

# Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation: Research Findings from Practitioners

John Roberto

(From: *INTERGENERATE: How Churches Can Become More Intentionally Intergenerational in Outlook and Practice*. Holly Catterton Allen, editor. Abilene Christian University Press, 2018)

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.

## Research Descriptions

The findings in this chapter are based on two research projects (2006 and 2013) on intergenerational faith formation along with a survey of intergenerational principles with the participants in the 2014 Symposium on Intergenerational Faith Formation.

The 2006 research was conducted with over 1000 Catholic parishes involved in the Generations of Faith Project,<sup>i</sup> a Lilly Endowment funded project sponsored by the Center for Ministry Development.<sup>ii</sup> At the conclusion of the Generations of Faith project in 2006 a qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) research study was conducted to determine the effects of intergenerational faith formation on participants, church leaders, and the whole faith community. The qualitative research study involved parish staff in 79 parishes; the online survey was completed by 434 of the approximately 1000 Catholic parishes that participated in the project.

In 2013 my colleague Jim Merhaut and I identified over 200 parishes that were involved in intergenerational faith formation from the original 2001-2006 group of churches and from new parishes that began after 2006. Fifty parishes completed a survey on the status of intergenerational faith formation in their churches. They were large, medium, and small-sized churches in suburban, rural, and urban settings. 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.

A summative review of these two research studies (along with relevant literature) surfaced a substantial list of intergenerational faith formation principles. In 2014 Lifelong Faith Associates sponsored a cross-denominational<sup>iii</sup> symposium on intergenerational faith formation; prior to the symposium, a survey outlining and describing these principles was sent to the 100 registered participants of the symposium. The purpose of the survey was to test the importance and application of these principles for intergenerational faith formation.

Drawing on these three research studies, this chapter proposes seventeen principles for the effective design, implementation, and facilitation of intergenerational learning. These principles can serve as guides for developing, enhancing and expanding, and evaluating intergenerational learning in a congregation.

## 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.

Since the early 2000s St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church in Acton, Massachusetts, has been offering monthly intergenerational learning as the core faith formation experience for all ages. Their curriculum is liturgically-centered, connecting faith formation with the realities of daily experience and the Eucharistic celebration. For St. Elizabeth the Sunday Eucharist is the heart of all efforts to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ. This is where their community accompanies everyone on their journey of life and faith. They schedule intergenerational learning monthly between Labor Day and the Easter season with four sessions per month to accommodate the large number of participants and their different schedules. Every session begins with a meal. What follows varies from month-to-month, but usually includes an opening activity in common and age-appropriate breakouts (grades K-4 with at least one parent, middle school, high school, and adult). Each session runs no longer than two and one-half hours. Each month's theme is drawn from one of the Sunday lectionary readings in that month. Some years they adopt a theme—2017-18 is Discipleship—while other years have a monthly theme drawn directly from the lectionary readings. In addition to monthly programs, St. Elizabeth sponsors a 24 hour intergenerational experience of prayer, learning, service, and worship called “24 Hours with the Lord” and has sponsored an intergenerational mission trip. To learn more about their work go to <http://www.seoh.org/faith-formation/gift>. (Download the annual plan with themes.)

While St. Elizabeth is a large suburban parish, Our Lady of Fatima is a small town church in New York State. Since the early 2000s they have been doing monthly intergenerational faith formation called GIFT, a parish model of intergenerational, life-long, event-centered faith formation. All ages gather once a month for a learning session around a yearly theme. In 2017-18 they are focusing on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and learning through her about the life of Jesus. Gatherings are on Saturday, and begin with a potluck supper immediately following the 4:00 pm Mass. To learn more about their program go to [http://www.rcda.org/churches/OurLadyOfFatima/faith\\_formation.html](http://www.rcda.org/churches/OurLadyOfFatima/faith_formation.html). (Download the annual plan with themes.)

St. Anthony on the Lake parish in Peewaukee, WI has been offering family-intergenerational faith formation for over 25 years. They started with 20 families and have grown to over 350 families, which

includes adult-only households. Offered on Sunday mornings or Monday evenings (whatever is most convenient for people), twice a month mid-September through March, the program begins with an intergenerational activity and breaks into age-group learning where both parents/grandparents, children, and youth explore faith themes covering the Bible, the Creed, sacraments, morality, and prayer and spirituality. The Sunday program begins at 10 am with fellowship and concludes at 12 noon; the Monday program begins with a light supper at 5:30 pm and ends at 7:30 pm. To learn more about their program go to: <http://www.stanthony.cc/family-program>.

## 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, and
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*<sup>iv</sup> 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.

## Conclusion

These seventeen principles can help every church in making intergenerational learning an essential foundation for lifelong faith formation. These principles are excellent guides for developing, enhancing and expanding, and evaluating intergenerational learning in your congregation.

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

---

<sup>i</sup> I served as the project coordinator for the Generations of Faith Project.

<sup>ii</sup> The Center for Ministry Development is a Catholic nonprofit organization serving diocese and parishes in

<sup>ii</sup> The Center for Ministry Development is a Catholic nonprofit organization serving diocese and parishes in youth and young adult ministry, family and intergenerational faith formation).

<sup>iii</sup> Survey participants represented eight Christian denominations: American Baptist, Christian Reformed, Episcopal, Lutheran ELCA, Presbyterian (USA), Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ), and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

<sup>iv</sup> Lectionaries from the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran and other Christian traditions offer similar guidelines.