



Insights from Research & Theory

Practices for Forming Faith Intergenerationally

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The Insights & Practices from Research and Theory Series explores the latest research and thinking on forming faith with families and age groups, and suggests practical strategies for forming faith that reflect the current research and thinking.

Part One. Insights from Research and Theory

We have known for some time that a graded-level, schooling model of faith formation focused almost *exclusively* on children and youth, *all by itself*, fails to move the needle in the quest for effective faith transmission, i.e., passing faith to the next generation. Rather, a whole life approach that offers intergenerational programming and home/family learning options, *along with* age-specific efforts has a much greater chance of authentic and lasting faith transmission.

Research and other literature clearly indicate that intergenerational faith formation plays a crucial role in the faith transmission process, and every church should consider how to incorporate it in their faith formation efforts. This report can help. Our review of the literature on intergenerational faith formation can be capsulized in the following categories.

1. **Benefits of intergenerationality.** The literature points to the significant value of intergenerational faith formation through such factors as the following: it strengthens faith and involvement for all ages, provides relationships beyond family, utilizes gifts and abilities of all, forms caring community, and passes on faith traditions. It's worth the work.
2. **Research findings.** In short, the research shows the importance of intergenerational connections, which benefits not just children and youth but emerging adults and all ages, and intentional intergenerational efforts which strengthen the vitality of church communities.
3. **Practical applications.** There are a host of ways intergenerationality can be infused into church life, including worship, mentoring programs, multi-age/family learning programs, milestone events, service projects, and parent formation and involvement. Creativity, outside-the-box thinking, is key to finding the right application.
4. **Principles and strategies.** What does it take to make it a reality? When a faith formation team is doing well with intergenerationality, they have embraced more than a few of these intentions: promoting Christian identity, building caring relationships, addressing developmental needs, employing varied and experiential methods, developing collaborative leadership, assessing current ministries, and starting small with experiments.

5. ***Becoming intentionally intergenerational.*** Some key factors to keep in mind: it requires commitment over time, it must focus on belonging, learning, and serving *together*, and it must see intergenerationality as integral to church life and ministry.

Let's explore further.

1. Benefits of Intergenerationality

Much of the literature we reviewed spoke to the benefits of intergenerational faith formation. Here is a brief summary of how the following authors describe those benefits: Holly Allen, David Csinos, CRC Faith Formation Ministries, Wilson McCoy, John Roberto, and Linda Staats. (You will find full reference to their articles at the end of this report.)

- ◆ Amid today's age-segregated society, research and experience are revealing immense benefits and blessings of intergenerational connection for the whole church. One of the primary benefits is a stronger sense of belonging. When all ages worship, learn, serve, and socialize together, people feel welcomed and accepted regardless of age or life stage. Intergenerational community provides a place where everyone can experience care and find their place.
- ◆ Intergenerational connections also bless families, providing support beyond the nuclear family. For wounded or stressed families, this wider web of care brings healing. For youth and young adults, intergenerational mentors and role models guide their faith journey.
- ◆ Sharing life across generations allows each age group to contribute their unique gifts. The young bring energy and questions, while older members provide wisdom and experience. Valuing each generation's passions and strengths produces a community where all can flourish.
- ◆ Relationships outside of family are vital for faith growth. Intergenerational communities allow people to share deeply and grow together as disciples of Jesus. Faith is strengthened when lived in caring community rather than isolation.
- ◆ Research over decades affirms that intergenerational connection benefits both the young and old. Children develop more positive attitudes about the elderly. And seniors experience greater life satisfaction and self-worth. When generations share life, all are enriched.

Though creating intergenerational community requires effort, practitioners describe the blessings as worth it. People experience belonging, purpose, and spiritual growth. Faith is put into practice through mutual service. Leadership is developed. Core traditions are passed on. And most of all, people glimpse life together as the body of Christ.

The benefits of intergenerationality remind us we need each other. When generations share life and faith, the whole community is enhanced.

2. Research Findings

Research on intergenerational faith formation is not voluminous. However, several authors in our review refer to broad studies of faith formation where aspects of intergenerational intentions are important to their findings. These studies include Christian Smith's research (National Study on Youth and Religion, and others), Fuller Youth Institute's College Transition Project, the more recent Churches Engaging Young People Project, Barna's surveys, and the Canadian Hemorrhaging Faith project. All are prominent studies that have drawn widespread attention to the significance of intergenerationality especially for youth and emerging adults (Allen).

Here is our brief summary of the research findings. These findings are supported in the writings of Allen, Roberto, and Csinos. (See reference to their articles at the end of this report.)

- ◆ According to the authors mentioned just above, major studies have investigated the role of intergenerational connection and community in faith development. Their findings reveal significant benefits of intergenerational experiences and relationships, leading to recommendations for churches to become more intergenerational.
- ◆ One of the most consistent findings is that young people who have relationships with non-parental adults in their faith community show stronger faith maturity and are more likely to remain actively engaged in the church. Intergenerational mentoring and role models provide guidance as adolescents navigate questions of identity, meaning, and purpose.
- ◆ Research also indicates that involvement in intergenerational worship correlates with higher faith maturity in high school and college students. Young people experience a sense of belonging and gain spiritual nourishment in worshipping alongside the whole church family. Several major studies found that age-segregated ministries in churches contribute to young people disconnecting from the church after high school. Intergenerational connections help pass on faith traditions and retain more youth and young adults.
- ◆ Studies on intergenerational worship specifically found benefits like stronger belonging, spiritual connections across generations, transmitting faith to younger generations, and valuing all members. This permeates the whole church culture.

In response to their findings, researchers overwhelmingly recommend that churches become more intentionally intergenerational. They encourage intergenerational experiences in worship, learning, service, mentoring, and leadership to nurture faith growth in all generations. The research provides a compelling case that intergenerational community and relationships are critical for lifelong faith formation and church vitality. Though changing established patterns is difficult, it is well worth the effort.

3. Practical Applications

The literature points to nearly all aspects of church life and how each can be enhanced by an intergenerational outlook. Our general summary follows here. If you wish to dig deeper, consult the writings by these authors listed at the end of this report: Holly Allen, CFC Faith Formation Ministries, Wilson McCoy, Johannah Myers, John Roberto, and Tori Bennet Smit.

Intergenerational faith formation can become a reality. Research makes a compelling case for intergenerational ministry, but what does this look like in practice? Churches are discovering many creative and meaningful ways to foster intergenerational community.

Worship. One of the most central is intergenerational worship, where all ages participate and learn together. Churches can craft liturgies, sermons, and experiences with all generations in mind. Here it is worth mentioning Smit's five intergenerational practices for small churches:

- ◆ Providing meaningful participation of children in intergenerational worship teaches children to worship and experience God.
- ◆ Explore new models of faith formation like midweek programs, parent-child learning, seasonal events.
- ◆ Support and resource parents as primary faith nurturers of children.
- ◆ Share personal faith stories to join in God's big story.
- ◆ Involve children in intergenerational service projects.

Churches are moving towards more intergenerational ministry through worship, storytelling, service projects, parent equipping, and seeing intergenerational connection as the norm, starting with worship (Smit).

Mentoring. Mentoring programs pair younger and older members for spiritual guidance and friendship. Johannah Myers offers these key points:

- ◆ Adults should be apprenticing youth and children in practicing the faith, just as Jesus apprenticed his disciples.
- ◆ This means demonstrating and teaching the disciplines of the faith through real-life modeling and mentoring.
- ◆ Adults nurture faith in young people by including them in the rituals, ministries, and mission of the faith community.
- ◆ Intergenerational faith formation provides the ecosystem for apprenticing faith as generations learn collaboratively.

Apprenticing faith together emphasizes the need for adults to intentionally guide young people in practicing and living out the faith through intergenerational mentoring relationships and community. Adults have an important role in the faith development of younger generations (Myers).

Milestones. Milestone celebrations involve the whole church family. Parent equipping empowers the home as a vital faith incubator. Events like meals, camps, trips, and parties provide relaxed space for intergenerational bonding.

Programming. Intergenerational learning programs, retreats, VBS, service projects, and classes allow generations to share life and grow in faith together. Starting small with pilot intergenerational activities allows testing and learning before wider implementation. Patience and flexibility are needed as it takes time to change cultures. But each effort contributes to the long-term goal of an intergenerational church.

Leadership. Age diversity in leadership and staffing models unity across generations. Blended worship styles demonstrate that traditional and contemporary forms can coexist. Facilities can be evaluated for intergenerational accessibility. Schedules can be adjusted to enable collaboration.

Intergenerational ministry necessitates creativity, commitment, and openness to the Spirit's guidance. No single program accomplishes it. But many intergenerational threads woven throughout church life can form a tapestry of generations worshipping, serving, and growing together as the body of Christ.

4. Guiding Principles and Strategies

While not (yet) mainstream, there has been enough practice of intergenerational faith formation for us to catch a glimpse of principles and strategies that need to be in place for it to function well. All the literature we surveyed had insights in this area. Here is a summary of what we have gleaned.

Implementing effective intergenerational ministry requires commitment to core principles along with wise strategies tailored to each church context. Guiding principles give direction, while adaptive strategies allow creativity.

In his article “Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation,” John Roberto identifies 17 principles in four categories that effective intergenerational learning:

1. *Promoting Christian identity*: Strengthens faith commitment, teaches faith practices, increases involvement.
2. *Building relationships & community*: Creates new relationships, understanding across generations, inclusive community.
3. *Fostering learning & growth*: Addresses developmental needs, variety of learning styles, encourages faith sharing. Strengthens families.
4. *Empowering leadership*: Shared vision, collaborative leadership teams, well prepared facilitators (Roberto, “Principles”).

At the heart is a unifying vision of the church as an intergenerational family where all members belong and contribute. This promotes shared identity and purpose. Structures and activities should then provide intergenerational opportunities. Varied, experiential learning experiences address diverse needs and nurture growth through cross-generational relationships. Emphasizing our common faith story and practices brings unity across generations.

Collaborative leadership empowers teams to create intergenerational community. Patience and understanding are essential to overcome entrenched divisions. Move forward in gradual steps, while persisting through challenges. Assess current ministries to discern where to introduce intergenerational elements. Add intergenerational components to programs or redesign them to involve all ages. Create new intergenerational initiatives focusing on worship, learning, service, celebration, prayer.

As mentioned, start small with pilot experiments, evaluating and improving. Gather input from across generations. Equip leaders. Tell stories of God at work in the intergenerational community. In her article, “Benefits, Challenges, and Recommendations for Intergenerational Ministry,” Holly Allen offers these straight-forward recommendations:

- ◆ Get buy-in from all generations through two-way communication.
- ◆ Start small with pilot programs.
- ◆ Focus on building relationships before jumping into activities.
- ◆ Be creative and flexible in designing intergenerational experiences.
- ◆ Equip leaders and provide ongoing training.
- ◆ Persist despite difficulties to realize the blessings (Allen).

The goal is a culture where intergenerational belonging, relationship, and learning are integral to church life. Generations bless each other as the body of Christ through shared life and faith. By God's grace, this can enrich the wider community too. The path requires commitment to principles like belonging, growth, empowerment. Adapt strategies contextually and persist in deepening intergenerationality. The effort bears fruit as generations discover just how better together, we are.

5. Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational

We seek to cultivate and nurture an intergenerational church culture. As mentioned above, research resoundingly affirms the importance of intergenerational connection and community for lifelong faith formation. In response, churches are encouraged to become more intentionally intergenerational in outlook and practice. What does this culture shift entail?

At the core is a unifying vision of the church as an intergenerational family. Leadership must exemplify this vision in their attitudes and practices. It will require flexibility, openness to new approaches, and perseverance.

Assess current ministries to discern where to introduce intergenerational elements. Look for opportunities to bring generations together in existing programs and gatherings. Create new intergenerational initiatives as well. Focus areas are worship, learning, service, prayer, ritual celebrations, leadership development, and community events. The goal is generations worshipping, serving, and growing together in shared experiences.

CRC Faith Formation Ministries identified ten ways to be a more intergenerational church. Those ideas include: sharing faith stories together, planning worship for all ages, honoring diverse faith, developing leaders of all ages, having deep discussions, exploring faith fundamentals, modeling intergenerational leadership, serving together, experimenting wisely, and appointing an advocate.

They also identified ten ways to strengthen intergenerational worship. Those ideas include: gathering input from all ages, assessing current worship practices, writing an intergenerational covenant, using inclusive language, evaluating the worship space, building a culture of belonging, creating art together, educating during worship, engaging multiple senses, and sharing stories.

As noted, this takes experimentation, evaluation, and gradual implementation. Start small with pilot intergenerational activities. Gather input from across generations. Equip and empower diverse leaders. Communicate stories of God's work. Progress will be gradual as culture change is challenging. Mundane factors such as scheduling, transportation, and attitudes may need adjusting. Balance intergenerational and age-specific elements wisely. Persist through obstacles, revising approaches as needed.

The destination is worth the journey. An intergenerational culture permeates all aspects of church life. People of all ages belong, contribute, and grow together in Christ-centered community. This benefits both individuals and families while bearing witness to God's kingdom. We encourage you to take intentional steps to become communities where generations thrive together in Christ. The church's future depends on this rediscovery of our essential way of learning and growing in faith.

The Studies Consulted for this Report

This report is based on a review of the following resources.

- Allen, Holly and Christine Lawton and Cory Seibel. *Intergenerational Christian Formation* (Second Edition), Intervarsity Press, 2023. (See Chapter 3 and 9)
- Allen, Holly. “Benefits, Challenges, and Recommendations for Intergenerational Ministry.” (Chapter 16) *All Ages Becoming*. Edited by Valerie Grissom. Abilene Christian University Press, 2023.
- CRC Faith Formation Ministries, “Ten Ways to be a More Intergenerational Church.” Christian Reformed Church, 2016.
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- Csinos, David and Ivy Beckwith. “Better Together: The Formative Power of Intergenerational Community.” *The Journal of Family and Community Ministries*, Volume 28.
- Grissom, Valerie. “Challenge and Invitation to Become” *All Ages Becoming*. Edited by Valerie Grissom. Abilene Christian University Press, 2023.
- McCoy, Wilson. “All Ages Learning Together.” *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*. Edited by Holly Catterton Allen. Abilene Christian University Press, 2018.
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- Roberto, John. “Pathways to an Intergenerational Future.” *Engage All Generations*. Edited by Cory Seibel. Abilene Christian University Press, 2021.
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- Staats, Linda. “Circle of Blessing: Foundations and Fundamentals.” *All Ages Becoming*. Edited by Valerie Grissom. Abilene Christian University Press, 2023.
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Part Two. Strategies for Intergenerational Faith Formation

1. Transform Multigenerational Settings into Intergenerational Experiences

Every church has multigenerational environments in which at least two generations are participating in an event or activity—Sunday worship, church events, social gatherings, educational classes. Churches can utilize these environments to connect generations through relationship building and shared experiences.

How can your church transform multigenerational environments into experiences of intergenerational connection and community?

- ◆ *Consider relationships:* How will the generations interact with each other, get to know each other, share stories with each other? How will the experience incorporate intentional relationship building activities? How will everyone feel welcomed and safe?
- ◆ *Consider the content:* How will the experience engage generations in shared activities and in generationally appropriate activities?
- ◆ *Consider leadership:* How will each generation be involved in leadership roles, appropriate to their gifts, abilities, and age? How will the leadership team engage multiple generations?
- ◆ *Consider inclusion:* How will each generation feel valued and recognized in the experience?
- ◆ *Consider communication:* How will communication and social media channels be inclusive of all generations and provide connection among the generations?

2. Redesign Age-Specific Programs into Intergenerational Experiences

Age-specific programs and activities can provide opportunities for intergenerational connection, relationship building, and shared experiences. Opportunities abound, in children and youth programming, Vacation Bible School, service and mission trips, retreats, Bible studies, and more.

How can you transform age-specific programs by adding intergenerational activities or by redesigning the program into an intergenerational experience?

- ◆ *Consider adding intergenerational activities:* How can your church incorporate another generation in sharing their faith, wisdom, and interests in the program (interviews, storytelling, presentations, demonstrations)? How can you add mentors or spiritual guides to a program (grandparent mentors for young parents or spiritual guides for young people in confirmation)?
- ◆ *Consider replacing age-specific for intergenerational throughout the year:* How can your church incorporate regular intergenerational gatherings into your age group programs throughout the year?
- ◆ *Consider redesigning the program:* How can your church redesign an age specific program into an intergenerational program involving at least one additional generation, such as transforming camp or Vacation Bible School into a grandparent-grandchild program or transforming a youth service program or mission trip into an intergenerational service activity for all ages? Here are several ideas that illustrate how to transform age-specific programming into intergenerational opportunities:
 - Include all generations in Sunday worship and involve all generations in leadership roles—music, art, hospitality, reading scripture, and more. While there may be time during the

scripture readings and homily when children have a separate experience, it's important to have children involved with the whole worship community for most of the service.

- Add other generations into current age-group programs, such as mission trips, service projects, retreat experiences, and Vacation Bible School. Consider adding intergenerational experiences into VBS such as a grandparent component or redesigning the youth mission trip into an all ages mission trip.
- Incorporate intergenerational dialogues, interviews, and presentations into programming—providing opportunities for children and youth to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of (older) adults; and then reverse the process and provide opportunities for the (older) adults to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of children or teens through presentations, performances, and discussions.
- Add a mentoring component into programming for children, adolescents, and parents: parent mentors for baptismal parents, confirmation mentors, learning-to-pray mentors, justice and service mentors—to name a few possibilities.
- Connect people of different generations who have insights and life experiences that may be helpful to other generations, for example midlife and mature adults helping new parents with financial management and household management, or young people helping older adults navigate the digital and online world.
- Add intergenerational relationship building and activities into social and recreational activities in the church community, such as the church picnic and after worship gatherings.

3. Design New Intergenerational Initiatives

Designing for intergenerationality through new initiatives is an opportunity to create new programs, activities, or experiences that bring together all the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, worshipping, and more. Consider designing new intergenerational Vacation Bible School, summer camp, service projects and mission trips, retreat experiences, field trips, as well as grandparent and children programming. This is also an opportunity to eliminate those activities that work against intergenerationality and replace them with new initiatives.

Where are the greatest needs and/or opportunities for creating new initiatives that will contribute toward building an intergenerational culture in your church?

- ◆ *Consider celebrating and worshipping:* How can your church involve all generations more fully in Sunday worship and utilize their gifts throughout the service? How can you celebrate life milestones throughout life as intergenerational experiences at church and home?
- ◆ *Consider learning:* How can your church create intergenerational models of learning—weekly, biweekly, monthly, or seasonally—for the whole faith community? How can you create intergenerational models of Vacation Bible School or camp programs or Bible study programs?
- ◆ *Consider serving:* How can your church offer local and global service projects and mission experiences that engage all the generations together? How will you provide opportunities for reflection after the service and mission projects?
- ◆ *Consider praying:* How can your church create prayer experiences, retreat experiences, spiritual formation programs, spiritual direction, and prayer groups that engage multiple generations?

- ◆ *Consider mentoring:* How can your church offer intergenerational mentoring to accompany people of all ages, especially younger generations and new Christians, in their walk with Jesus as they develop a Christian way of life?

4. Make Intergenerational Learning Central

Intergenerational learning provides a way to educate the whole community, bringing all ages and generations together to learn with and from each other, build community, share faith, pray, celebrate, and practice the Christian faith. The key is that everyone is learning together—young and old, single and married, families with children and empty-nest families, and it involves the whole family—children, parents, grandparents, in a shared experience of the Christian faith. Churches can make intergenerational learning central to lifelong faith formation in at least two ways: as their core faith formation program for all ages, supplemented by age-specific and affinity group faith formation models, or as one element in a lifelong approach with age-specific and affinity group learning.

In the **first approach**, churches make intergenerational learning their core catechetical experience for all ages conducting monthly, biweekly, or weekly intergenerational programs, and then offering a variety of age-group or affinity group programs throughout the month or year to address specific age-appropriate needs. These churches replace or modify their age group programming to place the emphasis on all ages learning together. They often develop a multiyear curriculum for the whole community that can be built around themes from the Bible, the cycle of Sunday lectionary readings, church year feasts and seasons, Christian practices, service and social justice, prayer and spiritual disciplines, core Christian beliefs, and moral teachings.

In the **second approach**, churches implement intergenerational learning in targeted ways, such as, adding an all ages activity after Sunday worship, integrating an intergenerational component into Vacation Bible School, preparing for a sacrament or milestone celebration, learning about an upcoming church year feast or season (Advent-Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost), replacing an age group program with intergenerational learning on the same theme, to name a few examples.

One model of intergenerational learning incorporates three essential elements: all ages learning, in-depth learning in one of three formats, and sharing learning and applying the learning to life. Many intergenerational learning programs are extended-time programs from 1.5 to 3 hours in length, and incorporate the following program elements.

1. A shared meal
2. Shared prayer experience
3. An *All Ages Learning* experience on the topic of the program with content and methods appropriate to an all-ages audience
4. *In-depth Learning* on the topic exploring the content of the program in age appropriate ways. In-depth learning can be conducted in three different ways:
 - a) *Whole group format* provides a series of facilitated learning activities for all ages together with activities appropriate to all ages in intergenerational groupings
 - b) *Age group format* provides parallel, age-appropriate learning for groups at the same time with content and learning activities for age groups and family or parent groups
 - c) *Activity center learning* provides structured all ages and age-specific activity centers to explore and experience the content of the program
5. An *Integration Activity* for all ages to discover how to apply their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or digital formats.