

Intergenerational Formation

An introduction to Intergenerational Formation and Ministry

For some folks, intergenerational formation is still a fairly new way of thinking about Christian discipleship and for others they have been engaged in it for years in various ways. While those new to it may have read articles or books on the topic or perhaps even attended a workshop at a conference, others have no idea where to begin. Not surprisingly, most of those new to the conversation just want to know, “What are the most important things I need to know about intergenerational ministry in order to do it in my church?” That’s a big question to answer, so we’ve broken it down into smaller chunks that are aimed at helping you navigate the world of intergenerational formation. As a way of framing them, we’ve divided them up into three categories: 1) broader concepts (the first three), 2) terms and clarifications (the second three), and 3) practical considerations (the final four).

1. Without a doubt our current exploration into intergenerationality is built on the work of many folk and cultures that have come before us. We can look to Scripture to witness various expressions of multi-aged communities who likely insisted upon having all ages together for some form of communal worship. We see the mandate in Deuteronomy 6 to pass down the faith from generation to generation. And, we see this emphasis extended through to the New Testament where households were baptized by the first apostles.

That said, this is also a newer conversation that was a particular focus of Christian educators and clergy over the past century. As the religious education movement propelled Christian discipleship toward more peer-oriented education, there were those the latter half of last century—like John Westerhoff, Maria Harris and Carl Ellis Nelson—who urged the church toward a more communal expression of formation. It is particularly on the shoulders of these thinkers (and others) that the current conversation stands upon. More recently, we look to scholars like Holly Allen and John Roberto to help us frame our current thinking about intergenerational life-long faith formation.

2. It’s important to keep in mind, this way of formation is more focused on the internal nature of the Christian community. This doesn’t mean that there aren’t external results beyond the walls of the church, but that’s not its intent. It’s about the quality of the faith community, not quantity of people we can fit into our pews. When our focus is on increasing attendance in church, we run the risk of turning our formation efforts into a means aimed at the end of whatever we deem a successful church.

We live in a world that is dominated by outcome-based foci. We do this or that with anticipated results, and our actions and decisions are based on our hopes for what will result in the end. Intergenerational formation is not focused on growing a church or accumulating a corpus of knowledge that assumedly marks us as good disciples. It is not a program or curriculum that aims at reaching an anticipated

outcome. Rather, it's focused on *being* the church. It seeks to bolster the covenantal community towards a more holistic way of being together, in the spirit of Sabbath, where we rest and play. The value of this type of formation is in the expression itself. It's how we're meant to pass down our identity in Christ. The goal (if we must have one) is to be an intergenerational community as a way of being formed together, which is achieved by our very participation in it.

3. Thus, intergenerational formation has an emphasis on experiencing and participation, not on learning and accumulation of knowledge. The essence of intergenerationality is in the participation and experience of the community together. That doesn't mean it's just about providing a good (or fun) time for those involved (though we would hope it would be good... and at times fun). It means that the focus is not on the overt or external curriculum that is largely content based. Rather, its focus is on what it means to be formed together. The internal curriculum that is experienced in Christian practice is that we are all God's children and we journey together in faith.

By having all generations present and engaged in worship (or some other programmatic activity), we experience solidarity, connection and identity formation, *communally*. In some ways, it doesn't matter what we learn content-wise. Our folks will likely forget a lot of the content we teach over the years anyways (consider how much you remember from the last sermon you heard), but what they won't forget is the intrinsic value of being together and the vision of God's kingdom that is realized in those moments—something we refer to as “intergenerational holy moments.”

4. That said, as you continue on your journey into this growing conversation, there are a few terms and concepts that will be helpful to get. First, **it's critical to understand the difference between intergenerational, cross-generational, and multigenerational formation.**

Multigenerational formation is where there are several (or all) generations present, but all engaging in formation in different ways. It's akin to a potluck where everyone goes down into the basement of a church and gets whatever they want from the buffet of strange salads, ample crockpots of baked beans, and too many brownies. Then everyone self-segregates into their own groups. Older folks sit with older folks, the youth gravitate toward their peers, and the parents with young children find a place in the corner of the room to keep their rowdy kids under control. In other words, everyone is in the same place but doing their own thing.

Cross-generational formation is where there are two or more generations present, but there is a power differential between the generations. Children's ministry, youth ministry, and college ministry are great examples of cross-generational formation. One generation is serving as the teacher or leader, while the other generation is participating as the learner or follower. Keeping with the meal analogy, it like a confirmation sponsor or leader taking a confirmand out for ice cream. They are both having ice cream, but the person from the older generation is participating in an intentional activity to offer something to the younger one.

Intergenerational formation, like multigenerational, has most generations present, but its focus goes beyond mere presence. Its emphasis is specifically on the intersection between the different generations with an aim of having that intersection be characterized by an intentional *mutuality* and *reciprocity* (see more on these terms below). Intergenerational formation is like a thanksgiving dinner where everyone is eating the same food at the same table. No one is off at the kids' table in the foyer. Then, during the meal, everyone shares what they are thankful for—a new bike, a promotion, good health and the like. Everyone has value at the table and their contribution is received and experienced by all.

5. It is also important to understand a few terms or concepts that are associated with the growing intergenerational conversation—*mutuality, reciprocity, inclusion, equity, and accommodation* to name a few. Without going too deeply into each of these terms, it's worth considering what they mean as they get thrown around a fair amount by those talking about intergenerationality. Mutuality and reciprocity both deal with the nature of the exchange. Is there a common gain (or loss) for all the generations present? Are all generations giving and receiving in some way? These terms point to the quality or *nature of the interaction*.

Next, inclusion and equity point to the *nature of the activity*. Who is included or excluded by the activity or exercise chosen? Is there a sense of equity in what was planned for participants to encounter (note, this is not equality)? This doesn't mean that everything will be equal in its execution, but that there was an intentional consideration for the equitable nature of the activity for all present and that it doesn't intentionally or unintentionally exclude anyone from participation.

Accommodation as a way of understanding intergenerationality deals with the *nature of the relationships*. In other words, who is doing the accommodation? In cross-generational ministry, it's often the adults doing the accommodation, whereas in Sunday worship, it's the children and youth accommodating the adults in the traditional practices of worship. In the end, a healthily intergenerational community will have a mutual accommodation during their times together. Accommodations is best understood in relationship to the doctrine of the incarnation, in that Christ accommodated us in and through God's love for us.

6. Another clarification that is worth exploring is (and one that comes with much debate): **Are we talking about intergenerational "formation" or intergenerational "ministry" (or worship, or education, etc.)?** This has been a point of contention in the larger conversation, with our preference being the usage of the word "formation" over all others (as clearly noted throughout this article). Formation is the larger catch-all that describes the essential nature of what is happening. It's intergenerational. And, it's formation.

Ministry, on the other hand, deals with the particular output for the kind of gathering or mission. Ministry often implies something that is being done on behalf of another. We minister to people. We have children's or older adult ministries. Other expressions like intergenerational worship or intergenerational mission fall into the same category. They are expressions of the larger category of formation. In the end, it doesn't really matter what term you decide on using, so long as the intergenerational aspect of the gathering is intentionally cultivated.

7. Moving to more practical considerations around intergenerational formation, **determine where your intergenerational experiences are happening.** The ultimate location is in the Sunday worship gathering. We believe there should be a time during the week where the whole covenant community gathers together for mutual formation. This ideally happens in worship where the most sacred rituals and practices of Christianity come alive.

This doesn't mean that our education and programmatic offerings (e.g., Sunday school, mid-week programming, mission trips) are less important. These gatherings and events are great places to experiment with what intergenerational formation might look like in your larger faith community. These gatherings often have intergenerational elements (teachers, leaders, mentors) and you can build upon these relationships to create more intentional intergenerational experiences.

But, keep in mind, our intergenerational efforts shouldn't only remain in our ministry programs, because if they do, we run the risk of our broader faith community viewing intergenerational formation as just one more option in the smorgasbord of educational offerings.

8. Consider the language we are using when we communicate about our formational opportunities. For example, when we use “family” as part of the description of an intergenerational event or activity, we immediately isolate the experience to those who have children. Though it is not likely our intent, when people in our congregations see the word “family” they often excuse themselves from participation due to their lack of children or kids living at home with them (in the case of those older folk whose children are older). Intergenerational community is about the diversity of ages and life stages intersecting. “All age” is a better way to communicate that all are welcome.

9. Before we get folks to show up, we must plan what we’re actually offering. It’s been said in jest that much of intergenerational formation boils down to craft projects and group discussion questions. While there is some truth in this statement, it’s far from an accurate portrayal of the widespread creativity that we’re seeing in the intergenerational world. Crafts are great “third things” to get multiple generations intersecting, but they shouldn’t be the primary way we experiment. Moreover, discussion questions are a great way to engage multiple generations in dialogue, but they are a means of formation that, if not intentional, can slip too quickly into a cross-generational experience where the older generation is leading the young generations.

There is endless creativity in the church and it’s critical that we dip deeply into our creative pools to find new ways that multiple generations might intersect in meaningful ways. In the end, however, *what* we do is less important than how we do it. Making sure that all generations are able to participate is essential to cultivating opportunities for intergenerational intersection.

10. Finally, in all our new experimentation, consider the notion that **intergenerationality is about being a different kind of church not doing church differently.** It’s not a program to plug in, it’s a way of being that begins by valuing the role and presence that everyone in your community brings to the table. This is not a technical change that seeks to tweak your communities’ faith life, it’s an adaptive change that will ultimately transform your congregation and faith communities into a fuller expression of God’s kingdom on earth.

And, it’s worth noting that no adaptive change happens overnight. Intergenerational work happens over the long haul. That doesn’t mean you won’t see incredible moments of transformation in and between generations along the way—no doubt you will. In the end, however, it’s going to take many years to see the cultural shift in how your folks understand and experience intergenerational formation.

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