerational faith formation. True churches are intergenerational at their core. The intergenerational worshipping community is the paradigm (source and summit) for church life. The intergenerational family is the foundation for church life. It would seem like an easy transition from these two core church



experiences to say that Christians ought to be intergenerational in all that they do. Not that every gathering should be intergenerational, but that every gathering should build the intergenerationality of a church. Getting a church to think intergenerationally is a significant challenge for the future. When all adult gatherings include a consciousness of and a concern for teens and children, then we are on our way. Likewise, when all child and teen gatherings include a consciousness of and concern for the adults, then we are on our way. Accomplishing this is the subject of the next article in the Journal.

## Conclusion

Intergenerational faith formation is the default method for churches when one takes the long view of history. Our current culture has called us to be intentionally intergenerational in order to mine the riches of bringing young and old back together in fruitful partnership. While church leaders acknowledge the difficult work and the many challenges associated with intergenerational faith formation, they also cannot imagine returning to a program that separates the generations and focuses primarily on delivering faith formation content to children. Promoting

intergenerationality in the future will require leaders to proclaim the vision in inspirational ways, to continue to embrace creative and flexible program opportunities, to expand intergenerational experiences beyond catechetical programs, and to learn more from families about how to be intergenerational.

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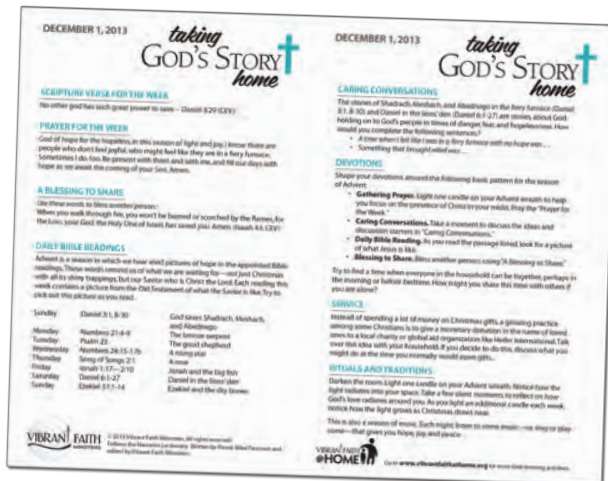


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## Planning for Intergenerationality: Moving Beyond the Program

Jim Merhaut

*‘Intergenerational’ is not something churches do—it is something they become.*  
Brenda Snailum, intergenerational study participant

**I**ntergenerational programming is one thing; intergenerationality is an entirely different thing. While the two concepts are related, there are significant differences. The primary difference comes down to one word: culture. Are you offering intergenerational programs, or has your church been transformed by embracing and owning the culture of intergenerationality? How do we promote and sustain the integration of the spirit of intergenerationality across every organization in the church? This article will address that question.

Integrating intergenerationality across all ministries and organizations means that there is a collaborative spirit in the church, which helps ministry leaders and group representatives put the good of the entire community, all ages and generations, before the good of their group. Perhaps a better way to say this is that the groups integrate their priorities with the priorities of the whole congregation, and this process of integration is a top priority of the church as a whole.

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## Imagine the Possibilities

*Imagine a church that is embracing this vision of intergenerational integration as leaders prepare the entire faith community for Lent. Lent is coming and the entire community is getting ready.*

*A team of representative members, called the Intergenerational Integration Team, has designed a variety of ways to assist the various organizations in the church with their Lenten preparations. They have focused their efforts on the theme for the year: “The Three Practices of Lent: Fasting, Praying, and Almsgiving.” The resources they have discovered and/or created fit the groups perfectly because the groups’ members were consulted before the resources were developed. The church groups know the drill and implement the ideas seamlessly into their meetings because this process has become a part of congregational culture over the past five years. It’s just the way they do things now.*

*Young adults—those at home, in college, or in the military—receive an email every Friday morning with a simple reflection on fasting. The reflection is designed to help the young adults who are away call to mind the children and older adults back home. They are encouraged to experience solidarity with their families, their fellow parishioners, and with the poor by participating in a fast each Friday during Lent. They are also encouraged to look for ways, wherever they are, to reach out with acts of kindness toward people who are both older and younger than they are.*

*Adults will experience the same kind of integration. All of the adult faith-sharing groups in the church dedicate their first session during Lent to “Three Practices of Lent” by exploring the meaning of Lent and reflecting on the Lenten lectionary readings in light of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Within the prayers, special attention is given to children, teens, and young adults. All of the parish committees and councils that meet prior to or at the beginning of Lent open their meetings with a special prayer service on the Lenten theme, also with special attention to the needs*

*of children, teens, and young adults. Some of these groups are preparing special prayer experiences and activities they will share with their children and grandchildren.*

*Families with children are called to reflect beyond their own needs. Home materials are developed for faith formation gatherings of families and children. These materials may have a particular focus on the needs of older adults. Families give alms this Lent by reaching out in service to older adults who live close to them. These older adults have been coached to practice the almsgiving of hospitality to the younger families who will arrive at their homes to offer a little help around the house.*

*Teens will be challenged to stretch their minds and spirits beyond the pressing needs of adolescence. Their Lenten prayers and activities will include reminders of and prayers for the particular needs of young children and older adults. They will prepare all Lent to offer a special version of Stations of the Cross for the whole community. Next year, they plan to “give away” the responsibility to prepare some of the stations to a group of children and other stations to a group of seniors. Perhaps the following year, all of the stations will be prepared intergenerationally.*

*Each group is called to intentionally reflect on those who are different in age from their own group and to explore ways to interact with the other generations in the parish.*

*The church’s website features inspiring artwork, photography, and videos showing meaningful and fruitful relationships across the generations. A special bulletin insert for each week of Lent is distributed at Sunday services reminding everyone about the vision of intergenerationality toward which the church is moving in a particularly focused way during this Lenten season.*

*The worship committee designs Sunday worship with an emphasis on the three practices and how they can be practiced for the benefit of those from other generations, and the pastor preaches in ways that help parishioners immerse themselves in the theme’s meaning while discovering practical ways to live the three practices intergenerationally in daily life.*

*Wherever you go in this faith community, people of all ages and generations are united in a common endeavor: to prepare for Lent, to experience Lent fully at home and in the congregation, and to integrate their learning into their daily lives. They are doing this with a sharp focus on the experiences and needs of those who are different in age. Faith formation is in the midst of a transformation. The church is moving toward a culture of intergenerationality.*

What does it take to get a church to this kind of integration so that every activity of the parish is grounded in a spirit of generosity and hospitality toward those who are different in age from myself or from my group? It takes a good plan, a lot of work, and perseverance. . . . all of which are sparked by visionary leadership. It starts with the pastor and the church staff.

## The Pastor and Staff: A Key Relationship

The task of promoting the culture of intergenerationality is usually the responsibility of a coordinator of faith formation and his or her team. Faith formation is the ministry area that is usually most conscious of the need for intergenerational perspectives in ministry. *For this reason, this article will address the intergenerational transformation of a church from the perspective of the faith formation leaders.*

Faith formation is a primary responsibility of the pastor, who shares this responsibility with a coordinator of faith formation and his or her leadership team. This person may be paid or volunteer. The coordinator works closely with the pastor to create and develop the plan, and this person should have the administrative skills to implement the plan smoothly. The pastor is responsible for empowering the faith formation coordinator by providing adequate, on-going direction and support at appropriate levels. A professional

relationship built upon mutual trust is critically important if the overall faith formation plan will be implemented properly. Little can be done for the good of the faith formation ministries when the pastor and the coordinator have not taken the time to develop a healthy, professional working relationship. A church cannot nurture a healthy spirit of intergenerationality if the pastor and the faith formation leaders are not on the same page and do not share the same vision.

The coordinator of faith formation can do much to build a positive working relationship with the pastor so that the pastor will be an effective ambassador for intergenerationality across the parish. Consider the following ideas::

- **Learn the Culture and Build Connections:** Observe your pastor closely to discern the kind of culture the pastor is building in the congregational. This is especially true if you have been working for a pastor for a year or less. Identify the ways in which the culture that is being built is consistent with an intergenerational culture. Note these opportunities, and engage the pastor in discussions about them. Keep the discussions positive and affirming. Express gratitude for how the pastor displays a sensitivity to the benefits of intergenerational relationships.
- **Ask Questions:** Keep probing questions at the front end of your conversations. Avoid the temptation to put forth your agenda until you understand where your pastor is coming from on any given day and/or topic.
- **Clarify the Mission:** You and the pastor need to be on the same page regarding the mission and goals of the ministry plan for the church.

- **Communicate Empathically:** Choose communication methods that work well for you and your pastor. Communication works best when we consider the needs of the other first.
- **No Surprises:** Keep the pastor well-informed about your progress on current projects as well as any new ideas you are considering for the future. Especially keep the pastor informed when problems develop. The pastor should hear about potential problems from you before anyone else.
- **Credit the Team:** Few things help to build a good relationship with a pastor more than quality work that is credited to the team. When you enjoy success in your ministry, make it clear that it is only possible because your pastor, other staff members, and volunteers supported your work. Teams, not individuals, accomplish great things. It's all about the body of Christ.

The pastor participates directly in faith formation in a number of key ways. Preaching is the most visible and consistent way a pastor forms the faith of the parishioners. The sermon is perhaps the best opportunity to build a consistent faith formation message across all ministries. The coordinator of faith formation who has taken the time to build a strong working relationship with the pastor can assist by providing clear and simple summaries of how intergenerational themes connect with the liturgical cycle or worship themes. Jesus lived in a culture that was thoroughly intergenerational; therefore, gospel stories ooze with intergenerationality. Church staff and leaders that meet together regularly can make lectionary-based prayer a regular part of meetings. Staff might consider praying the lectionary a month or more ahead of the cycle so that your prayerful reflections might have an opportunity to influence the pastor's homiletic preparations and general liturgy planning. Making connections between

intergenerational themes and liturgy is critical in the effort to build cross generational integration throughout the church, and the sermon is a key strategy toward achieving that goal.

Special appearances by the pastor at formal faith formation gatherings are effective ways to keep the pastor connected to faith formation efforts. Some pastors are excellent teachers and are willing to participate in programs as presenters. If not, the pastor can lead prayer experiences or even make informal visits to mingle with learners during less structured moments in the programs. As the pastor experiences what is happening in faith formation settings, the faith formation staff will have experiential reference points for discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the programs in terms of their integration of intergenerational spirit and practice.

## The Role of Leadership Councils

When you attend to the relationship you have with your pastor, you will notice that the pastor is more willing to support your efforts throughout the church. It will be important for the pastor to make space at meetings of church councils and leadership groups for faith formation updates *and* for faith formation experiences. If you are a member of the church's leadership council, you will have plenty of opportunities to work with the council. If you are not a member, the pastor may have to initiate this plan unless you are invited to become a member. Either way, if intergenerational perspectives and practices are going to be integrated into all ministries, it will have to happen with a variety of leadership groups.

Prepare to take the church's leadership council through an intergenerational discernment process that will help them not only to appreciate the benefits of a culture of intergenerationality, but also to incorporate

intergenerational perspectives and practices into council meetings. Request an opportunity to address the council on the need for a culture of intergenerationality in the congregation. The following information may help you make your case.

### The Biblical Roots of Intergenerationality

- Deuteronomy 6:9, Teach your children.
- Deuteronomy 29:10-12, The whole community enters into covenant with God.
- Joshua 8:34-35, All of what Moses taught is passed on to the men, women, and children together.
- Psalm 78:1-8, Whole generations pass on the faith to the following generations.
- Isaiah 11:6-9, On God's holy mountain, those who are naturally different shall come together, and the young are a paradigm for hope.
- Jeremiah 1:4-10, No one is too young to be a messenger for God.
- Joel 2:15-16, The whole community is called to fast.
- Malachi 3:22-24, The Old Testament closes with a call for parents and children to turn their hearts toward each other.
- Mark 10:13-16, Jesus affirms the presence of children in the midst of adults as a special sign of the kingdom of God. How can adults come to know God's kingdom without regular contact with children?
- Matthew 18:1-5, Jesus is teaching in an intergenerational setting and uses a child as a visual reminder of the disposition necessary for salvation.
- Matthew 14 & 15, Jesus teaches with whole families present (see 14:21 and 15:38).
- Acts 16:25-34, Paul and Silas baptize a prison guard and his entire household

together in his home. (See also Acts 16:14-15 for a similar example.)

- Acts 20:7-12 & Acts 21:5-6, Paul teaches and leads prayer with young and old present together.

### The Social-Scientific Importance of Intergenerational Relationships

- Jean Piaget: The experience of disequilibrium is a catalyst for cognitive development. Adults are the agents who facilitate the experience of cognitive disequilibrium in children and adolescents.
- Erik Erikson: Two key concepts of Erikson's theory of human development call for intergenerational interaction:
  - *Mutuality* is a concept that is often ignored in Erikson's work. It states that the generations need each other for the maturation process to unfold. He said that the generations "grow each other up."
  - *Generativity* calls adults to become more conscious over time of their responsibility to pass wisdom to the generations that follow them.
- Robert Kegan: Holding environments (such as healthy families or communities) serve three purposes, all of which point to the need for an intergenerational community:
  - Purpose 1: Give a person a comfortable environment in which to assimilate new information. While peer groups can create a comfortable environment, the environment can become too comfortable so that new information is not welcome or sought.
  - Purpose 2: Challenge a person to consider new ways of thinking and acting in response to new information. Most developmental



challenges come from outside of a peer group.

- Purpose 3: Provide an ongoing environment of stability throughout the assimilation and change process in order to sustain the change over a significant period of time. Intra-generational groups do not have the staying power of intergenerational groups. The experiences of family and society, for example, are more permanent and more stable than the experience of a particular grade in school.

■ The Search Institute's Developmental Relationships: This is the latest research being done by the Search Institute in Minneapolis, MN, and it is based upon their prior research on developmental assets. Chief among the assets that help children and teens mature in healthy ways are the positive relationships they engage in with parents, teachers, and other caring adults in the community. These relationships are not possible without regular intergenerational experiences at home, at school, at church, and in the wider community. The research shows that intergenerational relationships have a powerful impact on positive outcomes for children and teens socially, academically, and emotionally while also protecting them from negative outcomes.

■ Intergenerational Tradition: You will want to note that the vast majority of church ministry experiences throughout the history of Christianity have been and continue to be intergenerational. From house churches in the first century through Sunday liturgy today, intergenerational experiences have been the hallmark of church caring, praying, learning, celebrating, & serving:

- Caring: Formal and informal/planned and spontaneous expressions of care across the generations at church and at home such as caring conversations and kind gestures
- Praying: Communal prayer services at church and at home in addition to an intergenerational awareness within private prayer practices
- Learning: Forming faith up and down the generational spectrum at church and at home
- Celebrating: Intergenerational worship, sacramental rituals, celebrations and traditions at church and at home
- Serving: Intergenerational service learning experiences through church programs and planned/spontaneous service through family/neighborhood experiences

The role of a leadership council from this point forward is twofold: 1) setting an example for all ministries; and 2) advising you as you work to implement intergenerational experiences in other church organizations.

Leadership council meetings can include prayer experiences that are specifically designed to help council members reflect upon the gifts and the need of all ages and generations in the faith community. The council agenda can also include items that are relevant to all ages and generations in the community. Someone on the council can be charged with the task of keeping everyone in the community on the council's radar screen.

Another strategy to help the council feel the importance of intergenerational culture is to invite representatives from each generation to offer brief presentations to council. These presentations will help the council members to experience affectively what is happening for all of the generations in the faith community. It is one thing to think about and pray for a certain population; it is quite another thing to engage in face-to-face encounter with them.

## Intergenerational Integration Team

Now you have the pastor and the leadership council supporting your efforts to integrate intergenerationality into all ministries. Consider establishing a team of people who will embrace and implement the vision to integrate all ministries with the parish's intergenerational plan.

Selecting the right people for your Intergenerational Integration team is an important process that should be done in consultation with your pastor and other key members of the staff. The team will be more effective if there is broad representation from across the congregation. This is not a team that will impose its will on ministries and groups; rather, it is a team that represents the flavor of the various ministries and groups operating in the parish. Think about the American Revolution when you form this group. Why were the colonists so up in arms? One reason was that decisions were being made in England without representation from the colonists in America, and then those decisions were imposed on the colonists. The battle cry was, "Taxation without representation!" It was clear how the decisions benefited England but not always so clear how they benefited the colonists. Don't ignore this lesson. Forming diverse representative leadership teams prevents rebellion when you get to the implementation stage. While it is not necessary to have every group represented on the team, it is important that every group have a voice. In other words, someone on the team must be able to speak about any given group with a good level of familiarity either because he/she knows the group from experience or knows someone well who belongs to the group.

Representation is not all that the team will do. They will not just discuss issues; they will also compile (or create) and implement resources for various parish groups. The team members will need to be willing to develop

and/or find resources that work for various groups and create delivery methods so that the resources get into the right hands and are used effectively. The team will then evaluate how faith formation is being integrated into the parish groups and make adjustments based upon their findings.

Team members will need to be proven collaborators, excellent listeners, and detail-oriented implementers. They will serve the needs of multiple ministries and groups, and will have to develop an excellent rapport with the leaders of those ministries and groups. They will become trusted spiritual resource people for many members of your congregation. Team members should have a good track record of building and sustaining trusting relationships that last.

Resourcefulness and creativity will be helpful attributes for team members. Where can you find the right resources for each particular ministry or group? Team members will have to be able to answer that question. If nothing adequate can be found or purchased, team members may have to develop resources tailored to the particular needs of a ministry or group. This kind of resource development is enormously rewarding to a creative person and equally as frustrating to a person who is not gifted as a writer or program planner. Be sure to have at least a couple of creative programming types on your team.

Developing a clear profile for the right candidates for your team will greatly enhance your work and eliminate lots of potential problems with the integration plan. See the next page for a proposed job description for a member of the Intergenerational Integration team. You may use this job description or develop one of your own which addresses the particular needs in your congregation.

---

## Job Description

**Program:** Faith Formation

**Job Title:** Intergenerational Integration Team Member

### Tasks to be Performed with Other Team Members:

1. Represent one or more ministries or groups
2. Assess the integration intergenerational perspectives and practices across church ministries and groups
3. Identify and/or develop intergenerational resources for ministries and groups
4. Assist particular ministries or groups with implementation of resources
5. Evaluate resources in collaboration with each ministry or group
6. Evaluate the process of intergenerational change in the congregational culture

### Abilities Needed (skills, attitudes, understandings):

1. Ability to work well in group settings
2. Openness to new ideas
3. Excellent listening/communication skills
4. Appreciation for diverse spiritualities
5. Resourceful
6. Compliance with safe environment

### Length of Commitment

- Start date:
- End date:
- Meetings:
- Orientation:

### Support and Supervision

- Who provides support and supervision:
- When and where:
- Training and preparation offered:

### Benefits of the position

- *To the volunteer leader:* The opportunity to exercise your baptismal

call to ministry with a creative and diverse team of individuals and deepen your faith while you experience the joy of Christian service

- *To the community:* Building a more welcoming and supportive community across the generations.

Completed by (name) \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Establishing Your Mission and Setting Your Goals

Now that you have the support of the pastor and the leadership council; and now that you have identified, recruited, and trained team members for the Intergenerational Integration team, it is time to begin the work of integrating intergenerational perspectives and experiences into all ministries and groups.

All good work begins with clarity of mission. What is the purpose of the Intergenerational Integration team? A clear and concise mission statement will communicate the purpose of the team to both team members and the congregation. I would like to propose the following mission statements for your consideration:

*The Intergenerational Integration team serves all church ministries and groups by providing them with simple and relevant resources in order to help them appreciate, embrace, and promote intergenerationality in our congregation.*

OR

*The Intergenerational Integration team promotes and supports intergenerational perspectives and/or experiences every time people in our faith community gather in the name of the church.*

These statements leave little doubt about the core purpose of the group. Goals and strategies will help to flesh out and give shape

to the work of the team. Goals and strategies can change from year to year as the group's work progresses. Goals should clearly state the top priorities for the group in the coming year or two. Integration teams will have goals which address the following areas:

- Relationship of team to pastor and leadership council
- Relationship of team to church ministries and groups
- Communication methods
- Resource development
- Funding
- Evaluation

After goals are established, the team will discuss *how* to accomplish each goal. Concise strategy statements answer the "how" questions. Most goals will generate three or more strategies which will guide the particular actions of the team members as they work toward their goals.

## The Work of the Intergenerational Integration Team

Similar to the work that was done with the leadership council, the team assists leaders in church ministries and groups to raise their awareness of, their support for, and their interaction with the ages and generations that are not generally a part of their group. For example, if youth ministry has been predominantly a place for teenagers to gather without the presence of parents and other adults, the youth ministry leadership team will need to have a representative on the Intergenerational Integration team. As this person learns more about the need that teens have for healthy and abundant intergenerational relationships, new programs and resources can be developed to provide regular and relevant interaction between teens and adult. The group will also consider appropriate ways to connect teens with

younger children on a regular basis. Much of the efforts with youth ministry can be accomplished simply by integrating teens into many of the adult ministries that already exist in the church, especially liturgical or worship ministries.

In transforming youth ministry programs into intergenerational programs, it will be important to continue to offer high quality age-specific activities for teens. Peer ministry remains a significant part of youth ministry and should not be disregarded in the effort to become an intergenerational church. The most effective churches strike a healthy balance between age-specific programming and intergenerational programming. This is also true for child and adult ministries.

Groups that are primarily adult will continue to thrive in the church, but they can be invited to a more intergenerational perspective. Like the leadership council, it is helpful to design prayer experiences for them that call them beyond themselves to an awareness of and care for those from both younger and older generations. Also, if the group has a particular skill that it practices, it can be a wonderful opportunity for the group to mentor younger people into the skill. Here is an inspiring video of how that happens in one community with a retired group of men who are expert woodworkers:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9wkrSAZaWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9wkrSAZaWs).

Use the grid on the following page to inspire your own thinking about how to integrate intergenerationality in various groups.



Group	Contact	Group Purpose	Group Readiness	Potential Resources	Source of Resources	Team Member	Progress Notes

## Be Patient, Hopeful, and Persistent

Changing the culture of an organization is a long-term project. You will need to find ways to celebrate small wins for yourself and your team on a regular basis. You will also need to expect challenges to arise regularly. You will be asking the congregation to do things that are counter cultural. You may have a mix of initial enthusiasm and resistance. Support the enthusiasm and help it to grow so that the resistance becomes less relevant as the culture changes. The counter cultural dimension of intergenerational experiences should not be underestimated. People will feel unnatural at first. Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, comment on these challenges:

...change is hard and there will be complaints. Intergenerational experiences do not always meet the immediate felt needs of everyone present: the children *may not wish* to participate in an idea-oriented discussion; seniors *may not wish* to have young children disrupting a special event; the youth group *may not wish* their parents to be among them; the parents may not wish to be with their teens; and those whose offspring have recently flown the nest *may not wish* to reenter the world of children and chaos. The ministry leaders themselves can become discouraged reframing and tweaking already-existing community events and activities to embrace intergenerationality. Leading people out of their comfort zones may create initial uneasiness; moving into new forms of ministry requires more energy and commitment than remaining on the

well-known path. (*Intergenerational Christian Formation, 179-80*)

Your integration plan will evolve like a work of art over time. It is not something that will take shape overnight. Be patient...you may only be able to integrate a group or two at a time. As these groups become more ingrained in the perspectives and practices of intergenerationality, you will be freed up to direct your attention to other groups. Word of mouth will spread if your early efforts are done with great care and achieve notable success. Prepare well, persist with hope, and you will finish well. You are offering a service in the name of the noble cause of parish unity. You have every reason to be hopeful. God blesses all works of unity.

Faith formation can and should be a unifying force in your community. Planning to become an intergenerational church will help your community grow together as people of all ages experience caring, praying, learning, celebrating, and serving together. Working closely with your pastor and your leadership council to get things started will generate the right kind of support to bring the plan to completion. Organizing the Intergenerational Integration team will be a critical step toward getting the work done. Be sure to take the time with the team to develop a clear mission statement along with goals and strategies that will guide your actions as a group and as individuals. Finally, don't forget to enjoy and celebrate the fruits of your good work.

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## Emerging Models for Intergenerational Ministries

Jim Merhaut

**T**he twentieth century was marked by an obsession with the enticing experience of age segregation. The twenty-first century promises to bring the generations back together in fruitful harmony that will benefit everyone. Separating the generations can be a meaningful and helpful tactic when it is used judiciously and with a specific purpose in mind. It is not wise to separate people into age groups just because it is easy or because it's the way our church has always done it. It is also not appropriate to put people in age groups because they like it better that way, a tactic frequently used by mega churches to increase young family membership. Age-segregated experiences are valuable only when they are used at the service of the whole community. The default and paradigmatic Christian experience is intergenerational.

Most churches worship intergenerationally and always have. Some churches have begun to educate intergenerationally. Some very innovative churches have begun to experiment with intergenerational service learning experiences and prayer experiences that are designed to capture the hearts of all ages and generations. The results have been very positive, and the promise of restoring a deep sense of community in churches across the country offers great hope to Christian communities suffering from decline and a general lack of purpose.

All of the ministries of a Church reflect the culture and climate of the community. If the culture is disjointed by age groups that rarely come together, then the ministries will operate in

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isolation from each other and feed a cycle of disunity. Churches that are culturally intergenerational find themselves transforming all of their ministries with both intergenerational experiences and perspectives. We have identified five ministry areas that are ripe for intergenerationality. These five areas represent the life and work of any church community.

When they are transformed through a commitment to building a culture of intergenerationality, they become both signs of and instruments for the full experience of the body of Christ. The five ministry areas are:

- **Caring:** Formal and informal/planned and spontaneous expressions of care across the generations at church and at home including hospitality, caring conversations, gift-giving, and gratitude
- **Praying:** Communal prayer services at church and at home in addition to an intergenerational awareness within private prayer practices
- **Learning:** Forming faith up and down the generational spectrum at church and at home
- **Celebrating:** Intergenerational worship, sacramental rituals, celebrations and traditions at church and at home
- **Serving:** Intergenerational service learning experiences through church programs and planned/spontaneous service through family/neighborhood experiences

This essay will explore all five ministry areas through the lens of ministry models that are being implemented in churches today. We will also offer additional theoretical models based upon intergenerational practices that have been honed within intergenerational ministries over the past twenty years.

## 1. Caring

I recently gave a presentation at a church before Sunday worship began. I was introducing some new initiatives for youth ministry in the church. I informed the church members that researchers recommend that teens have at least five adults in their lives whom they can trust. That is five adults in addition to parents. I challenged parents to talk to their teens when they got home to identify those five trustworthy adults by name. I also asked them to identify which ones were from this church community. A couple of days later, I was talking to a man who was at the church when I had issued this challenge. He told me that one teen looked at his hand while I was speaking and began counting. He got to three and hesitated. Then he got to four. He couldn't think of the fifth adult he trusted. Later in the service the man sitting behind the teen greeted the teen at the ritual exchange of peace with the words, "My name is Steve. I'll be your number five." The man who shared the story said that the teen's face lit up. It was a true and genuine expression of care that will make a difference in this community as it journeys toward a culture of intergenerationality.

Offering expressions of care across the generations is a skill that needs to be developed in church communities if intergenerationality is going to become part of the church culture. Caring expressions are both a starting point and a sign of success when a congregation is intentionally becoming intergenerational. We offer formal intergenerational programs to help our parishioners connect emotionally with each other across the generations. After years of working at these programs, we begin to notice that spontaneous expressions of care across the generations happen on a regular basis. The caring that we planned at the beginning becomes the spontaneous and natural way that church members treat each other intergenerationally as a sign that the Christian

bonds of love are woven from young to old and old to young.

Expressions of care are distinct in that they tend to the emotional side of faith formation. We offer them because we feel connected to the other person, and we want, not only with our heads but also with the desire of our hearts, what is best for the other. Expressions of care create the warm emotional climate that is necessary for a person to want to enter into a relationship with God and a faith community.

Models for caring are often woven into other intergenerational program models such as learning or serving but they can also take the shape of programs unto themselves. Indeed an entire church can build its ministries around a model of caring by focusing its vision and mission on the practices of expressing care. Models for expressing intergenerational care include the best practices of hospitality, conversations, gift giving, and gratitude.

## Hospitality

Hospitality has been identified as a top priority for any church that wants to become culturally intergenerational. Our lives will be enriched and our communities will come alive when we offer a warm welcome to those who are different from us and embrace the changes that the other will bring into our individual and communal lives. Expressing care across the generations is a form of hospitality. It is a way that I can welcome someone different from me into my life.

Catholic Worker Houses are unique among organizations that serve the needs of the poor because of their singular focus on the practice of hospitality. Much can be learned from their operational model which is thoroughly intergenerational. The Catholic Worker movement models itself after a family. The Dorothy Day House in Youngstown, Ohio is a Catholic Worker House that welcomes people of all ages into the homey building for a good meal, good conversation, and a shower if

needed. There are no forms to fill out, no eligibility requirements, and no stipulations except that you walk through the door with a willingness to share a meal with others.

A central idea is that those who minister at a Catholic Worker House are in a privileged position to encounter the face of Christ as he presents himself uniquely in the poor and vulnerable members of the civic community. It is the poor, the recipients of the ministry, who are offering the greatest service in this model. By committing themselves to the practice of hospitality, Catholic Worker servants open themselves to a special transforming encounter with God.

Those who come for the meal notice the difference. They frequently comment on the different tone or climate of the Catholic Worker House in comparison to other places in the city where they might get a meal. "This place feels like home," is a common phrase heard around the dinner table that sits in a room designed to function as a place for a family meal. Before implementing a model like this, you will want to train a team of volunteers in the practice of hospitality. A good starting point would be [www.practicingourfaith.org/hospitality](http://www.practicingourfaith.org/hospitality).

Here's what the model might look like:

- Create a warm and welcoming physical environment by attending to lighting, temperature, furniture, colors, room size, and décor
- Attach no strings to participation. (There are no "shoulds" and "musts" to determine whether or not a person or family may participate.)
- Create a plan for welcoming people of all ages as they walk through the door. (Children will enjoy a different kind of welcome than seniors.)
- Offer food and drink.
- Engage the skills of meaningful conversation across the generations. (See caring conversations below.)

Building programs with a hospitality model are good in themselves as is the case with the

Catholic Worker movement, but this model can and should be a guide for all church gatherings. The principles and practices of the model are central to Christian faith.

## Caring Conversations

When people talk about what matters most to them in a relationship, (whether that relationship is a marriage, a friendship, a mentor, or a coworker) caring conversations usually rises to the top of the list. People want to connect with each other, and conversations are a primary way of doing that within any culture. On the flipside, people often complain when they can't connect with someone because that person is weak in the skill of conversation. It's difficult to talk with a person who never stops talking. It's equally difficult to talk with a person who does not respond. We feel unappreciated when someone's eyes are constantly averted when we are having a conversation. Anger derails the hope for a reasonable and safe exchange of words. We feel invisible when someone responds to our communication with an entirely unrelated or self-centered comment. There are best practices for creating meaningful conversations, and any model for intergenerational caring will incorporate these practices into the model.

- Create an emotionally safe and non-judgmental environment.
- Make eye contact.
- Balance between speaking and listening.
- Focus on interest in the other.
- Provide and seek feedback for the sake of understanding.

### Create an emotionally safe and non-judgmental environment.

People won't talk openly and honestly if they don't feel safe. Conversations should only continue as long as both parties involved are expressing care and concern for each other. Anger and judgment are key indicators of a

conversation that is moving into an unsafe realm. An emotionally safe environment is characterized by calm exchange of words and general feelings of joy and peace.

### Make eye contact.

Eye contact is the simple, physical, non-verbal expression in a conversation that says, "I care about you." It also expresses a willingness to be self-revealing. Expressing both care for the other and honesty about self are two hallmarks of meaningful conversation.

### Balance between speaking and listening.

Taking turns is one of the most basic ways that we teach children to be fair. Justice is a part of caring conversations. Partners in conversation need to live out the principles of justice by not taking more of their fair share of the stage and feeling secure that the other will not take his/her fair share either. Facilitators of good conversations need to be aware of introvert/extravert personality tendencies when working to promote balanced conversations.

### Focus on interest in the other.

It has often been said that everyone's favorite topic of conversation is the same, i.e. we all like to talk about ourselves. We feel good when someone takes an interest in what is happening in our lives. Great conversationalists wonder about the depth of mystery within the other. They paradoxically commit themselves to exploring the other, knowing that this exploration will be self-rewarding. We often find wonderful treasures about ourselves when we focus our attention on another person. By expressing care for another through interest in his/her life, we will come to discover surprising truths about ourselves.

### Provide and seek feedback for the sake of understanding.

The goal of a good conversation is to build understanding and unity between two or more people. Giving and receiving feedback are



essential strategies for creating understanding. In a meaningful conversation, each person repeats in his/her own words what is perceived to have been said by the other. This gives the other an opportunity to clarify confusion or confirm understanding. This strategy is dependent upon the first strategy of creating an emotionally safe environment. Honest feedback is nearly impossible to offer in an unsafe emotional environment. Insecurity also makes one hesitant to seek honest feedback.

Most churches that succeed at intergenerational programming understand the dynamics of caring conversations and build them into group discussions that occur within the program. People are not just told to talk about things. They are given rules and guidelines that clarify how they will talk about things. The rules or guidelines are gently enforced by trained facilitators during group discussions. When discussions happen in pairs, the overall facilitator reminds the pairs briefly to keep the conversations focused, respectful, and balanced.

## Gift Giving

God is love; that is who God is. But what does God do? God gives. God is a great gift giver. God generously gives what we need. God's greatest expression of care is the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. This expression of self-giving meets the deepest felt human need for both security and connection. Giving is a central theme in Christianity, and there are models for giving that can help us understand how to give to the church community as a whole and also can help us provide guidelines for caring expressions of giving between church members across the generations.

Service learning models often capture the true spirit of Christian giving. In high quality service learning experiences, those who serve are prepared well to meet the real and expressed needs of those they serve by giving not what the servant thinks should be given,

but rather what the recipient thinks should be given in light of the communities understanding of best practices for addressing the needs of those who are trapped in a cycle of poverty. There is general agreement that people who live in impoverished settings need understanding, restored relationships, educational opportunities, and empowerment in addition to financial assistance. These are well-known needs, expressed both by researchers and by people in poverty, which elicit creative and effective responses of giving from reputable service learning organizations and projects. Good giving happens in these cases because the giver understands, honors, and respects the dignity of the receiver.

This model applies to ministry leaders who give programs and resources to church members. Leaders too often give programs and resources without first checking to see if there has been any expressed need for what the program or resource offers. Effective giving models include assessment and constant evaluation to help the giver discern if the gifts are hitting the mark and meeting the need.

Interpersonal gift giving is no different. I recall a time years ago when I gave my wife a frying pan for Mother's Day... big mistake! This self-centered gift signaled to her that I had not taken the time to consider her needs before I purchased the gift. I was using a model of gift giving that dooms both individuals and organizations to failure. I gave a gift that reflected my desires more than her desires. This says that I care more about me than I do about her. I learned from the mistake... she got a redbud tree that I planted in the yard for her in a subsequent year. I had learned that she loves redbud trees, and she doesn't love gifts that invite her to work harder at housekeeping. Who would have guessed?

Intergenerational ministries that are built upon of a giving model will be designed with the needs of each generation in mind.

- Young children need security. Give them the freedom to stay with their parents during breakout sessions if they wish.

- Elementary children need simplicity, clarity, and movement. Give them clear illustrations of concepts and clear instructions for activities. Give them opportunities to shift gears regularly from listening to talking to sitting to standing to moving, etc.
- Teens need empowerment in the midst of meaningful connection with other teens and mentoring adults. Give them the opportunity to provide input into how the sessions should be designed to engage their interest and participation. Give them exposure to adults who are prepared to work with them in youth-friendly ways.
- Parents need help with parenting and, if married, time with each other. Give them resources for best practices for parents of infants, children, teens, and young adults. Give them childcare services to provide opportunities for spouses to make meaningful connections with each other during programs.
- Older adults need to experience the rewards of generativity. Give them opportunities to share their gifts and wisdom with the younger generations.

Giving leaders will relentlessly learn about the needs of each of the generations in their community by staying on top of generational research and by asking representatives from each generation what their particular needs are in this local community. The research will help you identify the powerful gifts you can give to the generations, but your church members will help you identify the gifts that will motivate them to participate in your program. Assessing the needs of your members can be done with surveys, focus groups, and ongoing soft research such as developing planned questions for spontaneous conversations. If you can match what the generational groups in your church tell you

they desire with what researchers tell you they need, you will have a winning combination that will make your gift of ministry hit the mark every time.

## Gratitude

A primary reason for Christian worship is to thank God for the generous gifts we receive in abundance. A gratitude spirituality is an essential component of a healthy intergenerational community. Great gift giving, of course, is the easiest way to inspire the kind of gratitude that leads to authentic worship, but nurturing the disposition of gratitude across the generations will certainly promote a thankful spirit and a greater sense of community in your church. When older adults are grateful for the contributions of children and teenagers, intergenerationality thrives. When teenagers appreciate their parents, positive developmental assets abound. Encouraging the practice of gratitude rounds out the model for intergenerational caring.

The practice of gratitude is both simple and powerful. Leaders can regularly encourage church members to focus on the numerous blessings of daily life and discourage members from falling into the temptation to focus on what is wrong. Focusing on what's wrong is appropriate only if there is a clearly communicated vision or path to move toward something good. Even in this case, we can encourage gratitude for the awareness of what is truly wrong and for the hope provided by the alternative direction.

Intergenerational gratitude can be nurtured on a daily basis in the homes of church members by inviting them to express appreciation for the gifts of older and younger church members. Church leaders can prepare simple prayer resources that can be used at the dinner table to accomplish this purpose. This will also help church members to avoid the common practice of focusing their prayer life on their needs and wants. Prayers of gratitude are other-centered and will help to build an awareness of the needs of others as well as a

desire to connect with and meet the needs of others, especially those vulnerable church members who are older or younger.

During intergenerational gatherings at church, leaders can provide regular opportunities for feedback from participants, focusing the feedback on what participants appreciate about the contributions of those who are older and younger than themselves. This may be awkward at first for some communities, but the more it is practiced, the more it will become a part of the culture. These simple gestures of caring will help to transform an age-segregated community into a fully intergenerational church.

## 2. Praying

### Family Way of the Cross

Stations of the Cross is a prayer ritual that churches often practice during the season of Lent. It is usually offered for the whole community, so one would suspect that it would be an intergenerational prayer experience, but those who show up to a traditional stations prayer service tend to populate the adult generations. Teens and children may be dragged along by some of the more zealous church families, but they generally attend reluctantly.

New models have emerged in recent years that help to make this traditional prayer more accessible for all the generations. Most of these models happen at church, but Liguori Publications recently released a model for families to use at home. *Way of the Cross for Families*, available in English and Spanish, is a simple resource that helps families pray the stations at home. It could also be easily adapted for an intergenerational experience with multiple families and other adults in a church member's home or at the church itself.

The home model for stations can take on a number of formats:

- Families can reflect upon one station per day during the season of Lent. Using this schedule, they will experience each station three times during the season. It is short, simple, painless, and meaningful.
- Families can add an element of creativity by using modeling clay to develop their own images of the stations and place the images throughout their home. They can visit the images and share what they understand about the station. Each family member can be encouraged to offer a prayer based upon their sharing.
- A church can form family faith groups made up of three-five families who agree to meet weekly during Lent to pray the Stations of the Cross in their homes. Each family can take turns hosting the gathering that might feature a simple Lenten meal in addition to the stations.

### Intergenerational Living Stations

Peter Fortier of St. Patrick Church in Collinsville, CT reports that about a dozen people generally attend their regular Stations of the Cross ritual on any given Friday during Lent. But, when they offer living stations featuring their youth ministry participants, the attendance swells to about 150 people representing all ages and generations. This intergenerational prayer event is happening in more and more churches around the country with great success. The model works partly because it engages large numbers of people in the planning and presenting of the prayer ritual. Friends, relatives, and others who have heard about the event attend because they know the presenters and they've heard that it is a high-quality prayer experience. Broad participation in planning and presenting is one way to transform a dying practice into a vibrant intergenerational experience, but

many leaders offer other suggestions that typically make intergenerational prayer effective.

## Characteristics of Effective Intergenerational Prayer Service Models

Church leaders who plan and implement prayer services for intergenerational groups agree on a number of things that need to be considered when offering prayer in intergenerational settings. While the list is not exhaustive, it provides insight into what works:

- Dynamic storytelling
- Diverse prayer expressions with a good mix of the traditional and the contemporary
- Interactive reproductions of traditional prayers such as transforming the rosary into a living rosary with participants standing on large beads made from colored paper or holding candles that are ignited as each part of the prayer is prayed (ideas offered by Diane Brennan and Peter Fortier)
- Call and response prayers from side to side
- Use of contemporary Christian music with guitar, bass, drums, and keyboard
- Using representatives from all age groups in prayer leadership roles
- Using audio/visual technology to enhance the sensory experience of the prayer

Using a wide variety of prayer forms and expressions creatively is essential to capture and address the spirituality of all ages and generations. Extra effort in this area reaps abundant spiritual benefits for the community.

## Private Prayer with an Intergenerational Twist

Intergenerational prayer is not limited to communal prayer. Church leaders can also encourage individuals to nurture an intergenerational perspective in their private prayer. Youth ministers can promote this perspective among teens by challenging them regularly to bring to mind church members and others who are in need from all of the generations in the faith community. Modeling this at youth group meetings will encourage teens to incorporate this perspective into their private prayer as well. Developing simple prayer cards could be a helpful resource for teens. The prayer cards can focus on short prayers for parents, seniors, and children.

The same concept can be used for adults and children. Church leaders can challenge each generations to keep in mind the hopes and needs of those from the other generations and to take those needs to the Lord in prayer. Nurturing intergenerational perspectives in private prayer will help to plant the seeds for intergenerationality throughout the congregation by getting individuals to think and pray beyond the perspectives of their own age group.

## 3. Learning

### Generations of Faith

Most of the intergenerational learning models used today in Catholic churches are indicative of the influence of the Generations of Faith project coordinated by John Roberto and sponsored by the Center for Ministry Development in the first decade of this century. John and his team (Leif Kehrwald, Mariette Martineau, and Joan Weber) trained over 1200 parishes in a three year span. New parishes receive training up to the present day but not at the accelerated rate that occurred under the Generations of Faith project.



Generations of Faith offered churches essentially two models from which to choose. The primary model consisted of intergenerational faith formation from start to finish at all sessions and usually replaced the classroom model that a church was currently using. The features of this model include:

- Once per month gathering usually during the school year
- Three-hour learning session beginning or ending with a meal
- Opening prayer
- All ages opening activity functioning as an icebreaker and topic introduction
- In depth learning in one or more of the following groupings:
  - Whole group together
  - Small breakout groups (age-specific or intergenerational)
  - Learning centers through which small groups rotate
- Reflection and application session for groups to share learning and explore ideas about how to apply learning to daily life
- Closing prayer
- Send off with materials to extend the learning into the home

The second model was called the blended model and provided the opportunity for churches to experiment with intergenerational learning while maintaining their current classroom model. The learning sessions for the blended model are structured the same way as the sessions for the primary model outlined above. The difference was the number of sessions offered per year. With the blended model, a parish generally offered between two to four sessions per year. They usually used the sessions to prepare people for significant church feasts or seasons, such as All Saints Day or Lent.

Inspired by the baptismal catechumenate and the pioneering theoretical work of C. Ellis Nelson and Charles Foster, both models in the Generations of Faith approach promoted events-centered catechesis. The great biblical

events in Judeo-Christian history (the death and resurrection of Jesus), the regular events on the liturgical calendar (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter), the predictable events of church life (sacramental ceremonies such as baptisms, 1<sup>st</sup> communions, penance services), and the irregular events of significance (triumphs and tragedies of daily life such as the dedication of a new church or a terrorist attack) are the curricular subjects of each unique church community. In an events-centered approach, the faith formation sessions are designed to prepare participants for the upcoming event as well as reflect upon the event and its ongoing meaning in daily life after it has been experienced.

## Weekly Lectionary Based Faith Formation

A weekly lectionary model was designed by and used successfully at St. Patrick Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina for 18 years before staff changes caused it to be cancelled. It is also an events-centered approach, but the emphasis is mystagogical reflection on the prior Sunday's readings rather than preparation. Joe Long, a parish staff member for more than two decades, reports that a doctoral candidate studied the learning outcomes of the children who participated in this program in comparison to children who attended a Catholic school. The ACRE (Assessment of Catechesis/Religious Education) test was used as the instrument to measure learning outcomes for both groups in the study. While the Catholic school children scored slightly higher than the parish program children, the researcher found no significant difference between the scores even though the parish children were only meeting for formal catechesis 30-35 times per year for 90 minutes with a significant portion of the time spent in prayer. Intergenerational models are founded upon the widely accepted principle that parents are the most powerful faith formation agents in the life of a child. The presence of parents in this program would give the

children a distinct advantage over the Catholic school children even with the far fewer contact hours for formal faith formation.

The model used by St. Patrick was scheduled on Wednesday evening from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. Nursery services were provided for children under four years. It opened with a well-planned experience of the Liturgy of the Word from the previous Sunday. The Liturgy of the Word was led by a member of the staff (pastor, deacon, or lay staff on a rotating basis) and included a homily and reflective comments by the leader. This was followed by breakout sessions with age-specific groups. Then the groups would return and report back to the large group and close with a prayer. Here is the model in outline form:

1. Gather
2. Liturgy of the Word from previous Sunday
  - Opening prayer
  - First reading
  - Psalm
  - Second reading
  - Gospel acclamation
  - Gospel proclamation
  - Homily
  - Creed
  - Prayers of the faithful
3. Breakout session for reflection and learning
  - Preschool group
  - Primary grades group
  - Intermediate grades group
  - Teens
  - Adults
4. Gather in large group for feedback
5. Closing prayer

A possible adaptation of this model could be to focus the midweek learning session on the readings for the upcoming Sunday. If this option were used, one could gather the participants and begin with a reflection on how the previous Sunday's readings are currently influencing their lives in the midst of the current week. This would be followed by the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word for

the upcoming Sunday. Then a learning session on the upcoming Sunday's readings would both prepare participants for the weekend liturgy and set them up for the mystagogical reflections at next week's learning session. This would accentuate the situating of Sunday worship in the center of the faith formation program. It would literally be the middle experience in the week and the middle experience in the learning session. Here's how it looks in outline form:

1. Gathering, hospitality, and icebreaker
2. Reflection session on how last Sunday's readings are being applied in the lives of participants featuring:
  - Witness talks
  - Small group sharing
  - Large group feedback
3. Liturgy of the Word for the upcoming Sunday
  - Opening prayer
  - First reading
  - Psalm
  - Second reading
  - Gospel acclamation
  - Gospel proclamation
  - Homily
  - Creed
  - Prayers of the faithful
4. Core content session on the liturgical and catechetical themes that emerge from the readings and the prayers of the liturgy using:
  - Oral presentation with audio/visual accents
  - Small group work...
  - In family groups
  - In age-specific groups
  - At learning centers
  - Large group feedback
5. Application plan
  - Brief presentation on possible application ideas
  - Small group work to generate application ideas
  - Commitment ceremony to motivate participants to go out and apply what was learned

## 6. Closing prayer and song taken from upcoming liturgy

Weekly models, once thought to be too ambitious, are doable and sustainable over time. Many Protestant churches have used parallel learning for all ages on a weekly basis for decades. In parallel learning, age-specific groups learn at their own level, and all groups focus on the same themes at the same time. The advantages of weekly, lectionary-based, intergenerational faith formation include:

- Regular contact helps to build a positive faith formation habit into the life of families and individuals.
- A weekly check-in provides leaders a regular opportunity to coach families and individuals on how to live out what they learn during the rhythm of their weekly routines.
- Weekly focus on liturgy enhances Sunday worship, which is the most important gathering of any Christian faith community.
- Parents and other adults exploring their faith every week in the presence of children and teens sends the clear, unspoken, and powerful message that faith formation is a lifelong adventure that does not end with the onset of young adulthood.

There are also challenges with the weekly model. Resources are hard to find for a weekly model, but there are a few worthy of note. Pflaum's *Gospel Weeklies* can be helpful when used in conjunction with other Lectionary-based resources. *Celebrating the Lectionary* by Liturgy Training Publication is another Lectionary-based resource that offers session plans for various age groups. *Living the Good News*, now published by Cokesbury is another resource to consider that is based upon both the Catholic Lectionary and the Revised Common Lectionary. Churches that adopt this model will need to develop a creative design team to write dynamic and relevant learning

sessions to engage all ages in the learning process.

## 4. Celebrating

### Sunday Worship: The Intergenerational Paradigm

The epitome of a church celebration is the Sunday worship service. Liturgy, literally the work of the people, is the intergenerational stronghold in Christian history. Liturgy is not the work of *some* of the people. It is the work of the whole community, all ages and generations gathered to worship the one God who binds them together in unity. Even in the midst of the obsessive age segregation of the twentieth century, most churches did not abandon intergenerational worship. Only the market-driven church growth movement within some Protestant denominations did so in an intentional way.

All ministries flow from and lead to authentic Sunday worship. The weekly liturgical gathering of the faith community is a paradigm for all ministry. Gathering, proclaiming, communing, and sending forth in mission are foundational to all ministries. It is significant that we gather as a whole community, the Word is proclaimed to the whole community, the breaking and sharing of the bread is for all of us and binds us together to be sent forth as the body of Christ for the world. Together we are a church, and being together is the fullness of who we are in all that we do.

St. Katherine Drexel Church in Ramsey, Minnesota takes intergenerationality seriously during their Sunday worship services. Lectors are as young as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Ushers mentor teens who want to become ushers. Whole families sometimes usher together. Children and teens are active in the music ministry along with adults. They assign a volunteer to operate the church sound board during the liturgy. The sound engineer is often a teenager who has a passion for sound technology. The choir

includes keyboards, guitars, and drums to try to capture a musical style that can be appealing to all ages.

## Sacramental Celebrations: Transforming Family Rituals into Whole Community Celebrations

Many of our sacramental rituals outside of Sunday liturgy have become family events rather than full intergenerational or whole community events. First Communion, for example, is often celebrated with the families of children who are receiving communion for the first time. The rest of the community is either not invited or not encouraged to attend. Baptisms, the entry point into the community, looks more like a family initiation rite than a church initiation rite. The community is only represented symbolically when it is just as easy to have them present both symbolically and really. While funerals have the same kind of distance from the Sunday liturgy, the community tends to be present in larger numbers. Why? Is a funeral more significant than a baptism? They are both one-time events, each with profound significance for the whole community. One welcomes a member while the other says goodbye.

Intergenerational churches are always looking for ways to tie key religious celebrations into the fabric of the whole community while continuing to honor the significance of the event for the families who are celebrating a milestone for one or more of their members.

Many churches, such as St. Michael in Canfield, Ohio and St. Patrick in Collinsville, Connecticut, incorporate their First Communion ceremonies within regular weekend liturgies. Families are welcome to select any of the weekend liturgies for their child's ceremony. Some churches have even offered the option of allowing individual families to celebrate First Communion at any weekend liturgy during the long seven-week season of Easter. It allows for the possibility of one or two candidates to receive First Communion at a time. This model highlights

the connection between Easter and initiation in an ongoing way. It also gives the whole community many opportunities to affirm their younger members while it gives younger members many opportunities to display the wonder of child-like faith to the rest of the community. In pastoral terms, it provides a welcome option clothed in simplicity and dignity for families that are not impressed by the pomp and circumstance of some church celebrations. Church leaders do a wonderful service to families when they create celebration models that meet the needs of a wide variety of families without compromising the integrity of the church's celebration.

Baptisms are also being celebrated more and more as a part of the Sunday liturgy. Private family celebrations are being transformed into intergenerational celebrations. The whole community is present to welcome its newest member. What could be more appropriate? Some churches offer this as the only baptismal model while others offer it as an option. Families who are having a child baptized need to be thoroughly prepared for the ceremony. Church leaders should not dismiss their concerns about standing before the entire community. This can be an intimidating experience for young parents. Talking through their concerns and fears with pastoral sensitivity and practical suggestions will help parents embrace the idea more readily.

## Other Intergenerational Celebration Models

Sacramental celebrations are not the only ways churches gather to celebrate. There are other intergenerational models being implemented that bring the whole community together to celebrate who they are and what they stand for.

Immaculate Heart of Mary in Austintown, Ohio initiated in 2013 a new hospitality event called *Welcome Home* that they will offer every summer for the whole community and anyone else from the surrounding community.



The event begins with an outdoor Sunday liturgy in the church parking lot. Church members bring their own lawn chairs, but extra chairs are provided by the community as a sign of hospitality for those who forget or who “missed the memo”. Worship is followed by a picnic lunch, some of the food provided by the parish as a whole and some provided potluck. Later in the afternoon there is a big dinner planned similarly. All of the church committees and organizations are invited to contribute to the event by developing an activity or offering a service that will enhance the experience. There were games for children, a Christian praise band performed, free chances were given away for gift baskets; it is essentially an intergenerational church fair that focuses on celebrating the church’s commitment to hospitality. Some members feared the financial burden of opening an event to the whole community. In the end, over 500 people showed up, but the spontaneous donations outweighed the expenses... not part of the plan, just a pleasant surprise!

An Eagle Scout in Canfield, Ohio developed a music event that was offered to the whole community. It was a celebration of the arts with all the proceeds going to pay for a water well to be built in the impoverished country of Haiti. The event featured many area bands donating their time, food booths offering their services at a discounted rate, bounce around inflatables for children, and a dunking tank for anyone. Reaching the financial goal would require over \$5,000 in donations. The event ended up generating enough donations to build three wells!

*Beer, Brats, & Bingo* is a program offered at a church in Minnesota for the whole family. Yes, a beer-drinking event for the whole family. Lots of churches have whole community events where alcohol is served. Not everyone, of course, drinks the beer; but the beer drinking is done intergenerationally. What does that mean? It means that when adults drink alcohol, they can either drink for themselves or with the whole community in mind. Drinking is an acquired skill, not an

inborn talent. People need to be mentored into responsible use of alcohol. Who can do that better than a caring, intergenerational church community? When adults are coached to be conscious about the effects of their behavior on the younger generation, they will be more likely to engage carefully rather than selfishly in adult activities such as drinking. Church leaders can help children and teens by designing programs in which adults are reminded about their responsibility to show the younger generations that responsible use of alcohol is a moral issue.

Celebrating intergenerationally cuts to the core of Christian identity primarily through Sunday worship. The paradigmatic experience of liturgy on Sundays is the model for Christian celebration and ministry in general. Aligning sacramental rituals and other celebrations with Sunday worship build a cohesive community that expresses the fullness of the body of Christ far more effectively than age-segregated ministries and celebrations.

## 5. Serving

### Families on a Mission

The research is clear that the experience of Christian service has a more lasting impact on children and teens when they serve with their parents. We also know that children mature in healthier ways when they have at least five significant adults in their lives beyond their parents. Intergenerational service is an outstanding way to fulfill a core mission of a church while providing a meaningful formation experience for adults, teens, and children.

I was the Project Coordinator for a Center for Ministry Development resource called *Families on a Mission*. The program was piloted at St. Michael Church in Canfield, Ohio in June of 2012 and then offered to churches around the country in 2013. The model was designed to be a local experience to

complement the usual long-distance service learning trips that churches often do with teens and/or adults. The local emphasis helps a church fulfill its role of being a leaven for the community in which it is established. It strengthens the relationship between the church and the poor and vulnerable members of the surrounding community. It also promotes the church as a valuable resource in the community. In developing this model we often asked church leaders if anyone but church members would notice if your church closed tomorrow. Many leaders reported that they didn't think too many non-members would notice. It was a wakeup call to the awareness that churches often become too inward looking. They become overly focused on the people who walk through the doors and forget that they have an essential mission to the world beyond their membership.

The mission to serve is a core Christian value. Service is what churches do in response to God's generous love. Service is not reserved for Confirmation programs or youth groups. It is an essential expression of real faith. Every Christian of every age and generation is called to serve. The family service model promotes service among the whole community in a uniquely powerful way. It gives parents and other adults an opportunity to mentor children and teens into the Christian life of service. It gives children and teens an opportunity to feel the power of making a significant difference in the lives of others. It gives local service agencies the opportunity to partner with a church that can provide much needed volunteer hours. And it gives the recipients of the service an opportunity to show the face of Christ to church members in a way that only they can do.

The model features three mornings of community service in agencies and organizations close to the parish. Entire families offered service together, parents and children working side-by-side to serve the needs of poor and vulnerable members in the local community. During the St. Michael pilot program, some families helped out at an educational facility offered for single mothers

and their young children. Other families provided recreational activities in a nursing home. One family with a teenage daughter helped out at a facility that serves children from families who have a member suffering from HIV/AIDS.

All of the families met in the morning to pray together, engage in a thematic icebreaker experience, and anticipate some key dynamics that would likely happen at the service sites. After splitting up and working at the service sites (each family served at the same site every day to help build relationships between the site participants and the families), the families returned to the church to engage in two-three hours of service learning experiences. The families then departed to their homes for the evening and returned the next day to experience the same basic schedule.

This model has some similarities to a Vacation Bible School program, but the focus is Christian service and the methods are intergenerational. The flexibility of the model is one of its advantages. Leaders would not want to limit the model to three consecutive days in the summer. The days could be split up into three consecutive Saturday experiences, or the families could be challenged to arrange their own service experiences and then be called together to go through the service learning sessions. When working with families in intergenerational settings, flexible and adaptable programming is a key to success.

As is common with family and intergenerational programming, deep friendships were formed across the generations among the participants. The families continue to socialize together over a year later and reminisce about how good the program was for all of them. They also continue to incorporate service into their routines, but they do it with a greater sense of purpose.

Here is a link to the Families on a Mission promotional video:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eZU\\_gzcGc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eZU_gzcGc)

## Monthly Family Service Learning Project

This model features a different service experience each month. The First Unitarian Church of Omaha organizes an intergenerational service experience on the last Sunday of every month from 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. The service experience is followed by lunch. Participants have volunteered at the local humane society or they've given their time to clean up a local walking trail. They've also done hospital visits. They promote the program to "children, youth, adults, and elders." In addition to giving back to the community, the program builds relationships among church members and gives them a way to live out their values.

## Family Service Learning Trips

There are organizations that sponsor service learning trips domestically and abroad for whole families. While the price tags for these programs are significant for a family, the rewards are enormous. Some families use their vacation time to participate in a family service learning trip. While you may not opt to participate in these programs with your church families, you can certainly learn about family service trips by exploring the features of their programs. Here are some links to webpages that will get you started with your exploration of family service trips:

- Cross Cultural Solutions:  
[www.crossculturalsolutions.org/discover-what-you-can-do/family-volunteer-opportunities](http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org/discover-what-you-can-do/family-volunteer-opportunities)
- Outreach 360:  
[www.outreach360.org/volunteer/gettingstarted](http://www.outreach360.org/volunteer/gettingstarted)
- Global Volunteers:  
[www.globalvolunteers.org/serve/family.asp](http://www.globalvolunteers.org/serve/family.asp)

St. Michael Church in Canfield, Ohio offered a family service learning trip for ten

years that focused on assisting a small community in rural Kentucky to develop a community center in a vandalized school building. Approximately 40-50 church members of all ages made the six-hour trip by car each year to spend a week renovating the building and helping to design and participate in community outreach programs especially for women and children from the surrounding area. Over the years, children and families from St. Michael forged friendships with children and families from the small Kentucky community. Both communities learned much from each other and benefited from the project. The trips ended when the community center developed into a thriving resource run by a small professional staff and many volunteers who participated in the programs during the building project. This family service learning experience was designed and implemented entirely by volunteer parishioners who partnered with a small service organization in Carter County Kentucky run by two Franciscan sisters.

## Family Service Nights

Family Service Nights are simple, self-contained programs that feature five-ten service booths where families can do a simple project for the benefit of someone or some group in need. At one booth they might create greeting cards for the elderly or for sick church members. At another booth they might make blankets for a homeless shelter. At another booth they might bake cookies or make sandwiches for a soup kitchen. There are lots of ways to contribute to service organizations without having to leave your church building. Doing Good Together is an organization that promotes and supports family service. They publish a manual on how to organize a family service night. You can learn more about them and their resources at [www.doinggoodtogether.org/index.php/resources-and-services/family-service-night/](http://www.doinggoodtogether.org/index.php/resources-and-services/family-service-night/).

Katy Hager of St. Katherine Drexel in Ramsey, Minnesota offers a repeat opportunity every month for church members of all ages to participate in a simple service project. The church has partnered with a program called *Feed My Starving Children*. Intergenerational groups gather monthly to pack food that will be shipped overseas by the charity. The simplicity of this experience would make it easy to build service learning around it, and it could be a very non-threatening entry point for many people to get started on building their practice of Christian service.

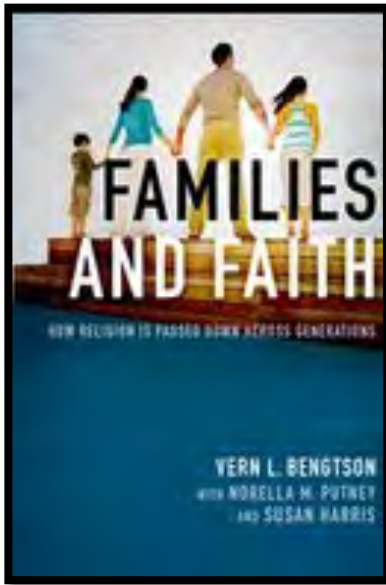
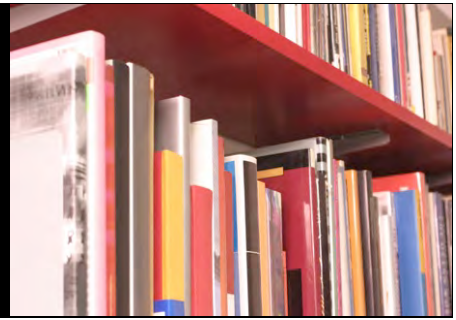
## Conclusion

Intergenerational experiences are not just for Sunday worship and a handful of faith formation sessions throughout the year. The benefits of bringing the generations together are many, and church leaders can create significantly stronger faith communities by looking for ways to transform current age-specific ministries into intergenerational ministries. The body of Christ is not complete when parts are missing. Church members of all ages are called to care, pray, learn, celebrate, and serve as one body. The full power of Christianity is engaged when representatives of all the generations clasp hands and fulfill the mission of the church together.



# Book Resources

## Intergenerational Faith Formation

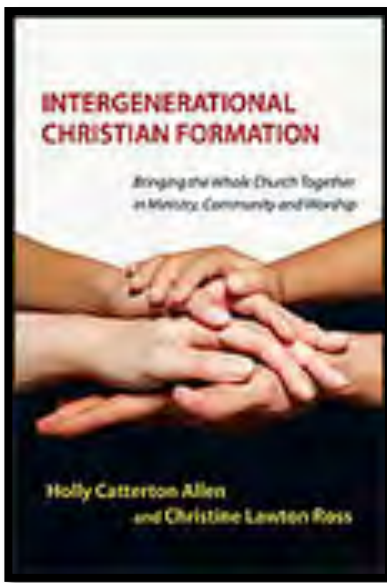


### **Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations**

Vern L. Bengtson with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris  
(Oxford, 2013)

Few things are more likely to cause heartache to devout parents than seeing their child leave the faith. And it seems, from media portrayals, that this is happening more and more frequently. But is religious change between generations common? How does religion get passed down from one generation to the next? How do some families succeed in passing on their faith while others do not? *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations* seeks to answer these questions and many more. For almost four decades, Vern Bengtson and his colleagues have been conducting the largest-ever study of religion and family across generations. They have followed more than 350 families composed of more than 3,500 individuals whose lives span more than a century - the oldest was born in 1881, the youngest in 1988 - to find out how religion is, or is not, passed down from one generation to the next. What they found may come as a surprise: despite enormous changes in American society, a child is actually more likely to remain within the fold than leave it, and even the nonreligious are more likely to follow their parents' example than to rebel. And while outside forces do play a role, the crucial factor in whether a child keeps the faith is the presence of a strong fatherly bond. Mixing unprecedented data with gripping interviews and sharp analysis, *Families and Faith* offers a fascinating exploration of what allows a family to pass on its most deeply-held tradition - its faith.

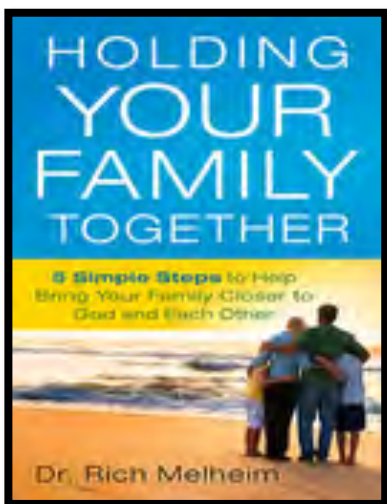
[Interview with Vern Bengtson - "Religion Runs in the Family"](#)



## Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship

Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross (IVP Academic, 2012)

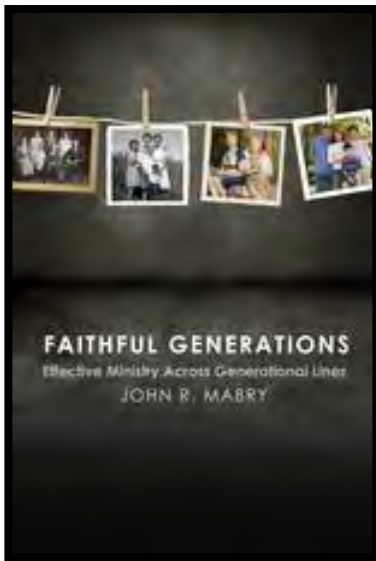
Most churches and faith communities segment their ministries by age and generation. But it was not always so. Throughout biblical tradition and the majority of history, communities of faith included people of all ages together in corporate worship, education and ministry. The church was not just multigenerational; it was intergenerational, with the whole church together as one family and people of all ages learning from one another in common life. In this comprehensive text, Holly Allen and Christine Ross offer a complete framework for intentional intergenerational Christian formation. They provide the theoretical foundations for intergenerationality, showing how learning and spiritual formation are better accomplished through intergenerational contexts. It is not just elders teaching youth; learning also takes place when adults discover fresh insights from children. Then the authors give concrete guidance for intergenerational praxis on how worship, learning, community and service can all be achieved intergenerationally. Case studies of intergenerational congregations provide models for how a culture of intergenerationality can be created in local churches.



## Holding Your Family Together

Rich Melheim (Regal, 2013)

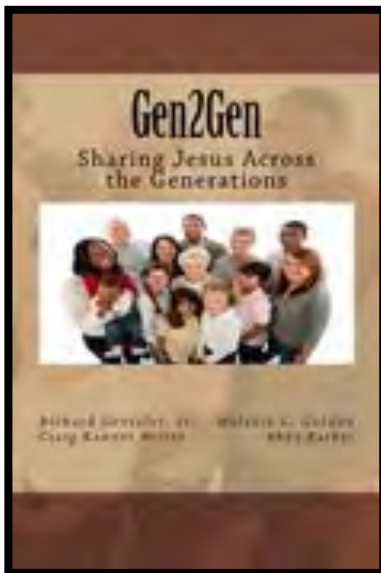
Most parents today would never think of sending their children to bed without dinner, or without brushing their teeth, or without doing any of the other nightly routines to keep their kids healthy. However, these same parents will often overlook sharing their day together as a family, or spending time in the Word, or praying together. In *Holding Your Family Together*, Rich Melheim explains how in just five minutes each day, parents can instill practices that will transform their family and enable their children to grow into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. He calls the practices the **The Faith 5**: 1) Sharing highs and lows of the day; 2) Reading: a key verse of scripture from Sunday's preaching/teaching; 3) Talking about how the highs and lows relate to the Scripture and asking "What is God saying to my situation?"; 4) Praying for one another's highs and lows; and 5) Blessing one another before turning out the lights on the day.



## Faithful Generations: Effective Ministry across Generational Lines

John R. Mabry (Church Publishing, 2013)

*Faithful Generations* provides a hopeful and helpful guide to the different adult generations alive today, discussing the events that formed them and the issues important to them. Most importantly, it describes their spiritual distinctions - the particular needs, gifts and concerns that drive these different generations. With a basic understanding of how other generations think and what drives them spiritually, ministers and congregations can not only avoid conflict, but also put those distinctions to work in order to minister more effectively and create harmony in our religious communities. The book provides a lucid analysis of how beliefs, expectations and experience differ from one generation to the next, and clear-cut, practical and specific advice about how to use that analysis to facilitate communication, congregational harmony and spiritual direction.



## Gen2Gen: Sharing Jesus Across the Generations

Richard Gentzler Jr., Melanie C Gordon, Craig Kennet Miller, and Abby Parker (GBOD - General Board of Discipleship, 2012)

As a new generation of children emerges and the older adult population enters a period of explosive growth, it is time to turn our attention to how churches can effectively be in ministry across the generations. *Gen2Gen: Sharing Jesus Across the Generations* is a collection of articles about the newest trends and issues that are impacting individuals, families, churches, and communities. Developed by the staff at the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, Gen2Gen will challenge you to create ministries that connect with the youngest and the oldest members of our society. The essays in the book are organized into the following categories: 1) Who Are We?, 2) Technology and the Church, 3) The Multi-World: Multi-ethnic/Multi-Cultural Aspects of Ministry in the 21st Century; and 4) The Multi-Generational Family.