

Lifelong Faith

**FORMATION FOR ALL
AGES AND GENERATIONS**

John Roberto



4

Intergenerational Faith Formation through the Christian Community

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.*

*He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments; (Ps. 78:1–7)*

The church community is where the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. This where God's people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and meet the source of the Church's life.

Maria Harris, in her classic book *Fashion Me a People*, presents a "whole church" vision of formation by explaining how the church's educational ministry is embodied and lived in five classical forms: *didache*, *koinonia*, *kerygma*, *diakonia*, and *leiturgia*. She says that the church educates *to* all these five classical forms, as well as *through* all of them:

- to *koinonia* (community and communion) by engaging in the forms of community and communion
- to *leiturgia* (worship and prayer) by engaging in the forms of prayer and worship and spirituality
- to *kerygma* (proclaiming the word of God) by attention to and practicing and incarnating the kerygma, "Jesus is risen," in speech of our own lives, especially the speech of advocacy
- to *diakonia* (service and outreach) by attention to our own service and reaching out to others, personally and communally, locally and globally
- to *didache* (teaching and learning) by attention to the most appropriate forms of teaching and learning (including schooling in our own communities (Harris 1989, 43–44)

We see similar processes reflected in John Westerhoff's vision of a community of faith-enculturation paradigm in which Christian education uses every aspect of the church's life for education (see *Will Our Children Have Faith*). "A viable paradigm or model for religious education needs to focus upon the radical nature of a Christian community where the tradition is faithfully transmitted through ritual and life, where persons as actors—thinking, feeling, willing, corporate selves—are nurtured and converted to radical faith, and where they are prepared and motivated for individual and corporate action in society on behalf of God's coming community" (Westerhoff 2012, 45). Westerhoff identifies three aspects of community life around which we need to develop educational programs: "the rituals of the people; the experiences persons have within the community, and the actions members of the community perform, individually and corporately, in the world" (Westerhoff 2012, 45).

Vital and vibrant churches create a culture where lifelong faith formation can thrive. The *Exemplary Youth Ministry* study found that a "culture of the Spirit"

was crucial for developing a vital faith in youth (and parents and adults). The study found churches with a sense of the living, active presence of God at work among the people of the whole community, its ministries with youth, its parents, the ministries of the larger church and its leaders provided the most powerful, pervasive influence on young people long-term. It was the communal awareness of participation in God's presence and action permeating the values, relationships, and activities of these churches that gave rise to a "culture of the Spirit" focused on mission and the transformation of life that made these communities so influential in the lives and faith of young people (Martinson, Black, and Roberto 2010).

The formative power of the whole Christian community is essential for lifelong faith formation. In the words of Joyce Mercer:

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. (Mercer 2013)

Integral to lifelong faith formation is the primacy of intergenerational community, relationships, and faith-forming experiences for developing and sustaining faith and discipleship in people of all ages and generations. When a church commits itself to building a culture of intergenerationality, it becomes a sign of and instrument for the full experience of the body of Christ by all ages and generations. We see this intergenerational culture demonstrated in the specific ways a church community:

- creates a welcoming environment of hospitality, trust, acceptance, emotional safety, and care that is conducive to promoting faith growth and mutual support across generations
- builds caring relationships among the generations in the church through worship, learning, service, and community events and activities
- creates intentional opportunities for bringing the generations together to build relationships and engage in shared activities
- involves *all* generations together in Sunday weekend worship; give special attention to being inclusive of children and teens in Sunday worship; and engages all generations in leadership roles in Sunday worship (music, reading, praying)
- engages all generations together in learning experiences that teach the Bible and the Christian tradition, and form disciples of all ages in Christian identity
- brings together the generations to learn from each other, share their faith stories, and find support for practicing their faith in daily life
- nurtures the spiritual life of all generations together through the community's prayer life, rituals, and blessings; brings together all generations to nurture their spiritual life through prayer and spiritual practices and disciplines
- engages all generations together in service to the poor and vulnerable, in the works of justice and advocacy, and in care for creation

An intergenerational church culture forms and deepens Christian identity and commitment as people develop relationships and actively participate in faith communities that teach, model, and live the Christian tradition and way of life. It strengthens relationships, connections, and community across generations; enhances their sense of belonging in the faith community; and provides valuable adult role models for children and adolescents. It supports families by surrounding them with a community of faith and engaging the whole family in a variety of faith-forming experiences together (caring relationships, celebrating, learning, praying, serving) and providing parents with opportunities to learn from Christians who are practicing their faith and raising faithful children.

How is your church engaged in forming faith through the life and ministries of the intergenerational Christian community? Use these questions to develop a profile of how your church forms the faith of all ages and generations *together*.

- ***Caring Relationships:*** How does your church build caring relationships between and among all the generations? How does your church welcome and include all generations in the life of the community?
- ***Worshipping:*** How does your church involve *all* generations in Sunday worship and your church's liturgical life throughout the year? How are people formed for participating in Sunday worship and celebrating the feasts and seasons of year?
- ***Celebrating:*** How does your church celebrate rituals, sacraments, and milestones as a whole community, providing a way for people to experience God's love through significant moments in the journey of life and faith?
- ***Learning:*** How does your church gather the generations to learn together, providing formation experiences in Christian practices, scripture, and the Christian tradition.
- ***Praying:*** How does your church engage all the generations together in praying, devotions, and spiritual disciplines?
- ***Serving:*** How does your church involve all generations together in living the Christian mission in the world by engaging in service to those in need, care for God's creation, and action and advocacy for justice?
- ***Ministering and Leading:*** How does your church equip the whole community to use their gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world? How does your church involve all generations in leadership roles appropriate to their age and abilities?

Enhancing Intergenerational Faith Forming

The journey to a more intentionally intergenerational faith formation community is unique for each church. There are practical strategies that every church can use to create, sustain, and deepen the intergenerational culture of their community. (See the Resource page following this chapter for a process to build or strengthen the intergenerational culture of your church by creating a multiyear vision with practical strategies.)

Strategy 1: Design All-Ages Faith Formation around Intergenerational Church Life Events

Building on Maria Harris's insight that the church is the curriculum, intergenerational events and experiences of church life can serve as the primary content for faith formation with all ages. Every church can build faith formation each year around the intergenerational events and experiences of church life, and

then design intergenerational, family, and age-specific programming around the events. Here are several categories of church life events that can form the basis of a multiyear intergenerational curriculum.

- *The feasts and seasons of the church year* provide a natural rhythm and calendar for fashioning faith: Advent and Christmas, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, Call of the Disciples, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Easter season, Pentecost, feasts from ethnic traditions, and many more throughout the year.
- *Sunday worship and the scripture readings* (lectionary or sermon series) provide a rich curriculum for the whole community with its cycle of weekly scripture readings.
- *Ritual, milestone, and sacramental celebrations* provide events rich in theological meaning and faith practice that celebrate the faith journey throughout life.
- *Acts of service and justice*—locally and globally—provide a focus on mission to the world and put in action biblical and church teaching on service, justice, and care for the earth.
- *Prayer and spiritual traditions* provide times for reflection, praying as a community, and living the practices of the spiritual life through the community's life together.
- *Congregational events* that originate within the life and history of an individual congregation, and celebrate and reinforce the congregation's identity and mission
- *Contemporary events* in the lives of families, the community, and the world provide an opportunity for the church to respond to the signs of the times and how the church and Christian faith can respond

To unlock the faith-forming power of these events, design faith formation for all ages using this four-step methodology that guides people from preparing to experiencing to reflecting to living.

1. **Prepare:** provide formation programs—intergenerationally, in families, and/or in age groups—that teach the knowledge and practices (biblical, theological) for participating in the event.
2. **Experience:** engage people in the direct experience of the event.
3. **Reflect:** guide people in reflecting on their experience of the event and its meaning for their lives.

4. **Live:** equip people with the practices, skills, and resources to integrate the meaning of the event into living as a Christian.

This methodology can be applied to church events in a variety of ways. These examples illustrate the process:

Prepare people for Sunday worship and rehearse the scripture readings. Engage them in the **experience** of Sunday worship and provide **reflection** activities. Equip them to **live** the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives with activities and resources in print and digital formats.

Prepare people on the biblical and church teachings of a justice issue. Engage them in the **experience/action** to serve those in need or work for justice or care for creation—locally and globally. Provide **reflection** times and activities to connect action with faith. Equip them to **live** the practices of service, justice, and/or care for creation in their daily lives.

Prepare people with the knowledge and skills to read, interpret, and apply the Bible to their lives. Engage them in **experiencing** and **reflecting** on the practices of reading the Bible at Sunday worship, through the seasons of the church year, and in the life of the church. Equip them to **live** their own practice of reading and studying the Bible.

Prepare people for exploring the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus through the seasons of the church year. Engage them by **experiencing** the seasons of the church year and **reflecting** on what they are learning about Jesus. Equip them to **live** more fully as disciples of Jesus through their experience of life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Prepare people with the knowledge and practices for prayer and enriching their spiritual life. Engage them in a variety of **experiences** of prayer and spiritual practices in the life of the church and opportunities for **reflection** on how to deepen their prayer and spiritual life. Equip them to develop their prayer life by **living** the practices of prayer and the spiritual disciplines in their daily lives.

Consult the strategies in chapter three for formation in Christian practices that engages people in learning the practices through the events and ministries of the church community.

Strategy 2: Transform Multigenerational into Intergenerational

Every church has multigenerational environments in which at least two generations are participating in an event or activity—Sunday worship, church events,

social gatherings, educational classes. Churches can utilize these environments to connect generations through relationship building and shared experiences.

How can your church transform multigenerational environments into experiences of intergenerational connection and community?

- **Consider relationships:** How will the generations interact with each other, get to know each other, share stories with each other? How will the experience incorporate intentional relationship building activities? How will everyone feel welcomed and safe?
- **Consider the content:** How will the experience engage generations in shared activities and in generationally appropriate activities?
- **Consider leadership:** How will each generation be involved in leadership roles, appropriate to their gifts, abilities, and age? How will the leadership team engage multiple generations?
- **Consider inclusion:** How will each generation feel valued and recognized in the experience?
- **Consider communication:** How will communication and social media channels be inclusive of all generations and provide connection among the generations?

Strategy 3: Transform Age-Specific into Intergenerational

Age-specific programs and activities can provide opportunities for intergenerational connection, relationship building, and shared experiences. Opportunities abound, in children and youth programming, Vacation Bible School, service and mission trips, retreats, and Bible studies, among others.

How can you transform age-specific programs by adding intergenerational activities or by redesigning the program into an intergenerational experience?

- **Consider adding intergenerational activities:** How can your church incorporate another generation in sharing their faith, wisdom, and interests in the program (interviews, storytelling, presentations, demonstrations)? How can you add mentors or spiritual guides to a program (grandparent mentors for young parents or spiritual guides for young people in confirmation)?
- **Consider replacing age-specific for intergenerational throughout the year:** How can your church incorporate regular intergenerational gatherings into your age group programs throughout the year?

- ***Consider redesigning the program:*** How can your church redesign an age-specific program into an intergenerational program involving at least one additional generation, such as transforming camp or Vacation Bible School into a grandparent-grandchild program or transforming a youth service program or mission trip into an intergenerational service activity for all ages?

Here are several ideas that illustrate how to transform age-specific programming into intergenerational opportunities:

- Include all generations in Sunday worship and involve all generations in worship leadership roles—music, art, hospitality, reading scripture, and more. While there may be time during the scripture readings and sermon/homily when children have a separate experience, it's important to have children involved with the whole worship community for most of the service.
- Add other generations into current age-group programs, such as mission trips, service projects, retreat experiences, and Vacation Bible School. Consider adding intergenerational experiences into VBS such as a grandparent component or redesigning the youth mission trip into an all ages mission trip from adolescents to older adults.
- Incorporate intergenerational dialogues, interviews, and presentations into programming—providing opportunities for children and youth to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of (older) adults; and then reverse the process and provide opportunities for the (older) adults to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of children or teens through presentations, performances, and discussions.
- Add a mentoring component into programming for children, adolescents, and parents: parent mentors for baptismal parents, confirmation mentors, learning-to-pray mentors, justice and service mentors—to name a few possibilities.
- Connect people of different generations who have insights and life experiences that may be helpful to other generations, for example midlife and mature adults helping new parents with financial management and household management, or young people helping older adults navigate the digital and online world.
- Add intergenerational relationship building and activities into social and recreational activities in the congregation, such as the church picnic and after worship gatherings.

Strategy 4: Design New Intergenerational Initiatives

The fourth strategy involves designing for intergenerationality through new initiatives. This is the opportunity to create new programs, activities, or experiences that bring together all the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, worshipping, and more. Consider designing new intergenerational Vacation Bible School, summer camp, service projects and mission trips, retreat experiences, field trips, as well as grandparent-grandchildren programming. This is also an opportunity to eliminate those activities that work against intergenerationality and replace them with new initiatives.

Where are the greatest needs and/or opportunities for creating new initiatives that will contribute toward building an intergenerational culture in your church?

- **Consider celebrating and worshipping:** How can your church involve all generations more fully in Sunday worship and utilize their gifts throughout the service? How can you celebrate life milestones throughout life as intergenerational experiences at church and home?
- **Consider learning:** How can your church create intergenerational models of learning—weekly, biweekly, monthly, or seasonally—for the whole faith community? How can you create intergenerational models of Vacation Bible School or camp programs or Bible study programs?
- **Consider praying:** How can your church create prayer experiences, retreat experiences, spiritual formation programs, spiritual direction, and prayer groups that engage multiple generations?
- **Consider serving:** How can your church offer local and global service projects and mission experiences that engage all the generations together? How will you provide opportunities for reflection after the service and mission projects?
- **Consider mentoring:** How can your church offer intergenerational mentoring to accompany people of all ages, especially younger generations and new Christians, in their walk with Jesus as they develop a Christian way of life?

Strategy 5: Make Intergenerational Learning Central to Church Life

Intergenerational learning provides a way to educate the whole community, bringing all ages and generations together to learn with and from each other, build community, share faith, pray, celebrate, and practice the Christian faith.

The key is that everyone is learning together—young and old, single and married, families with children and empty-nest families, and it involves the whole family—children, parents, grandparents, in a shared experience of the Christian faith. Churches can make intergenerational learning central to lifelong faith formation in at least two ways: as their core faith formation program for all ages, supplemented by age-specific and affinity group faith formation models, or as one element in a lifelong approach with age-specific and affinity group learning.

In the first approach, churches make intergenerational learning their core faith formation experience for all ages conducting monthly, biweekly, or weekly intergenerational programs, and then offering a variety of age-group or affinity-group programs throughout the month or year to address specific age-appropriate needs. These churches replace or modify their age group programming to place the emphasis on all ages learning together. They often develop a multiyear curriculum for the whole community that can be built around themes from the Bible, the cycle of Sunday lectionary readings, church year feasts and seasons, Christian practices, service and social justice, prayer and spiritual disciplines, core Christian beliefs, and moral teachings.

In the second approach, churches implement intergenerational learning in targeted ways, such as offering whole-community Bible studies, adding an all-ages activity after Sunday worship, integrating an intergenerational component into Vacation Bible School, preparing for a sacrament or milestone celebration, learning about an upcoming church year feast or season (Advent-Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost), replacing an age group program with intergenerational learning on the same theme, to name a few examples.

Embracing an intergenerational learning model is an excellent way to create and enhance the faith-forming power of the church. Research studies have confirmed that intergenerational learning promotes Christian identity, builds relationships and community, and fosters faith growth in all ages. Specifically, studies have found:

- Christian commitment is formed and strengthened as persons develop relationships and actively participate in intergenerational faith communities that teach, model, and live out the community's beliefs.
- People learn the ways of the faith community and how to live as a Christian today as they participate authentically and relationally with more experienced members of the community.

- People identify with their faith community and participate more fully with all ages and generations in the life and ministries of the faith community, including Sunday worship.
- Relationships created among people of all ages enhance their sense of belonging in the faith community and increase participation in church life.
- Generational understanding and positive intergenerational relationships affirm each person's value in the total community (regardless of age) and promote understanding of shared values and respect.
- A welcoming and safe environment of warmth, trust, emotional safety, and acceptance promotes faith sharing, group participation, mutual support, and care for one another.
- There is a positive effect on both the older and younger generations when young and old meet to share stories, create something, pray, sing, or just talk with each other.
- Families are supported by surrounding them with a community of faith and engaging them in caring, celebrating, learning, praying, and serving together.
- Parents are supported by other Christians who are practicing their faith and raising faithful children. (Roberto 2018, 101–8)

One model of intergenerational learning incorporates three essential elements: all ages learning, in-depth learning in one of three formats, sharing learning and applying the learning to life. Many intergenerational learning programs are extended-time programs from 1½ to 3 hours in length, depending on program elements.

Participants gather for:

- A shared meal
- An introduction and opening prayer
- **Part One:** An all-ages activity on the topic with content and methods appropriate to an all-ages audience
- **Part Two:** In-depth learning experiences for each generation—families with children, adolescents, and other adults—exploring the biblical and theological understanding of the topic using one of three possible learning formats.
 - A. 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.

- B. 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.
- C. The Activity Center Format provides structured intergenerational and age-specific learning activities at a variety of stations or centers.
- **Part Three:** Sharing learning reflections and application in intergenerational groups where participants share what they learned and prepare for applying their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or digital formats.

Other models of intergenerational learning include LOGOS and LIFT from GenOn Ministries (<https://www.genonministries.org>) and Messy Church (<https://messychurchusa.org>).

Integral to lifelong faith formation is the primacy of intergenerational community—relationships, and faith-forming experiences for developing and sustaining faith and discipleship in people of all ages and generations. When a church commits itself to building a culture of intergenerationality, it creates the environment for the Christian faith to flourish in all ages and generations. The practical strategies provide ideas for a church to create, sustain, and deepen its intergenerational culture of forming the faith of all ages and generations. (For articles, resources, and program examples of intergenerational faith formation, go to my Lifelong Faith website at www.LifelongFaith.com.)

Works Cited

- Harris, Maria. 1989. *Fashion Me a People*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Martinson, Roland, Wes Black, and John Roberto. 2010. *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. St. Paul, MN: Exemplary Youth Ministry.
- Mercer, Joyce Ann. 2013. "Cultivating a Community Practice." Patheos.com. August 13, 2013. www.patheos.com/Topics/Passing-on-the-Faith/Community-Practice-Joyce-Ann-Mercer-08-14-2013.html.
- Roberto, John. 2018. "Intergenerational Principles." In *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*, edited by Holly Catterton, 99–100. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.
- Westerhoff, John. 2012. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 3rd ed. New York: Morehouse.

RESOURCE

A Process for Building and Strengthening an Intergenerational Culture

Every church can build (or strengthen) an intergenerational culture. It's essential to have a multiyear vision for your church *and* practical strategies that give life to the vision. Here are a few practical steps for designing your plan.

1. Form an intergenerational task force representing the essential ministries of the church and be sure that all the generations are included from youth through older adults.
2. Develop a vision—with short descriptive sentences—of what an intergenerational church culture can look like in three years.
3. Explore the opportunities for building an intergenerational approach throughout church life.
 - Identify ministries, programs, and activities that are already *intergenerational* (with generations building relationships, learning, praying, worshipping, serving, and/or leading together); and develop strategies for strengthening and expanding intergenerational ministries, programs, and activities.
 - Identify ministries, programs, and activities that are *multigenerational* (with all ages present without the intergenerational connection and experiences) that can be transformed into more intentionally intergenerational experiences.
 - Identify *age-specific* ministries, programs, and activities that can be redesigned by including additional generations, building intergenerational relationships, engaging in intergenerational experiences, and more
 - Identify *new opportunities* for creating intergenerational experiences by intentionally designing programs, activities, and ministries to meet this objective.
4. Generate a variety of ideas and projects that the church can develop in each of the four categories: strengthening intergenerational opportunities, transforming multigenerational opportunities, redesigning age-specific opportunities, and designing new initiatives.

5. Create a three-year plan by selecting projects that fulfill the vision and provide practical ways to develop an intergenerational culture. A three-year plan allows you to identify projects that can be implemented in the short term (first year), and projects that need more time for design and implementation over the three years.
6. Present the plan to church leaders and the community. Make a solid case for the need to be intergenerational and the blessings and benefits that it will bring to the church community. Share the plan: your goals and short-term and long-term projects. Invite feedback, suggestions, and ideas.
7. Implement your plan. Short-term projects can launch quickly. Long-term projects may need to be piloted with a small group of your target audience (a version 1.0 of the project) to test its effectiveness, and then modify it for launching on a wider scale.
8. Continue to evaluate your efforts, but be patient. Each effort provides new learning that can be used to continue to move toward becoming a more intentionally intergenerational church.
9. Keep innovating! Introduce new projects and programs each year. Communicate the stories and examples of the benefits and blessings that are coming to the church community because of the intergenerational focus.