



# Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational: Models and Strategies

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John Roberto

**E**very church can become *intentionally intergenerational*! Most churches are intergenerational or multi-generational by membership. Some churches 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
- 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
- overcomes the age-segregated nature of our society, taking a pro-active, counter-cultural stance in the face of the countless ways society separates and pigeon-holes into age-specific groups

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## Where to Begin

There are dozens of ways that a church can become intentionally intergenerational. We have already seen examples in the articles by Holly Catterton Allen, Carol Howard Merritt, and Earl Creps. In the next section a variety of stories and examples provide more ideas to inspire your own efforts at becoming more intentionally intergenerational. They are organized in the following categories:

1. Intergenerational Social Events
2. Intergenerational Mentoring
3. Intergenerational Storytelling
4. Intergenerational Service
5. Intergenerational Learning  
(with profiles of parishes implementing intergenerational faith formation)

Here are several ideas for beginning your journey toward becoming intentionally intergenerational, and for moving from ideas to action:

1. Gather your church's key leaders and/or develop an "Intergenerational Task Force" made up of people in leadership roles from all the generations in your church.
2. Review the "Strategies for Becoming More Intentionally Intergenerational" (below).
3. Read the stories and examples in the next section.
4. Analyze your church's intergenerational strengths and weaknesses. Consider church life, ministries, specific intergenerational programs, projects, and events.
5. Identify areas for growth and improvement.
6. Develop a plan of action:
  - Identify strategies that your church can initiate that will bring an intergenerational focus to existing ministries and programs.
  - Identify new initiatives and programs that your church can launch to bring the generations together.
  - Identify long-term goals (3-5 years) for your church so that becoming intentionally intergenerational is an integral element of the culture of your church.
7. Present your plan to church leaders and the community. Make a solid case for the need to be intergenerational and the blessings and benefits that it will bring to the church community. Share your plan—short term

and long term goals and projects. Invite feedback, suggestions, and ideas.

8. Begin to implement your plan. Evaluate your efforts, but be patient. Each effort provides new learning that you can use to continue to move toward becoming a more intentionally intergenerational church.
9. Keep innovating! Each year introduce new projects and programs. And don't be afraid to communicate the stories and examples of the benefits and blessings that are coming to your church community.

## Strategies for Becoming More Intentionally Intergenerational

Before we turn to the stories and examples, here are several strategies for bringing an intergenerational focus to your current community life, ministries, and programming. These strategies can start your journey toward a deeper and richer intergenerational experience in your church.

### Focus on Community Life

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- Examine your church's activities—from worship to faith formation to social events—to determine if they are welcoming to all generations, especially the underserved and uninvolved (e.g., young adults).
- Explore how your church's activities can incorporate opportunities for more relationship building across generations.
- Provide community building at church-wide events. Include introductions and a brief community builder. This will help people get to know each other.
- Have one generation provide hospitality at parish-wide events for all of the other generations.
- Involve the parish community in praying for all the generations, for example: young people on a mission trip or retreat weekend; milestones in the life of individuals and families, such as the birth of a new child, marriages, graduations, and retirements.
- Offer simple, one-time opportunities for the older generations (adults) and the younger generations (children, youth, young adults) to get to know each other. These may include social events, service projects, or educational experiences. Make a concerted effort to invite

people from all generations to plan and participate in the activities.

- Encourage adults of all ages to share their faith journey, beliefs, and values with young people. Invite young people to share their stories, too.
- Link 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 money management and household management, or young people helping older adults navigate e-mail and the online world.
- Through worship services, newsletters, adult education, and other settings, urge all adults in the church to form meaningful relationships with young people in all areas of their life, including neighborhood, workplace, and social activities — not just in the church.

## **Infuse Intergenerational Relationship-Building and Programming into Existing Programs and Activities**

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- “Intergenerationalize” age-group programming — take a child- or youth-only program and re-design it to include other generations, such as an intergenerational service program.
- Integrate intergenerational programming into the age-group program plan and calendar, such as quarterly intergenerational nights as part of the children’s faith formation program.
- Structure age-group programs with an intergenerational connection, such as an educational program that includes interviews, a panel, and/or storytelling with people of different ages.
- Incorporate intergenerational dialogues into programming — provide opportunities for children and youth to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of older adults through presentations, performances, and discussions. Then *reverse* the process and provide opportunities for the older adults to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of children or teens through presentations, performances, and discussions.
- Develop mentoring relationships between youth and adults, such as prayer partners, learning-to-pray spiritual direction, service involvement, and Confirmation mentors. Mentoring

programs can replace some of the parish’s gathered youth programs.

## **Incorporate All Generations into Ministries and Leadership Roles**

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- Break-down an “adult-only” mentality by identifying specific roles for the younger generations in church leadership, such as adolescents serving as teachers in children’s faith formation or as worship leaders (lectors, greeters, musicians, artists to decorate the worship space).
- “Intergenerationalize” church councils and committees. Be sure to involve at least two members of each generation. This can be a time for mentoring younger generations by assigning an veteran member of a council or committee to support and nurture a younger member.
- Organize a leadership or ministry apprenticeship for younger generations to serve in church ministries and leadership positions.
- Create new parish or community leadership roles that are led by younger generations, especially young adults, and which draw upon some of their unique and special gifts that can benefit the entire community.
- Create a youth program or task form to analyze youth involvement in the parish or community. For example: working in teams, take a month to explore the life and ministries of the parish. Create a report on youth involvement in parish life for young people, for the parish staff and leadership, and for the parish community.

## **Create New Models of Intergenerational Programming**

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- Design intergenerational service programs (or redesign existing programs) that accommodate the needs and interests of all generations.
- Sponsor 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.
- Organize social-recreational activities, such as an intergenerational Olympics or a Wednesday night simple meal and Bible study during Lent.
- Offer intergenerational learning programs throughout the year that involve all generations in learning, relationships building, faith sharing, prayer and celebrating.

# Intergenerational Social Events

From: "Breaking Down the Age Barriers." Amy Hanson (Leadership Network, [www.leadnet.org](http://www.leadnet.org))

Because relationships that cross generational lines do not happen as naturally in American culture as they did in the past, some churches plan events that have intergenerational contact as the primary goal.

Encouraging connection between the generations is a major thrust of the older adult ministry at **First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, CA** (<http://evfreefullerton.com>). One of the primary ways they champion this value is through events called **Back to the Future**. Junior high students, high school students, and young adults of First Evangelical Free have all participated in the Back to the Future nights. The event involves approximately 24 older adults who come to a regular youth group activity. The entire group is broken into small groups so that one to two older adults are interacting with about 10 to 12 students. The older adults are given a list of questions to discuss with the young people:

- What was it like for you to be a 12-year-old? A 16-year-old? A person in your mid-20s?
- What was your first car? What were the popular dances, singers, and actors of your youth?
- What did your classroom look like and who was your best friend?
- When was a time in your life when God started to make sense?
- How did you come to know Christ?

Often the older adults will bring their yearbooks, letter jackets, and report cards for the younger people to see. The students are encouraged to ask questions and simply talk with the older adult about dating, family issues and other things of a concern to them. Rosalyn Encarcion, director of senior adult programs, says there are many benefits that come from these events. "Our older adults realize that their lives are significant and valuable as they pass on the lessons learned from their own life experiences. In turn, the youth have a broader worldview as they hear the wisdom of the older adults. The event is also a great way for breaking down the negative stereotypes that each generation may have toward the other. For example, not all older people are cranky and not all

young people are irresponsible and reckless."

Rosalyn also says that mentoring relationships and prayer partnerships are sometimes formed from the connections made during the Back to the Future nights.

Dave McElheran from **Cedar Mills Bible Church** (<http://www.cmbc.org>) says that you have to believe in the value of these types of events in order to get them started. "I sat down with our youth pastor and we brainstormed various activities that we thought the students and older adults would both enjoy. This is how our yearly **miniature golf event** was born." After people have signed up for the event the youth pastor and Dave match approximately two teens to one older adult. "We put a lot of care into how we pair the people up as we want to create the best environment we can for on-going relationships to occur." The night of the event they have a meal together and are given various questions that they can use to get to know each other. After this, they ride on busses to the miniature golf course. There are various prizes awarded, such as a Starbucks gift card that the older adult and the teens are to go out together and enjoy. "Everything about the night is to encourage positive relationships." Each golf team has their picture taken and then the names of the people along with their phone numbers are written on the back of the photo and given to each person. 75% of the teams maintain at least an acquaintance relationship and about 25% develop a lasting relationship that continues on and goes deeper.

Dave tells of one older woman, Peggy Horning who was flying to the east coast with her husband. When Dave asked her why they were making the trip, she said it was to attend the wedding of a special young woman from the church. How had this older woman and this young adult gotten connected and developed such a strong relationship? It began through the miniature golf event.

In the beginning it took a lot of effort to encourage the young people and the older people to get involved. "Both age groups had a fear of the other group, which is precisely why we do these kinds of activities. Now, after doing this for five years, we have junior high students that cannot wait to be in high school so that they can be a part of the mini-golf night."



# Intergenerational Mentoring

From: "Breaking Down the Age Barriers." Amy Hanson (Leadership Network, [www.leadnet.org](http://www.leadnet.org))

A mentor as defined by Webster's Dictionary is "a wise and trusted counselor or teacher; a loyal advisor." The concept of an experienced and wise adult passing on their knowledge to a young person has been gaining momentum in recent years. Schools and other secular organizations, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters have seen the value of older adults spending quality time with a young person. Churches are also finding that one-on-one mentoring relationships can become a way for love, care, and support to occur between the generations.

## Formal Mentoring Programs

Some churches participate in formal mentoring partnerships with local schools and community groups. Mike Smith, a lay leader at **Cedar Mill Bible Church** heard about a local high school mentoring program through a Chamber of Commerce event. The school had an existing mentoring program, but the only mentors had been parents from the school. Mike was the first "outside" person to volunteer and has now been participating for over four years and has mentored 6 students. When Mike first began meeting with one of his current mentorees, the student was struggling to maintain any grades above a D, but now he has a 3.0 grade point average. Mike says, "It is hard to describe how great it feels to know that I'm making a difference in the lives of these high school boys. To see the smiles on their faces or to have them run down the hall to give me a hug makes it worth all of the time and energy that I invest."

Many of the students participating in the program come from broken homes or just difficult situations. Each student has to personally ask to be matched with a mentor and their parents have to approve of the relationship. The mentor then makes the commitment to meet with the teenager for one hour, once a week, for an entire year.

Research has shown that students who have a committed mentor have better school attendance, a better chance of going on to higher education, and tend to trust their parents more. In addition, mentoring appears to help prevent substance abuse among teenagers.

But even beyond these benefits, some students are getting to hear about Christ. "During one of my first visits, the student asked me if I was a

Christian. For the remaining hour I told him about my faith and answered many of his questions. We've even had some of these teens visit our church."

Cedar Mills now has an on-going relationship with the school and supplies them with many mentors each year in addition to providing the training of all new mentors (whether these mentors come from the church or the community). Dave McElheran says, "We have a very good relationship with the school, thanks to Mike. In fact the principal attended one of our Sunday church services to publicly thank our congregation for our commitment and partnership. It is a great way that our adults are able to make a difference."

## Informal Mentoring

There are a number of organized mentoring programs throughout the country but it is difficult to quantify how much mentoring occurs outside a formal structure. Iola Boyd at the age of 82 was one of the founding members of the **Compassion House at First Baptist at the Mall in Lakeland, Florida** (<http://www.fbclakeland.org>).

Iola tirelessly gave herself to the ministry, working every day that it was open, which totaled three days each week. During her years serving many young people, home school kids, college students, and teenagers would volunteer their time. Iola personally took these groups under her wing, trained them, and put them to work. Before Iola passed away, she told Dave McClamma, senior associate pastor of adult ministries, "I want these young people to serve in this ministry when I am gone." Dave said, "It was her desire to reproduce her passion in each of them—and she did." One of the best examples was seen at her funeral service. In her years serving with the Compassion House, Iola constantly was asking people to donate peanut butter to the ministry. Anytime she was given an opportunity she would tell people, "don't forget the peanut butter." Iola worked at the ministry until she passed away at the age of 90 and at her memorial service the front of the church was lined with hundreds of jars of peanut butter.

# Intergenerational Storytelling

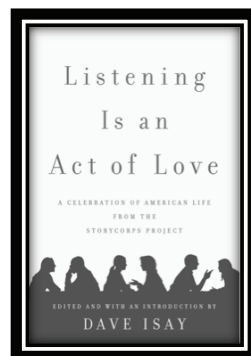
**Grace Presbyterian Church** ([www.gpch.org](http://www.gpch.org)) in Houston, TX recognized the power of preserving the individual stories of people and took on a book project *Stories of Grace*. The 174 pages in this book tell the individual stories of 24 people—stories of children, young adults, middle-age adults, and older adults. Each person was interviewed and asked to specifically consider the question, “Where are the handprints of God in my life?” The interviews were then edited and written in the form of stories. Doug Ferguson, the senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian said in the forward of the book, “Among the things that hold families together are the stories that are told and passed on from generation to generation... they are the stories of God’s mighty acts among us, stories of faithfulness and stories of grace.” The book brings value to each generation, recognizing that everyone has a story that needs to be passed on to others.

Dave McElheran, older adult ministries pastor at **Cedar Mills Bible Church** ([www.cmbc.org](http://www.cmbc.org)) in Portland, OR has attempted to capture and share the faith stories of older adults by using multimedia. Harvey Scarper, a member of Cedar Mills, lost his wife and was searching for purpose. After being asked to serve in the children’s ministry, Harvey began to involve himself in various ministries around the church and grew in his relationship with the Lord. Even after discovering he had cancer and only a short time to live, he continued to communicate his great joy found in Christ. Harvey tells of serving on a short term missions team in Slydell, Louisiana and being so thankful to God that he was not given his cancer diagnosis until he returned from this trip. Speaking about this event Harvey said with a huge smile on his face, “Isn’t God good? He waited to reveal this to me until after my time working in Louisiana! Isn’t that great!?”

Dave wanted to honor Harvey and have his legacy of faith be heard so he interviewed Harvey while a professional photographer from the church video taped the interaction. After editing the interview and weaving photographs into the film, the result was a six minute media presentation of Harvey sharing his testimony. The piece has been used in a variety of settings including adult Sunday school classes, high school groups, and even with individuals in Dave’s office. “I show it to individual older adults in order to disarm many of their excuses about being involved in the later years of life. Harvey’s testimony shows people that even

when you are not feeling well or you think you are too old, God can still use you.” The DVD was also viewed by the entire church family during a Sunday morning service with Harvey present. Dave said, “The presentation helped to breakdown the fear that our young people had toward older people and also helped our older adults be much more assertive in their ministry with the church. Overall, it communicated to the entire church body that our older adults are valuable.”

## Resource: The StoryCorps Project (<http://www.storycorps.net>)



StoryCorps is an independent nonprofit project whose mission is to honor and celebrate one another’s lives through listening. By recording the stories of our lives with the people we care about, we experience our history, hopes, and humanity. Since 2003, tens of thousands of everyday people have interviewed family and friends through StoryCorps. Each conversation is recorded on a free CD to take home and share, and is archived for generations to come at the Library of Congress. Millions listen to our award-winning broadcasts on public radio and the Internet. The book, *Listening Is an Act of Love* by Dave Isay, presents a sampling of the stories that have been recorded. StoryCorps is one of the largest oral history projects of its kind, creating a growing portrait of who we really are as Americans.

The heart of StoryCorps is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America, or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary. By helping people to connect, and to talk about the questions that matter, the StoryCorps experience is powerful and sometimes even life-changing. Our goal is to make that experience accessible to all, and find new ways to inspire people to record and preserve the stories of someone important to them.

**Go to [www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net) for resources on developing your own storytelling project.**

# Intergenerational Service

Intergenerational service is a great way to engage all of the generations in working together to respond to the needs of individuals, communities, and people around the world. Eugene Roehlkepartain and Jenny Friedman offer a number of practical guidelines and suggestions for family service, which can easily be applied to intergenerational service. They suggest the following:

1. Make the activities meaningful, so that every person, regardless of age, can contribute in a significant way.
2. Supply mentors or mentor families to individuals or families that have had little or no experience in service.
3. Offer various options to suit individuals and families with different ages, interests, time constraints, and locations.
4. Include preparation and reflection as part of any church-sponsored service activity.
5. Offer some simple “in-house” activities. Although some families are enthusiastic about and ready for community ministry, others may be more comfortable initially with simple service activities they can complete at the church.
6. Hold a service fair for all generations.
7. Provide service resources (books, media, websites) for families and all generations; include children’s books that focus on caring for others.
8. Become a clearinghouse for local and global service opportunities.
9. Organize regular family-intergenerational service days and events.
10. Organize an annual family and/or intergenerational mission trip.
11. Celebrate what church members are already doing.

Intergenerational services provides many benefits to individuals, families, and the whole church community. Intergenerational service. . .

- appeals to busy families who want to spend more quality time together
- helps people grow spiritually as they pray for, give to, and do service together
- 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
- emphasizes the importance of teamwork
- communicates that it is the responsibility of all Christians, regardless of age, to serve people and work for justice as a follower Jesus Christ

## Ideas for Intergenerational Service

There are so many ways to act on a particular need or issue. And there are so many people and organizations already engaged in transforming the world that will provide assistance in developing intergenerational service projects. You can develop a service project at the level of your local community, the country, or the world. There are organizations—local, national, and international—dedicated to transforming the world around almost every important need or issue. The internet provides everyone with access to ideas and organizations to assist you.

## Serving the Poor and Vulnerable

Here are examples of direct action to serve the poor and vulnerable—locally and around the world—that can be designed into intergenerational service projects.

- Prepare and serve a meal at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter.
- Donate goods such as food for the local food bank, clothing, school kits for children, “personal essentials” for those at a homeless shelter, a toy collection at Christmas, gift packages for prisoners.
- Care for the elderly by visiting them at a convalescent home or senior citizen facility or doing chores and shopping.
- Build or repair homes.

- Support efforts to provide vaccines and medical care to the world's poor, such as provide mosquito nets for malaria prevention, immunizations against childhood disease, and HIV/AIDS treatment.
- Work with people who have disabling conditions.
- Conduct 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, and/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.

## Acting for Justice to Ensure the Rights of All People

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Here are examples of action for justice projects that can be designed as an intergenerational initiative.

- Develop 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 a) becoming familiar with pending legislation or proposals that affect people's basic needs, b) writing advocacy letters or emails, c) working with advocacy groups, and/or d) work with organizations that are changing the structures that promote injustice.
- Support organizations that are working for justice—locally, nationally, and internationally by promoting the purpose and activities of organizations, providing financial support, and volunteering time to work with the organization.
- Develop a program or campaign to educate people in your church or community about a particular justice issue.
- Hold a Fair Trade Festival to provide a way for members of the church community to buy fair trade products, such as coffee, chocolate, and crafts, that benefit local producers in the developing world.

## Working for Peace

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Here are examples of ways to work for a peaceful world that can be designed as intergenerational projects.

- Work to end the violence of human trafficking of children by working with organizations seek to shut down trafficking rings and providing support for the victims.
- Address violence in the media through a church-wide or community-wide campaign that encourages by not purchasing and/or abstaining or limiting exposure to violent TV shows, movies, video games, and toys.
- Sponsor an intergenerational community-wide peace festival, working with organizations that seek to build bridges of understanding among people.

## Caring for Creation

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Here are examples of working for a peaceful world that can be designed as intergenerational projects.

- Conduct an campaign to educate and raise funds to adopt a piece of the planet through the Nature Conservatory's "Adopt an Acre" and "Rescue the Reef" programs, and the Rainforest Alliance's "Adopt-a-Rainforest" program; or protect endangered species and their habitats through the World Wildlife Fund's projects.
- Sponsor a community-wide "care for the environment day" by planting trees in your community and cleaning-up the community.

## Example: "Care Kits"

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Organizing and assembling "care kits" is a great opportunity for intergenerational action and for the whole church to learn about important justice issues. Here are two examples of projects sponsored by World Vision ([www.worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org)).

### AIDS Caregiver Kits

World Vision ([www.worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org))

Too many caregivers lack the basic supplies they need to safely and effectively minister to those who have AIDS in poor communities. Caregiver Kits provides basic supplies for those living with AIDS while protecting caregivers and preventing the spread of infection. For an average cost of just \$28 each, Caregiver Kits bring practical help to



caregivers and have an immeasurable impact on many people within the communities they serve. Churches and small groups raise funds for and assemble Caregiver Kits, which are shipped to World Vision distribution centers and then to AIDS-affected communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. World Vision coordinates the bulk purchase of kit contents. Churches pay for the bulk purchase. Participants sign up for “assembly day,” when everyone comes together to assemble the kits.

## SchoolTools Kits

World Vision ([www.worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org))

Millions of children living in poverty miss out on the chance for an education simply because they can't pay for essential supplies that go hand-in-hand with learning. That's why World Vision created SchoolTools—a program that inspires hope in children by providing them with the valuable school materials they so desperately need. SchoolTools collects kits of specific school supplies made from individuals, groups and organizations and delivers them through various ministry partners to needy children who wouldn't be able to attend class without them. Work as a church to assemble kits full of simple supplies that will light up the faces of the children who receive them. Through your gift to SchoolTools, you'll experience the blessing of knowing you've helped children in the United States and all over the world turn their dreams of education into reality.

## Church Wide Service Day

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**Faith in Action** ([www.putyourfaithinaction.org](http://www.putyourfaithinaction.org)), a national project sponsored by World Vision, is a four-week, church-wide campaign that creates an outward focus and a heart to serve in a congregation. The first three weeks are preparation through worship and learning, and the identification and organization of service projects. The fourth week culminates in a service day where the entire congregation engages in service projects in and with the community.

Here's the story of one church's experience:

“We decided to do Faith in Action before their materials were even printed,” recalled Jeff Lanningham, Associate Pastor at First Baptist Church in Vernon, Texas, where Dr. Ken Macklin is Senior Pastor. “We thought it was such a great idea—we didn't want to wait. And

our people loved it. Afterwards, one senior citizen said to me, “This was the best day in the life of our church!” “Our Faith in Action program was completely lay-led,” explained Pastor Jeff. “We gathered some lay leaders, laid the idea out to them and then explained that first they needed to decide whether to proceed with the program, and then they would need to take the bull by the horns and run it themselves.” So these leaders recruited more leaders, chose the service projects, recruited for each team, and began publicizing the day within their church family. “The spirit was unbelievable,” Pastor Jeff recalled. “We normally run 400 in worship—and we had more than that involved that day. In fact, it went down in our records that we had more than 100% involvement in missions on May 6.” Because of their commitment, First Baptist received a “church of the year” award from their state Baptist association and were asked to host a booth at the state's convention to explain to other pastors what they'd done and how they'd done it. On May 6, teams from the church served the community in many different ways: several kids' ministry teams gathered up kids in a local park, from nearby apartment complexes and government housing areas. They hosted games, activities and Bible stories for them. “Moms and dads came along too, just to watch,” said Pastor Jeff, so they were able to visit with parents. Other teams worked in the yards of needy families; one team visited families door-to-door, praying for needs. Others worked at light construction projects, building porches, replacing windows and roofing a patio. Other groups held worship services at the local jail, youth detention center and retirement homes. “In the meantime, a prayer team hunkered down at the church, with phones so that teams could call in with up-to-date requests. A group of nursery workers at church kept all the members' pre-school kids so parents could minister. And a third group prepared a quick breakfast before sending the teams out; plus lunch at mid-day for them to refuel before going back to serve.” Our Faith in Action Day was a fantastic opportunity for our church to get outside our own walls and into the community,” Pastor Jeff summed up. “Too often, we as churches get too complacent and fall into maintenance mode. This was an awakening for us to recognize once again that God put us in this community to be a light to them, by serving them.”

# Intergenerational Learning

## The Learning Model

James White, in *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Religious Education Press, 1988) identified four patterns of relationships that have become the basic pattern of intergenerational learning experiences: 1) In-Common Experiences, 2) Parallel Learning, 3) Contributive-Occasions, and 4) Interactive Sharing.

Most churches design their family-intergenerational learning programs using these four movements, adapting the process to fit their particular needs. The stories of churches with intergenerational faith formation illustrate the different adaptations of this basic process.

1. **In-Common Experiences.** Intergenerational religious education begins with a multigenerational experience of the theme that all the generations share together. In-common experiences of generations are usually less verbal and more observatory than in the other three elements. In this pattern there is something “out there” or “over there” for us to see or do, something that equalizes the ages. Thus, at the same time and place and in a similar manner, different-aged people listen to music or sing, make an art project, watch a video, hear a story, participate in a ritual, pray together, and so on. In-common experiences for the most part remain at what Jean Piaget calls the “concrete operational” level, where all can learn together.

Shared experiences are absolutely critical for building IGRE. They are the stuff by which other patterns of relationships are built. To the point, Fred Rogers, of television’s *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*, makes the case for what is prescribed here when he asks rhetorically, “How can older and younger people respond to each other if they have no experiences together?”

2. **Parallel Learning.** Parallel learning is the second major IG relational pattern. With it the generations are separated in order to work on the same topic or project, but in different ways at a “best fit” development, interest, or skill level. Some of the developmental levels we are talking about are cognitive, psychological,

physical, moral, valuational, and so on—all the ways that make people different and special. Though age groups may be separated, each one is focusing on the same learning task or topic. One of the major criticisms of IGRE is “the tendency to view equality or persons across the age spectrum with uniformity of experience,” with that experience only from the vantage point of the child. By engaging in parallel learning, however, this IGRE shortcoming is avoided.

3. **Contributive-Occasions.** The third pattern of learning is that of contributive-occasions. These occasions are often the step after parallel learning. What is involved is a coming together of different age groups or classes for the purpose of sharing what has been learned or created previously. The joining or rejoining becomes a contributive-occasion where separated pieces to a whole are added together for everyone’s benefit.

Contributive-occasions are more participatory than the other three patterns. If the contributions come from a previous period of parallel learning, the last part of that parallel learning would have been concerned with how to communicate acquired insights or behaviors to other age groups. By engaging “in mutual contribution” to one another, IG learners discover that the educational whole is great than the sum of its parts.

4. **Interactive Sharing.** Interactive sharing is the fourth major pattern in IGRE relationships. It is a distinctive style or way of learning. Here persons are provided with an opportunity for interpersonal exchange, which may involve experiences or thoughts or feelings or actions. At its best, interactive sharing facilitates a “crossing over” to hear and respond to another’s perspective.

In an ideal IGRE program or event, all four of the patterns of relationships will be enacted. People come together and have an in-common experience. Then they break to separately investigate the common subject at a level appropriate for their highest learning abilities. They come back together to present their

insights and work in a shared program. Finally, different generations interact with one another, giving and receiving in the exchanges. In the latter case the participants are sharing, reflecting, debating, and dreaming from the side of the other but for their own edification. (White, *Intergenerational Religious Education*, 26-30)

Together with my colleagues at the Center for Ministry Development (Mariette Martineau, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber), we developed a model of intergenerational learning based on White's four patterns, which is being used by Catholic parishes in the Generations of Faith Project and in the intergenerational sessions for the *People of Faith* series (a 6-volume series of intergenerational programs from Harcourt Religion). This process is also described in the book *Intergenerational Faith Formation* by Martineau, Kehrwald, and Weber (Twenty-Third Publications).

In this model, intergenerational learning experiences are designed around a four movement learning process.

- Welcome, Community Building and Opening Prayer
- 1. An **All-Ages Learning Experience** for the whole assembly that introduces the theme or topic for the program.
- 2. **In-Depth Learning Experiences** that probe the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific age-groups (families with children or children-only, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and conducted in one of three formats:
  - *Whole Group Format*: learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room (age-specific or all ages small groups)
  - *Age Group Format*: learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages
  - *Learning Activity Center Format*: learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers (age-specific and/or all ages learning centers)
- 3. An **All-Ages Contributive Learning Experience** in which each generation teaches the other generations.
- 4. **Reflection** on the learning experience and interactive group sharing. Preparation for living one's faith at home and in daily life.
  - Closing Prayer

## Approaches & Ideas for Intergenerational Learning

### I. 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.

Churches organize their curriculum in a number of different ways using the rich resources of the Christian tradition, such as:

- the three-year cycle of readings in the Sunday Lectionary
- Bible themes
- Christian practices
- core beliefs and practices of the Christian faith, such as the following schema for the Catholic parishes: liturgical year feasts and seasons, the Creed, sacraments, morality, justice and service, and prayer

### 2. Extend a topic featured in the faith formation program for children or teens, 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 teen 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 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 liturgical year feasts.**

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 for justice issues 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 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, 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.