

Case Study

Intergenerational Sacramental Preparation: The Restored Order for Initiation Sacraments Catholic Parish of the Holy Eucharist in Falmouth, Maine

It is November of 2014 and Georgette Dionne is in her second year as the Director of Lifelong Faith Formation at the Parish of the Holy Eucharist in Falmouth, Maine where she is implementing an intergenerational approach to sacramental preparation for families with children who are between the ages of 7 and 10. The Parish of the Holy Eucharist is a relatively new church comprised of four merged churches: St. Jude, Sacred Heart, Holy Martyrs and St. Gregory the Great. There are 3,000 families across the four sites. These types of mergers are becoming more common for Catholics in the Northeast due to demographic shifts and declining church attendance. As one would expect, the transition to intergenerational faith formation has been different for each of the four sites in this parish, but the consistent and patient presence of one faith formation director for all four sites is helping the parish embrace a unified approach to faith formation.

The Parish of the Holy Eucharist celebrates the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation & Eucharist) in what is known as the restored order. This means that people are initiated as members of the church by receiving Baptism first, then they are confirmed after their 7th birthday. In most cases, they will receive First Communion toward the end of the same ceremony in which they are confirmed. It is called the restored order because it reflects the practices of the earliest Christian communities and reverses a relatively recent Roman Catholic practice of confirming children and teens after they had already been initiated through Baptism and Eucharist.

Prior to the 2013-14 religious education year, the Parish of the Holy Eucharist was using a classroom model to prepare children for First Reconciliation, Confirmation and First Communion. For churches that place a strong emphasis on sacraments, shifting to an intergenerational model during sacramental preparation program is very effective. The sacrament years are a great place to start because families are highly motivated for faith formation when their children are preparing for sacraments. It is the optimal time to give them a first experience of family and intergenerational faith formation. Families that have a positive experience with intergenerational faith formation in a sacrament year become ambassadors for the expansion of intergenerational ministries in other areas of faith formation. The Parish of the Holy Eucharist took this first step in the fall of 2013 under Dionne's direction.

Georgette Dionne began with an invitation, not a mandate. She invited parents, grandparents and sponsors to participate in the faith formation sessions with their children who were preparing for the initiation sacraments. The invitational approach has been successful in many churches when they take the first steps to move away from classroom models. After a church has a significant percentage of families freely choosing family and intergenerational faith formation (about 25% is a good rule of thumb) over a classroom model, then a church is in a good position to make a wholesale programmatic switch away from the child-centered classroom to a full intergenerational model. Churches report minimal resistance when they are invitational and slowly and methodically work towards a complete changeover to an intergenerational model with an intentional and well-communicated plan of action.

Georgette's successful communication to parents is fueled by her passion for family and intergenerational faith formation. She believes that parent and other adult involvement is essential for a healthy faith community and for healthy child/teen faith formation. She communicates these values

with enthusiasm to the parents of children in the program. She delivers the following key messages in her invitation:

- The church program is secondary to the parent as a faith forming agent of children. Faith formation rises and falls on parent participation at church and at home.
- When parents participate, child satisfaction with the program increases. She tells parents that their presence makes their children happier. What parent doesn't want his/her child to be happy?
- There is learning to be had by everyone, adults included. Our children have a unique faith formation role to play for the benefit of adults in the church. Sharing faith formation with children enhances the faith of adults.

Georgette doesn't just invite parents to participate, she tells them why their participation is good for their children, good for the community and good for them as parents; and she delivers this message with an authentic and believable tone because she herself is fully invested in what has been proven to be true about parent involvement in faith formation.

Georgette's approach is paying off. She had good adult participation in the first year and increased participation by adults in the second year. Several adults also stepped forward this year to provide both written and spoken testimony to the powerful impact family and intergenerational faith formation has had on their lives and on their families. These witnesses are now a key part of her invitation. One dad decided to join the church after he participated in the program with his child. Researchers have reported that people leave Catholic churches primarily because their spiritual needs are not being met. It is adults who make decisions about whether a family should stay or leave. It stands to reason that if you offer quality opportunities for parents to grow in their faith on a consistent and ongoing basis, your church is poised for a healthy future. On the flipside, if your focus is primarily on children and teens, you are not influencing the decision-makers in the household. The family-centered program at the Parish of the Holy Eucharist is having a positive and increasing impact at all four sites.

Here are some of the program details:

- They meet weekly from early October to late April.
- They meet on a weekday evening or Sunday morning for 75 minutes.
- Children (ages 7-10), parents, grandparents and sponsors participate.
- The program includes about 75-80 children across the four sites.
- The program also includes a one-day retreat. Every child had an accompanying adult at the retreat.
- The resource they use is called *Growing Up Catholic* from The Pastoral Center, <http://www.growingupcatholic.com/>.

The impact and outcomes of this program are already evident. Dionne reports that families have spontaneously formed as small faith communities on their own. They are organizing themselves to reach out in service to the community and to create community building activities among themselves. Families are reporting a deeper appreciation for the meaning and purpose of Sunday worship. Adults with strong facilitation skills but poor faith formation are becoming increasingly confident and will be coached into faith formation roles in the church. Other intergenerational ministries are already developing in the church and are receiving a strong supportive response from members. Children are receiving positive faith modeling from adults who care for them. The modeling is happening at church and in their homes. The experience of the Parish of the Holy Eucharist is not an isolated success story. This approach has worked in other churches and can work for you. Get ready to take your first step!