

# Intergenerational Faith Formation Strategies

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Bringing generations together within the church provides benefits and blessings for all ages, and in a special way for young people and their parents.

- Intergenerational faith formation 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.
- Intergenerational faith formation 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.
- Intergenerational faith formation provides a curriculum for the whole community—Sunday worship, the lectionary and church year seasons, learning, service, ritual and sacraments, prayer, and more—that is a shared experience in faith and belonging for everyone.
- Intergenerational faith formation 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.
- Intergenerational faith formation strengthens the ability (confidence and competence) of parents and grandparents to promote religious socialization at home; be role models of faithful practice; engage in faith practices at home; and develop warm, affirming, and supportive relationships between parents (and grandparents) and their young people.

Congregations can enhance the power of intergenerational faith formation experiences in three connected ways.

1. *Utilizing* the intergenerational events and experiences of church life (community life events, worship and the lectionary, seasons of the year, service and mission projects, prayer and spiritual formation) as a primary “content” in faith formation by *preparing* people with the knowledge and practices for participating, by *engaging* people in the event, and by *reflecting* upon the meaning of the event and how to *live/practice* in daily life
2. *Infusing* intergenerational experiences and relationships into existing programs and activities, such as bringing mature adults into children and youth programs for interviews, storytelling, and mentoring; and transforming age-group programs (vacation Bible school, service projects) into intergenerational experiences
3. *Connecting* the generations through new intergenerational programs and experiences that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshipping. For example, developing grandparent-grandchildren programming—VBS, summer camp, service/mission projects, field trip; and/or creating new

intergenerational learning programs, service programs, retreat experiences, camp experiences, and much more.

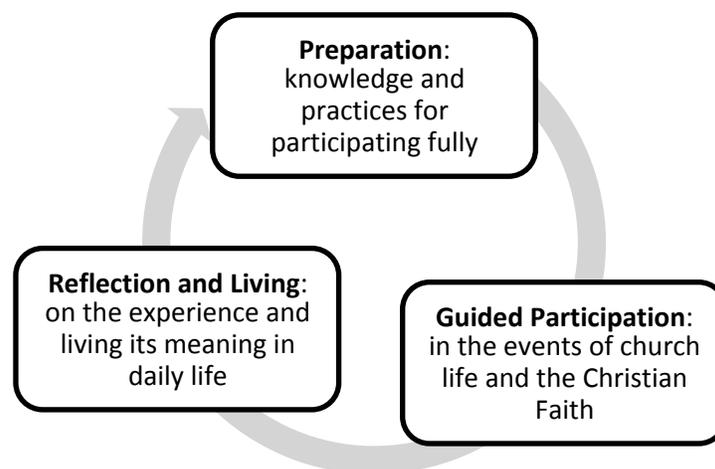
## #1. Utilize the Intergenerational Events and Experiences of Church Life

Every congregation already has events and experiences that can be enhanced and strengthened to unlock their faith forming potential.

- *The feasts and seasons of the church year* provide a natural rhythm and calendar for fashioning faith formation for children, adolescents and the whole family: Advent and Christmas, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, Call of the Disciples, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Easter season, Pentecost, 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 teachings 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 a individual congregation, and celebrate and reinforce the congregation's identity and mission

In order to tap into the power of these events, faith formation can be fashioned around the event using a simple three-step methodology:

1. *Prepare* people—intergenerationally or in age groups—with the knowledge and practices—for participating in the event, experience, or activity,
2. *Experience/participate* in the intergenerational event , experience, or activity
3. *Reflect* upon the meaning of the event and discover how to *live/practice* that learning in daily life



This method can easily be incorporated in a variety of faith formation settings—intergenerational programming, family-centered programming, and/or age group programming. Consider the possibilities of making church life and events your faith formation curriculum throughout the year.

- People prepare for Sunday worship and rehearse the Scripture readings; they experience Sunday worship with the faith community; and they are equipped to live the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives (with activities and resources delivered online).
- People learn about the a particular justice issues and the biblical and church teachings on the justice issue; they experience action to serve those in need, work for justice, and care for creation—locally and globally; and they reflect on that experience and integrate it’s meaning into their lives as Christians.
- People learn about the Bible and how to read it, interpret it, and apply it to their lives; they experience the Bible at Sunday worship and in the life of the community; and develop their own practice of Bible study and reading.
- People learn about Jesus by studying the Gospels; they experience the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus through the seasons of the church year; and they reflect upon their understanding of Jesus and how to follow him.
- People learn about prayer and spirituality and how to develop their spiritual lives through prayer and spiritual disciplines; they experience the prayer life of the faith community; and they are equipped to develop their own practice of prayer and the spiritual disciplines.

## #2. Infuse Intergenerational Experiences into Current Programs and Activities

Think of all the possibilities for incorporating intergenerational relationship building and experiences using the programs and activities your congregation is already offering—age-specific programs and all ages community activities. Allow the following ideas to spark your own thinking about the potential for infusing an intergenerational element into current programs and activities.

- 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 children, adolescent, and parent programming: parent mentors for baptism parents, confirmation mentors, learning-to-pray spiritual direction, 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.
- Involve the whole community in praying for special moments and experiences, for example: birth and baptism of a child, young people on a mission trip or retreat weekend, a milestone event such as first communion or graduations.
- Add intergenerational relationship building and activities into social and recreational activities in the congregation, such as the church picnic and after worship gatherings.
- Develop specific roles for the younger generations in church leadership, such as adolescents serving as teachers in children's faith formation or as worship leaders.
- Develop a leadership or ministry apprenticeship for younger generations to serve in church ministries and leadership positions.

### #3. Connect the Generations through New Intergenerational Programs and Experiences

A third way to enhance the power of intergenerational faith formation experiences in your congregation is to create new programs and activities that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshipping. Here are ideas for creating new intergenerational learning and intergenerational service programming.

#### Intergenerational Service Models

Intergenerational service provides many benefits to the whole church community. Intergenerational service helps narrow the generation gap between older and younger church members; recognizes that all people in the church, regardless of age, have talents to contribute that are valuable and important; assists young people in feeling a part of the church today, not just the church of tomorrow; connects the generations and builds relationships as they serve God by serving their neighbor; and communicates that it is the responsibility of all Christians, regardless of age, to serve people and work for justice as a follower Jesus Christ.

Here are several ideas for creating new programming that engages all ages in serving those in need, caring for creation, and working for justice. There are so many local, national, and global organizations that provide educational resources and action projects your church can use to create new intergenerational programming.

#### **An Annual Church-Wide Service Day**

Mobilize the whole faith community through an annual church-wide justice and service project. Create a four-week, church-wide campaign that culminates on a Sunday where the entire congregation engages in service projects in and with the community. As an individual church or with churches in your area, select a local and global project already developed by a justice or service organization. Then develop an annual theme, such as poverty, care for creation, peacemaking. Prepare the whole community for the service engagement, utilizing the resources developed by the partner organizations. Include 1) worship and prayer experiences focused on the particular theme or project; 2) educational sessions including

social analysis of the issues and reflection on the teachings of scripture and the Christian tradition; 3) household activities on the theme or project such as prayers, learning resources, and action suggestions; 4) a website with the resources, activities, action projects, and features to allow people to share what they are doing; and 5) special presentations by experts on the issues and by people engaged in action on the issue.

### **A Monthly Intergenerational Service Project**

Using the same design as the church-wide service day, a congregation can develop a monthly service project that addresses one particular need or issue (local and/or global) each month. Each month's project can include a short educational program of the topic, an action project, and reflection on the project. Themes for the service projects can correspond with calendar events and seasons, as well as church year seasons. Examples include Back to School (September) and school kits for students, Thanksgiving (November) and feeding the hungry, Lent (February or March) and serving the poor, and Earth Day (April) and caring for creation.

### **Intergenerational Service Nights at Church**

Service Nights are simple, self-contained programs at church that feature five to ten service activity stations that engage all ages in doing a simple project for the benefit of a group in need. At one station people might create greeting cards for the elderly or for sick church members. At another booth they might make blankets for a homeless shelter. At another booth they might bake cookies or make sandwiches for a soup kitchen. Many organizations provide the organizational logistics a church needs to a service project, for example Feed My Starving Children provides the resources for people to pack food that will be shipped to people in need.

## **Intergenerational Learning Models**

For more than 20 congregations from a variety of Christian traditions have been developing and implementing new models of intergenerational faith formation and learning. Intergenerational learning provides a way to educate the whole community, bringing all ages and generations together to learn with and from each other, build community, share faith, pray, celebrate, and practice the Christian faith. The key is that everyone is learning together—young and old, single and married, families with children and empty-nest families, and it involves the whole family—children, parents, grandparents, in a shared experience of the Christian faith.

We know from the research findings that one of the most significant features of intergenerational faith formation is the way it builds community among people, and relationships across ages and generations. Central to building relationships and community is creating an atmosphere of hospitality and welcoming at intergenerational learning sessions where everyone feels a sense of belonging, acceptance, and respect. *This welcoming spirit is as important as the content being taught.* The intergenerational learning model creates the environment and experiences where people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together. Adults gain meaningful insights from their interaction with children and youth; and children and youth experience meaningful support from non-parental adults. Intergenerational learning creates an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.

We know from the research that intergenerational learning strengthens parental and family faith by encouraging the whole family to participate—children, teens, parents, and grandparents. It equips parents (and grandparents) to be faith formers of their children by developing their competence and confidence through such faith-forming experiences as sharing stories, celebrating rituals, praying together, reading the Bible, and more. Intergenerational learning provides activities that model the practices that churches want parents and families to live at home. The research findings also revealed that families *enjoy* opportunities to pray, learn, and be together (even if parents may resist participating initially).

### **Model #1. Generations of Faith**

The Generations of Faith intergenerational model is based on the work of James White in his book *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988). White identified four patterns of relationships that shape the four components of an intergenerational religious education learning experience: 1) in-common experiences, 2) parallel learning, 3) contributive occasions, and 4) interactive sharing.

The model created by the Generations of Faith Project used White’s four components in the following way. This model can be used for all ages intergenerational faith formation or for family faith formation with children, adolescents, and their parents (and grandparents).

1. Gathering and opening prayer
2. All-ages learning experience: intergenerational learning begins with a multigenerational experience of a theme that all generations can share together.
3. In-depth learning experience: through structured learning activities each generation—families with children, adolescents, and other adults—explores the biblical and theological understanding of the topic, using one of three possible formats:
  - The *Age Group Format* provides parallel, age-appropriate learning for groups at the same time. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic—utilizing specific learning activities that are designed for their life cycle stage: families with children or children alone, adolescents, young adults, and adults.
  - The *Whole Group Format* provides a series of facilitated learning activities for everyone at the same time using intergenerational or age-specific small groups or table groups.
  - The *Learning Activity Center Format* provides structured intergenerational and age-specific learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area.
4. Sharing learning reflections and application: in intergenerational groups participants share what they learned and prepare for applying their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or online.
5. Closing prayer service

Congregations are using the intergenerational model of learning in a variety of ways:

1. To develop a faith formation curriculum for the whole community using intergenerational faith formation as the primary learning model, supplemented by age-specific and affinity group faith formation models
2. To extend a topic featured in the faith formation program for children or teens, to the whole community through intergenerational learning

3. To replace a topic in the children or adolescent program with intergenerational learning on the same theme
4. To add intergenerational learning to milestone and sacramental preparation and celebrations
5. To conduct intergenerational faith formation around church year feasts and seasons, such as Advent-Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Pentecost, and more
6. To add intergenerational learning experiences into a vacation Bible school, camp, or summer program
7. To conduct intergenerational learning in preparation for service projects and actions for justice
8. To sponsor an intergenerational retreat for the whole community.

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

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

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

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

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

### **Model 2. Logos**

A second model of intergenerational (and family) learning has been created by *GenOn Ministries* ([www.genonministries.org](http://www.genonministries.org)) and includes weekly intergenerational experiences for children and/or youth that creates an intentional arena where all ages can learn about and practice the art of Christian relationships. In these cross-generational gatherings, everyone eats together, plays together, studies together, and prays together. These four parts, plus weekly congregational worship, make up the whole, providing everyone involved a cross-generational arena in which to have a complete, holistic experience of Christian nurture. In addition, young people also lead in congregational worship on a regular basis.

The four-part learning model includes:

1. *Bible study*: A time for each grade or a combination of grades to study the Bible as the model for Christ-centered living. Churches can use a non-denominational curriculum developed by GenOn for LOGOS or their own curriculum.
2. *Worship skills*: Choir, drama, bells, or other arts are rehearsed at LOGOS and then presented regularly in corporate worship. Each church decides the best fit with its own liturgy and worship style.
3. *Family Time*: The shared meal is a time to gather regular “table families” of various ages who eat together each week for the entire program year. Kitchen teams prepare dinners that are served family style, using table settings and serving dishes practicing the art of serving one another.
4. *Recreation*: All have great fun in a cooperative atmosphere, often drawing on the hobbies and interests of adults in the congregation willing to share their passions on a one-time basis or longer.

### **Model 3. Messy Church**

A third model of family/intergeneration learning is *Messy Church* (<http://www.messychurch.org.uk>, <http://messychurchaustralia.com.au>) started in 2004 in the UK with a simple question: “How can our small church reach the many families in our community?” Messy Church was created for those outside the church, and became church for them, not a stepping stone to Sunday morning church. Messy Church is church for families who may not find other forms of church appealing and who don’t yet belong to a church. There are now thousands of Messy Churches all around the world in most denominations.

A typical Messy Church meets monthly and includes four parts:

1. A flexible, relaxed arrival time with drinks and snacks
2. Creative exploration of a Bible story or theme through many creative experiences for people of different learning styles and of all ages. Children and adults are not separated and are encouraged to explore the story or theme together

3. A short but explicit time of worship with story, music and prayers that builds on the creative exploration that has already occurred.
4. A generous welcome and hospitality is expressed through an invitation to share a delicious home-cooked, sit-down meal with others

The key values which define Messy Church are Christ-centeredness, creativity, and joyful celebration in a spirit of generous, inclusive hospitality. Messy Church tries to focus on people as they are and form relationships with whole families, no strings attached.

#### **Model 4. Intergenerational Vacation Bible School**

A fourth, emerging model is family/intergenerational vacation Bible school. Congregations have begun to re-think vacation Bible school, redesigning a child-only experience into a family or intergenerational experience. One approach to intergenerational VBS has all ages participating for three or four evenings in the summer with food, fun, music, learning, and games. The program incorporates typical VBS Bible content and interactive learning, but everything is intergenerational. A typical evening design (3 hours) could look like this: registration, light meal, opening /music, Bible story, outdoor activity/inside craft, and snacks and closing. A second approach begins each evening with a family-style meal. Then the children participate in Bible stories and activities, while the adults (parents, grandparents) participate in an adult-themed session. Families then reunite in the church for music and prayer to close the evening.

#### **Other Models**

For additional models of intergenerational faith formation check out the case studies in the two volumes of *Let's Kill Sunday School and Birth Cross + Gen Ministries* from Faith Inkubators.

### **Free Download**

To download an “Intergenerational Toolkit” from the *Generations Together* book with more details about strategies and ideas, and a variety of case studies of churches and intergenerational resources and activities go to the Vision and Practices section of the LifelongFaith.com website:

<https://www.lifelongfaith.com/intergenerational-faith-formation.html>.