

Case Study

Intergenerational Faith Formation

Reformation Lutheran Church, Milford, DE

Pastor Eric Evers of Reformation Lutheran Church in Milford Delaware is learning the lessons of intergenerational faith formation. They made some mistakes with their initial implementation of intergenerational faith formation, but they didn't give up. They discovered where they went wrong, made some critical adjustments, and now they are reaping the benefits.

Lessons Learned

The first intergenerational programming efforts left the older members in the congregation feeling like they were being pushed back into kindergarten. They were asked to perform juvenile tasks and engage in children's activities without a clear sense of direction or purpose. Rather than focusing on the faith development of all ages, the central focus was still on children... a common mistake when churches first shift from classroom models to intergenerational models of faith formation.

The planning team then made a concerted effort to develop programs that promoted adults and kids investing in each other on a personal level. Meaningful conversations across the generations is a key aspect of their renewed approach. For example, one program featured a meal in which all the participants paired up and shared photos of individuals who have had a significant impact on their own faith development. They deliberately mixed older members with younger families and newer members with seasoned members of their congregation for this activity. Their marketing effort for the new program also targeted older members of the congregation to encourage them to participate and to share the wisdom of their years with younger members.

Another lesson they learned is that more is sometimes more! When they first offered the program, it had two components: 1) Six large intergenerational gatherings per year; 2) Weekly intergenerational learning sessions that were connected thematically to the six gatherings. They dropped the weekly gatherings and found that they had lost momentum, so they are back to offering both components.

Program Structure

ReCreation is the driving force of their faith formation programming. It meets six times per year on Sundays, includes a meal, and provides take-home materials for participants to extend the learning into their homes.

Faith Connections is their Sunday School replacement that builds upon the work done at *ReCreation*. Here are the components of *Faith Connections*:

1. Opening prayer with song
2. 15-20 minutes of simple food and icebreaker activities connected to the faith formation theme of the previous or upcoming *ReCreation* experience
3. Age cohort breakout groups for core learning:
 - Elementary (k-5) Some 4th and 5th graders take leadership roles to assist younger kids.
 - Middle School/High School (6-12)
 - Parent Group – Has a focus on parenting issues

- Adult Bible Study

Many of the adults move back and forth from the parenting group to the Bible study depending upon their own formation needs.

Caring

The pastor has observed that caring relationships across the generations are growing. Older and younger generations are interacting more spontaneously during church gathering times and at social events. The children experience the church more like an extended family now. There is a lot of surrogate grandparenting evolving. One hopeful sign is that older members watch the local newspapers for articles that report on the accomplishments of kids in the congregation. They cut them out and bring them to church to share with the families of the featured children. They often include a caring note with the newspaper clip.

One young adult decided he would mentor a 5-year-old into the Acolyte worship ministry. Other members noted that they had never seen an Acolyte smile so much. A grandmother was inspired to do the same for her 5-year-old granddaughter. Without trusting intergenerational relationships, these kinds of spontaneous ministry-building experiences would not happen.

Connection to Worship

The intergenerational learning sessions have a direct connection with congregational worship. The children and teens have created interactive experiences that the church displays in the worship area of the church to assist all ages with greater focus on the meaning of worship and its outcomes. For example, the children challenged the congregation to pray and live in a more focused manner by developing a *Distractions Box*. Members were asked during the season of Advent to reflect upon what distracts them in their spiritual journeys and write them down on strips of straw-colored paper. The papers were removed from the box and added to the manger scene at Christmas time and the congregation was called to eliminate distractions from their focus on the coming of Christ at Christmas.

The teens created a prayer wall during Lent that was displayed in the back of the sanctuary. They invited members to post their prayers and petitions on the wall throughout Lent. All members were challenged to renew their prayer commitments in preparation for Easter.

Intergenerational faith formation is transforming Reformation Lutheran Church into a caring community that integrates its learning into its worship and the daily lives of all members. They are moving from being disjointed groups of people traveling parallel faith formation paths into a unified community of believers moving forward together in mission.