

Introduction

People, especially children and teens, learn best in developmentally appropriate settings. Wouldn't you agree? This is certainly what I learned in my education courses in college in the late 1970s. I learned the same concept in my youth ministry training courses in the 1980s. And all this was reinforced from my children's teachers in the 1990s. And, of course, it's pretty much what you'll hear from the education experts of the new millennium.

But in each of those decades, there's been a nagging contradiction to the strict developmental approach to education. Do we give children, teens, and adults enough credit for their ability to glean and learn in settings that cut across developmental lines? Do we give children enough credit for absorbing key learnings from experiences that were not specifically designed to address their developmental needs, concerns, tasks? And with respect to faith formation, how do children, adolescents, even adults *identify* with and *integrate* into the faith community when their learning is separate and segmented?

In response to the questions, we first believe that people learn the way they live. Home, church, and community (all of which are intergenerational) are the places where people learn best. When an intentional learning program reflects the nature and qualities of ordinary living, all ages can more readily enter into the educational experience.

There's no question that developmental theory, as applied in the last fifty years, has been a great asset to education, particularly for adolescents

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and children. But have we allowed the education pendulum to swing too far to the developmental side, to the exclusion of intergenerational learning, which, quite frankly, can at times be magical, powerful, and dramatic?

Reflect for a moment on how ancient peoples learned. Wasn't it much more relational, communal, and familial than our systematic, school house, age "appropriate" mode of education today? In fact, even today in cultures we might consider "less sophisticated" than our own, most learning takes place in the context of family and community, rather than separating children from society, dropping them into a fabricated environment—all of which is, of course, developmentally appropriate—and pumping them full of information. Do you suppose children of ancient peoples ever asked, "When will I ever need to know this?"

The purpose of this book is to show that not only is there a place for intergenerational learning in effective faith formation, there is a *necessity* for it. We contend that it is necessary not only for children, but for all ages: children, teens, young adults, adults, elderly, parents, grandparents, everyone.

Magic happens when we bring the generations together. It is not neat and tidy; rather, it is chaotic and messy. Yet our work with nearly 1500 parishes in seventy or more dioceses across North America shows us that people—children, teens, *and* adults—learn a great deal in intergenerational settings and *enjoy themselves* while doing so.

Many parish leaders are discovering that for over thirty years the Catholic Church has offered a comprehensive and compelling vision of faith formation and learning—lifelong, for all ages and generations, rooted in the life of the church. Embracing the vision of faith formation in the *General Directory for Catechesis* requires moving away from the schooling paradigm to a community or "whole church" paradigm of faith formation. Intergenerational learning is a key method to help us embrace this vision and bring it to practical reality.

We don't mean to be simplistic. Just bringing persons of various ages and stages together in the same room for faith learning is *not* the magic bullet that will solve all of today's catechetical problems. Yet, parish faith formation that engages the whole community in a journey through the core curriculum of Catholic faith, rooted in the events of church life, has the potential for responding effectively to most existing

catechetical problems of our day. And the primary (though not the only) *method* for engaging the whole community in that core curriculum is intergenerational learning. It is a means to an end, not the end itself.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* reminds us, “it should not be overlooked that the recipient of catechesis is the whole Christian community and every person in it” (#168). Intergenerational learning provides an opportunity to gather the whole parish to learn, pray, celebrate, and share. What’s the most important activity of the faith community? Worship, right? What’s the method for gathering the community to worship? Do we put them in age-segmented, developmentally appropriate settings? No. The most important thing we do as a faith community we do together, *everybody all together!* In a similar fashion, we have discovered that learning about our faith *all together* has a profound and positive impact on the life of the community.

With this vision of lifelong faith formation for the whole community and with this method of intergenerational learning, we seek to...

- transform the focus on children-only (think of all the time, energy, and resources we commit to children only) by implementing lifelong faith formation for all ages and generations, including and especially adults
- transform “start and stop” catechesis (think graduation at confirmation; think preparation for sacraments) by implementing lifelong and continuous faith formation—learning for a lifetime through involvement in the events of church life
- transform age segregation (think grade levels or groups: youth group, older adults group) by implementing intergenerational faith formation—making connections among the generations in learning programs and parish involvement
- transform the focus on the “textbook as the curriculum” by utilizing the events of church life as the curriculum for all ages and generations—tapping into the educative and transformative power of the church year, sacramental celebrations, community prayer, and works of justice and service *and* providing catechesis that prepares everyone to learn by participating in the events of church life

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- transform the attitude of blaming families for our current situation—the “family’s faith is the problem”—by nurturing family faith at home as integral to faith formation
- transform catechesis as a separate “program” by implementing a more collaborative and integrated approach that involves all of the parish’s ministries in faith formation.

Effective catechesis is interconnected with liturgy, sacraments, the church year, justice and service, prayer—and utilizes intergenerational learning as a key method for implementation.

What We Are Learning

In the spring of 2005, we conducted a comprehensive research survey of parishes engaged in the *Generations of Faith* approach to lifelong faith formation. Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, we gathered data from nearly 1000 parishes from all across North America. All of these parishes were utilizing intergenerational learning as a key method of implementation.

Our research yielded a plethora of findings and conclusions on all aspects of this innovative faith-formation effort. Here, we want to share with you the findings related to intergenerational learning.

- Parishes are having success in engaging all ages in faith formation, especially parents and other adults. They now have a lifelong curriculum that provides foundational catechesis for everyone.
- Parishioners of all ages are developing a deeper understanding of the foundational themes of the Catholic faith—church year, liturgy and sacraments, creed, morality, prayer, justice—and learning how to live their faith in the parish, at home, and in the world.
- Parishes are having success with the intergenerational learning model, gathering parishioners of all the generations to learn together. Many parishes are pleasantly surprised by the high level of participation and the positive response from parishioners of all ages. And they are attracting large numbers of adults: middle-aged adults without children and older adults!

- Parishioners are beginning to build relationships with people across all of the ages, and this is benefiting the entire parish community.
- Parents are participating with their children, often for the first time, and are finding benefit in learning together as a family. Families are beginning to incorporate faith sharing activities at home.

Leaders from these parishes recognize the value of building a supportive faith community among all the generations. They recognize that intergenerational learning provides an opportunity to gather the whole parish to learn, pray, celebrate, and share. And they see benefits to the community as well as to individuals. Specifically, these benefits include:

- building community and meaningful relationships across all the generations in a parish
- providing a setting for each generation to share and learn from the other generations (their faith, stories, wisdom, experience, and knowledge); the parent and grandparent generations pass on the traditions of family and faith to the younger generations; while the younger generations share their faith, energy, and new insights with the parent and grandparent generations
- providing an environment where new ways of living one's faith can be practiced
- providing adult role models for children and youth
- promoting understanding of shared values and a common faith, as well as respect for individuals in all stages and ages of life
- helping to overcome the age-segregated nature of our society and church programs.

These features of intergenerational faith formation are explored in greater detail in Chapter One.

In This Book

This book has been a group effort on the part of those of us who work with the *Generations of Faith* project. All of us have learned a great deal about intergenerational faith formation in the last five years.

We are convinced that it is a necessary, crucial, and effective tool for catechesis. Each contributing author brings a different lens of expertise to understand the nuances and complexities of intergenerational learning and the implications for effective lifelong learning for the whole community.

This book serves as a companion to three other books that we at the Center for Ministry Development have written. These document the development of the *Generations of Faith* project (GOF).

- *Generations of Faith Resource Manual: Lifelong Faith Formation for the Whole Parish Community* by John Roberto and Mariette Martineau
- *Generations of Faith Sourcebook: Lifelong Faith Formation for the Whole Parish Community* by John Roberto
- *Families and Faith: A Vision and Practice for Parish Leaders* edited by Leif Kehrwald

These three books—also published by Twenty-Third Publications—articulate the vision and break open the mechanics of implementing event-centered, lifelong, intergenerational faith formation in the parish. This book, *Intergenerational Faith Formation*, explores the key method for fulfilling this overarching vision.

In this book, you will read about the following:

- Chapter One addresses the context and urgency for intergenerational faith formation. This chapter looks at the critical need for intergenerational learning in today's church, and offers what some parishes have to say about their experience in utilizing this method.
- Chapters Two and Three take a look at how people learn today, current theories for learning, and principles for effective learning that are age, gender, and culture inclusive. These chapters make a case for intergenerational learning as one of the ways in which people learn best.
- Chapter Four outlines the theory that supports intergenerational learning. It explores the necessary elements that need to be present for persons of all ages to learn in a multigenerational context. This chapter also highlights some common pitfalls and mistakes. And

Chapter Five explores theological foundations for intergenerational faith formation.

- Chapters Six and Seven explore the current practice of intergenerational faith formation in the church today. These chapters offer examples and stories from parishes implementing intergenerational faith formation and explore their catechetical effectiveness. Based on data from our qualitative and quantitative research of *Generations of Faith* parishes, the reader will see what is entailed in the transition from a schooling model to an intergenerational model of faith formation.
- Chapter Eight breaks open the nuts and bolts of implementing intergenerational faith formation in the parish. These chapters explore ways to incorporate intergenerational learning into the parish's systematic catechetical plan, specifically with respect to such programs as sacramental preparation, vacation Bible school, parish mission, and so on. In an effort to articulate the critical practices necessary for fruitful implementation of intergenerational faith learning, these chapters will include real-life parish stories.

As with all of our publications, this book is intended to be a discussion starter rather than the final word. Read it. Discuss it with your colleagues. Engage in the practice of intergenerational learning, and let us know what you learn. You are on the front lines of catechetical ministry. You know how to make things work in your particular community. Share your feedback with us, and we will pass it along to others who are also anxious to succeed. Send your comments directly to me, Leif Kehrwald, at lkehrwald@cmdnet.org.

About the Center for Ministry Development

Founded in 1978, the Center for Ministry Development is an independent, non-profit organization whose core purpose is to bring the Good News in new ways to the people of God. CMD's mission is to empower faith communities and their leaders for effective ministry with youth, young adults, and families through ministry education, ministry development training, programs, and publications.