



## Planning for Intergenerationality: Moving Beyond the Program

Jim Merhaut

*‘Intergenerational’ is not something churches do—it is something they become.*  
Brenda Snailum, intergenerational study participant

**I**ntergenerational programming is one thing; intergenerationality is an entirely different thing. While the two concepts are related, there are significant differences. The primary difference comes down to one word: culture. Are you offering intergenerational programs, or has your church been transformed by embracing and owning the culture of intergenerationality? How do we promote and sustain the integration of the spirit of intergenerationality across every organization in the church? This article will address that question.

Integrating intergenerationality across all ministries and organizations means that there is a collaborative spirit in the church, which helps ministry leaders and group representatives put the good of the entire community, all ages and generations, before the good of their group. Perhaps a better way to say this is that the groups integrate their priorities with the priorities of the whole congregation, and this process of integration is a top priority of the church as a whole.

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## Imagine the Possibilities

*Imagine a church that is embracing this vision of intergenerational integration as leaders prepare the entire faith community for Lent. Lent is coming and the entire community is getting ready.*

*A team of representative members, called the Intergenerational Integration Team, has designed a variety of ways to assist the various organizations in the church with their Lenten preparations. They have focused their efforts on the theme for the year: “The Three Practices of Lent: Fasting, Praying, and Almsgiving.” The resources they have discovered and/or created fit the groups perfectly because the groups’ members were consulted before the resources were developed. The church groups know the drill and implement the ideas seamlessly into their meetings because this process has become a part of congregational culture over the past five years. It’s just the way they do things now.*

*Young adults—those at home, in college, or in the military—receive an email every Friday morning with a simple reflection on fasting. The reflection is designed to help the young adults who are away call to mind the children and older adults back home. They are encouraged to experience solidarity with their families, their fellow parishioners, and with the poor by participating in a fast each Friday during Lent. They are also encouraged to look for ways, wherever they are, to reach out with acts of kindness toward people who are both older and younger than they are.*

*Adults will experience the same kind of integration. All of the adult faith-sharing groups in the church dedicate their first session during Lent to “Three Practices of Lent” by exploring the meaning of Lent and reflecting on the Lenten lectionary readings in light of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Within the prayers, special attention is given to children, teens, and young adults. All of the parish committees and councils that meet prior to or at the beginning of Lent open their meetings with a special prayer service on the Lenten theme, also with special attention to the needs*

*of children, teens, and young adults. Some of these groups are preparing special prayer experiences and activities they will share with their children and grandchildren.*

*Families with children are called to reflect beyond their own needs. Home materials are developed for faith formation gatherings of families and children. These materials may have a particular focus on the needs of older adults. Families give alms this Lent by reaching out in service to older adults who live close to them. These older adults have been coached to practice the almsgiving of hospitality to the younger families who will arrive at their homes to offer a little help around the house.*

*Teens will be challenged to stretch their minds and spirits beyond the pressing needs of adolescence. Their Lenten prayers and activities will include reminders of and prayers for the particular needs of young children and older adults. They will prepare all Lent to offer a special version of Stations of the Cross for the whole community. Next year, they plan to “give away” the responsibility to prepare some of the stations to a group of children and other stations to a group of seniors. Perhaps the following year, all of the stations will be prepared intergenerationally.*

*Each group is called to intentionally reflect on those who are different in age from their own group and to explore ways to interact with the other generations in the parish.*

*The church’s website features inspiring artwork, photography, and videos showing meaningful and fruitful relationships across the generations. A special bulletin insert for each week of Lent is distributed at Sunday services reminding everyone about the vision of intergenerationality toward which the church is moving in a particularly focused way during this Lenten season.*

*The worship committee designs Sunday worship with an emphasis on the three practices and how they can be practiced for the benefit of those from other generations, and the pastor preaches in ways that help parishioners immerse themselves in the theme’s meaning while discovering practical ways to live the three practices intergenerationally in daily life.*

*Wherever you go in this faith community, people of all ages and generations are united in a common endeavor: to prepare for Lent, to experience Lent fully at home and in the congregation, and to integrate their learning into their daily lives. They are doing this with a sharp focus on the experiences and needs of those who are different in age. Faith formation is in the midst of a transformation. The church is moving toward a culture of intergenerationality.*

What does it take to get a church to this kind of integration so that every activity of the parish is grounded in a spirit of generosity and hospitality toward those who are different in age from myself or from my group? It takes a good plan, a lot of work, and perseverance. . . . all of which are sparked by visionary leadership. It starts with the pastor and the church staff.

## The Pastor and Staff: A Key Relationship

The task of promoting the culture of intergenerationality is usually the responsibility of a coordinator of faith formation and his or her team. Faith formation is the ministry area that is usually most conscious of the need for intergenerational perspectives in ministry. *For this reason, this article will address the intergenerational transformation of a church from the perspective of the faith formation leaders.*

Faith formation is a primary responsibility of the pastor, who shares this responsibility with a coordinator of faith formation and his or her leadership team. This person may be paid or volunteer. The coordinator works closely with the pastor to create and develop the plan, and this person should have the administrative skills to implement the plan smoothly. The pastor is responsible for empowering the faith formation coordinator by providing adequate, on-going direction and support at appropriate levels. A professional

relationship built upon mutual trust is critically important if the overall faith formation plan will be implemented properly. Little can be done for the good of the faith formation ministries when the pastor and the coordinator have not taken the time to develop a healthy, professional working relationship. A church cannot nurture a healthy spirit of intergenerationality if the pastor and the faith formation leaders are not on the same page and do not share the same vision.

The coordinator of faith formation can do much to build a positive working relationship with the pastor so that the pastor will be an effective ambassador for intergenerationality across the parish. Consider the following ideas::

- **Learn the Culture and Build Connections:** Observe your pastor closely to discern the kind of culture the pastor is building in the congregational. This is especially true if you have been working for a pastor for a year or less. Identify the ways in which the culture that is being built is consistent with an intergenerational culture. Note these opportunities, and engage the pastor in discussions about them. Keep the discussions positive and affirming. Express gratitude for how the pastor displays a sensitivity to the benefits of intergenerational relationships.
- **Ask Questions:** Keep probing questions at the front end of your conversations. Avoid the temptation to put forth your agenda until you understand where your pastor is coming from on any given day and/or topic.
- **Clarify the Mission:** You and the pastor need to be on the same page regarding the mission and goals of the ministry plan for the church.

- **Communicate Empathically:** Choose communication methods that work well for you and your pastor. Communication works best when we consider the needs of the other first.
- **No Surprises:** Keep the pastor well-informed about your progress on current projects as well as any new ideas you are considering for the future. Especially keep the pastor informed when problems develop. The pastor should hear about potential problems from you before anyone else.
- **Credit the Team:** Few things help to build a good relationship with a pastor more than quality work that is credited to the team. When you enjoy success in your ministry, make it clear that it is only possible because your pastor, other staff members, and volunteers supported your work. Teams, not individuals, accomplish great things. It's all about the body of Christ.

The pastor participates directly in faith formation in a number of key ways. Preaching is the most visible and consistent way a pastor forms the faith of the parishioners. The sermon is perhaps the best opportunity to build a consistent faith formation message across all ministries. The coordinator of faith formation who has taken the time to build a strong working relationship with the pastor can assist by providing clear and simple summaries of how intergenerational themes connect with the liturgical cycle or worship themes. Jesus lived in a culture that was thoroughly intergenerational; therefore, gospel stories ooze with intergenerationality. Church staff and leaders that meet together regularly can make lectionary-based prayer a regular part of meetings. Staff might consider praying the lectionary a month or more ahead of the cycle so that your prayerful reflections might have an opportunity to influence the pastor's homiletic preparations and general liturgy planning. Making connections between

intergenerational themes and liturgy is critical in the effort to build cross generational integration throughout the church, and the sermon is a key strategy toward achieving that goal.

Special appearances by the pastor at formal faith formation gatherings are effective ways to keep the pastor connected to faith formation efforts. Some pastors are excellent teachers and are willing to participate in programs as presenters. If not, the pastor can lead prayer experiences or even make informal visits to mingle with learners during less structured moments in the programs. As the pastor experiences what is happening in faith formation settings, the faith formation staff will have experiential reference points for discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the programs in terms of their integration of intergenerational spirit and practice.

## The Role of Leadership Councils

When you attend to the relationship you have with your pastor, you will notice that the pastor is more willing to support your efforts throughout the church. It will be important for the pastor to make space at meetings of church councils and leadership groups for faith formation updates *and* for faith formation experiences. If you are a member of the church's leadership council, you will have plenty of opportunities to work with the council. If you are not a member, the pastor may have to initiate this plan unless you are invited to become a member. Either way, if intergenerational perspectives and practices are going to be integrated into all ministries, it will have to happen with a variety of leadership groups.

Prepare to take the church's leadership council through an intergenerational discernment process that will help them not only to appreciate the benefits of a culture of intergenerationality, but also to incorporate

intergenerational perspectives and practices into council meetings. Request an opportunity to address the council on the need for a culture of intergenerationality in the congregation. The following information may help you make your case.

### The Biblical Roots of Intergenerationality

- Deuteronomy 6:9, Teach your children.
- Deuteronomy 29:10-12, The whole community enters into covenant with God.
- Joshua 8:34-35, All of what Moses taught is passed on to the men, women, and children together.
- Psalm 78:1-8, Whole generations pass on the faith to the following generations.
- Isaiah 11:6-9, On God's holy mountain, those who are naturally different shall come together, and the young are a paradigm for hope.
- Jeremiah 1:4-10, No one is too young to be a messenger for God.
- Joel 2:15-16, The whole community is called to fast.
- Malachi 3:22-24, The Old Testament closes with a call for parents and children to turn their hearts toward each other.
- Mark 10:13-16, Jesus affirms the presence of children in the midst of adults as a special sign of the kingdom of God. How can adults come to know God's kingdom without regular contact with children?
- Matthew 18:1-5, Jesus is teaching in an intergenerational setting and uses a child as a visual reminder of the disposition necessary for salvation.
- Matthew 14 & 15, Jesus teaches with whole families present (see 14:21 and 15:38).
- Acts 16:25-34, Paul and Silas baptize a prison guard and his entire household

together in his home. (See also Acts 16:14-15 for a similar example.)

- Acts 20:7-12 & Acts 21:5-6, Paul teaches and leads prayer with young and old present together.

### The Social-Scientific Importance of Intergenerational Relationships

- Jean Piaget: The experience of disequilibrium is a catalyst for cognitive development. Adults are the agents who facilitate the experience of cognitive disequilibrium in children and adolescents.
- Erik Erikson: Two key concepts of Erikson's theory of human development call for intergenerational interaction:
  - *Mutuality* is a concept that is often ignored in Erikson's work. It states that the generations need each other for the maturation process to unfold. He said that the generations "grow each other up."
  - *Generativity* calls adults to become more conscious over time of their responsibility to pass wisdom to the generations that follow them.
- Robert Kegan: Holding environments (such as healthy families or communities) serve three purposes, all of which point to the need for an intergenerational community:
  - Purpose 1: Give a person a comfortable environment in which to assimilate new information. While peer groups can create a comfortable environment, the environment can become too comfortable so that new information is not welcome or sought.
  - Purpose 2: Challenge a person to consider new ways of thinking and acting in response to new information. Most developmental

challenges come from outside of a peer group.

- Purpose 3: Provide an ongoing environment of stability throughout the assimilation and change process in order to sustain the change over a significant period of time. Intra-generational groups do not have the staying power of intergenerational groups. The experiences of family and society, for example, are more permanent and more stable than the experience of a particular grade in school.

■ The Search Institute's Developmental Relationships: This is the latest research being done by the Search Institute in Minneapolis, MN, and it is based upon their prior research on developmental assets. Chief among the assets that help children and teens mature in healthy ways are the positive relationships they engage in with parents, teachers, and other caring adults in the community. These relationships are not possible without regular intergenerational experiences at home, at school, at church, and in the wider community. The research shows that intergenerational relationships have a powerful impact on positive outcomes for children and teens socially, academically, and emotionally while also protecting them from negative outcomes.

■ Intergenerational Tradition: You will want to note that the vast majority of church ministry experiences throughout the history of Christianity have been and continue to be intergenerational. From house churches in the first century through Sunday liturgy today, intergenerational experiences have been the hallmark of church caring, praying, learning, celebrating, & serving:

- Caring: Formal and informal/planned and spontaneous expressions of care across the generations at church and at home such as caring conversations and kind gestures
- Praying: Communal prayer services at church and at home in addition to an intergenerational awareness within private prayer practices
- Learning: Forming faith up and down the generational spectrum at church and at home
- Celebrating: Intergenerational worship, sacramental rituals, celebrations and traditions at church and at home
- Serving: Intergenerational service learning experiences through church programs and planned/spontaneous service through family/neighborhood experiences

The role of a leadership council from this point forward is twofold: 1) setting an example for all ministries; and 2) advising you as you work to implement intergenerational experiences in other church organizations.

Leadership council meetings can include prayer experiences that are specifically designed to help council members reflect upon the gifts and the need of all ages and generations in the faith community. The council agenda can also include items that are relevant to all ages and generations in the community. Someone on the council can be charged with the task of keeping everyone in the community on the council's radar screen.

Another strategy to help the council feel the importance of intergenerational culture is to invite representatives from each generation to offer brief presentations to council. These presentations will help the council members to experience affectively what is happening for all of the generations in the faith community. It is one thing to think about and pray for a certain population; it is quite another thing to engage in face-to-face encounter with them.

## Intergenerational Integration Team

Now you have the pastor and the leadership council supporting your efforts to integrate intergenerationality into all ministries. Consider establishing a team of people who will embrace and implement the vision to integrate all ministries with the parish's intergenerational plan.

Selecting the right people for your Intergenerational Integration team is an important process that should be done in consultation with your pastor and other key members of the staff. The team will be more effective if there is broad representation from across the congregation. This is not a team that will impose its will on ministries and groups; rather, it is a team that represents the flavor of the various ministries and groups operating in the parish. Think about the American Revolution when you form this group. Why were the colonists so up in arms? One reason was that decisions were being made in England without representation from the colonists in America, and then those decisions were imposed on the colonists. The battle cry was, "Taxation without representation!" It was clear how the decisions benefited England but not always so clear how they benefited the colonists. Don't ignore this lesson. Forming diverse representative leadership teams prevents rebellion when you get to the implementation stage. While it is not necessary to have every group represented on the team, it is important that every group have a voice. In other words, someone on the team must be able to speak about any given group with a good level of familiarity either because he/she knows the group from experience or knows someone well who belongs to the group.

Representation is not all that the team will do. They will not just discuss issues; they will also compile (or create) and implement resources for various parish groups. The team members will need to be willing to develop

and/or find resources that work for various groups and create delivery methods so that the resources get into the right hands and are used effectively. The team will then evaluate how faith formation is being integrated into the parish groups and make adjustments based upon their findings.

Team members will need to be proven collaborators, excellent listeners, and detail-oriented implementers. They will serve the needs of multiple ministries and groups, and will have to develop an excellent rapport with the leaders of those ministries and groups. They will become trusted spiritual resource people for many members of your congregation. Team members should have a good track record of building and sustaining trusting relationships that last.

Resourcefulness and creativity will be helpful attributes for team members. Where can you find the right resources for each particular ministry or group? Team members will have to be able to answer that question. If nothing adequate can be found or purchased, team members may have to develop resources tailored to the particular needs of a ministry or group. This kind of resource development is enormously rewarding to a creative person and equally as frustrating to a person who is not gifted as a writer or program planner. Be sure to have at least a couple of creative programming types on your team.

Developing a clear profile for the right candidates for your team will greatly enhance your work and eliminate lots of potential problems with the integration plan. See the next page for a proposed job description for a member of the Intergenerational Integration team. You may use this job description or develop one of your own which addresses the particular needs in your congregation.

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## Job Description

**Program:** Faith Formation

**Job Title:** Intergenerational Integration Team Member

### Tasks to be Performed with Other Team Members:

1. Represent one or more ministries or groups
2. Assess the integration intergenerational perspectives and practices across church ministries and groups
3. Identify and/or develop intergenerational resources for ministries and groups
4. Assist particular ministries or groups with implementation of resources
5. Evaluate resources in collaboration with each ministry or group
6. Evaluate the process of intergenerational change in the congregational culture

### Abilities Needed (skills, attitudes, understandings):

1. Ability to work well in group settings
2. Openness to new ideas
3. Excellent listening/communication skills
4. Appreciation for diverse spiritualities
5. Resourceful
6. Compliance with safe environment

### Length of Commitment

- Start date:
- End date:
- Meetings:
- Orientation:

### Support and Supervision

- Who provides support and supervision:
- When and where:
- Training and preparation offered:

### Benefits of the position

- *To the volunteer leader:* The opportunity to exercise your baptismal

call to ministry with a creative and diverse team of individuals and deepen your faith while you experience the joy of Christian service

- *To the community:* Building a more welcoming and supportive community across the generations.

Completed by (name) \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Establishing Your Mission and Setting Your Goals

Now that you have the support of the pastor and the leadership council; and now that you have identified, recruited, and trained team members for the Intergenerational Integration team, it is time to begin the work of integrating intergenerational perspectives and experiences into all ministries and groups.

All good work begins with clarity of mission. What is the purpose of the Intergenerational Integration team? A clear and concise mission statement will communicate the purpose of the team to both team members and the congregation. I would like to propose the following mission statements for your consideration:

*The Intergenerational Integration team serves all church ministries and groups by providing them with simple and relevant resources in order to help them appreciate, embrace, and promote intergenerationality in our congregation.*

OR

*The Intergenerational Integration team promotes and supports intergenerational perspectives and/or experiences every time people in our faith community gather in the name of the church.*

These statements leave little doubt about the core purpose of the group. Goals and strategies will help to flesh out and give shape



to the work of the team. Goals and strategies can change from year to year as the group's work progresses. Goals should clearly state the top priorities for the group in the coming year or two. Integration teams will have goals which address the following areas:

- Relationship of team to pastor and leadership council
- Relationship of team to church ministries and groups
- Communication methods
- Resource development
- Funding
- Evaluation

After goals are established, the team will discuss *how* to accomplish each goal. Concise strategy statements answer the "how" questions. Most goals will generate three or more strategies which will guide the particular actions of the team members as they work toward their goals.

## The Work of the Intergenerational Integration Team

Similar to the work that was done with the leadership council, the team assists leaders in church ministries and groups to raise their awareness of, their support for, and their interaction with the ages and generations that are not generally a part of their group. For example, if youth ministry has been predominantly a place for teenagers to gather without the presence of parents and other adults, the youth ministry leadership team will need to have a representative on the Intergenerational Integration team. As this person learns more about the need that teens have for healthy and abundant intergenerational relationships, new programs and resources can be developed to provide regular and relevant interaction between teens and adult. The group will also consider appropriate ways to connect teens with

younger children on a regular basis. Much of the efforts with youth ministry can be accomplished simply by integrating teens into many of the adult ministries that already exist in the church, especially liturgical or worship ministries.

In transforming youth ministry programs into intergenerational programs, it will be important to continue to offer high quality age-specific activities for teens. Peer ministry remains a significant part of youth ministry and should not be disregarded in the effort to become an intergenerational church. The most effective churches strike a healthy balance between age-specific programming and intergenerational programming. This is also true for child and adult ministries.

Groups that are primarily adult will continue to thrive in the church, but they can be invited to a more intergenerational perspective. Like the leadership council, it is helpful to design prayer experiences for them that call them beyond themselves to an awareness of and care for those from both younger and older generations. Also, if the group has a particular skill that it practices, it can be a wonderful opportunity for the group to mentor younger people into the skill. Here is an inspiring video of how that happens in one community with a retired group of men who are expert woodworkers:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9wkrSAZaWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9wkrSAZaWs).

Use the grid on the following page to inspire your own thinking about how to integrate intergenerationality in various groups.

Group	Contact	Group Purpose	Group Readiness	Potential Resources	Source of Resources	Team Member	Progress Notes

## Be Patient, Hopeful, and Persistent

Changing the culture of an organization is a long-term project. You will need to find ways to celebrate small wins for yourself and your team on a regular basis. You will also need to expect challenges to arise regularly. You will be asking the congregation to do things that are counter cultural. You may have a mix of initial enthusiasm and resistance. Support the enthusiasm and help it to grow so that the resistance becomes less relevant as the culture changes. The counter cultural dimension of intergenerational experiences should not be underestimated. People will feel unnatural at first. Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, comment on these challenges:

...change is hard and there will be complaints. Intergenerational experiences do not always meet the immediate felt needs of everyone present: the children *may not wish* to participate in an idea-oriented discussion; seniors *may not wish* to have young children disrupting a special event; the youth group *may not wish* their parents to be among them; the parents may not wish to be with their teens; and those whose offspring have recently flown the nest *may not wish* to reenter the world of children and chaos. The ministry leaders themselves can become discouraged reframing and tweaking already-existing community events and activities to embrace intergenerationality. Leading people out of their comfort zones may create initial uneasiness; moving into new forms of ministry requires more energy and commitment than remaining on the

well-known path. (*Intergenerational Christian Formation, 179-80*)

Your integration plan will evolve like a work of art over time. It is not something that will take shape overnight. Be patient...you may only be able to integrate a group or two at a time. As these groups become more ingrained in the perspectives and practices of intergenerationality, you will be freed up to direct your attention to other groups. Word of mouth will spread if your early efforts are done with great care and achieve notable success. Prepare well, persist with hope, and you will finish well. You are offering a service in the name of the noble cause of parish unity. You have every reason to be hopeful. God blesses all works of unity.

Faith formation can and should be a unifying force in your community. Planning to become an intergenerational church will help your community grow together as people of all ages experience caring, praying, learning, celebrating, and serving together. Working closely with your pastor and your leadership council to get things started will generate the right kind of support to bring the plan to completion. Organizing the Intergenerational Integration team will be a critical step toward getting the work done. Be sure to take the time with the team to develop a clear mission statement along with goals and strategies that will guide your actions as a group and as individuals. Finally, don't forget to enjoy and celebrate the fruits of your good work.

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