

Case Study

Weekly Lectionary Based Faith Formation St. Patrick Church - Fayetteville, NC

A weekly lectionary model was designed by and used successfully at St. Patrick Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina for 18 years before staff changes caused it to be cancelled. They focused on the Scripture readings from the previous Sunday and offered generous doses of prayer and worship as the context for each week's learning session.

Joe Long, a parish staff member for more than two decades, reports that a doctoral candidate studied the learning outcomes of the children who participated in this program in comparison to children who attended a Catholic school. The ACRE (Assessment of Catechesis/Religious Education) test was used as the instrument to measure learning outcomes for both groups in the study. While the Catholic school children scored slightly higher than the parish program children, the researcher found no significant difference between the scores even though the parish children were only meeting for formal catechesis 30-35 times per year for 90 minutes with a significant portion of the time spent in prayer. Intergenerational models are founded upon the widely accepted principle that parents are the most powerful faith formation agents in the life of a child. The presence of parents in this program would give the children a distinct advantage over the Catholic school children even with the far fewer contact hours for formal faith formation.

The model used by St. Patrick was scheduled on Wednesday evening from 7:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. Nursery services were provided for children under four years. It opened with a well-planned prayer experience based upon the Bible readings from the previous Sunday led by a member of the church staff and included reflective comments by the prayer leader. This was followed by breakout sessions with age-specific groups. All age groups focused on the same content. Then the groups would return and report back to the large group and close with a prayer. Here is the model in outline form:

1. Gather
2. Readings, prayers and reflections based upon the previous Sunday
3. Breakout session for reflection and learning
 - Preschool group
 - Primary grades group
 - Intermediate grades group
 - Teens
 - Adults
4. Gather in large group for sharing and reflection
5. Closing prayer

A possible adaptation of this model could be to focus the midweek learning session on the readings for the upcoming Sunday. If this option were used, one could gather the participants and begin with a reflection on how the previous Sunday's readings are currently influencing their lives in the midst of the current week. This would be followed by the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word for the upcoming Sunday. Then a learning session on the upcoming Sunday's readings would both prepare participants for the weekend worship service and set them up for the reflections at next week's learning session. This approach accentuates the situating of Sunday worship in the center of the faith formation program, philosophically and programmatically. Here is how it looks in outline form:

1. Gathering, hospitality, and icebreaker
2. Reflection session on how last Sunday's readings are being applied in the lives of participants featuring...
 - Witness talks
 - Small group sharing
 - Large group feedback
3. Prayer experience based upon upcoming Sunday Scripture readings
4. Core content session based upon themes that emerge from the readings and the prayers
 - Oral presentation with audio/visual accents
 - Small group work... in family groups or in age-specific groups or at learning centers
 - Large group feedback
5. Application plan
 - Brief presentation on possible application ideas
 - Small group work to generate application ideas
 - Commitment ceremony to motivate participants to go out and apply what was learned
6. Closing prayer and song taken from upcoming Sunday worship service

Weekly models, once thought to be too ambitious, are doable and sustainable over time. Many Protestant churches have used parallel learning for all ages on a weekly basis for decades. In parallel learning, age-specific groups learn at their own level, and all groups focus on the same themes at the same time. The advantages of weekly, lectionary-based, intergenerational faith formation are obvious:

- Regular contact helps to build a positive faith formation habit into the life of families and individuals.
- A weekly check-in provides leaders a regular opportunity to coach families and individuals on how to live out what they learn during the rhythm of their weekly routines.
- Weekly focus on liturgy enhances Sunday worship, which is the central gathering of any Christian faith community.
- Parents and other adults exploring their faith every week in the presence of children and teens sends the clear, unspoken, and powerful message that faith formation is a lifelong adventure that does not end with the onset of young adulthood.

Any Lectionary-based resource would be helpful for the learning portion of this kind of programming. Much of the time is spent in prayer so there would be less time proportionally spent on formal learning. The integration of prayer, worship and learning is a unique strength represented by this case study and has the potential of being powerfully transformative if the prayer and worship experiences are planned well.