



# The Importance of Intergenerational Community for Faith Formation

John Roberto

**S**omething old is new again. Congregations across the United States are rediscovering the power of the intergenerational faith community. Most congregations are multi-generational by membership. Some are *intentionally* intergenerational. They make their intergenerational character a defining feature of their community life, ministries, and programming. These churches make it a priority to foster intergenerational relationships, faith sharing, and storytelling; to incorporate all generations in worship; to develop service projects that involve all ages, and to engage all generations in learning together. For these churches, being intergenerational is a way of life. It is an integral element of their culture. It is who they are!

Bringing generations together within the church provides benefits and blessings on a variety of levels. Insights from research and pastoral experience tell us that being intentionally intergenerational:

- reclaims God's intent for faith to be shared in community and across generations
- affirms each person's value in the total community (regardless of age)
- fosters a foundation of support of each other's concerns, interests, and activities
- provides "up close and personal" formation in faith as children, teens, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults engage in sharing faith, teaching, learning, and praying for one another
- teaches us to care for one another
- provides role models for children and youth
- teaches us to value older adults
- allows us to pass on the traditions of family and faith

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- enhances people's identification with their congregation and integration within the community
- encourages greater faith in all generations
- creates special relationships between adults and youth
- fosters leadership regardless of age or stature
- utilizes the strengths (the wisdom, experience, and knowledge) of one generation to meet the needs of another generation
- promotes understanding of shared values and respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life
- utilizes the creative talents of younger and older generations to provide service to the church and community

The "Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry," as reported in the book *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, identified the significance of an intentionally intergenerational congregation on the faith maturity of young people. Congregation whose basic ministries were thoroughly intergenerational have a significant impact on the faith growth and commitment of young people. In these congregations young people are welcomed and expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship, outreach, and decision-making.

At Sunday worship in these congregations adults and youth greet each other and groups of adults gather for informal conversation with young people before and after the services. Young people bring their friends to worship because they are valued and the worship services engage them. Young people feel at home in these safe and nurturing communities where their participation, energy, concerns, questions, and faith life are valued. They turn to adults in the congregation for guidance and care. Young people come to know a living and active God through relationships in the community. They

get to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Jesus. The study presents a picture of welcoming congregations who respect and value young people and their youth ministries. These youth are surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence, and immersed in a larger, multi-generational community of quality relationships informed by faith in Jesus Christ.

What becomes clear in the "Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry" is that in addition to learning about God through excellent Bible teaching, young people come to know a living and active God through relationships in the community. The young people in these congregations get to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Jesus. The study concludes that the power of faithful, multi-generational Christian relationships is at the heart of effective youth ministry.

## Challenges for Intergenerational Relationships

There are many forces in our society and within our congregations that make the (re)establishment of intergenerational faith formation and relationship-building countercultural. We live in a society defined by age segregation, in which adults and children have minimal contact and activities. On a daily basis children and young people experience very few settings that are truly intergenerational; and this is also true for older adults in our society. The architecture and design of communities and neighborhoods tend to isolate individuals and families, and virtually every program and institution is organized to meet age-specific

needs at the expense of the richness of intergenerational community.

While intergenerational communities and extended families have long been the norm in human societies all over the world, U.S. society is pulling the generations apart. Among the many factors contributing to this are individualism, mobility, grandparents living at a distance from their children and grandchildren, age-segregated housing and activities for older adults, and the separation of children and youth by age levels and grades in education and activities.

Religious congregations are among the very few settings in our society where three or more generations gather for intentional activities, such as Sunday worship. Yet even in churches, children, youth, and adults are segregated by age from the rest of the community for many, if not most, of their activities. Educational programs are organized into learning groups or classes organized by age group or grade level. In a typical congregation today a child can be involved in Christian education programs from first grade through high school and never have the opportunity to meet and learn with other generations in the faith community—to the detriment of the individual and the other generations in the congregation. In some congregations children and youth are even separated for worship. In these congregations there are few, if any, settings for intergenerational learning and relationship-building. Is it any wonder that teenagers leave the church in their high school years? They have never had the opportunity to develop intergenerational relationships and develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to the faith community. Teenagers don't leave the church; the church and teens were never introduced!

Age-specific and intergenerational faith formation are not either-or choices; they are complementary. Lifelong faith formation balances age-specific and intergenerational programs, activities, and strategies. Throughout the lifecycle there is a need for age groups (and interest-centered groups) to

gather because of age-related differences in development and age-related learning needs. Each congregation needs to determine the balance that is appropriate.

## Approaches for Enhancing Intergenerational Relationships

There are dozens of ways that churches today are moving toward an intergenerational future, while still incorporating age-specific and interest-centered ministries and programming. In her article, "Breaking Down the Age Barriers," Amy Hanson (2008) reflects on the research she conducted on innovative churches across the U.S. She found that innovative churches are intentionally building multi-generational ministries into the fabric of their church culture. Some of the methods that she found to be effective included:

- Creating natural ways for the generations to serve together.
- Honoring older adults by asking them to tell their stories.
- Educating the church body on the value of intergenerational ministry.
- Finding ways to make the worship service multi-generational.
- Encouraging affinity groups, rather than age groups, as a way for people to connect.
- Hosting strategic intergenerational events.
- Matching young people with older adults in mentoring relationships. (Hanson, 3)

There many ways for churches to enhance intergenerational relationships that will promote lifelong faith formation. These practices are already being implemented in one form or another in Christian churches today and provide a starting part of a

congregation to develop its own customized plan.

## Building Intergenerational Relationships throughout Church Life

Congregations can build intergenerational relationships by adjusting existing ministries and programs, and by creating new opportunities for intergenerational connections. Here are a few examples.

- Integrating intergenerational programming into age-group programming, such as quarterly intergenerational gatherings as part of the children's faith formation.
- Structuring age-group programs with an intergenerational connection, such as an educational program that includes interviews, panels, and storytelling with people of different generations.
- Incorporating intergenerational dialogues into programming—providing opportunities for children and youth to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of older adults through presentations, performances, and discussions. And then *reversing* the process and providing opportunities for the older adults to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of children or teens through presentations, performances, and discussions.
- Developing mentoring relationships between children/youth and adults, such as prayer partners, learning-to-pray spiritual direction, service involvements, and confirmation mentors.
- Linking people of different generations (older-to-younger or younger-to-older) in the church who have insights and life experiences that may be helpful to

the other, such as mid life and older adults helping young adults and new parents with financial management and household management, or young people helping older adults navigate the digital and online world.

- Involving the community in praying for each generation, e.g., when young people leave on a mission trip or retreat weekend or when people celebrate a milestone, such as the birth of a child, a marriage, a graduation, and a retirement.
- Developing specific roles for the younger generations in church leadership, such as adolescents serving as teachers in children's faith formation or as worship leaders.
- Organizing a leadership or ministry apprenticeship for younger generations to serve in church ministries and leadership positions.
- Sponsoring music and art projects such as a community concert where musicians of all ages perform together, or an intergenerational art exchange or exhibit, or an Advent or Lent music festival.
- Organizing social and recreational activities that build intergenerational relationships, such as an intergenerational Olympics, a Friday night simple meal during Lent, or a summer film festival (maybe outdoors on a large screen).

## Developing Intergenerational Learning

Congregations are becoming intentionally intergenerational by incorporating intergenerational learning into their lifelong faith formation plan. Intergenerational learning provides a way to educate the whole community, bringing all ages and generations together to learn with and from each other. Intergenerational learning integrates learning, building community, sharing faith, praying,

celebrating, and practicing faith. The key point 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 in a shared learning experience.

Churches tend to implement 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 make the intergenerational learning program their core faith formation program for all ages usually conducting monthly intergenerational programs as their core experience, and then offering a variety of age-group or affinity-group programs throughout the month. They have replaced or modified their age group programming, such as Sunday School, 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.

One model of intergenerational learning being used by hundreds of churches across the United States begins with an All Ages Learning Experience (intergenerational); moves to an In-Depth Learning Experience (age-specific or intergenerational) taught in one of three formats: age group, whole group or learning activity centers; and concludes by Sharing Learning Reflections and Preparing for Practice (intergenerational).

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

For more on intergenerational learning see *Becoming a Church of Lifelong Learners* by John Roberto (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), and *Intergenerational Faith Formation* by Mariette Martineau, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber (Twenty-Third Publications, 2008). For articles on intergenerational learning go to [www.LifelongFaith.com](http://www.LifelongFaith.com), “Intergenerational Faith Formation.”

## Utilizing Milestones throughout Life

Milestones are significant moments in life’s journey that provide the opportunity for people of all ages to experience God’s love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Faith formation around milestones, sacramental celebrations, and life transitions provides another way that congregations can be intentionally intergenerational—engaging the whole community in the celebration of the milestone, promoting the spiritual and faith growth of all ages, enhancing family faith practice at home, and strengthening people’s engagement in the church community.

*Congregational milestones* include: baptism, welcoming young children to worship, first communion, presentation of Bibles, confirmation, marriage, a funeral, sending people on mission trips, and much more. *Lifecycle milestones* include: entering a new stage of schooling, graduations (middle

school, high school, college, or graduate school), getting a driver’s license, leaving home for college or the military, first home or apartment, new career or job, moving, retirement, death of a family member, and much more. *Annual milestones* include birthdays, anniversaries, start of the school year (e.g. blessing backpacks), seasons of the church year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week), and much more.

Each milestone incorporates intergenerational components at home and church: 1) a ritual celebration or a blessing marking the milestone with the whole church community; 2) a home ritual celebration or blessing marking the milestone; 3) a learning program, for the individual and the family, that prepares them for the milestone and its significance for their life and faith; 4) a tangible, visible reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, given by the church community; and 5) people and resources to support continuing faith growth and practice after the milestone.

For resources on milestones faith formation see *Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation* (Vibrant Faith Ministries, 2007), *Faith Stepping Stones* (Faith Inkubators, [www.faithink.org](http://www.faithink.org)), *Milestones of Faith* by Laura Keeley and Robert J. Keeley (Faith Alive 2009), and *Shift* by Brian Haynes (Group, 2009).

## Creating Intergenerational Service

Intergenerational service provides many benefits to individuals, families, and 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 children and youth 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; communicates that it

is the responsibility of all Christians, regardless of age, to serve people and work for justice as a follower Jesus Christ.

Churches can incorporate inter-generational service into existing service projects and activities *and* create intergenerational versions of an existing program. Almost any service project can become intergenerational. For example:

- Offering mission trips for adults and young people.
- Connecting youth with adults in the church who already preparing and serving meals at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter.
- Engaging children, parents, and older adults in collecting and delivering food baskets, school kits for children, “personal essentials” for those at a homeless shelter, toys at Christmas, gift packages for prisoners, and so on.
- Involving families in caring for the elderly by visiting them at a convalescent home or senior citizen facility or doing chores and shopping.
- Supporting efforts to provide vaccines and medical care to the world’s poor, such as mosquito nets for malaria prevention and immunizations against childhood disease.
- Conducting a church-wide or community-wide intergenerational fundraising project to a) support the efforts of local and national groups who work directly with the poor, b) adopt a community in another country by supporting them financially and learning about their culture and community life, or c) support organizations that are building schools and libraries for children in the poorest countries of the world by providing books and/or our money to purchase books for children.
- Developing intergenerational justice teams to advocate for just policies and priorities that protect human life,

promote human dignity, preserve God’s creation, and build peace by 1) becoming familiar with pending legislation or proposals that affect people’s basic needs, 2) writing advocacy letters or emails, 3) working with advocacy groups, and/or 4) working with organizations that are changing the structures that promote injustice.

- Holding a fair trade festival to provide a way for people to buy fair trade products, such as coffee, chocolate, and crafts, that benefit local producers in the developing world.
- Sponsoring a community-wide “care for the environment day” by planting trees and cleaning-up the community

Churches can mobilize the whole faith community through an annual church-wide justice and service project. An example of this type of church-wide involvement is *Faith in Action Day* sponsored by World Vision and Outreach, Inc. It is a four-week, church-wide campaign that culminates in a Sunday where the entire congregation engages in service projects in and with the community (see [www.putyourfaithinaction.org](http://www.putyourfaithinaction.org)). Churches can select a local and/or 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: 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: prayers, learning resources, 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.

## Being Intergenerational Makes a Difference

In my work and research on intergenerational faith formation I have discovered the power that it has to renew and enliven a faith community. For six years I developed and coordinated the Generations of Faith Project, a service of the Center for Ministry Development and a Lilly Endowment funded project. At the conclusion of the project we conducted a qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) research study to determine what effects intergenerational faith formation was having on the participants, the church leaders, and the whole community. Over 400 Catholic parishes responded, out of the close to 1,000 parishes who participated in the Generations of Faith Project. We found many hopeful signs in the churches that were making intentional intergenerational learning a centerpiece of their lifelong faith formation efforts. (The results of the study are available on my website, [www.LifelongFaith.com](http://www.LifelongFaith.com) under “Intergenerational Faith Formation.”)

We discovered that the practice of intergenerational learning strengthens and creates new relationships and increases participation in church life. Specifically the study found:

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

We discovered 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 was involvement of all ages and generations in learning together: parents and children, teens, young adults, adults, older adults, and whole families.
- Intergenerational learning addressed 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 were participating in faith formation.
- Families enjoyed opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families were growing in the ways that they share faith. Parents were participating in a learning program with their children, often for the first time, and finding benefits in learning together as a family.

We discovered that intergenerational learning created a learning environment—one of warmth, trust, acceptance, and care—conducive to all ages, and promoted group participation, activities, and discussion. Specifically the study found:

- Intergenerational learning created an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.
- Intergenerational learning engaged the participants in a variety of learning activities that were experiential, multi-sensory, and interactive. It fostered all-ages learning, as well addressing the developmental needs and abilities of the different age groups. Faith sharing and personal experience were an important element of intergenerational learning.



- Intergenerational learning was exciting; the enthusiasm, joy, and energy were attractive and contagious.

We discovered that the practice of intergenerational learning required a diversity of leadership who practiced a *collaborative* and *empowering* style of leadership. This style of leadership needed to be exercised not just by the pastor or faith formation coordinator, but by the entire leadership team. Intergeneration learning required committed volunteer leaders who were engaged in a variety of roles in lifelong faith formation: planning, teaching, organizing, and supporting. Teamwork and collaboration were essential for the effective planning and implementation of intergenerational learning.

It is clear to me that living as an *intentionally* intergenerational Christian community brings great blessings and benefits to everyone. Being intergenerational makes a difference!

## Resources

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