

Principles & Practices of Intergenerational Faith Formation: Research Findings from Practitioners

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This article is based on two research projects (2006 and 2013) on intergenerational faith formation and a survey of intergenerational principles with the participants in a 2014 Symposium on Intergenerational Faith Formation. The 2006 and 2013 research was conducted on Catholic parishes involved in the Generations of Faith Project, a Lilly Endowment funded project sponsored by the Center for Ministry Development (a Catholic nonprofit organization serving diocese and parishes in youth and young adult ministry, family and intergenerational faith formation). The 2014 survey was conducted with an ecumenical group of leaders represented eight Christian denominations (American Baptist, Christian Reformed, Episcopal, Lutheran ELCA, Presbyterian (USA), Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ) and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Intergenerational 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: 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 their lifelong approach with age-specific and affinity group learning.

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.

For more on intergenerational learning see *Becoming a Church of Lifelong Learners* by John Roberto (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), *Intergenerational Faith Formation* by Mariette Martineau, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber (Twenty-Third Publications, 2008), and *Generations Together* by Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto (Lifelong Faith, 2014).

For articles, case studies, and interviews with leaders on intergenerational learning go to the Reimagine Faith Formation website: www.reimaginefaithformation.com/intergenerational.

The Research Studies

Study #1. Generations of Faith Project (2006)

At the conclusion of the Generations of Faith project we conducted a qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) research study to determine the effects of intergenerational faith formation on participants, church leaders, and the whole faith community. The Generations of Faith research examined the progress and effectiveness of the participating parishes in developing and implementing an intergenerational, lifelong faith formation curriculum for parish and home faith formation.

A qualitative research study, utilizing eight focus groups of parish staff in 79 parishes in eight dioceses and in-depth interviews with selected parishes, was conducted in the Spring of 2005. Parishes were organized into two focus group sessions—one group comprised parishes that adopted intergenerational program for all parish formation, and a second group that blended intergenerational programming with existing weekly classes for children and teens. The results were compiled in August 2005.

A quantitative, online survey of all participating GOF parishes was conducted in December 2005 through January 2006 using SurveyMonkey.com. Over 434 of the approximately 1000 Catholic parishes who participated in the project responded to the survey.

Finding #1. Intergenerational faith formation strengthens and creates new relationships and increases participation in church life.

The *Generations of Faith Research Study* (qualitative and quantitative research) found that the practice of intergenerational learning promotes relationship building and participation in church life. Specifically the study found:

- Intergenerational relationships are created as people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together.
- Intergenerational learning strengthens the faith community through relationship building and participation in church life; people take time to talk and share with each other.
- Participation in intergenerational learning leads to greater involvement in church life, including Sunday liturgy, church events, and church ministries.

The survey of 434 Catholic parishes asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. Families benefit from intergenerational learning through opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families are growing in ways that they share faith. (4.06)
2. Intergenerational learning strengthens the parish community through relationship building and participation in parish life; people take time to talk and share with each other. (4.0)
3. Our parish is reaching new audiences, such as adults and whole families, through intergenerational learning. (3.76)
4. Intergenerational relationships are created through intergenerational learning, as people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together. (3.73)
5. Participation in GOF learning programs leads to greater involvement of participants in parish life, including Sunday Mass, sacraments, service projects, and in the ministries of the parish. (3.69)

Responses from Focus Groups

Relationships

I found in intergenerational learning a chance to find belonging, a sense of community, a sense of value and worth in a way that I can contribute to, and then just getting to know people of all ages in my community. As a newcomer it has been a wonderful experience.

The older couples, they just talk to the kids. It's like a grandparent taking them on because their own grandparents aren't close. So it's very good to see that everybody is involved. Everybody feels comfortable being involved.

One of the changes I saw from the program is the relationship that now even the youngest children in this parish have with our senior citizens, which they did not have before because they were all in their isolated groups. I think this shows great respect for who our elders are, and that's why our first program was on the role of the elders.

We are so pleased to see all ages sitting and eating and conversing with one another. Parishioners who have never met are forging friendships and looking forward to seeing each other the following month. Confirmation students are doing most of their service hours during the sessions, and the parishioners notice it. Adults seem to really be interested in the sessions.

It's faith sharing. It's building community. It's bringing people together. It's opening doors. And they don't sit there in silence. They chatter all the time and they're happy to be there.

It's been a great way for our parish family to grow closer together by learning from each other. The adults seem to enjoy the interaction with the young people in our parish. It's hard to get everyone to break away from the meal segment to start the program! They are really enjoying just being together, and that is a gift.

The biggest thing that I see is community, community, community. You can see Church happening within the group, and you can see a mentoring that is unbelievable.

I see more people talking to each other after Mass or spending time together. As staff, we recognize people and they recognize us. It's just building relationships and community within a parish.

Involvement in Church Life

There has been an increase in liturgical attendance, and more families are volunteering to do faith formation together. The marginalized in the parish feel invited, and watching them grow has been wonderful.

More people are coming to intergenerational learning who I haven't seen at Mass before. They're participating more and seeing faith as more than just Sunday morning Mass.

We have seen such an increase in participation at church events. An unbelievable number of people came to participate in the Holy Thursday service, and that carried through to this year. Extremely well-attended.

Finding #2. Intergenerational faith formation engages all ages and the whole family in learning together.

The *Generations of Faith Research Study* found that intergenerational learning did, in fact, bring together people of all ages, including families, for learning. In particular many churches found that parents and adults began participating in faith formation because of intergenerational learning. Specifically the study found:

- There is involvement of all ages and generations in learning together: parents and children, teens, young adults, adults, older adults, and whole families.
- Intergenerational learning addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith and fill in the gaps in their formation. More middle-age and older adults are participating in faith formation.
- Families enjoy opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families are growing in the ways that they share faith. Parents are participating in a learning program with their children, often for the first time, and are finding benefits in learning together as a family.

The survey asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. Families benefit from intergenerational learning through opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families are growing in ways that they share faith. (4.06)
2. Intergenerational learning addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith. (3.97)

3. Families are growing in faith and developing ways to share their faith through intergenerational learning. (3.92)
4. Our parish is reaching new audiences, such as adults and whole families, through intergenerational learning. (3.76)
5. There has been an increase in the number of adults participating in faith formation because of intergenerational learning. (3.57)

Responses from Focus Groups

All Ages

I see a great strength as bringing all age groups together to learn about their faith. That's been a real change for our people, and they are responding.

It's really helped me to appreciate the wisdom of our seniors, the energy and faithfulness and spirit of our children, the hunger of our parents, and the questioning of our young adults. We bring all that together in a community setting, and allow them to minister to each other and to help each other grow, and then bring it home with them.

Adult Involvement

I think the biggest change is that we have adults who are excited to come and learn and grow in their faith. And not just a few, but we have many adults who didn't have the opportunity before to participate and grow in their faith. That's very exciting.

We try to challenge adults—to stretch them a bit, even with the simplest things they may be ignorant of. There is a vast need for religious formation and education out there.

I think there's just a hunger for spirituality out there. I think people are looking for something and we're filling in that gap.

Family Involvement

What gives me hope is that I see families being transformed, that we're empowering people to talk about their faith in a whole different way.

For the families who have participated, their lives have changed: their relationship with one another, their relationship with God, and their relationship with the church—total transformation.

I think another big change has been that we've empowered parents to pass on the faith to their children. We've done that in a way in which we are teaching them about their faith and they're learning, so that when they get into the car and drive home they can share the topic with their kids. They know what they are talking about and they feel empowered because they're able to do what they promised at Baptism; that is, to pass their faith on to the children.

With the parents there, the whole family can participate and have something to talk about based on the subject presented at the learning session.

This is what we've been looking for: bringing families together to do this and to be involved together instead of fracturing them into different components.

I know one of the things they love about it is that they get to do this as a family. They say "I liked being together with my family."

Finding #3. Intergenerational faith formation creates a conducive environment for all ages to learn, and utilizes a variety of learning activities to address the diversity of learning styles and developmental needs.

The *Generations of Faith Research Study* found that intergenerational learning creates a learning environment—one of warmth, trust, acceptance, and care—conducive to all ages, that promotes group participation, activities, and discussion. Intergenerational learning programs incorporate a variety of experiential, multi-sensory, and interactive learning experiences to foster all-ages learning, as well address the developmental needs and abilities of the different age groups. Specifically the study found:

- Intergenerational learning creates an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.
- Intergenerational learning engages the participants in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, and interactive. Faith sharing and personal experience are an important element of intergenerational learning.
- Intergenerational learning is exciting; the enthusiasm, joy, and energy are attractive and contagious.

The Generations of Faith survey asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. Intergenerational learning engages participants in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, interactive, and involve faith sharing. (4.26)
2. Intergenerational learning provides an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level. (3.98)

The survey also asked parish leaders to rate the effectiveness of intergenerational learning using a rating from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

1. How would adults rate the overall quality and experience of the intergenerational learning programs? (3.95)
2. How would families with children rate the overall quality and experience of the intergenerational learning programs? (3.84)
3. How would middle school and high school youth rate the overall quality and experience of intergenerational learning programs? (3.06)

Intergenerational learning incorporates a variety of methods and approaches that actively engage people in the learning process and respond to their different learning styles.

Responses from Focus Groups

Environment

I think adults are seeing that it's OK to continue their learning. It's OK not to know everything. This is a safe environment for them to come in and share and listen. I think this environment has made it more welcoming and comfortable for some people to continue exploring their faith.

One by one they came up and they just shared the faith in their lives in an amazing way. They just got it! That there was a sharing, there was a trust; when we broke, people weren't talking about the weather, they were talking about faith.

One of the reasons I love intergenerational learning is because it's a very non-threatening environment in which to get updated, with the result that people begin sharing faith more in their homes.

When the adults met together the sharing was phenomenal. It was people, one-on-one, just opening up and really sharing. They also expressed a desire for more.

Learning

I've seen a change in adults, from simply memorizing their faith to understanding their faith. They have a deep desire to understand more than just what is in the catechism, and they want to know "Why?": "Why are we doing this?" "Why is this so important to us?" I think people are grasping the fact that it's OK to question their faith—that, I believe, is the key to understanding it. And that's one of the things I reiterate constantly: it's all right to question.

It's experiential. People are doing something: they're singing, they're praying, they're watching an event. It's happening in their midst, around them; it's not all up on the stage. It's very interactive.

We had four people get up and give witness to their experience of having celebrated the sacrament. It was powerful and amazing, just four regular people of different generations.

It was more exciting that just being in the regular classroom, and I think the kids are a little more excited with the activities and the skits and some of the fun things we do in the beginning.

For me, it's the excitement and the energy of the people that come to intergenerational learning and the interaction we have with them. I look forward to that energy and enthusiasm.

You really experience enthusiasm that's significantly noticeable, a real positive atmosphere that was contagious, a real excitement; people are charged. I think they feel really excited about it.

Finding #4. Intergenerational faith formation requires a diversity of leaders who embrace a collaborative and empowering style of leadership.

The *Generations of Faith Research Study* found that the practice of intergenerational learning requires a *collaborative* and *empowering* style of leadership. This style of leadership needs to be exercised not just by the pastor or religious education coordinator but also by the entire leadership team for intergenerational learning. Teamwork and collaboration are essential for effective planning and implementation of intergenerational learning. Specifically the study found:

- 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.

The intergenerational learning team includes people who are directly involved in the organization and facilitation of intergenerational learning, and people who will be involved in administrative and support roles. A typical intergenerational learning program will involve a variety of leaders, including:

1. An intergenerational program facilitator
2. Teachers/facilitators for age-appropriate learning groups: families with children or children only, adolescents, young adults, and adults
3. Table group facilitators for age-appropriate learning groups, where necessary
4. Assistants to help with activities
5. Prayer leaders for opening and closing prayer
6. Music leader and/or music team for prayer and activities
7. Hospitality team
8. Set-up and cleanup team
9. Food preparation team
10. Creative arts people
11. Promotion and registration staff

The survey asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement (rating: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

1. Through their involvement in intergenerational learning, volunteer leaders grow in their knowledge of the faith and their sharing it with others. (4.21)
2. Leadership teams share a common vision for intergenerational learning and its implementation in the parish. (4.17)
3. Through their involvement in intergenerational learning, volunteer leaders feel closer to God. (3.92)

The survey also asked parish leaders to rate the effectiveness of intergenerational learning using a rating from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

1. How would you rate the quality of collaboration and teamwork among the GOF leadership teams? (3.87)
2. How would you rate your parish's efforts in equipping (training, resources) leaders for their roles in GOF and trusting them to take responsibility for GOF? (3.37)
3. How would you rate your parish's efforts in developing a variety of leaders necessary for the effective implementation of GOF? (3.10)

Responses from Focus Groups

Coordinator

We were fortunate to have a person who spearheaded the whole thing, who coordinated everything, a person who had the vision, understood the process and what was involved, and was able to pull people together, keep them on track, and keep it moving forward. I think that was a great, great plus.

I have to say a big part of the success of the program has been the coordinator's leadership and her understanding of the curriculum. She was always there. It seemed like her whole ten years of experience kind of built her up for this, so it was really, really, helpful.

The coordinator has a lot of competency and experience. She's very personable. She deals with people first. She has a theological background; it's nice to have someone oversee things who has a good spirit about it.

Teamwork

It's been a wonderful affirmation for me personally and professionally of collaborative ministry, and how alive and powerful that can be.

One of the things that certainly impressed me was the fact that we had a team that came together to plan for the event and the celebration. Some of these people would not have ever seen themselves as being creative or having any good ideas. All of a sudden around a table they began to think together, and we came up with some really nice ideas. There was a real spirited collaboration happening.

Committed Volunteer Leaders

I think there's a real sense of teamwork and confidence in one another.

We're getting more volunteers, people stepping forward to help. We have volunteers from the edges stepping in, people who've never offered to help. It's a different spirit than before.

I don't think we could have thought about doing this process if we weren't aware of the quality of people we have. This parish is blessed in having many talented and eager people who have had some very positive experiences and the gift of being able to share; this was there beforehand. We have some great sources to draw from.

Leaders Growing Spiritually

God is here when these people are here. You can feel his presence. It's beautiful being involved with it, and very rewarding.

I think the Holy Spirit has been a part of our parish and been involved in this program; that is really what has made it happen.

It keeps me fresh, it invigorates me, it gives me life. I love it.

It's probably helped me be stronger in my faith. I've gained a lot more knowledge about Catholicism.

I think it pushes you to develop a deeper understanding of things. When I gave a presentation, I looked at the materials and used them, but I wanted more. I wanted to give more because I wanted them to understand more.

My faith has just blossomed.

Conclusions

The key findings from the focus groups and survey can be summarized in the following 16 conclusions.

1. Parishes are having success in engaging all ages in faith formation, especially parents and adults of all ages. They are implementing a lifelong curriculum that provides foundational faith formation for everyone in the parish community
2. Many parishes are shifting their educational model entirely to the Generations of Faith approach, introducing monthly intergenerational learning programs for the whole parish community, while other parishes are blending intergenerational learning with their existing age group catechesis.
3. Parishes are integrating intergenerational learning with existing parish programs and ministries, developing a more unified and comprehensive model of lifelong faith formation.
4. Parishioners of all ages are developing a deeper understanding of the foundational events and themes of the Catholic faith (Church year, liturgy and sacraments, Creed, morality, prayer, justice) and

learning how to live their faith in the parish, at home, and in the world. And this deeper understanding is leading to greater participation of all ages in parish life.

5. Intergenerational learning is preparing people for greater participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the parish. Participation in intergenerational learning leads to greater involvement in parish life, including the liturgical and sacramental life of the parish, justice and service projects, and parish ministries.
6. Parishes are having great success with the intergenerational learning model. Parishes are seeing high levels of participation and positive responses from parishioners of all ages. In addition to families with children and teens, they are attracting large numbers of middle-aged adults without children and older adults. Parents are participating with their children, often for the first time, and are finding great benefits in learning together as a family.
7. Participants are building relationships across all ages as people learn from each other and grow in faith together. Intergenerational learning is strengthening the parish community—through relationship-building and participation in church life. People take time to talk and share with each other. The entire parish community is benefiting.
8. Intergenerational learning is addressing a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith and fill in the gaps in their formation. More adults are participating in faith formation.
9. Families are enjoying the opportunities to pray, learn, and be together through intergenerational learning. Families are growing in the ways that they share faith.
10. Intergenerational learning creates an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level. Participants are engaged in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, and interactive. Sharing faith and personal experience are an important element of learning.
11. Parishioners of all ages are finding ways to use the activities in the home kit as part of their daily life and home life. Families are beginning to incorporate faith sharing activities in family life.
12. Parishes are discovering that successful implementation of lifelong faith formation depends on the participation and investment of the whole parish staff and ministry leaders in lifelong faith formation, not just those involved in faith formation.
13. The active support and involvement of the pastor, as evidenced by encouragement, an empowering style, long term commitment, and advocacy, is important for the effective implementation of lifelong faith formation.
14. Parish teams across ministries are working together to design and conduct intergenerational faith formation, bringing parish leaders together in a common effort to implement lifelong faith formation. A coordinator of lifelong faith formation, who fully understands the vision and can work with others to implement it, is essential for effective implementation.
15. A large number of committed volunteer leaders are engaged in a variety of roles in lifelong faith formation: planning, teaching, organizing, and supporting. Many parishes are discovering talented and resourceful people to take leadership in lifelong faith formation.
16. Through their participation as leaders in lifelong faith formation, leaders feel closer to God, and grow in their knowledge of the Catholic faith and their confidence in sharing it with others.

Study #2. Study of Catholic Parishes Engaged in Intergenerational Faith Formation (2013)

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 that 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.

Impact of Intergenerational Faith Formation on the Participants

The following statements, ranked in priority order, describe the impact of intergenerational faith formation on the participants. (1-5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

1. IFF engages people in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, interactive, and involve faith sharing. (4.40)
2. IFF provides an environment where people feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level. (4.38)
3. IFF provides parents with high quality learning experiences. (4.32)
4. IFF provides families with children with high quality learning experiences. (4.26)
5. More adults are participating in faith formation because of IFF. (4.20)
6. IFF provides adults with high quality learning experiences. (4.16)
7. Adults are growing in faith through IFF. (4.16)
8. IFF addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith. (4.08)
9. IFF provides families with children with practical home materials. (4.06)
10. Adults gain meaningful insights from their interaction with children and youth through IFF. (3.98)
11. Children & youth experience meaningful support from several non-parental adults through IFF. (3.94)
12. Families with children are growing in faith through IFF and are sharing and living faith at home. (3.86)
13. IFF provides middle school youth with high quality learning experiences. (3.78)
14. Middle school youth are growing in faith through IFF. (3.74)
15. IFF provides adults with practical home materials. (3.70)
16. High school youth are growing in faith through IFF. (3.52)
17. IFF provides high school youth with high quality learning experiences. (3.44)

Impact of Intergenerational Faith Formation on the Parish Community

The following statements, ranked in priority order, describe the impact of intergenerational faith formation on the parish community. (1-5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

1. IFF volunteer leaders grow in their knowledge of the Catholic faith and their confidence in sharing it with others. (4.34)
2. IFF teams share a common vision. (4.10)
3. There is collaboration and teamwork among IFF leadership teams. (4.06)
4. IFF is strengthening relationships among people in the parish community. (4.02)
5. IFF volunteer leaders feel closer to God. (3.98)
6. Our parish develops the leaders necessary for IFF. (3.76)
7. Our parish is reaching new audiences, such as adults and whole families, through IFF. (3.72)
8. Intergenerational relationships are being created through IFF. (3.72)
9. Participation in IFF programs leads to greater involvement of people in parish life, including Sunday Mass, service, and the ministries of the parish. (3.68)

Factors that Sustain Intergenerational Faith Formation

The following factors or characteristics, ranked in priority order, help a parish sustain and grow intergenerational faith formation. (1-5 scale from not important to very important)

1. The parish community is welcoming and hospitable. (4.62)
2. The IFF team designs programs that are creative, interactive, and engaging for all ages and generations. (4.62)
3. The pastor and parish staff share a common vision for IFF. (4.44)
4. IFF volunteer leaders are well-prepared for their roles in IFF programs. (4.44)
5. IFF volunteer leaders are well-supported by the IFF team. (4.42)
6. The pastor and parish staff empower people in the community for leadership. (4.38)
7. Sunday Mass is engaging for all ages and generations. (4.34)
8. The IFF team works collaboratively in designing and conducting IFF programs. (4.34)
9. The parish facility (or physical setting) is conducive to IFF programs. (4.32)
10. The IFF team is able to find new faith formation resources for IFF programming. (4.30)
11. The parish has had consistent leadership for IFF. (4.22)
12. Parishioners know and understand the faith formation mission of the parish. (4.20)
13. The parish offers a variety of intergenerational events/programs throughout the year (e.g., liturgies, prayer, service, community life). (4.16)

Effective Practices and Associated Outcomes

Matching the positive outcomes of intergenerational faith formation with the common practices that produce them gives us a clear picture of where churches need to focus their efforts in order to be successful with intergenerational ministries. Some of the outcomes reported by faith formation leaders are: 1) stronger families, 2) a greater sense of community, 3) a safe learning environment, and 4) motivated learners

Finding #1. Stronger Families

One could also say that the future of any church passes by way of the family. Faith formation leaders see tremendous benefits to families that participate in intergenerational faith formation.. Two of the top five “Impact” findings are family related (items #3 and #4).

This finding is consistent with the 2005 study by the Center for Ministry Development, Generations of Faith Research Study. Benefits to the family ranked among the highest outcomes in that study as well. Families that learn, pray, talk, and serve together are much more likely to experience the positive outcomes of church membership than families that experience these faith practices in age-specific settings. The importance of nurturing family faith with the whole family together was highlighted in the Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry. The results were reported in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (Martinson, Black, Roberto, 2010). They conclude, “Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are three times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and twice as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith.” The *Effective Christian Education Study* (Search Institute, 1990) found that family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity, even more important than lifelong exposure to Christian education.

Intergenerational faith formation strengthens parental faith with high quality learning experiences. It also puts those same parents in a position to express their faith in the presence of their children. This dynamic helps to build stronger faith families, and these faithful families produce service-oriented children who are more likely to carry the practices of discipleship into their adult years than children and teens who participate in church faith formation experiences without their parents. Parental faith was cited by emerging adults who are connected to their faith as a key factor that sustained their faith through college. (National Study of Youth & Religion, Smith and Snell, 2003)

Strong churches are made up of strong families. Separating family members from each other for faith formation experiences is counterproductive for churches. Intergenerational faith formation builds family faith by providing opportunities for parents and children to talk about the mysteries of faith, to experience prayer and worship together, and to serve those in need shoulder-to-shoulder. For the vast majority of the church’s history, this is how children learned to be adult disciples. The evidence from a large body of research confirms that families remain our most powerful tool for raising faith-filled disciples.

Finding #2. A Greater Sense of Community

Does intergenerational faith formation strengthen relationships in the parish community? Yes, and 86.8% of the parish leaders in our survey agreed, with 26.3% of them strongly agreeing. This was the highest ranked impact statement of all statements relevant to intergenerational faith formation’s impact on the community as a whole. People feel like they belong to a parish community when they participate in intergenerational programming.

This is a highly significant finding in light of other research. Abraham Maslow famously demonstrated that belonging is a basic human need. Human beings cannot thrive unless they feel like they belong to a community. In some cases, this is even more basic than the need for safety or self-preservation as is the case with those who stay in abusive relationships. People place a very high value on a sense of community. What does this value mean for churches today?

In a fascinating study by James Kouzes and Barry Posner summarized in their book, *The Truth about Leadership*, commitment to a community is shown to be driven more by the personal values of the members than by the corporate values of the community. Kouzes and Posner discovered that people commit to organizations when organizations understand and honor what the people value most. If people value the feeling of belonging, then organizations like churches should be building communities that are hospitable and that create a warm sense of community if those churches want committed members.

We asked church leaders to list the three greatest benefits of intergenerational faith formation for their church. The most commonly mentioned benefit is that intergenerational faith formation builds a stronger sense of community in the church. Hospitality emerged as the key to building this sense of community. A commitment to hospitality is the most important factor for sustaining and growing intergenerational faith formation in a church. It scored a remarkably high 4.63 on a scale of 5 as most important. Perhaps more than anything else, churches need to be places of hospitality in order to build commitment from members. Hospitality creates the sense of belonging that is desired so deeply by all people.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders can think about hospitality in two key ways: 1) building a spirit of hospitality will strengthen intergenerational programming. It is the top sustaining factor; and 2) Intergenerational programming will strengthen the sense of belonging that is at the heart of a strong, hospitable church community. A stronger sense of community is the highest rated impact of intergenerational faith formation on a church community.

Put more simply: build hospitality for stronger intergenerational programming; build strong intergenerational programming to become a more hospitable church. It really is two sides to one coin.

There are many reasons why intergenerational faith formation builds a strong sense of community. An obvious reason is that an intergenerational gathering is a rare treasure in our peer oriented culture. Any organization that promotes intergenerational experiences will be an organization in the culture where welcoming is a mark of distinction. True community is intergenerational, but there are other findings in our survey that point to practices in intergenerational churches that clearly enhance this sense of community.

Finding #3. A Safe Place

Trust is a foundational building block for healthy growth and development. People need to work to create safe places where a sense of trust can thrive. Intergenerational gatherings are safe places where people can freely ask questions and engage in faith discussions without fear. Survey participants were presented with seventeen statements about the known impact of intergenerational faith formation on program participants. The safe learning environment was ranked #1 among all statements of impact.

There can be no trust in a learning community without a safe and comfortable environment. Imagine some of the age-specific groups you have participated in over the years, especially in your adolescent years. Safety was not always a guarantee. Kindness does not always emerge in a peer group. Psychologist, Mary Pipher, once said, “A great deal of America’s social sickness comes from age segregation. If ten fourteen-year-olds are grouped together, they will form a Lord of the Flies culture with its competitiveness and meanness. But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them all.” Adults in general, and churches in particular, have an obligation to provide safe places for children, teens, and other adults to gather and learn without fear. Bringing the generations together enhances safety.

Church sex abuse scandals in recent years highlight the importance of being more vigilant about safety for minors. Not only are intergenerational gatherings safer than peer gatherings in terms of the emotional climate of the learning environment, they are also sexually safer because of the presence of parents and multiple other adults. Intergenerational models ideally group multiple adults with multiple teens and multiple children in the same room at the same time. Clearly no learning environment can be completely safe, but intergenerational models offer the potential of remarkable benefits for children and teens in terms of safety. While this is true, it is also important not to relax the high standards that have been wisely implemented in

age-specific settings such as school and parish religious education programs when a church shifts to intergenerational programming. During breakout sessions and free time, leaders need to consistently implement and clearly communicate strong boundaries for the protection of children and teens.

Finding #4. Motivated Learners

Forcing people into faith formation is about as far away from the heart of Christian formation as one can get. Freedom is a predominant theme in the Scriptures and in the tradition of Christianity. When communities have to force people to participate, the battle for true community is already lost. Leaders of intergenerational faith formation note that the creative approach of the learning sessions has a high impact on participants.

The creative and diverse learning approaches used by intergenerational practitioners was ranked second highest among factors that impact participants (see the first chart). This approach to session planning is based upon the belief that it is the responsibility of leaders to be inspirational. If we can't force faith learning, we have to find ways to motivate learners by connecting with what matters to them. We need to inspire the learners. Creative approaches and diverse teaching methodologies provide the best chance of capturing the attention and energy of learners.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders understand that there is no one approach to teaching that will work for everyone, especially when the learning community is age diverse. There is no publication that will be sufficient to meet the learning needs of the gathered intergenerational community. Successful practitioners rely upon a variety of faith formation resources, their own experience, the creative spark of community members, and the inspiration of prayer to guide their session planning.

Other churches develop special music ministries that are used exclusively for intergenerational gatherings. Some write and produce their own dramatic presentations. Some build elaborate props to enhance the visual learning experience for all ages. Clearly, adults represent the portion of the community that will freely choose to participate or not to participate, to make room on the calendar for faith formation or find ways to pack the calendar with other pursuits as a means of escaping a meaningless faith formation experience. Adult participation is a key barometer. If adults are not showing up for faith formation sessions, then we need to discern whether or not we are effectively designing programs to meet their learning needs. Leaders report that adults come consistently to intergenerational learning sessions when those sessions are creative and engaging. Adults will perceive the programs as relevant when leaders take the time to learn about the needs of the adults in the community and address those needs at every gathering while using diverse methodologies to address relevant content.

Challenges

1. Leadership

In the open-ended comments of our survey, leadership, in terms of more staff, was the top identified need of faith formation leaders. Intergenerational faith formation leaders need help. They are looking for dedicated parish staff and volunteers to help them sustain the vision of lifelong faith formation. Resources for those leaders was the second highest identified need. Leadership training that features recruitment, training, and sustaining strategies is a growing need for faith formation leaders.

Leadership also made a strong showing in the quantitative portion of the survey. After hospitality, leadership factored in as the next four highest factors that sustain intergenerational faith formation in a church community.

Dynamic and effective intergenerational faith formation is always a team leadership effort. Some parishes have more than one hundred people volunteering to put together a monthly intergenerational faith formation program. The volunteers are facilitating learning, planning and preparing meals, developing creative learning sessions, developing and preparing home materials, designing environment, creating and offering prayer experiences, developing warm and welcoming experiences for the opening of a session, and more.

Some of the key leadership traits include:

- The ability to inspire large numbers of church members with a compelling vision of faith formation for the whole community
- The insight to name the highest priorities and most important strategies to bring the vision to life
- The charisma to build a working and volunteering environment filled with joy, hope, and meaningful work/ministry opportunities
- The organization skills to develop a leadership system with clear oral and written communication channels
- The flexibility to create a wide variety of ways for people to contribute to the faith formation mission
- The willingness to be supportive by offering meaningful and relevant training and mentoring to staff and volunteers at all levels of the ministry
- The humility to step back and empower others to do what they are called and trained to do
- The wisdom to step in and help when needed
- The determination and commitment to stick to the mission when difficult challenges arise
- The generosity of saying thank you endlessly, specifically, and authentically

2. Youth Ministry

Even after decades of theoretical and research findings that promote integrating teens into the life of the whole community rather than segregating them exclusively or primarily into youth groups, there remains a significant challenge with integrating teens into intergenerational programs. The reasons for this were not clarified in our survey, and they are likely many and complex. The influence of the broader culture and the experiences of adolescents in the educational system would seem to be significant.

Church growth movements in evangelical protestant churches also promote age segregation as a way to attract teens and young families to churches. There is a certain level of comfort in a peer group that is not present in an intergenerational group that makes age segregated ministry very tempting for shrinking churches that want to attract large numbers of new members. This has proven to be a short-sighted strategy. One of the challenges of intergenerational practitioners is to clearly articulate the vision of intergenerational faith formation in an inspiring way that matches the enthusiastic proselytizing of church growth practitioners.

Leaders also need to find new ways to integrate teens into intergenerational programs that address the needs and concerns of teens while incorporating their particular gifts for ministry. One insight that was expressed by youth leaders is that teens must be active participants in any program. They will not tolerate passive participation as much as other age groups will. Finding ways to let teens serve the program as they participate in it is helpful.

3. Faith Formation at Home

While faith formation leaders believe that faith in the home is being expressed and lived more effectively because of intergenerational faith formation opportunities offered at church, there is still a concern that faith practices in the home are far from what they could be. While 84.2% of leaders believe they are providing practical materials for families to use at home, only 65.8% of leaders believe these materials are having an impact in the homes of participants. This is an area with great promise for future growth. We know that the home is the place where faith is formed foundationally. We also know what families need to do in order to become strong faith formers for each other at home, i.e. engage in caring conversations, develop rituals and traditions, pray and read the Bible together, and engage in service together. Now it is just a matter of developing strategies to get the job done. Intergenerational faith formation leaders will need to connect home faith formation strategies with the things that families value most. The only way to know what they value most is to ask them. Home faith formation will not become a regular practice for families until they find a way to integrate it into what they love to do. When leaders know what families value and love, then they will unlock the key to successful home faith formation resources. The resources should be developed in light of what families value.

One thing that emerges very strongly in time studies of families is their love for television. Families spend more media time with television than with any other media device. Clearly this expresses a value that families have. They value watching television. The chart below expresses the time spent in hours per day that adults use media. Statistics for youth are similar with television as the top media form.

Given this information, it would seem that media literacy would be an ideal way to connect faith with what is going on in homes. Intergenerational program leaders ought to be watching lots of television to capture themes that are influencing the families in our churches. We can then connect our teaching more effectively to what is happening in families. We can develop home resources that help families spend these hundreds of hours of television viewing more actively and in light of faith values. And perhaps these viewing hours would drop a bit if families were given some assistance with developing a faith-filled way of using media in the home.

4. Integration throughout the Church

While leaders have considerable success offering intergenerational programs, they experience a challenge with the creation of an intergenerational culture throughout the congregation. Leaders identified this as the third highest need for the future growth of intergenerational faith formation. True churches are intergenerational at their core. The intergenerational worshipping community is the paradigm (source and summit) for church life. The intergenerational family is the foundation for church life. It would seem like an easy transition from these two core church experiences to say that Christians ought to be intergenerational in all that they do. Not that every gathering should be intergenerational, but that every gathering should build the intergenerationality of a church. Getting a church to think intergenerationally is a significant challenge for the future. When all adult gatherings include a consciousness of and a concern for teens and children, then we are on our way. Likewise, when all child and teen gatherings include a consciousness of and concern for the adults, then we are on our way.

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Study #3. Research on Principles of Intergenerational Faith Formation (2014)

In preparation for the 2014 Symposium on Intergenerational Faith Formation sponsored by LifelongFaith Associates, I conducted a survey on the principles which inform intergenerational practice. After a review of the two prior research studies and the literature on intergenerational faith formation, I constructed a survey that was sent to the 100 registered participants representing eight Christian denominations (American Baptist, Christian Reformed, Episcopal, Lutheran ELCA, Presbyterian (USA), Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ) and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The 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 out 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Survey Results

We received responses from 79 of the Symposium participants. They rated each principle in two ways: first, they rated their level of **agreement** (from 1-5, strongly disagree to strongly agree) of how much that principle informed and guided intergenerational faith formation; and second, they rated how **important** each principle is in guiding the effective practice of intergenerational faith formation and ministry in their congregation.

Agreement	Principles	Importance
	Christian Identity	
4.26	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.	4.42
4.35	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.	4.23
4.41	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.	4.25
	Relationships & Community	
4.55	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.	4.36

4.28	5. IFF promotes a community where generational differences can be transcended rather than reinforced, where generational understanding and positive intergenerational relationships can be experienced.	4.17
4.42	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.	4.41
4.51	7. IFF fosters a climate that includes valuing, nurturing, and employing the gifts of every person from young to old.	4.33
4.41	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.	4.32
	Developmental	
4.04	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.	4.03
4.17	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.	4.03
4.27	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.	4.00
	Learning and Growth	
4.33	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.	4.20
4.35	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.	4.26
4.41	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.	4.25
4.17	15. IFF equips people to live their faith in daily life, and engages them in service to others, locally and globally.	4.25
	Leadership	
4.34	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.	4.20
4.23	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.	4.25