

Envisioning the Future of Intergenerational Faith Formation

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This presentation will examine the growth and development of intergenerational faith formation in congregations, effective practices and models, and emerging trends for becoming intentionally intergenerational in churches and in society.

Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation: Research Findings from Practitioners

Christian congregations are rediscovering the importance of intergenerational faith formation and are making cross-age relationship building a defining characteristic of their community life. Research is now providing evidence of the enduring importance of intergenerational experiences for the formation of faith in the younger generations, as well as adults and the whole family.

Over the last two decades congregations from a variety of Christian traditions have been developing and implementing new models of intergenerational faith formation and learning. 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.

An Intergenerational Faith Formation Learning Model

The Generations of Faith intergenerational model is based on the work of James White in his book *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988). White identified four patterns of relationships that shape the four components of an intergenerational religious education learning experience: 1) in-common experiences, 2) parallel learning, 3) contributive occasions, and 4) interactive sharing.

The model created by the Generations of Faith Project expanded upon White's four components in the following way:

1. Gathering and opening prayer
2. All-ages learning experience: intergenerational learning begins with a multigenerational experience of a theme that all generations can share together.
3. In-depth learning experience: through structured learning activities each generation—families with children, adolescents, and other adults—explores the biblical and theological understanding of the topic, using one of three possible formats:
 - The *Age Group Format* provides parallel, age-appropriate learning for groups at the same time. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic—utilizing specific learning activities that are designed for their life cycle stage: families with children or children alone, adolescents, young adults, and adults.
 - The *Whole Group Format* provides a series of facilitated learning activities for everyone at the same time using intergenerational or age-specific small groups or table groups.

- The *Learning Activity Center Format* provides structured intergenerational and age-specific learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area.
4. Sharing learning reflections and application: in intergenerational groups participants share what they learned and prepare for applying their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or online.
 5. Closing prayer service

Through the Generations of Faith Project we learned that churches can implement intergenerational learning in two ways: 1) as their core faith formation program for all ages, supplemented by age-specific and affinity group faith formation models, or 2) as one element in a lifelong approach with age-specific and affinity group learning, such as whole-community Bible studies, adding an all-ages activity after Sunday worship, integrating an intergenerational component into vacation Bible school, preparing for a sacramental or milestone celebration, learning about an upcoming church year feast or season, or church-wide events such as Stewardship Sunday.

Churches that make intergenerational learning their core faith formation experience for all ages conduct monthly, bi-weekly, or weekly intergenerational programs, and then offer 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 develop a multi-year curriculum for the whole community 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.

Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation

This section presents seventeen principles, drawn from the research described earlier, to guide the design, implementation, facilitation, and leadership of intergenerational learning in a congregation. The principles are organized into four categories:

1. Promoting Christian identity
2. Building relationships and community
3. Fostering learning and growth
4. Collaborating and equipping leadership

These principles can serve as guides for developing, enhancing and expanding, and evaluating intergenerational learning in a congregation.

Promoting Christian Identity

Principle 1. Through intergenerational faith formation Christian commitment is formed and strengthened as persons develop relationships and actively participate in intergenerational faith communities that teach, model, and live out the community's beliefs.

Principle 2. Through intergenerational faith formation people learn the ways of the faith community and how to live as a Christian today as they participate authentically and relationally with more experienced members of the community.

Principle 3. Through intergenerational faith formation people identify with their faith community and participate more fully with all ages and generations in the life and ministries of the faith community.

We know from the research findings that participation in intergenerational learning leads to greater involvement of participants in church life, including Sunday worship, sacraments, service projects, and the ministries of the church; also, participation in these all-age learning activities leads to a deeper understanding of the core events and practices of the Christian faith.

One of the ways that churches promote Christian identity and church participation is by focusing the primary content of the learning on the central events of the Christian faith, for example:

- *The feasts and seasons of the church year* provide a natural rhythm and calendar to the curriculum: Advent and Christmas, Lent and Holy Week, Easter Season, Pentecost, and more.
- The *Revised Common* and *Catholic Lectionaries* provide a rich curriculum for the whole community with its three-year cycle of Scripture readings. The *Narrative Lectionary* provides a four-year cycle following the sweep of the biblical story, from Creation through the early Christian church.
- *Ritual, milestone, and sacramental celebrations* provide events rich in theological meaning that celebrate the faith journey throughout life: baptism, confirmation, first Bible, first communion, graduation, marriage, funerals, and more.
- *Acts of service and justice*—locally and globally—provide a focus on mission to the world and put in action biblical and church teachings on service, justice, care for the earth.

When the central events of the Christian faith are the focus of intergenerational faith formation, churches have the opportunity to *prepare* people through intergenerational learning with the appropriate knowledge and practices for participation, to *immerse* them in the events and experiences of church life, and to guide their *reflection* upon the meaning of the event and how to live/practice that learning in daily life. For example:

- People learn about worship and how to worship in intergenerational settings; experience Sunday worship with the faith community and practice worshipping; and live the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives (with activities and resources delivered online).
- People learn about the Bible and how to read it, interpret it, and apply it to their lives; experience the Bible at Sunday worship and at home; and develop their own practice of Bible study and reading (with activities and resources delivered online).
- People learn about Jesus and the Christian tradition and what it means for life today; experience the teachings of Jesus and the Christian tradition through participation in the events of church life, and continue to learn and live the Christian faith in daily life today (with activities and resources delivered online).
- People learn about prayer and spirituality and how to develop their spiritual lives through prayer and spiritual disciplines, experience the prayer life of the faith community, and develop their own practice of prayer and the spiritual disciplines (with activities and resources delivered online).
- People learn about the justice issues of our day and the biblical and church teachings on justice, service, and care for creation in intergenerational settings; experience acts of justice and service with the faith community—locally and globally; and engage in the practices of serving those in need, caring for creation, and working for justice—as individuals, with their peers, with their families, and with their church and other groups and organizations (with activities and resources delivered online).

Building Relationships and Community

- Principle 4.** Intergenerational faith formation strengthens and creates new relationships among people of all ages, enhances their sense of belonging in the faith community, and increases participation in church life.
- Principle 5.** Intergenerational faith formation promotes a community where generational differences can be transcended rather than reinforced, and where generational understanding and positive intergenerational relationships can be experienced.
- Principle 6.** Intergenerational faith formation affirms each person's value in the total community (regardless of age), and promotes understanding of shared values and respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life.
- Principle 7.** Intergenerational faith formation fosters a climate that includes valuing, nurturing, and employing the gifts of every person from young to old.
- Principle 8.** Intergenerational faith formation creates a welcoming and safe environment—of warmth, trust, emotional safety, acceptance, and care—conducive to promoting faith sharing, group participation, mutual support, and care for one another in the congregation and in the community.

We know from the research findings that one of the most significant features of intergenerational faith formation is the way it builds community among people, and relationships across ages and generations. Central to building relationships and community is creating an atmosphere of hospitality and welcoming at intergenerational learning sessions where everyone feels a sense of belonging, acceptance, and respect. *This welcoming spirit is as important as the content being taught.*

The intergenerational learning model creates the environment and experiences where people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together. Adults gain meaningful insights from their interaction with children and youth; and children and youth experience meaningful support from non-parental adults. Intergenerational learning creates an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.

Fostering Learning and Growth

- Principle 9.** Intergenerational faith formation addresses the social and developmental needs of age groups, and speaks to the relevant concerns and challenges people face today within the context of intergenerational community and experiences.
- Principle 10.** Intergenerational faith formation addresses the variety of faith styles and religious experiences of people in the congregation by engaging people of all ages in a variety of activities that are developmentally appropriate, experiential, multi-sensory, interactive, and participatory.
- Principle 11.** Intergenerational faith formation settings are authentic learning environments made up of individuals at various stages in their faith journeys, who teach and learn from each other.
- Principle 12.** Intergenerational faith formation encourages faith growth and practice in all generations and provides “up close and personal” faith experiences as children, teens, young adults, midlife adults, and older adults engage in sharing faith, teaching, learning, serving, celebrating, and praying for one another.
- Principle 13.** Intergenerational faith formation has a positive effect on both the older and younger generations by creating intentional opportunities for young and old to meet together, to share stories, to create something together, or merely to talk with each other.

Principle 14. Intergenerational faith formation supports families by surrounding them with a community of faith and engaging the whole family in caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving together; and providing parents with opportunities to learn from Christians who are practicing their faith and raising faithful children.

Principle 15. Intergenerational faith formation equips people to live their faith in daily life, and engages them in service to others, locally and globally.

We know from the research that intergenerational learning works most effectively when it engages people in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, interactive, and involve faith sharing. People of all ages and generations learn best when the learning program engages them experientially, through their heads, hearts, and lifestyles. In order to accomplish this, churches design intergenerational learning with features such as:

- Respecting the variety of learning styles among the participants with a diversity of learning experiences, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective activities, others through exploration and analysis, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices.
- Recognizing the multiple intelligences (linguistic, spatial, musical, logical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist) among the participants, and designing learning methods and activities that address the variety of intelligences in the group.
- Incorporating a variety of methods that are appropriate to all ages learning and to age-appropriate learning, and encouraging people to participate in a variety of learning activities, even if they are new for them.
- Utilizing as many of the five senses as possible throughout the learning experience through multi-sensory methods that engage the whole person—art, drama, music, dance, storytelling, media, prayer, and rituals.
- Teaching and modeling the skills for listening and sharing across generations, creating an environment conducive to storytelling and faith sharing.
- Engaging people in collaborative and group-centered formats for study, inquiry, activities, and sharing.
- Incorporating real-life application of learning by helping people experience new ways to practice their faith during the session, and finding ways to transfer learning from the session to their daily lives.

We know from the research that intergenerational learning strengthens parental and family faith by encouraging the whole family to participate—children, teens, parents, and grandparents. It equips parents (and grandparents) to be faith formers of their children by developing their competence and confidence through such faith-forming experiences as sharing stories, celebrating rituals, praying together, reading the Bible, and more. Intergenerational learning provides activities that model the practices that churches want parents and families to live at home. The research findings also revealed that families *enjoy* opportunities to pray, learn, and be together (even if parents may resist participating initially).

Empowering and Collaborating Leadership

Principle 16. Intergenerational faith formation is led by congregational leaders who embrace a collaborative, team-based, and empowering style of leadership, and have a shared vision of an intergenerational church.

Principle 17. Intergenerational faith formation ministry and programming is facilitated by teams who work collaboratively in designing and conducting programming, and are well prepared and supported in their ministry.

The research showed that the churches that implemented intergenerational faith formation *effectively* demonstrated several important leadership characteristics. First and foremost is consistent leadership for intergenerational faith formation; that is, from the pastor to the coordinator to the volunteer leaders share a common vision for intergenerational faith formation that they share with the whole church community.

In addition, the practice of intergenerational learning requires a diversity of leaders who practice a *collaborative* and *empowering* style of leadership. This style of leadership is exercised not just by the pastor and coordinator of intergenerational faith formation but by the entire leadership team. Intergenerational learning requires committed volunteer leaders who are engaged in a variety of roles in lifelong faith formation: planning, teaching, organizing, and supporting. Teamwork and collaboration are essential for the effective planning and implementation of intergenerational learning.

Resources

Allen, Holly Catterton and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012.

Amidei, Kathie, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto. *Generations Together: Caring, Praying Learning, Celebrating, and Serving Together*. Naugatuck: LifelongFaith Associates, 2014.

Martineau, Mariette, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber. *Intergenerational Faith Formation*. New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008.

Roberto, John. *Becoming a Church of Lifelong Learners*. New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006.

White, James. *Intergenerational Religious Education*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988.

A Study of Faith Formation in Christian Churches

(October 2018)

Total Responses: 1059

Family faith formation programming in churches.

(Ranked in order from strongly disagree to strongly agree. 5 = highest score)

1. The church provides experiences for the whole family that promote growth in faith and discipleship.	3.80
2. The church helps parents (or caregivers) grow in faith and discipleship, and practice a vital and informed Christian faith.	3.68
3. The church provides families with resources to nurture growth in Christian faith and practice at home.	3.66
4. The church teaches parents the practices for forming faith at home (celebrating rituals and milestones, praying, serving, learning the Christian faith, reading the Bible)	3.49
5. The church helps grandparents grow in faith and discipleship, and practice a vital and informed Christian faith.	3.43
6. The church connects with families at home through social media and a website with content for family faith practices and parent formation.	3.23
7. The church teaches grandparents the practices for forming faith at home.	3.03
8. The church equips parents with the knowledge and skills for parenting today.	2.99

Types of family faith formation programming offered by churches.

(Ranked in order)

1. Family large group programs at church (monthly or seasonal)	50%
2. At-home family activities (Bible reading, prayers, devotions, rituals, service)	45%
3. Family service projects and/or mission trips	32%
4. Parent workshops	24%
5. Online resources and courses for parents	17%
6. Family retreats and camps	15%
7. Family cluster or small group programs	14%
8. Family-centered lectionary-based Scripture reflection	12%
9. Family-centered vacation Bible school	12%
10. Mentoring for parents	7%
11. Family Bible study	4%
12. Grandparent workshops or webinars	2%
13. Parent webinars (online)	2%

Do not offer family programming: 17% (223)

Types of intergenerational (all ages together) faith formation programming offered by churches. (Ranked in order)

1. Seasonal/occasional intergenerational program	53%
2. Intergenerational service projects or mission trips	30%
3. Monthly intergenerational learning program	12%
4. Intergenerational retreats or camps	12%
5. Intergenerational mentoring	11%
6. Weekly or bi-weekly intergenerational learning program	9%
7. Small group intergenerational learning program	8%
8. Intergenerational Bible study	6%
9. Intergenerational lectionary-based Scripture reflection	6%

Do not offer intergenerational programming: 28% (286)

Effectiveness and impact of intergenerational faith formation in churches (only intergenerational churches).

(Ranked in order from strongly disagree to strongly agree. 5 = highest score)

1. IFF strengthens relationships among people of all ages, enhances their sense of belonging in the faith community, and increases participation in church life.	4.29
2. IFF has a positive effect on both the older and young populations by creating intentional opportunities to meet together, share stories, and create something together.	4.20
3. IFF affirms each person's value in the total community (regardless of age), and promotes understanding of shared values and respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life.	4.19
4. IFF creates a welcoming and safe environment conducive to promoting faith sharing, group participation, mutual support, and care for one another in the congregation and in the community.	4.18
5. IFF supports families by surrounding them with a community of faith and engaging the whole family in learning and practicing their faith.	4.12
6. People learn the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith through IFF as they participate with more experienced members of the church community.	4.11
7. IFF promotes a community where generational differences can be transcended rather than reinforced, where generational understanding and positive intergenerational relationships can be experienced.	4.11
8. Christian commitment is formed and strengthened through participation in IFF experiences.	4.10
9. IFF provides parents with opportunities to learn from Christians who are practicing their faith.	4.01
10. IFF incorporates real-life application of learning by engaging people in the life of the church community and helping people apply their learning to daily living as Christians.	3.96
11. IFF engages all ages in service to others and actions of justice, locally and globally.	3.95
12. IFF engages people in a variety of activities that are developmentally-appropriate, experiential, multi-sensory, interactive, and participatory.	3.92

13. IFF ministries and programming are facilitated by staff and teams who work collaboratively in designing and conducting programming, and are well-prepared and supported in their ministry. 3.69
14. IFF addresses the social and developmental needs of age groups. 3.63

What are three of the most significant issues or trends affecting the future of faith formation in your church?

Worship Membership Schedules Busy Lives Youth Ministry
 Sports Abuse Faith Formation Leadership
 Parents Young Adults Attendance
 Community Families Older Church
 Young People Aging Interest Activities Programs
 Participation Social Commitment Understanding
 Volunteers

Intergenerational Life Participation Older
 Commitment Worship Young Leaders
 Community Ministry Faith Formation
 Congregation Families Sports Church
 Activities Parents Staff Volunteers Schedules
 Attendance Space Leadership Social Media
 Programs Spiritual Resources Culture

Ministry Social Media Age Intergenerational Community Getting
 Sports Young Adults Volunteers Leadership
 Parents Resources Faith Commitment
 Families Support Church Leaders
 Attendance Issues Activities Interest Youth
 Technology Schedules Busy Lives Participation

What are the three most helpful resources that a church-serving organization can develop to enhance lifelong, intergenerational ministries at your church?

Leaders Communication Sharing Volunteers Ministry
Social Media **Groups** Workshops Materials Video
Programs Support Faith Opportunities
Resources Community
Intergenerational Staff Family Bible Studies
Church Relationships Curriculum Short Ideas Participation
Training IFF
Practical Pastor Ideas Bible Studies Ministry Life Parents
Volunteers **Church** Staff Programs Support
Family Small Groups Resources
Relationships **Intergenerational** Social Media
Curriculum Community Faith Engaging Materials
Experiences Training Young Adults Activities Opportunities
Group Retreats Materials Prayer Opportunities Staff
Ages Relationships Intergenerational Practices
Church Develop Faith Youth Resources
Social Media Families Bible Programs
Understanding Training Love Ministry Mentoring Ideas
Young People Worship Community

Program Ideas

1) An intergenerational VBS or summer camp program; 2) Intergenerational service and mission trips; 3) Intergenerational worship resources for planning; 4) Small group intergenerational models; 5) Intergenerational Bible study, storytelling curriculum, retreats, and prayer experiences; 6) Intergenerational Godly Play; 7) Intergenerational mentoring

Training Ideas

Create a variety of training programs for church staff and leaders on intergenerational ministry and faith formation (on-site, online, blended).

Research

Conduct intergenerational research and educate churches on the importance of intergenerational ministry and faith formation, e.g., research into intergenerational best practices; case studies; examples of intergenerational principles in action and intergenerational models in churches.