

# Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation: Research Findings from Practitioners

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## The Intergenerational Faith Formation Learning Model

The Generations of Faith intergenerational model is based on the work of James White in the book *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988.) White identified four patterns of relationships that shape the four components of an IGRE learning experience: 1) In-Common Experiences, 2) Parallel Learning, 3) Contribute Occasions, and 4) Interactive Sharing.

The model of learning used by parishes in the Generations of Faith project included the following elements:

1. Gathering and Opening Prayer
2. All-Ages Learning Experience. Intergenerational learning begins with a multigenerational experience of the theme that all the generations share together.
3. In-Depth Learning Experience. Through structured learning activities each generation—families with children, adolescents, and 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

Churches implemented intergenerational learning in one of two approaches. In the first approach churches made intergenerational learning their core faith formation program for all ages conducting monthly, bi-weekly, and weekly intergenerational programs as their core experience, and then offering a variety of age-group or affinity-group programs throughout the month or year. They replaced or modified their age group programming, such as weekly classes, to place an emphasis on all ages learning together. They develop a multi-year curriculum for the whole community that can include themes from the Bible, the cycle of Sunday lectionary readings, church year feasts and seasons, Christian practices, service and social justice, prayer and spiritual disciplines, core Christian beliefs, and moral teachings.

In the second approach intergenerational learning can take a variety of forms, such as an all-ages workshop, a whole-congregation Bible study, all ages conversations after Sunday worship focused on the scripture readings and sermon. Churches have also added an intergenerational learning component to a vacation Bible school or summer program. They take the theme from the summer program and offer an intergenerational program on that same theme for the whole community, engaging the parents and grandparents in learning around the

same content as the children have experienced. Churches also use intergenerational learning to prepare the community for a new liturgical year and the lectionary readings, for particular church year feasts and seasons (Advent-Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost), and for church-wide events, such as Stewardship Sunday.

## **Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation**

After a review of the two prior research studies and the literature on intergenerational faith formation, a survey was developed and sent to the 100 registered participants of the 2014 Symposium on Intergenerational Faith Formation. The purpose was to test the importance and application of 17 principles of intergenerational faith formation. In this section the major findings results from the two research projects (2006 and 2013) with churches engaged in intergenerational faith formation are correlated with the 17 principles.

### **Christian Identity**

1. Through IFF Christian commitment is formed and strengthened as persons develop relationships and actively participate in intergenerational faith communities that teach, model, and live our the communities' beliefs.
2. Through IFF people learn the ways of the community of practice as they participate authentically and relationally with more experienced members of the culture; people learn Christian ways from more experienced members of the culture through intergenerational Christian communities.
3. Through IFF people identify with their community of practice as they are allowed to participate legitimately in the activities to be learned – as children and new believers (and others) participate in relational community doing “Christian” things with those further down the road, they come to identify with the believing community.

#### **Findings for 2006 Research**

- Families benefit from intergenerational learning through opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families are growing in ways that they share faith.
- Intergenerational learning addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith.
- Participation in intergenerational learning programs leads to greater involvement of participants in parish life, including Sunday Mass, sacraments, service projects, and in the ministries of the parish.

#### **Findings from 2013 Research**

- Adults: More adults are participating in faith formation because of IFF. IFF provides adults with high quality learning experiences. Adults are growing in faith through IFF. IFF addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith.
- Children and youth experience meaningful support from several non-parental adults through IFF.
- Participation in IFF programs leads to greater involvement of people in parish life, including Sunday Mass, service, and the ministries of the parish.

### **Relationships and Community**

4. IFF 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.
5. IFF promotes a community where generational differences can be transcended rather than reinforced, where generational understanding and positive intergenerational relationships can be experienced.

6. IFF affirms each person's value in the total community (regardless of age), and promote understanding of shared values and respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life.
7. IFF fosters a climate that includes valuing, nurturing, and employing the gifts of every person from young to old.
8. IFF 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.

#### **Findings for 2006 Research**

- Intergenerational learning strengthens the parish community through relationship building and participation in parish life; people take time to talk and share with each other.
- Intergenerational relationships are created through intergenerational learning, as people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together.
- Intergenerational learning creates an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.
- Participation in intergenerational learning programs leads to greater involvement of participants in parish life, including Sunday Mass, sacraments, service projects, and in the ministries of the parish.
- Our parish is reaching new audiences, such as adults and whole families, through intergenerational learning.

#### **Findings from 2013 Research**

- IFF provides an environment where people feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.
- Adults gain meaningful insights from their interaction with children and youth through IFF.
- Children and youth experience meaningful support from several non-parental adults through IFF.
- IFF is strengthening relationships among people in the parish community.
- Our parish is reaching new audiences, such as adults and whole families, through IFF.
- Intergenerational relationships are being created through IFF.
- Participation in IFF programs leads to greater involvement of people in parish life, including Sunday Mass, service, and the ministries of the parish.
- The parish community is welcoming and hospitable.

## **Developmental**

9. IFF 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.
10. IFF 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.
11. IFF settings are authentic, complex learning environments, made up of individuals at various stages in their faith journeys, teaching some and learning from others as they participate in their community of believers.

#### **Findings for 2006 Research**

- IFF engages people in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, interactive, and involve faith sharing

### **Findings from 2013 Research**

- IFF provides parents with high quality learning experiences.
- IFF provides families with children with high quality learning experiences.
- Adults: More adults are participating in faith formation because of IFF. IFF provides adults with high quality learning experiences. Adults are growing in faith through IFF. IFF addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith.
- Adults gain meaningful insights from their interaction with children and youth through IFF.
- IFF provides middle school youth with high quality learning experiences. Middle school youth are growing in faith through IFF.
- High school youth are growing in faith through IFF. IFF provides high school youth with high quality learning experiences.
- The parish offers a variety of intergenerational events/programs throughout the year (e.g., liturgies, prayer, service, community life).

## **Learning and Growth**

12. IFF encourages 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.
13. IFF has a positive effect on both the older and young populations involved by creating intentional opportunities for young and old to meet together, to share stories, to create something together or merely to talk which can be mutually beneficial and bless the whole body of Christ.
14. IFF 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.
15. IFF equips people to live their faith in daily life, and engages them in service to others, locally and globally.

### **Findings for 2006 Research**

- Intergenerational relationships are created through intergenerational learning, as people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together.
- Families benefit from intergenerational learning through opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families are growing in ways that they share faith.
- Families are growing in faith and developing ways to share their faith through intergenerational learning.
- Intergenerational learning addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith.
- There has been an increase in the number of adults participating in faith formation because of intergenerational learning.

### **Findings from 2013 Research**

- The IFF team designs programs that are creative, interactive, and engaging for all ages and generations.
- IFF provides parents with high quality learning experiences.
- IFF provides families with children with high quality learning experiences. IFF provides families with children with practical home materials.
- Families with children are growing in faith through IFF and are sharing and living faith at home.

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- IFF provides middle school youth with high quality learning experiences. Middle school youth are growing in faith through IFF.
- High school youth are growing in faith through IFF. IFF provides high school youth with high quality learning experiences.

## Leadership

16. IFF 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.
17. IFF ministries and programming is facilitated by teams who work collaboratively in designing and conducting programming, and are well-prepared and supported in their ministry.

### Findings for 2006 Research

- Intergenerational learning requires a coordinator who fully understands the vision and can work with others to implement it.
- Intergenerational learning requires a team approach, leadership teams with a shared vision for implementation and that practice teamwork and collaboration.
- Intergenerational learning requires committed volunteer leaders who are engaged in a variety of roles in lifelong faith formation: planning, teaching, organizing, and supporting.
- Intergenerational learning requires volunteer leaders who are empowered and trusted to take responsibility for key aspects of the implementation of lifelong faith formation.
- Through their participation as leaders in intergenerational learning, leaders feel closer to God, and grow in their knowledge of the faith and their confidence in sharing it with others.

### Findings from 2013 Research

- The pastor and parish staff share a common vision for IFF.
- Parishioners know and understand the faith formation mission of the parish.
- The pastor and parish staff empower people in the community for leadership.
- IFF teams share a common vision.
- The IFF team works collaboratively in designing and conducting IFF programs.
- IFF volunteer leaders grow in their knowledge of the Catholic faith and their confidence in sharing it with others.
- There is collaboration and teamwork among IFF leadership teams.
- IFF volunteer leaders feel closer to God.
- IFF volunteer leaders are well-prepared for their roles in IFF programs.
- IFF volunteer leaders are well-supported by the IFF team.
- The IFF team is able to find new faith formation resources for IFF programming.
- The parish has had consistent leadership for IFF.