



Faith Formation across the Generations

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Growing up in rural Saskatchewan, I was surrounded by many caring and supportive family and community members of all ages. Though the school we attended had the typical grade-level classrooms, the school's population was small enough that many activities were undertaken together. Being a farming community, most of the families in town lived close to their extended families, so aunts, uncles, grandparents and so on were a weekly if not daily presence in our lives.

On a social level, we often gathered as extended families to share meals and socialize. Church life was a regular part of our intergenerational existence, as well. Our grandparents and parents often had visible leadership roles in the community, lecturing, cantoring, and so on. Church socials were an important place where the generations gathered: young and old all worked together to host the church fall suppers, to prepare funeral lunches for the family of the deceased, and to participate in the seasonal clean-ups and church maintenance. Adults and young people shared easy conversations in the local store, and cheered each other on at the hockey and curling rinks.

Life was not perfect, but relationships between the generations were naturally nurtured and respected. Values were shared, stories were told, and experiences were created together. Though we would never have defined it like this, we were a eucharistic community, diverse yet of one body.

As the parent of three young children, living in our current world, I have to create or seek out opportunities for them to intentionally relate with other generations. Their lives are mostly spent in an age-segregated context, whether in their classrooms at school, in their sports programs, or even in religious education at the church. Like many families of my generation who relocate to find work, my children's grandparents and extended family are far away. And so there are few contexts for them to interact with older or younger generations. They have few teens or adults in their lives who share faith with them, and they often wonder why we as a household are believers.

Before we initiated intergenerational learning in our community, church for them was often perceived as something they were brought to once a week, and where they had little interaction with the people around them. In relation to church, my children often talked about one thing: the intergenerational learning events that they had experienced at our previous church. They often talked of the people they had met there and of the learning they had participated in, and they often expressed a longing to have those experiences again.

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It took a few years of watching and waiting before we were ready to suggest intergenerational learning to our new church. But eventually we did, and it has meant a new awakening for the Christian community as a whole.

Now, once a month, something different happens in our church. Imagine that it is Thursday night at Notre Dame Parish, and people are starting to gather in the hall for the monthly intergenerational learning session. The population resembles a family reunion with a diversity of households gathered. There are whole extended families gathered together—grandma, grandpa, mom, dad, and children. There are single older adults; there are moms and/or dads with one or two children; and there are even a few teenagers and young adults in the group. Everyone sincerely greets one another and seats themselves for a meal. Beyond the Sunday worship experience, it is one of the few times that our congregation intentionally gathers as an intergenerational community. Time is taken to nurture relationships, to pray and worship, and for an in-depth learning experience that engages all the learners.

No one is there as a bystander; all participate actively in the evening's activities. There is even a visitor from a neighboring church attending this evening, because the they are wondering what is going on at Notre Dame. The visitor is skeptical about whether children, youth, and adults can really learn together. It has been so engrained in us that learning can only happen in an age specific context that we have forgotten how natural it was for many of us to live and learn in intergenerational communities.

Over the past ten years, the Center for Ministry Development, where I work, has been working

with Catholic parishes to enable them to see how intergenerational learning is a critical part of lifelong faith formation. We believe that learning in this context is essential to the spiritual health of families, and that it makes a significant contribution to the overall health of the Christian community. Intergenerational learning nurtures important relationships between people of all ages, and it supports and guides members to better practice their faith at home, at work, and at school.

Here are comments from parishes who have practiced intergenerational learning for several years:

and fill in the gaps in their formation. More adults are participating in faith formation.

- ◆ Families are enjoying the opportunities to pray, learn, and be together through intergenerational learning. Families are growing in the ways that they share faith. 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

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- ◆ Participants are building relationships across all ages as people learn from each other and grow in faith together. Intergenerational learning is strengthening the church community through relationship building and participation in parish life. People take time to talk and share with each other. The entire community is benefiting.
- ◆ Intergenerational learning is addressing the hunger of adults to learn more about their faith

personal experience are an important element of learning.

- ◆ People of all ages are finding ways to use the activities in the home kit [a send-home tool for intergeneration learning] as part of their daily life and home life. Families are beginning to incorporate faith-sharing activities in family life.

(Generations of Faith Project: Summary Report)

Being a Truly Christian Community

I have often wondered how we are able to fully understand the meaning of Christian community when we live in such a divided world. We divide believers and non-believers, we segregate young and old, we distinguish between cultures and languages and needs. In fact, we manage to creatively divide ourselves up at every opportunity. Yet our Christian faith challenges us again and again to witness the hope and possibility of being community in the world. Through the celebration of Eucharist we seek to proclaim that all are welcome, all belong, all are united together through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can serve together, we can heal together, we can pray together, and we can build community together, all because we are of one faith, called to be disciples in every moment of our lives.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “In Christian usage, the word “church” designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. “The Church” is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.” (no. 752)

If we believe we are the People of God, we need to embrace the call to relationships that being a people demands. Not just relationships of the same, but relationships of the diverse. It is important for a young

person to try and understand the perspective and stories of an older person. In the simple witnessing of their faith, many a child has softened the heart of the older generation, thus enabling the Spirit to enter. The faithful testimony of a young adult can move young people to re-evaluate their priorities and directions. One isn’t a “people” alone!

evident through all members of the community gathered together to learn and share faith together. Whether it be the joy of a household welcoming a new baby or the witness of faith in an older person whose spouse has just been moved to a nursing home, intergenerational faith formation can be the nurturing place for Christian identity and values, where the long-held faith

Intergenerational learning creates centers of dialogue for exploring faith.

We are not formed or fashioned into a people in isolation. It is only in community, through the grace and power of the Trinity inherent in the whole community that we can be the People of God. The *General Directory for Catechesis* makes it clear: “In giving attention to the individual, it should not be overlooked that the recipient of catechesis is the whole Christian community and every person in it” (no. 168).

The nature of intergenerational faith formation stands as a countercultural witness to the consumer-driven society that plants the seeds of need, using “things” to fill the need of relationships, purpose, and meaning. Intergenerational faith formation calls us to remove the blinders of assumption from our eyes and to call forward the best from one another as we explore our call to be disciples of Jesus Christ in today’s world. It provides a setting in which to learn compassion, to learn how to listen, to celebrate the gift of faith in the hope found in others.

Through intergenerational learning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is

traditions of the Christian community are shared.

Our faith formation programs need to provide opportunities for intergenerational learning that includes all ages and generations in the community. This type of learning provides an opportunity to gather the whole community together to learn, pray, celebrate, and share. It has tremendous benefits for the community and for individuals.

Intergenerational faith formation:

- ◆ builds community and meaningful relationships across all the generations in a church
- ◆ provides a setting for each generation to share and learn from the other generations (their faith, stories, wisdom, experience, and knowledge). The parent and grandparent generations pass on the traditions of family and faith to the younger generations, while the younger generations share their faith, energy, and new insights with the parent and grandparent generations.

- ◆ provides an environment where new ways of living one's faith can be practiced
- ◆ provides adult role models for children and youth.
- ◆ promotes understanding of shared values and a common faith, as well as respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life.
- ◆ helps to overcome the age-segregated nature of programs in both our parishes and society.

Intergenerational Learning: Features

Intergenerational learning is much more than different ages learning the same thing at the same time or in the same place. Sometimes called cross-generational learning, it includes intentional opportunities for learners to “cross” their generational boundaries and learn, pray, serve, and be in community with a variety of ages.

Through intentional community building, learners of all ages feel comfortable with one another studying and celebrating the rich traditions of the Christian faith. Intergenerational learning provides opportunities for young and old to teach one another. For example:

- ◆ Scripture takes on a new meaning for the elderly as they listen to a young person's research on the Isaiah passages in preparation for Advent.

- ◆ Children grow in their understanding of discipleship as they listen to their parents or other adults talk about the challenges of being a person of justice.
- ◆ Parents and grandparents pass on traditions of family and faith to the younger generations, while the younger generations inspire others with their energy, enthusiasm, and fresh insights.

Intergenerational learning creates centers of dialogue for exploring faith. Through these conversations we are all nurtured and challenged to live out our baptismal commitments. Cross-generational faith sharing helps us celebrate the presence of God throughout our diverse life experiences. We help one another with our questions, and occasionally offer inspired answers.

Intergenerational learning provides role models and mentors who inspire our hearts so that we can live out our faith to the fullest. How awe-inspiring it is to hear

- ◆ an eight-year-old talk about her plan to help the homeless in her city
- ◆ a thirty-year-old mom share how she seeks to find the face of God in every person she meets as she takes her children to the playground each day
- ◆ a middle-age man share his struggle to find God's presence as he journeyed with his dying wife

- ◆ a seventy-year-old couple talks of their committed love through the sacrament of marriage that they have shared for fifty years.

Intergenerational learning provides opportunities to practice one's faith as each person better learns how to pray, how to read Scripture, and how to relate to people of different ages and cultures. Imagine Christians of all ages practicing together to be church.

Intergenerational Learning: Characteristics

Intergenerational learning incorporates the best of what is important about learning. People of all ages and generations learn best when the learning program engages them experientially, through their heads, hearts, and lifestyles. Students of all ages learn best when their own experiences are honored and respected. Multi-sensory methods to engage the whole person—art, drama, music, dance, storytelling, media, prayer, rituals—are key building blocks for effective intergenerational learning experiences. One need only imagine Jesus, and how he taught through story and images, to realize that learning is broader than lectures and presentations.

Intergenerational learning is enriched through the use of collaborative and group-centered formats for study, inquiry, activities, and sharing. Today's generations of learners are accustomed to interactive learning that actively engages them in the learning process.

Good learning always has real-world application, making the connection between learning and life, and faith and life. When

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learners leave the intergenerational learning sessions they need to be ready to live out their faith in new and renewed ways. Good learning involves more than just receiving content; it also involves integrating that content into daily practice.

Intergenerational Learning: Process

The following learning process, and its many variations, is being used by thousands of churches across North America to design and facilitate intergenerational learning programs.

Part One: Gathering

Registration and Hospitality

Registration may be needed before the learning event takes place in order to determine the number of people who plan on attending. Registration may also be needed as the learners gather for the session to distribute nametags, handouts, home kits, and perhaps collect outstanding fees.

Hospitality is critical toward creating a vibrant learning community. If learners are welcomed warmly, they will more readily participate in the learning program. People learn best in an environment characterized by trust, acceptance, and inquiry. Beyond the gathering, hospitality is critical throughout the entire intergenerational learning experience.

Program Overview

People of all ages like to know how they are going to be spending their time together. As you begin your session, give the learners an overview of the program. Post the agenda on flip chart sheets, use a PowerPoint presentation, or

distribute small pieces of paper for individual learners to carry with them. You may choose to bundle the handouts and take-home materials into a small booklet, placing the program agenda on the front cover.

Group Formation and Community Building

Depending on the learning model or activities chosen, learners are divided into groups: family clusters, intergenerational groups, or age-specific groups. The grouping choices depend on the topic for the session, the physical space, the leadership available, and the number of participants. Community building helps participants feel safe, comfortable, and welcome. Many churches start their learning experiences with a snack or meal.

Opening Prayer Service

The opening prayer service launches the learning experience, as it introduces the theme and roots participants in the community of the Trinity. In some sessions, the opening prayer experience is expanded to serve as the “All-Ages Learning Experience.”

Part Two: All-Ages Learning Experience

The All-Ages Learning Experience provides participants with a multigenerational experience to engage them in the topic of the session. All-ages learning experiences equalize the ages, so that listening to music or singing, watching a dramatic presentation, making an art project, watching a video, hearing a story, participating in a ritual, or praying together are things that different-aged people do at the same time and place, and in a similar manner. Shared experiences are absolutely critical for intergenerational learning.

Part Three. In-Depth Learning Experience

In this, the longest portion of the intergenerational experience (usually about 90 minutes), learning formats are selected according to audience, facilitation, physical space, and topic. A church may use one format one month and a different format the next, depending on the topic being explored. A community may even blend the whole group and age group formats at the same learning session. For example, families with children separate so that the parents have a brief catechetical session on the topic while the children participate in music or crafts related to the topic. The families are then reunited after 15 to 20 minutes to continue to participate in the learning experience together. Here follows an overview of the three learning formats.

Whole Group Format

The Whole Group Format gathers all participants into one large space and guides them through each learning experience at the same time. Imagine a large church hall or adaptable worship space in which tables (preferably round) and chairs have been set up and people of all ages are gathered. Some of the table groups appear to have two or three families working together on a project, some have teenagers or adults working together, and other table groups have people of all ages at them.

At the front or middle of the room is a large-group facilitator (emcee) giving instructions to the groups, and guiding them through the learning experience. Circulating throughout the room are leaders in brightly colored T-shirts assisting the table groups as needed, or who

have been assigned to help facilitate the learning at one of the table groups.

Some of the younger children are participating in the learning experience with their families, while others have chosen to attend the preschool learning option being offered in the vestibule of the church.

The Whole Group Format is a good choice for intergenerational learning when a church has:

- a large physical space with good acoustics and sound system, and appropriate furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large-group facilitator (emcee), capable of providing clear instructions, and able to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of facilitators who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to assign one facilitator to work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time but in different ways in the same space.

Timing is crucial. The various table groups must be able to accomplish the learning tasks in a similar timeframe to prevent some table groups having to wait long periods for other groups to finish.

Age Group Format

The Age Group format provides for three or more separate parallel learning groups to focus on the same topic through the use of learning activities best suited for their learning abilities.

Imagine the learning assembly has just completed their All-Ages Opening Experience and participants are moving into various spaces in the church facility.

Families with preschool children have moved to the carpeted space of the school library for their learning time. Families with school-aged children have moved into one of the church halls for their learning, and the teen and adult groups have also found a comfortable learning space. For the next hour or so all of the learning will take place in these parallel learning groups.

The Age Group Format is a good choice for intergenerational learning when a church has:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning. Some topics are best explored using different activities for different groups.

The number of age groups may vary depending on your total number of participants. The following age groups are recommended. You may decide to have fewer groups—such as putting all teens together, or putting young adults and adults together—if your overall numbers dictate such a choice.

- Three years old and younger: child care
- Four and five year olds, with or without parents: preschool program with one or more teachers
- Parents with children in grades 1-5. We know that parents and children need time to learn together, to learn how to share faith and

talk about faith with one another. Times for parents of teens to learn with their teens should also be offered at varying learning sessions.

- Middle school: grades 6-8
- High school: grades 9-12
- Young adults (single, married couples): 18-39 years old
- Adults: 40 years and older.

Learning Activity Center Format

The Learning Activity Center Format provides structured learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area. Imagine groups of learning teams, whether they are age-specific or inter-generational, busy at a variety of learning activity centers in the church complex. After a twenty-five minute learning period, the church complex erupts into temporary chaos as the learning groups move from one learning center to the next.

The learning activity center format is a good choice for intergenerational learning when a church has:

- a large physical space where multiple learning centers can be set up without each center being too noisy or distracting for other centers, or a church complex that has multiple meeting or classrooms in which the centers can be hosted
- an adequate number of facilitators to guide the learning at each center, or activities that are simple enough for learners to guide themselves
- a learning focus that lends itself to exploration through a variety of shorter topics that are facilitated through a variety of methods, such as a scripture drama and

discussion, making a project together like an Advent wreath, a video with a response activity, and so on.

Part Four. Sharing Learning Reflections and Home Application

This portion of the learning event helps participants share what they've learned with each other, and to discover ways to apply the learning to their lives.

Whole Group Sharing

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each learning group to share some highlights of their in-depth learning experience with the rest of the community. Groups may describe the project or activity they created, give a verbal summary, share a symbol of their learning, offer a dramatic presentation, and so on.

Whole group sharing can be conducted in small groups (e.g., families with children, youth, young adults, adults) sharing their learning activities, or conducted with presentations to the entire learning assembly.

Reflection

Through reflection, participants can integrate what they have learned into their lives. Only then will they experience change and growth.

In the "present," you will ask participants to reflect on their learning experience by responding to simple open-ended sentence, such as "I learned..., I discovered..., I was surprised by..., I was moved by..." After a period of reflection, they share with a partner or table group.

For the "future," you might give participants a postcard in their home kit with same open-ended sentences. After participating in the church event that the learning

session was preparing them for, they fill out the card and drop it in the collection basket. Their learning may be shared anonymously with the whole community through the church bulletin and other means.

Home Application

Participants are given an opportunity to craft a concrete action plan for how they will live out what they have learned. This may be done in a simple format such as a to-do list or a pledge card. The learners are also given, with explanation and guidance as needed, any tools and resources they will need to continue the learning, praying, and serving at home.

Part Five. Closing Prayer Service

The closing prayer service reminds participants what the learning is all about: celebrating and building the kingdom of God. Symbols and responses like pledge cards, prayers of intercession, action plans, and so on can be incorporated into a closing prayer service.

Opportunities for Intergenerational Faith Formation

Use intergenerational learning to prepare for significant happenings in church life. For example, offer an intergenerational learning session on solidarity to prepare the community for Lent, or a session on faithfulness to prepare everyone for the annual blessing of married couples. Offer an intergenerational church-wide retreat, such as a daylong or weekend retreat focused on an event or topic important to your faith community, or an intergenerational vacation Bible school program.

Intergenerational faith formation is integral to our churches as we seek to nurture lifelong faith formation in our communities. The possibilities are endless. What opportunities can you provide for your community to strengthen their call to be the People of God by learning together?

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Ways to Utilize Intergenerational Learning

1. Develop a faith formation curriculum for the whole community using intergenerational faith formation as the primary learning model.

Many churches across the country have adopted intergenerational faith formation as their primary learning model. The intergenerational curriculum becomes the core faith formation curriculum for the whole Christian community, supplemented by age-specific topics for children, teens, and adults. For example, many churches offer monthly intergenerational learning sessions for the whole faith community. They may offer the same intergenerational program several times each month to accommodate the number of people in the church, using different days and times to make it easy for people to participate.

Here is an example of topics for an entire year of intergenerational learning focused on Jesus and discipleship. This example makes clear the intimate connection between faith formation, Sunday worship (with a special focus on the lectionary), and the liturgical seasons.

November-December	Birth of Jesus
January-February	Called to Discipleship
March-April	Death of Jesus
April-May	Resurrection of Jesus
June-Summer	Living as Disciples
September-October	Identity of Jesus

2. Extend a topic or theme being featured in the faith formation program for children or adolescents, to the whole community through intergenerational learning.

A topic that the children are studying can be extended to the whole community through intergenerational learning. For example, if the children are studying about Jesus, consider offering an intergenerational program on the identity of Christ. Schedule it within the same timeframe that the children are studying the unit on Jesus.

If the young people are preparing for a service project or mission trip, use the opportunity to conduct an intergenerational session on Christian service, and get everyone engaged in supporting the teenagers. Intergenerational learning provides a common

learning experience for the whole community that can support age group learning programs. Examine your age group curriculum and look for the opportunities and topics for extending age group learning to the whole community.

3. Replace a topic in the children or adolescent faith formation program with intergenerational learning on the same theme.

Intergenerational learning can provide a different learning model for teaching the same content that would have been taught to the children. For example, replace the children's sessions on prayer with one or more intergenerational sessions on prayer for all members of the community. Children will benefit greatly by learning together with their parents and the other generations of the Christian community.

4. Add intergenerational learning to sacramental preparation and sacramental celebrations.

Sacrament preparation offers a marvelous opportunity to offer intergenerational learning for the whole community and/or the extended family of the one preparing for the sacrament. The celebration of a sacrament, such as baptism or Eucharist, is an opportunity to enrich the faith of the whole community. For example, your church can offer intergenerational learning each year around the celebration of First Communion, focusing on different aspects of the Sunday liturgy within the context of the sacrament. During the Christian initiation formation process (RCIA), intergenerational sessions can be offered on initiation themes, such as the baptism and conversion. In addition, many Catholic parishes conduct intergenerational learning programs to prepare the community for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation in Advent or Lent.

5. Conduct intergenerational faith formation before major church year feasts and seasons, as well as church events.

The church calendar is rich with possibilities for intergenerational learning for the whole community. Conduct intergenerational programs to prepare all generations for major liturgical feasts and seasons, such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, and

Pentecost, as well as significant events in the life of your church, such as the anniversary of the founding of the church, stewardship Sunday, or a ministries fair. There are dozens of opportunities for preparing the whole community to participate more intentionally and meaningfully in church events.

6. Add intergenerational learning to a vacation Bible school or summer program.

Many churches sponsor summer programs for children. This is another opportunity to add an intergenerational learning program for the whole community. Take a theme from the summer program and offer an intergenerational program on that same theme for families of the children and the whole community. For example, if the focus of the program is being a friend of Jesus, the church can sponsor an intergenerational program on becoming a disciple or living as a disciple.

7. Conduct intergenerational learning around local, national, and international justice issues, events, and action projects.

Justice issues, events, and action projects provide opportunities to engage the whole community in the work of justice and service, as well as learn about the biblical teachings on justice. For example, prepare the community for a justice and service project, such as

helping to feed and clothe the poor in your community, with an intergenerational program on poverty and the needs of the poor. Celebrate the national holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr., by conducting an intergenerational program on racial equality or peace and nonviolence, and then engaging in an action project. Enlist the whole community in supporting the work of national and international organizations by adopting an organizations' project, such as building homes through Habitat for Humanity, and then conducting an intergenerational program on housing and poverty.

8. Sponsor an intergenerational retreat for the whole community.

Many churches conduct a community-wide retreat or mission over several days each year, usually with weekend and evening sessions. This is a great opportunity to enrich the faith of the whole community. Organize your retreat by conducting intergenerational sessions, rather than sessions for individual groups. Develop a focus for the mission, such as following Jesus, or growing in prayer, or what we believe as Christians. Select individual topics for each session of the mission and provide participants with materials to continue the retreat at home.

People of Faith Intergenerational Faith Formation Resources

Six Volumes: Jesus, Creed, Sacraments, Morality, Justice, and Prayer

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