



## Intergenerational Faith Formation Today: Its Impact and Sustainability

Jim Merhaut

It was 1988 when James White published his landmark book, *Intergenerational Religious Education*. White put into words what many people were beginning to sense in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: that there is something unnatural and unhealthy about forming children, youth, and adults in isolation from each other. Others have noted the risks of age segregation too. “This lack of intergenerational contact leads each generation to see itself as a separate subculture rather than as an integral part of an entire community, perspectives that often lead to conflict and competition rather than cooperation” (Martinson and Shallue, 4).

Until recently, the Church had always been fundamentally intergenerational both in its worship practices and in its learning practices. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did we witness the emergence of age segregation as the primary learning environment in churches. While the age segregation model’s efficiency made it possible for church educators to operate like a well-oiled machine, its deficiencies soon became apparent as the potential for making faith stick beyond adolescence dwindled with the decline of distinctive church culture in American communities. The close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left us wondering, in the words of John Westerhoff, “Will our children have faith?”

The first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the development of new models of faith formation that integrate age-specific and intergenerational learning in creative ways. Many churches that

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**Jim Merhaut** is a ministry consultant, writer, teacher, and relationship coach. He holds a Masters degree in Religious Education from Duquesne University. He is an award-winning author and co-author of several books and dozens of other publications. Jim’s most recent book is *Gratitude Journal: A Journey of Transformation*. He was also the principal writer and project coordinator for *Families on a Mission: A Family Service and Mission Experience*. Jim is a 26-year veteran in church ministry having worked in parish, diocesan, Catholic school, university and retreat center settings. He most recently served as the Project Coordinator for Lifelong Faith Formation Services at the Center for Ministry Development and the President and CEO of Villa Maria Education & Spirituality Center. Jim has offered keynotes, retreats and workshops around the country, specializing in family spirituality, lifelong faith formation, and ministry leadership. Along with his publishing and speaking ministries, he offers coaching services to ministry teams and married couples. On the side, he is a professional musician and recording artist with JD Eicher and the Goodnights. ([www.spiritualhelpforyou.com](http://www.spiritualhelpforyou.com))

offer intergenerational faith formation got their start with the Generations of Faith project led by John Roberto and sponsored by the Center for Ministry Development. This project, funded by the Lily Foundation, offered intergenerational faith formation training to over 1,200 Catholic churches beginning in 2001 and continuing for five years.

New research about intergenerational learning is emerging in both Catholic and Protestant circles. The churches that have endured and thrived are the focus of this article. Most of them are Catholic churches that participated in the Generations of Faith training. LifelongFaith Associates has been surfacing churches throughout the United States that are offering some form of intergenerational faith formation. We will examine some key practices that are emerging consistently in the churches that are making intergenerational faith formation a part of their culture. For some churches, it has become the way they do things.

The dedication of these faith formation leaders is inspiring. Many churches, against significant odds, are changing the way we think about religious education. They are building their programs on what they believe to be the best practices in faith formation with limited resources and minimal institutional support. They fervently believe that the journey of faith is lifelong and that dedicated Christians seek learning from childhood through old age. These churches provide opportunities for faith formation to children, teens, young adults, and older adults. They work with families and single persons. They believe that the presence of children is essential for adult faith growth and the presence of adults, including those who are not parents, is essential for the faith growth of children and teens.

In this study, we surveyed and talked to Catholic faith formation leaders in suburban, rural, and urban settings. They were large, medium, and small-sized churches. Some were combined with, or in the process of combining

with, another church. We asked faith formation leaders in churches to tell us what they have learned over the past decade. They told us about content, methods, sustainability, and the impact that the intergenerational model has had on them and the congregations they serve.

## Effective Practices and Associated Outcomes

The fruits of our labor are significant indicators of whether or not we are on the right path. Results matter. Matching the positive outcomes of intergenerational faith formation with the common practices that produce them gives us a clear picture of where churches need to focus their efforts in order to be successful with intergenerational ministries. Some of the outcomes reported by faith formation leaders are:

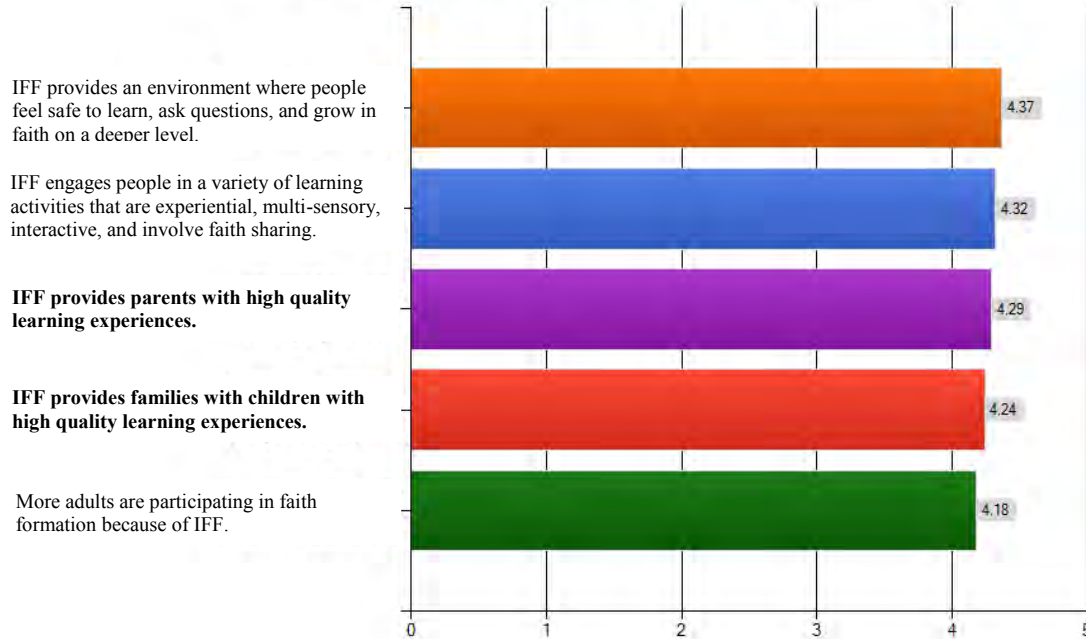
- Stronger families
- A greater sense of community
- A safe learning environment
- Motivated learners

### Stronger Families

*The future of humanity passes  
by way of the family.*  
(Pope John Paul II)

One could also say that the future of any church passes by way of the family. Faith formation leaders see tremendous benefits to families that participate in intergenerational faith formation. We asked leaders to rate seventeen impact statements related to intergenerational faith formation on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The five highest scoring impact statements are shown in the chart below. Two of the top five are family related (see bold items in chart).

The following statements describe the impact of intergenerational faith formation (IFF) on the participants. Please rate your degree of agreement with each statement.



This finding is consistent with the 2005 study by the Center for Ministry Development, *Generations of Faith Research Study*. Benefits to the family ranked among the highest outcomes in that study as well. Families that learn, pray, talk, and serve together are much more likely to experience the positive outcomes of church membership than families that experience these faith practices in age-specific settings. The importance of nurturing family faith with the whole family together was highlighted in the *Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry*. The results were reported in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (Martinson, Black, Roberto, 2010). They conclude, “Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are *three* times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and *twice* as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith.” The *Effective Christian Education Study* (Search Institute, 1990) found that family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity, even more

important than lifelong exposure to Christian education.

Intergenerational faith formation strengthens parental faith with high quality learning experiences. It also puts those same parents in a position to express their faith in the presence of their children. This dynamic helps to build stronger faith families, and these faithful families produce service-oriented children who are more likely to carry the practices of discipleship into their adult years than children and teens who participate in church faith formation experiences without their parents. Parental faith was cited by emerging adults who are connected to their faith as a key factor that sustained their faith through college. (*National Study of Youth & Religion*, Smith and Snell, 2003)

Strong churches are made up of strong families. Separating family members from each other for faith formation experiences is counterproductive for churches. Intergenerational faith formation builds family faith by providing opportunities for parents and children to talk about the mysteries of faith, to experience prayer and worship

together, and to serve those in need shoulder-to-shoulder. For the vast majority of the church's history, this is how children learned to be adult disciples. The evidence from a large body of research confirms that families remain our most powerful tool for raising faith-filled disciples.

## A Greater Sense of Community

Does intergenerational faith formation strengthen relationships in the parish

community? Yes, and 86.8% of the parish leaders in our survey agreed, with 26.3% of them strongly agreeing. This was the highest ranked impact statement of all statements relevant to intergenerational faith formation's impact on the community as a whole. People feel like they belong to a parish community when they participate in intergenerational programming.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating (out of 5)
<b>IFF is strengthening relationships among people in the parish community.</b>	0%	5.3%	7.9%	60.5%	26.3%	4.08

This is a highly significant finding in light of other research. Abraham Maslow famously demonstrated that belonging is a basic human need. Human beings cannot thrive unless they feel like they belong to a community. In some cases, this is even more basic than the need for safety or self-preservation as is the case with those who stay in abusive relationships. People place a very high value on a sense of community. What does this value mean for churches today?

In a fascinating study by James Kouzes and Barry Posner summarized in their book, *The Truth about Leadership*, commitment to a community is shown to be driven more by the personal values of the members than by the corporate values of the community. Kouzes and Posner discovered that people commit to organizations when organizations understand and honor what the people value most. If people value the feeling of belonging, then organizations like churches should be building communities that are hospitable and that create a warm sense of community if those churches want committed members.

We asked church leaders to list the three greatest benefits of intergenerational faith formation for their church. The most commonly mentioned benefit is that

intergenerational faith formation builds a stronger sense of community in the church. Hospitality emerged as the key to building this sense of community. A commitment to hospitality is the most important factor for sustaining and growing intergenerational faith formation in a church. It scored a remarkably high 4.63 on a scale of 5 as most important. Perhaps more than anything else, churches need to be places of hospitality in order to build commitment from members. Hospitality creates the sense of belonging that is desired so deeply by all people.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders can think about hospitality in two key ways:

1. Building a spirit of hospitality will strengthen intergenerational programming. It is the top sustaining factor.
2. Intergenerational programming will strengthen the sense of belonging that is at the heart of a strong, hospitable church community. A stronger sense of community is the highest rated impact of intergenerational faith formation on a church community.

Put more simply: build hospitality for stronger intergenerational programming; build strong intergenerational programming to become a more hospitable church. It really is two sides to one coin.

There are many reasons why intergenerational faith formation builds a strong sense of community. An obvious reason is that an intergenerational gathering is a rare treasure in our peer oriented culture. Any organization that promotes intergenerational experiences will be an organization in the culture where welcoming is a mark of distinction. True community is intergenerational, but there are other findings in our survey that point to practices in intergenerational churches that clearly enhance this sense of community.

## A Safe Place

Trust is a foundational building block for healthy growth and development. People need to work to create safe places where a sense of trust can thrive. Intergenerational gatherings are safe places where people can freely ask questions and engage in faith discussions without fear. Survey participants were presented with seventeen statements about the known impact of intergenerational faith formation on program participants. The safe learning environment was ranked #1 among all statements of impact. (See first chart.)

There can be no trust in a learning community without a safe and comfortable environment. Imagine some of the age-specific groups you have participated in over the years, especially in your adolescent years. Safety was not always a guarantee. Kindness does not always emerge in a peer group. Psychologist, Mary Pipher, once said, "A great deal of America's social sickness comes from age segregation. If ten fourteen-year-olds are grouped together, they will form a *Lord of the Flies* culture with its competitiveness and meanness. But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them

all." Adults in general, and churches in particular, have an obligation to provide safe places for children, teens, and other adults to gather and learn without fear. Bringing the generations together enhances safety.

Church sex abuse scandals in recent years highlight the importance of being more vigilant about safety for minors. Not only are intergenerational gatherings safer than peer gatherings in terms of the emotional climate of the learning environment, they are also sexually safer because of the presence of parents and multiple other adults. Intergenerational models ideally group multiple adults with multiple teens and multiple children in the same room at the same time. Clearly no learning environment can be completely safe, but intergenerational models offer the potential of remarkable benefits for children and teens in terms of safety. While this is true, it is also important not to relax the high standards that have been wisely implemented in age-specific settings such as school and parish religious education programs when a church shifts to intergenerational programming. During breakout sessions and free time, leaders need to consistently implement and clearly communicate strong boundaries for the protection of children and teens.

## Motivated Learners

Forcing people into faith formation is about as far away from the heart of Christian formation as one can get. Freedom is a predominant theme in the Scriptures and in the tradition of Christianity. When communities have to force people to participate, the battle for true community is already lost. Leaders of intergenerational faith formation note that the creative approach of the learning sessions has a high impact on participants.

The creative and diverse learning approaches used by intergenerational practitioners was ranked second highest among factors that impact participants (see the first chart). This approach to session

planning is based upon the belief that it is the responsibility of leaders to be inspirational. If we can't force faith learning, we have to find ways to motivate learners by connecting with what matters to them. We need to inspire the learners. Creative approaches and diverse teaching methodologies provide the best chance of capturing the attention and energy of learners.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders understand that there is no one approach to teaching that will work for everyone, especially when the learning community is age diverse. There is no publication that will be sufficient to meet the learning needs of the gathered intergenerational community. Successful practitioners rely upon a variety of faith formation resources, their own experience, the creative spark of community members, and the inspiration of prayer to guide their session planning.

St. Elizabeth Church in Acton, Massachusetts submitted this creative video as a way to introduce people to intergenerational learning:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2CBkYm37Cs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2CBkYm37Cs).

Other churches develop special music ministries that are used exclusively for intergenerational gatherings. Some write and produce their own dramatic presentations. Some build elaborate props to enhance the visual learning experience for all ages. Clearly, adults represent the portion of the community that will freely choose to participate or not to participate, to make room on the calendar for faith formation or find ways to pack the calendar with other pursuits as a means of escaping a meaningless faith formation experience. Adult participation is a key barometer. If adults are not showing up for faith formation sessions, then we need to discern whether or not we are effectively designing programs to meet their learning needs. Leaders report that adults come consistently to intergenerational learning sessions when those sessions are creative and engaging. Adults will perceive the programs as relevant when leaders take the time to learn about the needs of the adults in the

community and address those needs at every gathering while using diverse methodologies to address relevant content.

## The Leadership Question

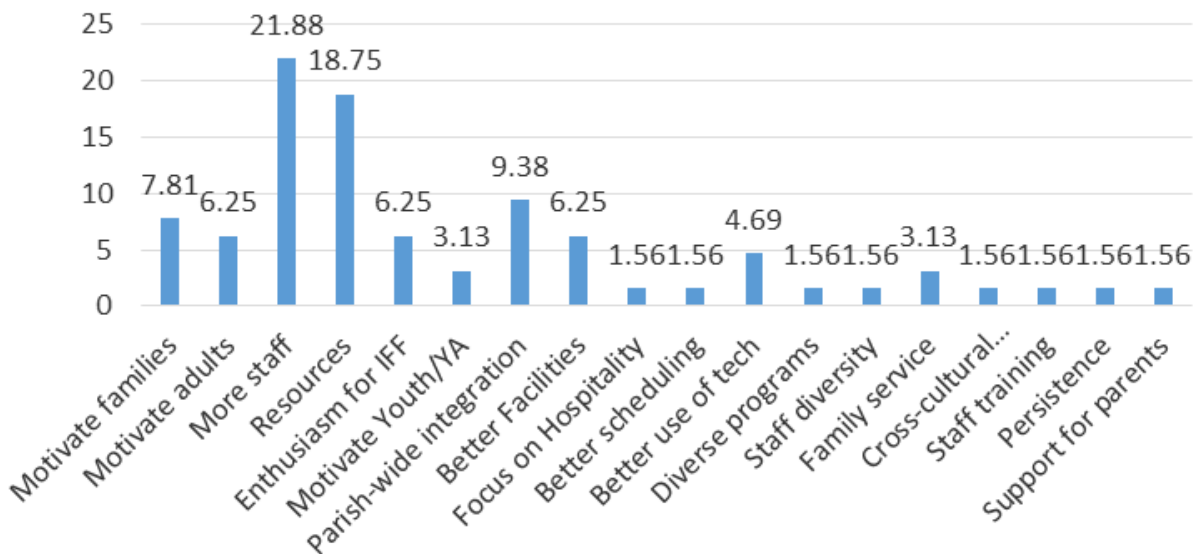
In the open-ended comments of our survey, leadership, in terms of more staff, was the top identified need of faith formation leaders.

Intergenerational faith formation leaders need help. They are looking for dedicated parish staff and volunteers to help them sustain the vision of lifelong faith formation. Resources for those leaders was the second highest identified need. Leadership training that features recruitment, training, and sustaining strategies is a growing need for faith formation leaders.

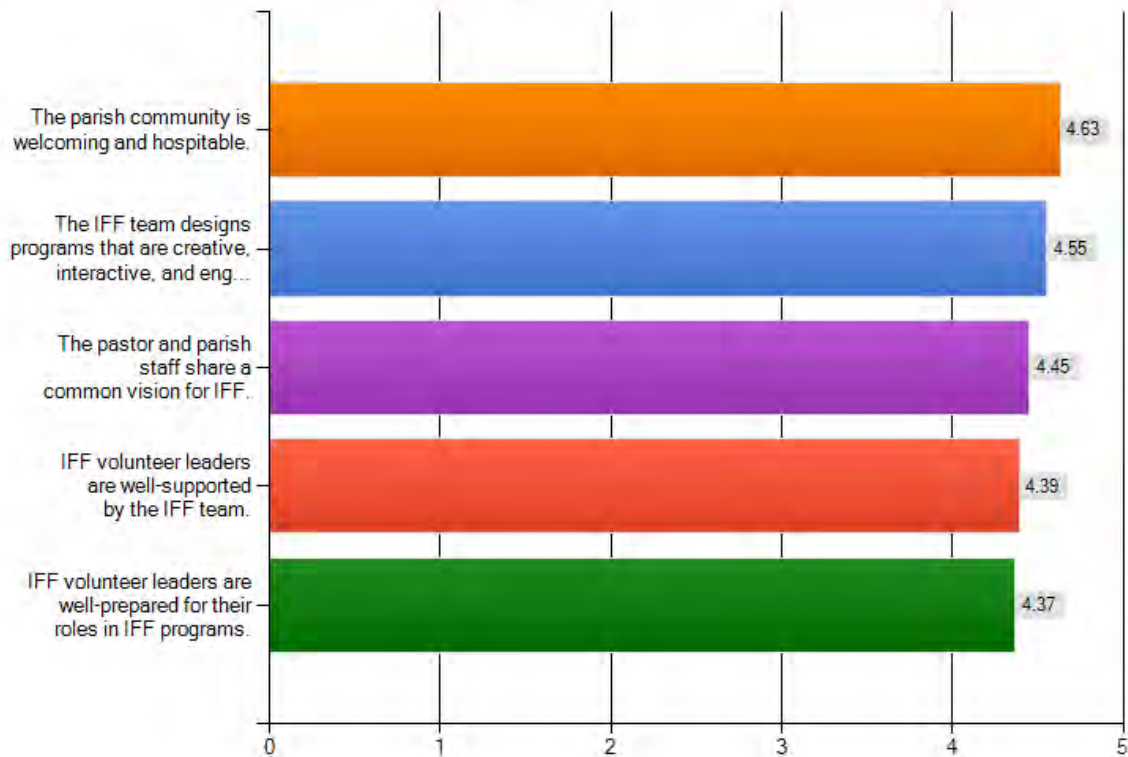
Leadership also made a strong showing in the quantitative portion of the survey. After hospitality, leadership factored in as the next four highest factors that sustain intergenerational faith formation in a church community. (See charts below.)

Dynamic and effective intergenerational faith formation is always a team leadership effort. Some parishes have more than one hundred people volunteering to put together a monthly intergenerational faith formation program. The volunteers are facilitating learning, planning and preparing meals, developing creative learning sessions, developing and preparing home materials, designing environment, creating and offering prayer experiences, developing warm and welcoming experiences for the opening of a session, and more.

## Key Needs for IFF Growth Percent of Total Responses



The following statements describe factors or characteristics that help your parish sustain and grow intergenerational faith formation (IFF). Please indicate how important each factor is for your parish.



Some key leadership traits include:

- The ability to inspire large numbers of church members with a compelling vision of faith formation for the whole community
- The insight to name the highest priorities and most important strategies to bring the vision to life
- The charisma to build a working and volunteering environment filled with joy, hope, and meaningful work/ministry opportunities
- The organization skills to develop a leadership system with clear oral and written communication channels
- The flexibility to create a wide variety of ways for people to contribute to the faith formation mission
- The willingness to be supportive by offering meaningful and relevant training and mentoring to staff and volunteers at all levels of the ministry
- The humility to step back and empower others to do what they are called and trained to do
- The wisdom to step in and help when needed
- The determination and commitment to stick to the mission when difficult challenges arise
- The generosity of saying thank you endlessly, specifically, and authentically

## Continuing Challenges

Leaders identified some areas of ongoing challenge for them in both the quantitative and the open-ended sections of the survey.

### 1. Youth Ministry

Even after decades of theoretical and research findings that promote integrating teens into the life of the whole community rather than segregating them exclusively or primarily into youth groups, there remains a significant challenge with integrating teens into

intergenerational programs. The reasons for this were not clarified in our survey, and they are likely many and complex. The influence of the broader culture and the experiences of adolescents in the educational system would seem to be significant.

Church growth movements in evangelical protestant churches also promote age segregation as a way to attract teens and young families to churches. There is a certain level of comfort in a peer group that is not present in an intergenerational group that makes age segregated ministry very tempting for shrinking churches that want to attract large numbers of new members. This has proven to be a short-sighted strategy. One of the challenges of intergenerational practitioners is to clearly articulate the vision of intergenerational faith formation in an inspiring way that matches the enthusiastic proselytizing of church growth practitioners.

Leaders also need to find new ways to integrate teens into intergenerational programs that address the needs and concerns of teens while incorporating their particular gifts for ministry. One insight that was expressed by youth leaders is that teens must be active participants in any program. They will not tolerate passive participation as much as other age groups will. Finding ways to let teens serve the program as they participate in it is helpful.

### 2. Faith Formation at Home

While faith formation leaders believe that faith in the home is being expressed and lived more effectively because of intergenerational faith formation opportunities offered at church, there is still a concern that faith practices in the home are far from what they could be. While 84.2% of leaders believe they are providing practical materials for families to use at home, only 65.8% of leaders believe these materials are having an impact in the homes of participants. This is an area with great promise for future growth. We know that the home is the place where faith is formed



foundationally. We also know what families need to do in order to become strong faith formers for each other at home, i.e. engage in caring conversations, develop rituals and traditions, pray and read the Bible together, and engage in service together. Now it is just a matter of developing strategies to get the job done. Intergenerational faith formation leaders will need to connect home faith formation strategies with the things that families value most. The only way to know what they value most is to ask them. Home faith formation will not become a regular practice for families until they find a way to integrate it into what they love to do. When

leaders know what families value and love, then they will unlock the key to successful home faith formation resources. The resources should be developed in light of what families value.

One thing that emerges very strongly in time studies of families is their love for television. Families spend more media time with television than with any other media device. Clearly this expresses a value that families have. They value watching television. The chart below expresses the time spent in hours per day that adults use media. Statistics for youth are similar with television as the top media form.

**Average Time Spent per Day with Major Media by US Adults, 2008-2011**  
minutes

	2008	2009	2010	2011
TV and video	254	267	264	274
Internet	137	146	155	167
Radio	102	98	96	94
Mobile	32	39	50	65
Newspapers	38	33	30	26
Magazines	25	22	20	18
Other	48	46	46	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>635</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>660</b>	<b>693</b>

*Note: time spent with each medium includes all time spent with that medium, regardless of multitasking; for example, 1 hour of multitasking on the internet and watching TV is counted as 1 hour for TV and 1 hour for internet; numbers may not add up to total due to rounding*  
Source: eMarketer, Dec 2011

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Given this information, it would seem that media literacy would be an ideal way to connect faith with what is going on in homes. Intergenerational program leaders ought to be watching lots of television to capture themes that are influencing the families in our churches. We can then connect our teaching more effectively to what is happening in families. We can develop home resources that help families spend these hundreds of hours of television viewing more actively and in light of faith values. And perhaps these viewing hours would drop a bit if families were given some assistance with developing a faith-filled way of using media in the home.

## Integration throughout the Church

While leaders have considerable success offering intergenerational programs, they experience a challenge with the creation of an intergenerational culture throughout the congregation. Leaders identified this as the third highest need for the future growth of intergenerational faith formation. True churches are intergenerational at their core. The intergenerational worshipping community is the paradigm (source and summit) for church life. The intergenerational family is the foundation for church life. It would seem like an easy transition from these two core church

experiences to say that Christians ought to be intergenerational in all that they do. Not that every gathering should be intergenerational, but that every gathering should build the intergenerationality of a church. Getting a church to think intergenerationally is a significant challenge for the future. When all adult gatherings include a consciousness of and a concern for teens and children, then we are on our way. Likewise, when all child and teen gatherings include a consciousness of and concern for the adults, then we are on our way. Accomplishing this is the subject of the next article in the Journal.

## Conclusion

Intergenerational faith formation is the default method for churches when one takes the long view of history. Our current culture has called us to be intentionally intergenerational in order to mine the riches of bringing young and old back together in fruitful partnership. While church leaders acknowledge the difficult work and the many challenges associated with intergenerational faith formation, they also cannot imagine returning to a program that separates the generations and focuses primarily on delivering faith formation content to children. Promoting

intergenerationality in the future will require leaders to proclaim the vision in inspirational ways, to continue to embrace creative and flexible program opportunities, to expand intergenerational experiences beyond catechetical programs, and to learn more from families about how to be intergenerational.

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