

## chapter one

# Generations Together: A Vision of an Intergenerational Church

■ John Roberto

■ Christian congregations across the United States are rediscovering the power of the intergenerational faith community for forming and transforming people in Christian faith. In a world dominated by age-segmented and age-focused activities, experiences, products, and programs, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of *intergenerationality* in our congregations. Far too many Christian churches have lost the primacy of intergenerational relationships, community, and faith-forming experiences for developing and sustaining faith in people of all ages and generations.

Every church can discover its intergenerational heart and soul. This book *Generations Together* focuses on five essential components of congregational life—*caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving*—that are at the heart of every Christian community. When a congregation commits itself to building a culture of intergenerationality through these five elements, each element becomes a sign of and instrument for the full experience of the body of Christ by all ages and generations.

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- **Caring.** Cultivating caring relationships across generations in the congregation and community, becoming a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love.
- **Celebrating.** Worshiping God together through Sunday worship, rituals, sacraments, and the liturgical seasons that involve all of the ages and generations.
- **Learning.** Engaging all ages and generations together in learning experiences that teach scripture and the Christian tradition, informing and forming disciples of all ages in Christian identity.
- **Praying.** Nurturing the spiritual life of the whole community through the congregation's prayer services, rituals, and blessings throughout the year.
- **Serving.** Involving all ages and generations in service and mission to the world, especially to the poor and vulnerable, and in the works of justice and advocacy.

This chapter presents a vision of intergenerational church life, ministries, and faith formation informed by research on religious transmission, by scripture and theology, and by contemporary thinking about congregational culture and faith formation. It then offers a way to view the connection between intergenerational experiences at church with daily life at home and in the world using online resources and support for faith formation. As you continue reading the next chapters in *Generations Together* you will learn what this vision looks like in practice and how to develop approaches to guide your congregation in becoming more intentionally intergenerational. Use this book to serve as a guide to assist your congregation in envisioning and designing projects and initiatives to become more intentionally intergenerational, connect with people's daily lives at home and in the world, and utilize the abundance of digital resources to deepen people's faith life.

## Foundational Insights

### The Intergenerational View from Research

A variety of research studies over the past ten years have confirmed the importance of intergenerational relationships and experiences for the healthy development of children and adolescents—and for faith development and religious transmission across generations.

The 2000 Search Institute study, *Grading Grown-Ups: American Adults Report on Their Real Relationships with Kids* found “there is clear evidence that young people benefit from multiple, sustained relationships outside their immediate family. For example, Search Institute research has found that the more adults a young person

reports that he or she can turn to, the better off that young person is. Yet just 22 percent of the youth surveyed reported having strong relationships with five or more adults other than their parents” (Scales, et al., 5). To grow up healthy, young people need to be surrounded, supported, and guided within a sustained network of adults in addition to their parents, who choose to know, name, support, affirm, acknowledge, guide, and include children and adolescents in their lives.

The *Grading Grown-Ups* study revealed that youth and adults have shared priorities for intergenerational relationships. However, there was also general agreement that these relationship-building actions are not happening often enough. There appears to be a gap between what adults believe and what they do. Of the eighteen actions studied, only the top three—encouraging school success, teaching respect for cultural differences, and teaching shared values—are reported to be happening with any regularity. Some very important actions that adults could exercise in their relationships are not being practiced: passing down traditions, having meaningful conversations, being engaged in giving and serving to help the needy, modeling giving and serving to make life fair and equal, discussing religious beliefs, and discussing personal values.

What is clear from the study is that “forming meaningful relationships across generations needs to become an expected part of everyday life. All adults need to see being engaged with kids as part of their responsibility, as part of their community and this society. Children and youth need to be able to count on adults for support, guidance, and modeling” (Scales, et al., xi).

In October 2003, the Search Institute conducted a field test survey in fifteen US congregations of their instrument *Building Assets, Strengthening Faith: An Intergenerational Survey for Congregations*. While only a limited survey, it does provide a glimpse of the state of intergenerational programming in congregations. The adult and youth respondents rated their congregation as doing very or extremely well in the following intergenerational opportunities (note the low scores for intergenerational relationship building and learning opportunities):

- 52 percent have worship or prayer services that are spiritually uplifting for people of all ages
- 42 percent provide opportunities for children, youth, and adults to serve others together
- 40 percent help people of all ages feel their gifts and talents are valued
- 29 percent have children and youth in leadership roles for the whole congregation
- 29 percent provide opportunities for children, youth, and adults to get to know each other
- 29 percent provide opportunities for children, youth, and adults to learn and study together

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Eugene Roehlkepartain, the report's author, emphasized the need for intergenerational relationships and learning. "Nurturing faith and building assets involves more than what the congregation does specifically for children, youth, and families. Faith and assets are strengthened through intergenerational relationships, programs, and activities, including the ones examined in this section of the survey. Together, these items help congregations understand the ways they are, truly, an intergenerational community. The invitation for congregations is to discover a balance between age-specific opportunities and intergenerational opportunities in a time when generations are, too often, isolated from each other" (Roehlkepartain, 11).

In his study *Growing Up Religious*, Robert Wuthnow explored the religious journeys of people who grew up religious and the role of the family and affirmed the fact that "effective religious socialization comes about through embedded practices; that is, through specific, deliberate religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community" (Wuthnow, xxxi-ii). Several common family activities continually surfaced in his research:

- eating together, especially the power of Sunday meals and holidays
- praying: bedtime rituals and prayer, grace before meals, family Seder
- having family conversations
- displaying sacred objects and religious images, especially the Bible
- celebrating holidays
- providing moral instruction
- engaging in family devotions and reading the Bible

Wuthnow found that spiritual practices were woven into the very fiber of people's being; it was a total immersion. For these people, being religious was a way of life. "The daily round of family activities must somehow be brought into the presence of God. Parents praying, families eating together, conversations focusing on what is proper and improper, and sacred artifacts are all important ways in which family space is sacralized. They come together, forming an almost imperceptible mirage of experience" (Wuthnow, 8).

David Dollahite and Loren Marks have developed a research-based conceptual model that focuses on the processes at work in highly religious families as they strive to fulfill the sacred purposes suggested by their faith. They discovered eight processes that families engage in as they seek to fulfill their sacred purposes by:

1. turning to God for support, guidance, and strength
2. sanctifying the family by living religion at home
3. resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness

4. serving others in the family and faith community
5. overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith
6. abstaining from proscribed activities and substances
7. sacrificing time, money, comfort, and convenience for religious reasons
8. nurturing spiritual growth through example, teaching, and discussion, and encouraging spiritual development by teaching religious values

“Research, including our own, shows that parent teaching, example, and dialogue about religious matters are important predictors of whether children come to endorse the faith of their parents, a major sacred objective for most highly religious parents” (Dollahite and Marks, 537).

In their book *Sticky Faith*, Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford examined the factors that made for a “sticky faith” during the college years, drawn from their research on college students who participated in church youth groups for four years. One of those critical factors was the importance of congregations that maximize intergenerational relationships.

First, they discovered that involvement in all-church (intergenerational) worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation.

While small groups, mentoring, justice works, and a host of other youth ministry activities are important, the reality is that the challenges of kids, ministry programs, and spiritual development are far too complicated to be met with a single solution. The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky finding: high school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity. We found this to be true in our studies of both high school seniors AND college freshmen (Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, 75).

Second, they found that the more teenagers serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick. “The students we surveyed who had served in middle school or children’s ministry while they were in high school seemed to have stickier faith in college” (Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, 75).

Third, when adults in the congregation show an interest in young people and build relationships with them, young people feel welcomed and valued. “By far, the number one way churches made teens in our survey felt welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed an interest in them” (Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, 77). And the influence of adult–youth relationships continues into the college years.

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Contact from at least one adult from the congregation outside of the youth ministry during the first semesters of college is linked with sticky faith. Hearing from an adult from their home church—whether via text, email, phone, or something you’ve perhaps heard of called the US Postal Service—seems to help students take their faith to college with them. In fact, the ongoing contact still makes a difference *three years later* (Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, 100).

Fourth, congregations that increase the ratio of adults to kids increase the likelihood that college-aged young adults would stay engaged with their church. Chap Clark of Fuller Seminary suggests a 5:1 adult to youth ratio in youth ministry, i.e., five adults who are willing to commit to invest in one teenager in a variety of ways. This view is supported by the Search Institute’s research in *Grading Grown-Ups—American Adults Report on Their Real Relationships with Kids*. A 2007 LifeWay Research study of why young adults from ages eighteen to twenty-two drop out reinforces the importance of the adult-youth relationship. The study found that a church in which teenagers had at least one adult from church make a significant time investment in their lives were more likely to keep attending church. More of those who stayed in church—by a margin of 46 percent to 28 percent—said five or more adults at church had invested time with them personally and spiritually.

Using the three National Study on Youth and Religion research studies that followed adolescents into emerging adulthood, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell were able to identify seven factors that helped account for emerging adult religious commitment and practice.

A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors—(1) *parental religion*, (2) *prayer*, (3) *importance of faith*, and (4) *scripture reading*—stands an 85 percent chance of landing in the highest category of religion as an emerging adult; but one who scores in the lowest one-quarter on that scale stands only a miniscule chance (0.4 percent) of landing at the high end of religion when he or she is eighteen to twenty-three years old. In short, the combination of a teenager’s parent religion, importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading makes an enormous substantive difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood.

A teenager who scores in the top quarter of a scale measuring three more factors—(5) *having supportive nonparent adults in one’s religious congregation*, (6) *having religious experiences*, and (7) *not doubting religious faith*—stands seventy-five times the chance of landing in the highest category of religion compared to one who scores in the bottom quarter. These three variables taken alone thus also make a big difference in the probability

that a teenager will end up being highly religious as he or she grows into emerging adulthood.

In brief, with these seven factors alone, we have identified some powerful teenage factors associated with and, we think, causing differences in emerging adult religious commitment and practice (Smith and Snell, 220–221).

Smith and Snell also found that approximately 70 percent of youth who at some time or other before mid-emerging adulthood commit to live their lives for God, the vast majority appear to do so early in life, apparently before the age of fourteen. Most make their first commitments to God as children or during the preteen or very early teen years. Many religious trajectories followed in the course of life's development seemed to be formed early on in life.

All of these findings point to the essential role of parents and the family in nurturing faith growth in the first third of life. Smith and Denton conclude:

Teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents' religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization (Smith and Snell, 232).

### **Intergenerational Religious Momentum**

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. They write:

In reviewing the thirty-five years of data we had collected from over 3,500 family members, we were struck by how often we saw persistent patterns of religion (and sometimes non-religion) across generations. Something about religion seems to “stick around” families over generations, more so than other characteristics we had compared across generations in an earlier study—characteristics such as political and social attitudes, values, reflecting humanism and materialism, and psychological attributes such as self-esteem and depression (Bengston, et al., 138).

Their book, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*, presents findings that complement, expand, and deepen current studies on the importance of intergenerationality in religious transmission. Bengston and colleagues propose a theory or model—*intergenerational religious momentum*—that integrates their research findings by identifying factors that they found to encourage or impede intergenerational religious momentum.

The model on page 15 is based on the work of Vern Bengston and his colleagues (see page 193 in *Faith and Families*) and seeks to depict not only a summary of the research findings but also how the many religious influences that youth encounter come together to contribute to their religious identity, practices, and beliefs. Bengston describes it in the following way:

1. The *outcome* at the center is the young adult’s religious practices and beliefs.
2. Surrounding the process are *contextual factors* surrounding the young adult and his or her family: influences from contemporary culture, historical events, generational differences in religious expression that can reinforce or detract from the intergenerational religious momentum, the probability of the child following in the parents’ religious footsteps.
3. The next factor shows *influences from religious organizations*: programs and worship activities of churches, synagogues, and temples and inputs from religious leaders such as pastors, priests, rabbis, campus ministers, and religious educators. Religious influences encountered in education, and the influence of friends on religious and practices, can also reinforce or detract from intergenerational religious momentum.
4. At the center of this theory are *family influences*, starting with religious inheritance of children, what they are born into—the religious tradition of their parents, their parents’ religious involvement, and whether the parents were of the same religious faith at marriage. Being born into a religious household will become relevant to many religious choices of children as they become young adults, as well as their parents’ involvement in these religious influences. In some families, it is grandparents who maintain and sustain intergenerational religious momentum.



## INTERGENERATIONAL RELIGIOUS MOMENTUM

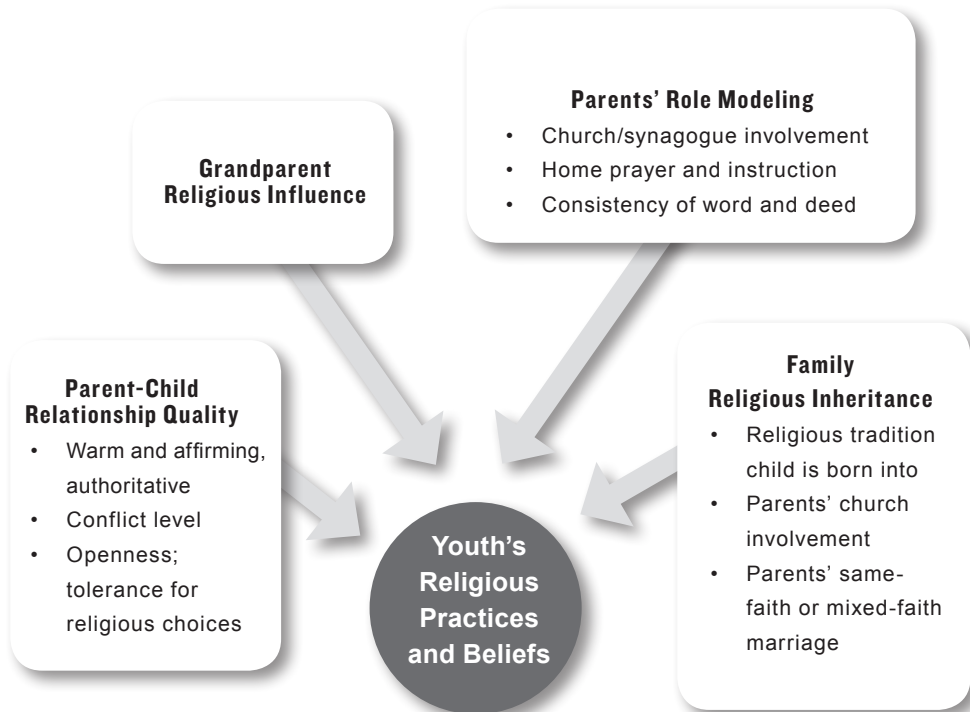
### Contextual Factors

- Influences from contemporary culture
- Influences from historical events
- Generational religious differences
- Religious influence of peers

### Influences from Religious Organization

- Church, synagogue, temple activities
- Priests, ministers, rabbis, youth ministers
- Religious influences in school or college

## FAMILY INFLUENCES



Most important in the theory are parental behaviors that influence religious development. The first category is “role modeling”—what parents do in setting examples for religious practice and belief, such as attending church regularly, participating in church activities, and encouraging faith development at home through prayers, scripture reading, and religious stories. Moreover, as seen from our interviews, it is important that parents show consistency between belief and practice: “walking the walk and not just talking the talk.”

The second category concerns the quality of the parent-child relationship and is called “intergenerational solidarity.” Our data show the affective (emotional) dimension of parental behavior is very important in influencing religious transmission. Parents who are warm and affirming are more likely to have children who follow them; parents who are cold or authoritarian, ambivalent or distracted, are less likely to have children follow them. Also affecting transmission is the level of conflict between parents and children. Moreover, we have seen that parents who are perceived as open and accepting of their child’s religious choices are more likely to achieve transmission. Particularly important, according to our data, is the role of father’s presence. Parental piety—religious role modeling, setting a good example—will not compensate for a distant dad.

The theory of intergenerational religious momentum depicted here summarizes our research results, showing how various influences throughout childhood and into young adult affect development of a religious orientation. For example, the data show the positive inputs on the part of parents (such as warmth and affirmation or positive role modeling) lead to more likely transmission of faith, while negative inputs (an authoritarian style of parenting or inconsistency in role modeling) lead to a lower probability of transmission. The theory can also depict change, for example, if a father alters his authoritarian religious style, becomes a more consistent role model, or allows his children more freedom of religious choice, then the outcomes could be an increased probability of transmission (Bengston, et al., 193–195).

**Family influence.** The research affirms that families matter a great deal in determining the moral and religious outcomes of young adults. Parents have more religious influence than they think. It’s safe to say that based on this study, the National Study on Youth and Religion (see *Souls in Transition*), and many more studies that parents’ religiosity is the primary influence on the religiosity of their young adult children. While there are other factors that influence religious practice, they do not diminish the effect of their family of origin. “A majority of the

parents and young adults in our sample share similar religious identities, practices, and beliefs. For example six of our ten parents have young adult children who report they have the same religious traditions as their parents—or share their parents' preference for no affiliation at all" (Bengston, et al., 185).

It is also safe to say that children, teens, and young adults with strong ties to their family of origin are less likely to drop out of church. A high-quality, parent-child relationship leads to higher religiosity. "It is the nature and quality of the relationship they have with their child that is crucial—perhaps as much or more than what parents do and teach religiously. Our study indicates that relationships with parents that are felt to be close, warm, and affirming are associated with higher religious transmission than are relationships perceived as cold, distant, or authoritarian—regardless of the level of parental piety. This is particularly true for relations with fathers" (Bengston, et al., 196). These warm, affirming relationships were most likely to result in the successful transmission of religion. Children and teens responded best to parents who were unconditionally supportive, who did not force their beliefs or practices on them.

**Grandparent influence.** Grandparents and great-grandparents are having an increasing influence on religious transmission, support, and socialization. One way they do this is by reinforcing or accentuating parents' religious socialization. A second way is by providing, replacing, or substituting for parents' religious socialization by becoming the moral and religious models and teachers for their grandchildren.

The increasing role of grandparents and multigenerational households reflects a societal trend as well. The numbers of multigenerational households are rapidly increasing in American society. Today more than 51.4 million Americans of all ages—or about one in six—live in multigenerational households, a more than 10 percent increase since the start of the Great Recession in 2007. Some multigenerational families choose to live together, such as ethnic communities that value the presence of the older generation in the household; others form because of the current economic situation, such as young adults living with parents until they can live on their own; still others because they are involved in caregiving for older family members. Whatever the reasons, multigenerational households are an increasingly important part of the fabric of society.

In addition to the rise of the multigenerational household, is the rise in grandparents caring for grandchildren. In 2011, according to Pew Research, some seven million grandparents were living with a grandchild—an increase of 22 percent from 2000, when fewer than six million grandparents were living with a grandchild. Approximately three million of these children were also being cared for primarily by that grandparent. In most cases (71 percent), grandchildren living with a grandparent are actually living in the grandparent's household. This share rises to 94 percent among those children who are also being cared for primarily by a grandparent.

## Implications

This brief survey of major studies on the impact of intergenerational relationships and experiences on healthy development and religious transmission leads to a central question: Why do we still believe, despite all of the research, that having age-level ministries, faith formation, and programming is the best and primary way to grow faithful followers of Christ? This is *not* to say that congregations should not provide age-focused or affinity group ministry and faith formation. It *is* to say: What should be central to the congregation's ministries and faith formation?

What if your congregation viewed its community life, ministries, and faith formation through the intergenerational lens provided by the research studies? If that were to happen, a congregation would want to strengthen the ability (confidence and competence) of parents and grandparents to promote religious socialization; be role models of faithful practice; engage in faith practices at home, and develop warm, affirming, and unconditionally support relationships between parents (and grandparents) and their children, teens, and young adults. It would want to focus on the extended family as a unit by bringing together grandparents, parents, and children, and strengthening connections across generations by offering intergenerational learning, service, worship, prayer, and caring relationships. It would want to foster high-quality caring relationships across the generations in a congregation—becoming a 5:1 church where at least five adults are willing to commit to invest in one child or teenager in a variety of ways. And so much more.

Congregations that take the research seriously will be well on their road to becoming much more intentionally intergenerational—becoming an intergenerational church.

## The Intergenerational View from Congregational Culture

Intergenerationality has deep roots in our Jewish and Christian heritage. The call for one generation to share its faith and story with future generations is deeply embedded in the Jewish tradition. Moses' instruction to the parents and grandparents of his day makes this clear:

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:1-9).

From the first century onward, Christian faith communities have been intergenerational communities. Allan G. Harkness writes, “Ever since the development of Christian faith communities in the post-Pentecost era of Christianity, there has been a consciousness that such communities need to encourage and embody a genuine intergenerationalism” (Harkness 1998, 431).

From its Jewish roots, the early Christian church maintained its intergenerational identity with all ages considered to be integral parts of it. “The church is all generations. From the newly baptized infant to the homebound, aged widow—all are members of the faith community. None are potential members; none are ex-members. Though some congregations may have no younger members (and a few no elderly), most have all five generations. And all are members of the Body” (Koehler, 10).

Allan Harkness offers three theological perspectives that inform an intergenerational vision and practice in Christian communities:

1. *Intergenerationality is an expression of who God is.* God’s character is trinitarian—a community or communion of love.
2. *Intergenerationality is the essence of the church.* Intergenerationality was a distinctive feature of the faith communities in both the Old and New Testaments. “The churches of the New Testament maintained the intergenerational model drawn from their Old Testament roots, with persons of all ages considered to be integral. . . . An integral component of Christian ecclesiology continues to be that communities of the Christian faith—churches—should normatively comprise person of all ages” (Harkness, 127).
3. *Intergenerational processes are integral to personal faith development.* Children and youth growth in faith by walking and celebrating with adults *and* adults grow in faith through the process (mutuality). There are six areas in which theological perspectives undergird the necessity for intergenerational interaction for personal faith development: (1) common faith development needs to cross the age groups, (2) acceptance and affirmation is enhanced by intergenerational contact, (3) spiritual qualities that lie at the heart of faith need intergenerational expression, (4) intergenerational interaction

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reinforces discipleship as an age-related journey, (5) holistic faith development requires intergenerational interaction, and 6) intergenerational interaction enhances Christian integrity (Harkness, 129–132).

Harkness concludes by writing, “The overall picture from a biblical and theological perspective is that intergenerational interaction is crucial to enable Christians to move towards increasing maturity in their faith, through the unity of word, behavior, and attitude, which was modeled and advocated by Jesus himself and which was integral to the ecclesiology of the early church. Heightened intergenerational expression is also crucial for most Christian communities if they are going to develop their corporate identity in line with, and to ensure their practices are congruent with, their stated ecclesiology and divine commission” (Harkness, 132).

Christine Ross writes that “intergenerational ministry occurs when a congregation intentionally combines the generations together in mutual serving, sharing, or learning with the core activities of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community” (Ross 2007, 27). Intergenerationality happens in and through all of the ministries of the congregation. Churches that have a culture that is intergenerational find themselves transforming all of their ministries with both intergenerational experiences and perspectives.

Essential to a congregational culture of intergenerationality is mutuality and interpersonal interaction across generations, providing the context for relationship building, storytelling, faith sharing, and shared faith practices. Allan Harkness writes, “Intergenerational activity refers to interaction across age groups in which there is a sense of mutuality—that is, where participants both give to and receive from those of other ages. It is much more about collaborative involvement *with* others, rather than simply ministry *to* others” (Harkness 2012, 122).

Most congregations are multigenerational by membership. Some are *intentionally* intergenerational. They make their intergenerational character a defining feature of their community life, ministries, and faith formation. These churches make it a priority to foster intergenerational relationships, faith sharing, and storytelling; to incorporate all generations in worship; to develop service projects that involve all ages; and to engage all generations in learning together. For these churches, being intergenerational is a way of life. It is an integral element of their culture. It is who they are!

Every church can become intentionally intergenerational in its life, ministry, and faith-forming experiences. *Generations Together* focuses on five essential components of congregational life—*caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving*—that are at the heart of every Christian community. When a congregation commits itself to building a culture of intergenerationality through these five elements, each element becomes a sign of and instrument for the full experience of the body of Christ by all ages and generations.

- **Caring.** Cultivating caring relationships across generations in the congregation and community, becoming a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love.
- **Celebrating.** Worshiping God together through Sunday worship, rituals, sacraments, and the liturgical seasons that involves all of the ages and generations.
- **Learning.** Engaging all ages and generations together in learning experiences that teach scripture and the Christian tradition, informing and forming disciples of all ages in Christian identity.
- **Praying.** Nurturing the spiritual life of the whole community through the congregation's prayer services, rituals, and blessings throughout the year.
- **Serving.** Involving all ages and generations in service and mission to the world, especially to the poor and vulnerable, and in the works of justice and advocacy.

You can see and hear these five elements and the vision of an intergenerational faith community in this passage from the Book of Acts:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:43–47).

All aspects of a Christian community's shared life can be made to nurture, sustain, and grow people in Christian identity. Congregational culture is crucial in establishing vital faith in the young and old. A congregational culture that is endowed with a sense of the living, active presence of God at work among the people of the whole church, permeating the values, relationships, and activities of the whole congregation, makes a significant difference in promoting faith growth and practice in the lives of all people. A congregation whose basic ministries are thoroughly intergenerational can make a significant difference in nurturing a life-long faith in people (see *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*).

*The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* research study identified many of the most important congregational characteristics (Faith Assets) that create this vibrant culture of Christian faith.

1. The congregation possesses a sense of God's living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service.

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2. The congregation makes faith central, recognizing and participating in God's sustaining and transforming life and work.
3. The congregation practices the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and worship.
4. The congregation focuses on discipleship and is committed to knowing and following Jesus Christ.
5. The congregation emphasizes scripture and values the authority of scripture in its life and mission.
6. The congregation makes witness central and consistently witnesses, serves, promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice.
7. The congregation demonstrates hospitality, and values and welcomes all people.
8. The congregation's life reflects high-quality personal and group relationships.
9. The congregation expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship.
10. The congregation sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally (Martinson, Black, and Roberto, 58–59).

What becomes clear in this study of youth ministry and congregational life is that in addition to learning about God through excellent Bible teaching and youth ministry activities and relationships, young people come to know a living and active God through relationships in the community. The young people in the congregations of this study came to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Jesus. The power of faithful, multigenerational Christian relationships is at the heart of effective youth ministry. This is an insight that applies to all ages and generations.

Every congregation can become *intentionally* intergenerational and create a culture of Christian faith through *caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving* that promotes discipleship, faith growth, and faith practice in all ages and generations for a lifetime.

### The Intergenerational View from Faith Formation

Consistent with both the view from research and from congregational culture, contemporary thinking on faith formation is focused on envisioning a broader paradigm for congregational life and faith formation. Joyce Mercer, author and professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, asks the question this way: What's the best curriculum for forming children and youth in Christian



faith? She responds by focusing on the formative power of the whole Christian community.

We invite people into the way of life that embodies God's love, justice, compassion, and reconciliation, by being, doing, and thinking about it together. The best curriculum for forming children, youth, and anyone else in Christian faith is guided participation in a community of practice where people are vibrantly, passionately risking themselves together in lives of faith in a world crying out for the love of Christ.

Guided participation in a community of practice puts a premium on both participation and practice. Watch children in play imitating the adults around them to see how even the youngest among us hunger to participate in the way of life they see enacted before them. That's a good instinct to follow, because people—children or otherwise!—don't become Christian by learning *about* what Christians do, say, or think (although at some point, particularly in adolescence and beyond, doing so can be an important part of deepening one's faith identity). We become Christian, taking on the identity of one who is a disciple of Jesus, by acting the way Christians act and by talking the way Christians talk. Over time through practice, even our hearts and minds are formed in this way of life.

She makes the point that guided participation in practice isn't just doing. It includes fully and actively practicing our faith in our everyday lives *and* making theological meaning out of the stuff of everyday life. In order to accomplish this, we need places and ways to learn and inhabit faith stories.

Charles Foster in *From Generation to Generation* proposes seven themes to guide our "our educational imagination" about "what the education of congregations might look like in forming and transforming the faith of children and youth (as well as their families and all adults) within the agency of their religious traditions." His themes clearly resonate with an intergenerational congregational culture of faith formation. Briefly summarized his themes include the following (see Foster, 125–142):

1. *An education that forms the faith of children and youth builds up and equips congregations (and their religious traditions) to be the body of Christ in the world.* This involves engaging young people (and their families and all adults) in the disciplines of developing proficiency in the ecclesial practices of worshipping God and serving neighbor; involving them in the practices and perspectives, sensibilities and habits associated with being the body of Christ in ministry in the world; and preparing them to participate in and celebrate Christ's ministry as the focus of a congregation's education.

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2. *To engage children and youth in building up and equipping the church as the body of Christ in ministry in the world plunges a congregation (and the agencies of its religious tradition) necessarily into ecclesial-grounded educational practices of forming and transforming faith.* This involves focusing on Christian practices and, especially, the two sets of practices that establish the context for all others: loving God and neighbor (the Great Commandment).
3. *A faith-forming education requires the interdependence of the generations.* This involves developing sustained patterns of intergenerational learning, relationships, and mentoring that develop young people's identification with the faith community, give them memories of hope to enliven their future, and create their sense of responsibility for the well-being of the community and the earth.
4. *The responsibility of mentoring the faith of children and youth belongs to the whole congregation in the full range of its ministries.* This involves highlighting the community as mentor/teacher in which no one, yet everyone, may move in and out of the interplay of teaching and learning, of forming and being formed. The clearest way of learning to be Christian is to participate with others in the practices of being Christian. Each member of a faith community may potentially mentor someone at the threshold of expertise in some shared community practice.
5. *As congregations engage in practices of mentoring to build up and equip the church as the body of Christ in ministry in the world, the diversity of the gifts and graces of young people (and the whole community) is nurtured.*
6. *A faith-forming education must be contextually relevant to people of all ages today.*
7. *A faith-forming education relevant to the challenges of contemporary experience engages congregations in the preparation of their children, youth, and adults to participate in the events central to their identity as Christian communities.* A faith-forming education centered on events includes the practices of *anticipation* through stories from the past associated with the event, of *preparation* in which we develop knowledge and skill for participating in the event, of *rehearsal* of the event, of *participation* in the event, and of *critical reflection* upon our participation in the event.

Among the events central to the Christian community are the feasts and seasons of the church year, Sunday worship and the lectionary, sacramental and ritual celebrations, holidays and holydays, works of justice and acts of service, times of prayer, spiritual traditions, and events that originate within the life and history of a individual congregation. A faith-forming education that is centered in the events of the Christian community is intrinsically an intergenerational experience.

*The Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation* of the Episcopal Church is a comprehensive vision of lifelong faith formation that is centered in the life, events, and ministries of the Christian community. It promotes a vision of a congregational culture that nurtures growth in faith and equips people for active discipleship in the world—and doing all of this through participation in and engagement with an intergenerational faith community. It describes Christian formation as “a lifelong journey with Christ, in Christ, and to Christ. Lifelong Christian faith formation is lifelong growth in the knowledge, service, and love of God as followers of Christ and is informed by scripture, tradition and reason.”

The *Charter* envisions God inviting, inspiring, and transforming people. Through the Christian church God *invites* all people into a prayerful life of worship, continuous learning, intentional outreach, advocacy, and service. God invites people to hear the word of God through scripture and spread the good news. Through the Christian church God *inspires* all people to experience liturgy and worship, study scripture, and grow as disciples. Through the Christian church, God *transforms* all people to do the work of Jesus Christ in the world and strive to be a loving and witnessing community. (To read the complete *Charter* see the appendix on page 35 or go to [www.episcopalchurch.org/page/adult-formation-lifelong-learning](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/adult-formation-lifelong-learning).)

The three voices we have examined reflect a much larger body of thinking about a broader, more comprehensive, and intergenerational paradigm for congregational life and faith formation. They echo and deepen the work of C. Ellis Nelson, John Westerhoff, and Maria Harris who pioneered an understanding of faith growth that was rooted in the church and its communal life and ministries. At the heart of their vision is an intergenerational church—*caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving*—nurturing the Christian faith of all its people and equipping them to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today.

## Faith-forming Processes for All Ages and Generations

The goal of nurturing Christian faith in all ages and equipping people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world has guided Christian churches for 2,000 years. This is a robust, vital, and life-giving Christian faith that is holistic: a way of the head, the heart, and the hands.

- *A way of the head* (inform) demands a discipleship of faith, seeking understanding and belief with personal conviction, sustained by study, reflecting, discerning and deciding, all toward spiritual wisdom for life.
- *A way of the heart* (form) demands a discipleship of right relationships and right desires, community building, hospitality and inclusion, trust in God’s love, and prayer and worship.

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- *A way of the hands* (transform) demands a discipleship of love, justice, peacemaking, simplicity, integrity, healing, and repentance (see Groome, 111–119).

Churches want Christian formation that *informs, forms, and transforms*; that immerses people into the practices and way of life of a tradition-bearing community where they can be transformed spiritually; and that engages all ages and generations in a lifelong process of growing, experiencing, celebrating, and living the Christian faith throughout life. While they may express this differently, Christian churches seek to help people:

- grow in their relationship with God throughout their lives
- live as disciples of Jesus Christ at home, in the workplace, in the community and the world
- develop an understanding of the Bible and their particular faith tradition
- deepen their spiritual life and practices
- engage in service and mission to the world
- relate the Christian faith to life today
- participate in the life and ministries of their faith community

The church, as an intergenerational faith community, is the primary context for faith formation—a community of practice where all ministries are engaged in faith formation.

### Faith-forming Processes in the Congregation

From our survey of the research on religious transmission and on faith-forming congregations we know that there are at least eight essential faith-forming processes that promote faith growth *and* that make a significant difference in the lives of children, youth, adults, and families. *And when these are done intergenerationally they are magnified in their importance and impact.* The eight faith-forming processes include:

1. caring relationships
2. reading the Bible
3. learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life today
4. worshiping with the faith community
5. celebrating rituals and milestones
6. praying, devotions, and spiritual formation

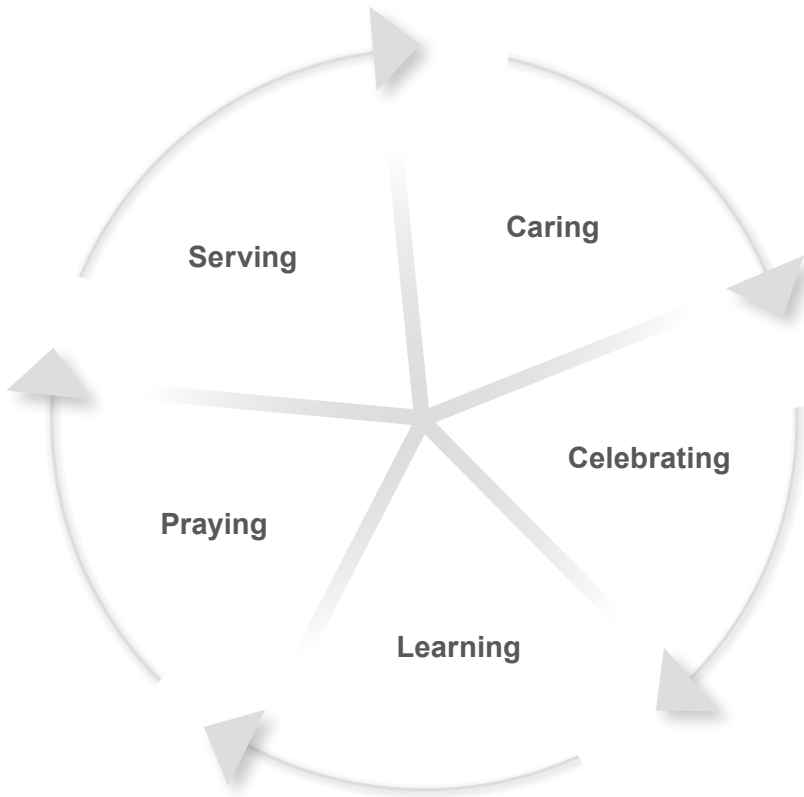
7. serving people in need, working for justice, and caring for creation
8. celebrating the liturgical seasons

These eight processes are supported by a congregational culture that experiences God's living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service; makes faith central, emphasizes prayer, focuses on discipleship, emphasizes scripture, makes mission central, demonstrates hospitality, creates community, promotes uplifting worship, fosters ethical responsibility, and promotes service to those in need. And they are supported by congregational leadership that exercises spiritual influence and models faith, demonstrates leadership competence, demonstrates interpersonal competence, and supports leaders and teams. (Martinson, Black, and Roberto, 58–59).

In *Generations Together* the eight faith-forming processes are incorporated into the five essential components of congregational life—*caring*, *celebrating*, *learning*, *praying*, and *serving*—that are at the heart of every Christian community. (See diagram on page 28.) These are the ways in which a congregation can foster intergenerationality within the faith community, nurture the faith life of all ages, and equip people to live their Christian faith at home and in the world.

- **Caring.** Cultivating caring relationships across generations in the congregation and community —becoming a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love—through intergenerational relationship-building in all ministries and programs, storytelling, mentoring, community life events, and more.
- **Celebrating.** Worshiping God together through intergenerational Sunday worship—engaging all ages in worship and leadership roles, whole community rituals and sacramental celebrations, milestone celebrations, and church year feasts and seasons that involve ages and generations.
- **Learning.** Engaging all ages and generations in intergenerational learning experiences that teach scripture and the Christian tradition, informing and forming disciples of all ages in Christian identity.
- **Praying.** Nurturing the spiritual life of the whole community through churchwide prayer services, rituals, and blessings throughout the year that bring together all ages and generations; and engaging people in spiritual formation.
- **Serving.** Involving all ages and generations in service and mission to the world, especially to the poor and vulnerable, in caring for creation, and in the works of justice and advocacy through local and global projects.

INTERGENERATIONAL HEART OF CONGREGATIONAL LIFE



**Faith-forming Processes in the Family**

Each of the eight faith formation processes are essential to family life as well. Research on family life and religiosity points to six important areas in which congregations can make a significant and lasting difference in the lives of (extended) families.

1. **Faith life.** Parents and grandparents (and family members) are growing in Christian faith and practicing a vital and informed Christian faith.
2. **Socialization.** Parents and grandparents are modeling the Christian faith and practice, and providing religious socialization for children and teens.
3. **Participation.** Families are participating in congregational worship and community life together.

4. **Faith practices.** Families are engaging in faith practices that nurture faith and develop active discipleship, including family devotions, family conversations, prayer, Bible reading, shared meals (especially Sunday meals and holidays), holiday and holyday celebration, moral instruction and guidance, reliance on God for support and guidance, forgiveness and healing, and service to those in need.
5. **Family life assets.** Families are developing a healthy and strong family life built on:
  - nurturing relationships and family harmony—positive communication, affection, respect and love, emotional openness
  - establishing routines—family meals, shared activities, meaningful traditions, dependability
  - maintaining expectations—openness about tough topics, fair rules, defined boundaries, clear expectations
  - adapting to challenges—management of daily commitments, problem-solving, democratic decision-making
  - connecting to the community (Family Assets, Search Institute)
6. **Parenting style.** Parents are practicing a warm, supportive, affirming, and authoritative parenting style.

When a congregation lives *caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving* intergenerationally, a natural connection to (extended) families and the home is established. Congregations can utilize family participation in congregational life, ministries, and faith formation to teach, model, and demonstrate Christian values and faith practices that families can live everyday at home. Participation in intergenerational experiences helps to develop the faith of parents and grandparents and increases their confidence and competence for engaging in faith practices at home. Intergenerational participation creates a shared experienced—often missing from everyday life—of families learning together, sharing faith, praying together, serving, and celebrating rituals and traditions. Families learn the knowledge and skills for sharing faith, celebrating traditions, and practicing the Christian faith at home and in the world; and they receive encouragement for continued family conversations at home. Congregations also have the opportunity to provide resources to help families share, celebrate, and practice their faith at home.

## Faith-forming Processes Online

We live in a world with an abundance of high-quality religious and spiritual digital content available in a variety of forms: online, apps, e-books, video, and much more. In the digital age, congregations can develop online digital platforms

(websites) to extend and deepen intergenerational experiences by utilizing these digital faith formation resources and by fostering social connections among people through social media. Congregations now have a way to connect with people and resource them in their daily lives. For example, a congregation can extend Sunday worship through the week using a variety of digital content that deepens the understanding and practice of the Sunday readings, sermon, and church year season. Digital content can provide prayers, devotions, rituals, video of the sermon with a study guide, service/action ideas, conversation activities, and more. This example can be applied to each of the five components of church life: *caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving*.

Imagine an online faith formation center where people of all ages and generations can find (and link to) high-quality religious content and experiences—worship, prayer, spiritual practices, Bible study, Christian beliefs and traditions, rituals and milestones, music, and so much more *and* that connects to the experiences they are having in the congregation. Imagine a parent resource center with the best knowledge, practices, and tools for parenting in print, audio, and video; links to quality parent websites; and a parent blog and/or Facebook page to share their experiences and insights. Imagine an online justice and service center that connects with congregational justice and service projects where people of all ages can learn about social issues, explore biblical and Christian teaching on justice, find ways to continue acting together through local and global projects and organizations, and then share their experiences using a blog or social media. Imagine an online prayer and spirituality center where people can access daily prayer experiences, offer prayer intentions, pray for others, learn about spiritual practices, download prayer activities for the home, and so much more.

*Note.* For examples of congregations that have built websites with online faith-forming content and activities that connect church events with people's daily lives go to [www.IntergenerationalFaith.com](http://www.IntergenerationalFaith.com).

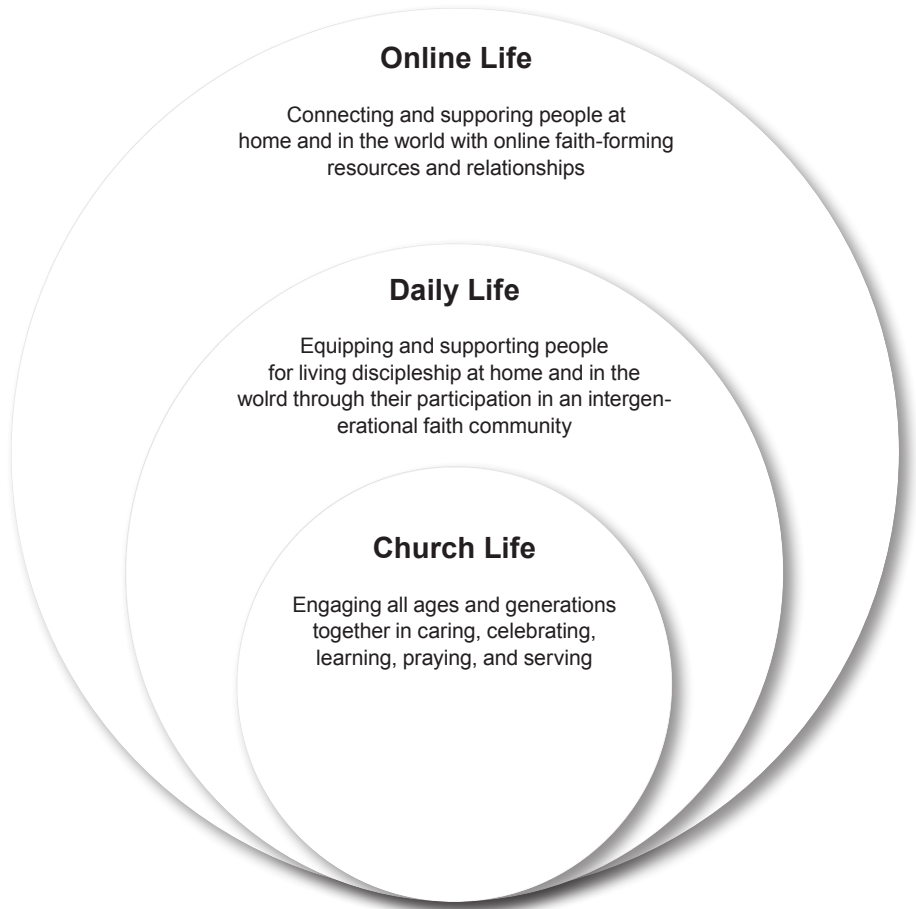
## **A Faith-forming System**

Congregation, family, and online can now be connected in a model of faith formation for all ages and generations. The intergenerational experiences of *caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving* in the congregation foster intergenerationality within the faith community, nurture the faith life of all ages, and equip people to live their Christian faith at home and in the world. Through these intergenerational experiences congregations can *inform, form, and transform* individuals and families. They can assist them to continue their growth in faith, practice their faith, and apply their faith to life today. The online digital platform provides a way to support people in their faith growth by providing resources and activities to enrich their faith and practice and by connecting people to each other—all of which is accessible and available anytime and anywhere.



The diagram below illustrates the interconnection and provides a way for a congregation to build intentional connections between congregational experiences, daily life, and online resources and relationships.

**CONNECTING CHURCH LIFE, DAILY LIFE, AND ONLINE LIFE**



This faith-forming system can guide your congregation in envisioning and designing projects and initiatives to become more intentionally intergenerational, connect with people's daily lives at home and in the world, and utilize the abundance of digital resources to deepen people's faith life.

## The Benefits and Blessings of an Intergenerational Church

Congregations are discovering that bringing generations together provides benefits and blessings on a variety of levels—for the congregation as a whole, for families, for individuals of all ages, and for the wider community. These benefits of becoming an intentionally intergenerational congregation have been identified from research studies and the experience of congregations. (To learn more about the research and benefits of intergenerationality in church life, consult “Resources” at the end of the chapter on page 34.)

1. Intergenerational churches reclaim God’s intent for faith to be shared in community and across generations and bring understanding and unity within a congregation.
2. Intergenerational experiences create and strengthen relationships among people of all ages and enhance their sense of belonging in the faith community.
3. Intergenerational experiences create a welcoming environment, hospitality, trust, acceptance, emotional safety, and care—conducive to promoting faith sharing, group participation, and mutual support. Intergenerational experiences teach people to care for one another in the congregation and in the community.
4. Intergenerational experiences enhance people’s identification with their congregation and integration with the faith community, decreasing the isolation so many people—both young and old—feel today.
5. Intergenerational experiences lead to greater involvement in church life, including Sunday worship, church events, and church ministries.
6. Intergenerational experiences affirm each person’s value in the total community (regardless of age), teaching younger generations to value the older generations and the older the younger generations.
7. Intergenerational experiences utilize the wisdom, experience, and knowledge of one generation to meet the needs of another generation.
8. Intergenerational experiences promote understanding of shared values and respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life.
9. Intergenerational experiences address 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, multisensory, interactive, and participatory.

10. Intergenerational experiences encourage faith growth and practice in all generations and provide “up close and personal” formation in faith as children, teens, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults engage in sharing faith, teaching, learning, serving, celebrating, and praying for one another.
11. Intergenerational experiences support families by surrounding them with a community of faith and providing parents with opportunities to learn from Christians who have raised faithful children.
12. Intergenerational experiences increase the opportunities for children and youth to have Christian role models outside of their families.
13. Intergenerational experiences utilize the creative gifts and talents of younger and older generations to provide service to the church and world.
14. Intergenerational churches have key leaders—pastors and ministry leaders—who practice a collaborative and empowering style of leadership that values a team approach to ministry. Leaders and teams have a shared vision for an intergenerational church

Living as an *intentionally* intergenerational Christian community brings great blessings and benefits to everyone. Being intergenerational makes a huge difference!

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## **APPENDIX: THE CHARTER FOR LIFELONG CHRISTIAN FORMATION**

Lifelong Christian Faith Formation in The Episcopal Church is lifelong growth in the knowledge, service and love of God as followers of Christ and is informed by Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

**I have called you friends** (John 15:14-16)

**Through The Episcopal Church, God Invites all people:**

- To enter into a prayerful life of worship, continuous learning, intentional outreach, advocacy and service.
- To hear the Word of God through scripture, to honor church teachings, and continually to embrace the joy of Baptism and Eucharist, spreading the Good News of the risen Christ and ministering to all.
- To respond to the needs of our constantly changing communities, as Jesus calls us, in ways that reflect our diversity and cultures as we seek, wonder and discover together.
- To hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people, placing ourselves in the stories of our faith, thereby empowering us to proclaim the Gospel message.

**You did not choose me, but I chose you  
and appointed you to go and bear fruit** (John 15:14-16)

**Through The Episcopal Church, God Inspires all people:**

- To experience Anglican liturgy, which draws us closer to God, helps us discern God's will and encourages us to share our faith journeys.

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- To study Scripture, mindful of the context of our societies and cultures, calling us to seek truth anew while remaining fully present in the community of faith.
- To develop new learning experiences, equipping disciples for life in a world of secular challenges and carefully listening for the words of modern sages who embody the teachings of Christ.
- To prepare for a sustainable future by calling the community to become guardians of God's creation.

**I am giving you these commands  
that you may love one another (John 15:17).**

### **Through The Episcopal Church, God Transforms all people:**

- By doing the work Jesus Christ calls us to do, living into the reality that we are all created in the image of God and carrying out God's work of reconciliation, love, forgiveness, healing, justice and peace.
- By striving to be a loving and witnessing community, which faithfully confronts the tensions in the church and the world as we struggle to live God's will.
- By seeking out diverse and expansive ways to empower prophetic action, evangelism, advocacy and collaboration in our contemporary global context.
- By holding all accountable to lift every voice in order to reconcile oppressed and oppressor to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Christian faith formation in The Episcopal Church is a lifelong journey with Christ, in Christ, and to Christ.**

*Developed by the Standing Commission on Lifelong Christian Formation and Education in conjunction with the Proclaiming Education for ALL Taskforce, Christian Educators throughout The Episcopal Church, and the Office of Adult Faith Formation for The Episcopal Church.*

[www.episcopalchurch.org/page/adult-formation-lifelong-learning](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/adult-formation-lifelong-learning)