

Pathways to an Intergenerational Church and Faith Formation

John Roberto

(A version of this article appeared in the book Engage All Generations: A Strategic Toolkit for Creating Intergenerational Faith Communities, edited by Cory Seibel. Abilene Christian University Press, 2021).

Let's take a moment to reflect on the remarkable development in the thinking and practice of intergenerationality over the past three decades. Christian churches – in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, to name a few countries – are rediscovering the power of the intergenerational faith community for forming and transforming people in Christian faith. We are rediscovering the primacy of intergenerational community, relationships, and faith-forming experiences for developing and sustaining faith and discipleship in people of all ages and generations. *Churches are rediscovering their intergenerational heart and soul.*

The key message of this article is that every church has the potential to develop, sustain, and expand initiatives toward creating a future that is more intergenerational and connected across generations. Becoming more intentionally intergenerational is a journey with many pathways. Creating an intergenerational church culture is possible for every church. This article also offers five suggestions to help you and your church develop a more fully intergenerational church culture

1. Promote the Blessings and Benefits of Intergenerationality

Living as an intentionally intergenerational Christian community brings great blessings and benefits to everyone in the faith community. We have learned from research and experience that these blessings and benefits can inspire your community and drive your initiatives. Keep these blessings and benefits in front of your community as you work to strengthen your intergenerational culture. And then add some new ones based on your churches' experience.

Creating an intergenerational church culture. . . .

- Reclaims God's intent for faith to be shared in community and across generations and bring understanding and unity within a church.
- Teaches people to care for one another in the church and in the community.
- Creates a welcoming environment—hospitality, trust, acceptance, emotional safety, and care—conducive to promoting faith sharing, group participation, and mutual support across all generations.

- Strengthens relationships among people of all ages, enhances their sense of belonging to the faith community, and increases participation in church life.
- Affirms each person's value in the total community, regardless of age, and utilizes the wisdom, experience, and knowledge of one generation to meet the needs of another generation.
- Helps people learn the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith as they participate with more experienced members of the church community.
- Promotes a community where generational differences can be transcended rather than reinforced, where generational understanding and positive intergenerational relationships can be experienced.
- Encourages faith growth and practice in all generations through intergenerational faith forming experiences, and provides "up close and personal" formation in faith as children, teens, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults engage together in sharing faith, teaching, learning, serving, celebrating, and praying with one another.
- Supports families by surrounding them with a community of faith and providing parents with opportunities to learn from practicing Christians who have raised faithful children.
- Increases the opportunities for children and youth to have Christian role models outside of their families.
- Engages the creative gifts and talents of younger and older generations to serve the church and world.

2. Develop a Culture of Intergenerationality

In *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out*, Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro write, ". . . we believe culture is to the church what a soul is to the human body. It is an overall life force that the Holy Spirit uses to give energy, personality, and uniqueness to everything a body of believers says and does." Church culture influences everything you do. It colors the way you choose and introduce programs. It shapes how you select and train leaders. "Your culture is the lens through which you view your life. If you change the lens, you change your outlook. Change the culture, and everything else changes, including the future." (Lewis and Cordeiro, xxi)

It takes time to build an intergenerational culture in a church. In the early 2000s I worked with hundreds of Catholic parishes that embraced an intergenerational approach to faith formation that, over time, transformed how their parishes formed people of all ages in faith and discipleship. Two decades later that transformation provided the foundation for creating a culture of intergenerationality that permeates all of parish life.

Every church can build (or strengthen) an intergenerational culture. It's essential to have a multi-year vision for your church and practical strategies that give life to the vision. Here are a few practical steps for designing your plan. (The next section has strategies.)

1. Form an intergenerational task force representing the essential ministries of the church, and be sure that all of the generations are included from youth through older adults.
2. Develop a vision – with short descriptive sentences – of what an intergenerational church culture can look like in three years.
3. Explore the opportunities for building an intergenerational approach throughout church life.
 - First, identify ministries, programs, and activities that are already *intergenerational* (with generations building relationships, learning, praying, worshipping, serving, and/or leading together); and develop strategies for strengthening and expanding intergenerational ministries, programs, and activities.
 - Second, identify ministries, programs, and activities that are *multigenerational* (with all ages present without the intergenerational connection and experiences) that can be transformed into more intentionally intergenerational experiences.
 - Third, identify *age-specific* ministries, programs, and activities that can be redesigned by including additional generations, building intergenerational relationships, engaging in intergenerational experiences, and more
 - Fourth, identify *new opportunities* for creating intergenerational experiences by designing new programs, activities, and ministries.
4. Generate a variety of ideas and projects that the church can develop in each of the four categories: 1) strengthen intergenerational, 2) transform multigenerational, 3) redesign age-specific, and 4) design new initiatives.
5. Create a three-year plan by selecting projects that fulfill the vision and provide practical ways to develop an intergenerational culture. A three-year plan allows you to identify projects that can be implemented in the short term (first year), and projects that need more time for design and implementation over the three years.
6. Present the 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 the plan: your goals and short-term and long-term projects. Invite feedback, suggestions, and ideas.
7. Implement your plan. Short term projects can launch quickly. Long term projects may need to be piloted with a small group of your target audience (a version 1.0 of the project) in order to test its effectiveness, and then modified for launching it on a wider scale.
8. Continue to evaluate your efforts, but be patient. Each effort provides new learning that you can be used to continue to move toward becoming a more intentionally intergenerational church community.
9. Keep innovating! Introduce new projects and programs each year. Communicate the stories and examples of the benefits and blessings that are coming to the church community because of the intergenerational focus.

3. Design a Variety of Strategies to Build an Intergenerational Culture.

Use the following questions and ideas to stimulate your creativity in designing new initiatives to build intergenerationality into everything you do. No strategy alone will build an intergenerational church culture, but the cumulative effect of multiple initiatives will all contribute to a vibrant intergenerational culture in the church.

Strategy 1. Transforming Multigenerational into Intergenerational

Every church has multigenerational environments in which at least two generations are participating in an event or activity—Sunday worship, church events, social gatherings, and more. There is often minimal effort to connect generations through relationship building and shared experiences.

How can you transform multigenerational environments into experiences of intergenerational connection and community?

- *Consider relationships:* How will the generations interact with each other, get to know each other, share stories with each other? How will the experience incorporate intentional relationship building activities? How will everyone feel welcomed and safe?
- *Consider the content:* How will the experience engage generations in shared activities and in generationally-appropriate activities?
- *Consider leadership:* How will each generation be involved in leadership roles, appropriate to their gifts, abilities, and age? How will the leadership team engage multiple generations?
- *Consider inclusion:* How will each generation feel valued and recognized in the experience?

Strategy 2. Transforming Age-Specific into Intergenerational

Age-specific programs and activities provide opportunities for intergenerational connection, relationship building, and shared experiences—children’s classes, vacation Bible school, youth programs, service and mission trips, retreats, Bible studies, and more.

How can you transform age-specific programs by adding intergenerational activities or by redesigning the program into an intergenerational experience?

- *Consider adding intergenerational activities:* How can you incorporate another generation in sharing their faith, wisdom, and interests in the program (e.g., interviews, storytelling, presentations, demonstrations)? How can you add mentors or spiritual guides to a program (e.g., grandparent mentors for young parents or spiritual guides for young people in confirmation)?

- *Consider replacing age-specific for intergenerational throughout the year:* How can you incorporate regular intergenerational gatherings into your age group program schedules throughout the year?
- *Consider redesigning the program:* How can you redesign an age-specific program into an intergenerational program involving at least one additional generation (e.g., transforming camp or vacation Bible school into a grandparent-grandchild program, or transforming a youth service program/mission trip into an intergenerational service activity for all ages)?

Strategy 3. Designing New Intergenerational Initiatives

The first two strategies focus on redesigning for intergenerationality. The third strategy engages you in designing for intergenerationality through new initiatives (programs, activities, resources). This is the opportunity to create new programs, activities, or experiences that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, worshipping, and more. It is also an opportunity to eliminate those activities that work against intergenerationality and replace them with new initiatives.

Where are the greatest needs and/or opportunities for creating new initiatives that will contribute toward building an intergenerational culture in your church?

- *Consider Celebrating:* How can you celebrate milestones throughout life as intergenerational experiences at church and home?
- *Consider Learning:* How can you create intergenerational models of learning—weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or seasonally—for the whole faith community? How can you create intergenerational models of vacation Bible school or camp programs or Bible study programs?
- *Consider Praying:* How can you create prayer experiences, retreat experiences, spiritual formation programs, spiritual direction, and prayer groups that engage multiple generations?
- *Consider Serving:* How can you offer local and global service projects and mission experiences that engage all the generations together?

It is also worth noting that we are learning a lot about using digital tools and media to connect the generations. While it is not a substitute for face-to-face physical gatherings, digital tools have enabled generations to stay connected through virtual family meetings and dinners, regular communication, prayer, shared activities, storytelling, reading stories, and much more. Digital tools have enabled churches to bring generations together online for worship, storytelling, prayer, service projects, and more. We are recognizing the power of digital platforms, methods, and media to bring people together intergenerationally. It is another arena for designing new intergenerational initiatives.

Strategy 4. Engaging with the Neighborhood Community Intergenerationally

The United States and many other countries are in the throes of a huge demographic shift. For the first time in U.S. history, people over 60 outnumber people under 18. Some have raised fears of a generational divide, but there are significant efforts underway to connect across generations and create a better future together. *Are we ready to utilize the “experience dividend” of adults 60 and over in our churches and communities.*

The Covid19 pandemic has heightened the experience of isolation and loneliness across all generations. The societal challenge in a post-Covid world is creating generational connection and collaboration in ways that benefit all ages, solve critical social problems, and mend the fraying social fabric.

How can your church be a catalyst for creating intergenerational connections and innovative projects that serve the common good in your neighborhood community?

How can you mobilize your intergenerational community (the people) and intergenerational wisdom (knowledge and practices) to benefit your neighborhood community?

Our faith communities are rich resources of social capital. We can partner with other religious congregations and community organizations to address a wide range of topics—from literacy to loneliness, housing to health care, education to the environment, and much more. Faith communities can be catalysts for connecting the young and the old, fostering communication and understanding across generations, building community in neighborhoods with intergenerational events and activities, activating public spaces with intergenerational programming, advancing early care and education by engaging more adults 50+ with children, improving outcomes for youth and older adults through mentoring, increasing affordable housing by expanding intergenerational housing options, and much more.

I believe that engaging with the neighborhood community through intergenerational relationships and community-wide projects will be an important arena for innovation for all churches. To explore more possibilities for engaging the neighborhood community see *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting Generations* by Marc Friedman and the Encore website at <https://encore.org>; and *Weave: The Social Fabric Initiative* launched by David Brooks at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative>.

Conclusion

The five suggestions are designed to accompany you and your community on the journey toward deeper intergenerationality. Remember: *Every church has the potential to develop, sustain, and expand initiatives toward creating a future that is more intergenerational and connected across generations.*

Works Cited

Lewis, Robert and Wayne Cordeiro. *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Intergenerational Resources

- ❖ For videos and articles on intergenerational faith formation go to the “intergenerational” section of the Lifelong Faith website:
<https://www.lifelongfaith.com/intergenerational.html>.
- ❖ For video-based training to design intergenerational faith formation go Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/intergenerational-faith-formation.html>.
- ❖ For free intergenerational programs go to the Intergenerational Faith website:
<https://www.intergenerationalfaith.com>

Intergenerational Books

Allen, Holly Catterton, editor. *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018.

Allen, Holly Catterton and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012.

Amidei, Kathie, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto. *Generations Together: Caring, Praying Learning, Celebrating, and Serving Together*. Cheshire, CT: LifelongFaith Associates, 2014.

Freedman, Marc. *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting Generations*. New York: Public Affairs, 2018.

Martineau, Mariette, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber. *Intergenerational Faith Formation*. New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008.

Seibel, Cory, editor. *Engage All Generations: A Strategic Toolkit for Creating Intergenerational Faith Communities*. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2021.

About the Author

John Roberto, the current NCCL Board Chair, has spent a lifetime working in Catholic faith formation—teaching, writing, researching, and consulting. He founded Lifelong Faith Associates in 2006 to continue his work. He was the founder and director of the Center for Ministry Development from 1978 to 2006. He was the creator and project coordinator of the Generations of Faith Project, a five-year Lilly Endowment funded project (2001-2006) to develop intergenerational faith formation in Catholic parishes. His latest publications include *Lifelong Faith: Formation for All Ages and Generations* (Church Publishing, 2022), *Faith Formation with a New Generation*, *Families at the Center of Faith Formation*, *Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century*, and *Generations Together*.