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## Study guide

# Generations of faith

*How intergenerational ministry can sustain the church*

By Robert C. Blezard

It's no secret that membership in the ELCA is getting older, and many grandmas and grandpas in our churches today lament how few children and young adults are present. What's a congregation to do? Leading Lutheran thinkers believe intergenerational ministry can help by bringing people of all ages together for a time of fellowship, faith and/or fun!

### EXERCISE 1: PASSING ON THE FAITH

Ideally, every generation learns about the faith from those who went before them.

- In what years were you a child or youth being formed in the faith?
- Describe the person who was most important to your faith development. What was your relationship with them? What did they do and how did they do it?
- What was the role of the church in your faith development? What regular programs and structures were in place to help guide you in the faith? How did (or didn't) the church support your relationship with the person you described above?
- Do churches today raise children in the faith the same way as when you were young? Explain. What's different?
- How can your congregation do a better job of raising children in the faith?
- How can you better help pass on the faith to a youth or child in your congregation, the way a grown-up passed it on to you?

### EXERCISE 2: WHERE ARE THE YOUNG PEOPLE?

The lament of many ELCA congregations involves the missing generations of people under 30. The lamentations are accompanied by hand-wringing about what we can do to introduce or reintroduce young people into the faith.

- How would your congregation answer the question, "Where are the children?"
- What, would you estimate, is the percentage of people under 21 who participate in worship and other church activities?
- Was it always this way? Can you think of a time when the church's membership was more diversified by age? When was that? What was happening in the church and the world then?
- When did things start to change? How? Why?
- What has occurred in church and wider society that has contributed to the trend?
- What strategies has your congregation used to turn things around?



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# Study guide: **Generations of faith**

*continued*

## **EXERCISE 3: SEGREGATED BY AGE**

In many churches, programs, education and activities are geared toward specific age groups, and others, while not targeted to age groups, just seem to attract participants of a certain generation. The result is that folks are segregated into groups, with little interaction among them.

- Looking at your church's classes, programs and activities, do people tend to be segregated by age? If so, why? Was it by design of the program, or did it just evolve that way?
- What is the benefit of participants in an activity being of the same age? When does it work well, and why?
- What is the drawback to segregating people by age? Under what circumstances would it not serve participants and the church's mission well?
- What would it take for your congregation to adopt models of ministry that integrated people by age? How could you or your study group help make that happen?

## **EXERCISE 4: INTEGRATED BY FAITH**

Worship is certainly a time when people of all ages are gathered together for the purpose of ministry. But this isn't the case for many other regular ministries of the church. How can we change that? Start by consulting a year's worth of monthly calendars or church newsletters and make a list of all the regular ministries, events and activities your church engages in. Go through the list and consider:

- Which ones are geared to a specific age group, whether intentionally or by default?
- Which ones are at least nominally open for all ages?
- For those geared toward a specific group, brainstorm whether and how the ministry or activity could be changed to open it up to people of other ages, particularly children, youth or young adults.
- For those appropriate for all ages, explore how they could be made even more accessible, fulfilling or enjoyable to younger people.
- Finally, using as inspiration the stories of intergenerational ministries highlighted in *Living Lutheran*, come up with some original ideas for activities, programs or ministries that would be suitable for people of all ages.
- Compile your work into a report and give it to your congregation council or pastor for review.

## **EXERCISE 5: FAITH FORMATION AT HOME**

Martin Luther wrote that fathers and mothers "are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children."

- Do you agree with this sentiment? Why or why not?



### About the study guide author:

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## Study guide: **Generations of faith**

*continued*

- What was your parents' or family's role in your faith development?
- What religious practices did you practice at home when you were growing up? What did they mean to you?
- As a grown-up, do you still practice them in your home? Why or why not?
- How could you as a spouse, parent, grandparent, uncle or aunt, brother or sister, or even close friend introduce or rediscover faith-forming practices that would enrich the spiritual lives of the household? What might those faith practices include?
- Does your congregation support, equip and encourage families to practice ministry and develop faith at home? If so, how? How would you evaluate the efforts? What could the congregation do better? If not, why not?
- As a study group, brainstorm ideas for home ministry and faith formation. Make a list. Next, brainstorm ideas for how a congregation can support, encourage and equip families to practice faith and form children in the faith. Give the lists to your pastor and congregation council to help your church's efforts.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- It's been said that children are the future of the church. It's also said that children are the church now. In what ways are both statements true? In what ways are they both limited? Which statement do you believe holds more validity, and why? How could a wise church leader hold them both in tension? How could they guide your intergenerational ministry?
- What does it mean that the church is the body of Christ in the world? What does that mean for individual church members? What duties are implied? What responsibilities are implied? Are children exempt from being part of the body of Christ in the world? In what ways do some congregations act and plan as if children were exempt? How can congregations take children more seriously as part of the body of Christ?
- As a child or youth, did you have an adult who served as your mentor in the faith (even if they didn't have that formal title or role)? If yes, describe what they did for you. If not, describe whether and how a mentor might have been helpful. How might you be a mentor to a child or youth?
- In the *Living Lutheran* article, Linda Staats defines intergenerational ministry as the intentional gathering of interaction between all generations, with an emphasis on the word "intentional." Would you agree? How might you change it? How does it fit with what your congregation is doing or trying? Why is "intentional" such an important concept?



## How intergenerational ministry can sustain the church

By **Wendy Healy**

Where are the young people? How will we pass on the faith to future generations? What can we do to bring youth to church?

These questions can be heard in many congregations as they ponder the challenge to attract younger people to worship. As congregations age and dwindle, it's natural to wonder how they might engage youth.

The answers may lie in intergenerational ministry. Those deeply involved in the field say that connecting generations is a good way to engage congregations, because all generations are part of the body of Christ.

"If we're going to truly be the body of Christ,

we need to have all generations in ministry," said Linda Staats, a leader and educator in the field of intergenerational ministry. "God is present in every generation. When we don't have each generation participating, we're missing perspectives and values. It all comes down to being the body of Christ. I've never experienced as much Holy Spirit as when the generations are together."

Staats, a baby boomer who grew up surrounded by her grandparents and great-grandparents, directs HomeGrown Faith, an online community and resource center supporting intergenerational ministry. She has

worked with youth and educational ministries, served as assistant to the bishop in the Rocky Mountain and Grand Canyon synods, and coordinated the Generosity Project, an ELCA cross-generational, household-focused program to connect generations and create faith practices of generosity.

Staats defines intergenerational ministry as the intentional gathering of and interaction between all generations, with emphasis on the word “intentional.”

“Faith isn’t a hand-me-down,” she said. “We say God is present in every single generation, and we’re here to witness, embellish and support that. Every generation needs to make faith their own.”

In her work with congregations, Staats often gathers people from all generations in a circle to facilitate faith conversations. She also encourages pastors to ask questions at the beginning of worship about what generations are present. Who’s the oldest? Who’s the youngest?



Photo: Linda Staats

During a Generosity Project workshop called “Circle of Generations” at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wis., the oldest and youngest participants are introduced to each other.

Staats points out that, in the past, congregations segregated members by age. “Since the 1950s, the model for ministry was measured by your age. We have Sunday school rooms for 2-year-olds, 5-year-olds, youth group, etc. This model isn’t the body of Christ, and it’s only recently being challenged.”

Segregating the generations, she says, causes some of the tension felt by congregations today. “The

## “If we’re going to truly be the body of Christ, we need to have all generations in ministry.”

older members are aghast at young people going to communion in torn jeans that they probably bought for \$100 a pair,” she added.

Many congregations are now embracing intergenerational ministry by rethinking such programs as Sunday school, Bible study and devotion time. Connecting the generations can be a matter of reexamining congregational traditions. Staats advises congregations to replace their customary Youth Sunday with an Intergenerational Sunday. Sometimes simple



Photo: Jae Staats

Small, mixed-age groups reflect on God’s story together at an intergenerational Generosity Project event held at All Saints Lutheran Church in Phoenix.

activities or changes can make a difference, such as asking a cross-generational group to hand out bulletins at worship or putting rocking chairs in the back of the sanctuary so grandparents can rock their grandbabies.

When congregations bring people together to nurture lifelong faith, they find that each generation has something to offer. “Children pick up the importance of worship and rituals from adults,” Staats said, “and adults

pick up the awe from kids.”

Generations in action

“My least favorite saying is, ‘Children are the future of the church,’” said Matt Byrd, pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church in West Chester, Ohio. “They’re the church now. They can serve here and now with adults, who can share wisdom and insight and be welcoming and inclusive to children.”

Christ the King has focused on intergenerational ministry through its summer drama camp. Held instead of vacation Bible school (VBS), the camp unites multiple generations to produce a musical that’s performed in the sanctuary.

The congregation had already launched the camp in response to declining VBS enrollment when Byrd was called to Christ the King five years ago. “It was intentional,” he said. “The congregation was aging and

**“Adults and kids working together is really important. The philosophy is that faith stays with kids if they have adults who can connect with them, specifically adults who aren’t their parents.”**



New friendships are formed between generations as they work on a craft project together during a Generosity Project workshop at King of Glory Lutheran Church in Carmel, Ind.



Participants in a workshop at Parroquia Luterana Sagrado Corazón, Waukegan, Ill., work together on a craft.

evangelism through procreation wasn’t happening. So we considered how could we teach people about the arts, have kids and adults work together, and be together in worship space.

“One of the things about us is that we do a good job at discerning our gifts and how they can be used for ministry in the world. We have lots of creative and artistic people, and we still wanted to do outreach, so we came up with drama camp.”

The pandemic prevented the congregation from hosting the camp for the past two years, but prior to that it gathered about 25 adults, teens and children every summer to present a musical based on a Bible story.

Byrd said the camp uses his skills as both a youth minister and a college theater major. “It’s amazing the way God works and how the Holy Spirit calls us to use our gifts,” he said.

Past productions have covered the stories of Esther,

David and Goliath, and Jonah and the whale. Drama camp regulars are now considering writing their own script based on a New Testament story.

“The beauty of theater is that anyone, at any age, can participate,” Byrd said. “We want everyone to have fun and joy in what they’re doing. The joy of being together and working toward a goal is where everyone wins. That sense of grace and joy as we celebrate as a community is phenomenal.”

The basis for the camp is 1 Corinthians 12:20-30, which discusses diversity and unity—and echoes Staats’ comments that all generations are needed in ministry to complete the body of Christ.

“Adults and kids working together is really important,” Byrd said. “The philosophy is that faith stays with kids if they have adults who can connect with them, specifically adults who aren’t their parents. Intergenerational ministry is a way to reinforce and teach stories of faith.

way to integrate the generations.

“It’s making connections,” she said. “It’s everyone’s call to reach out to others, as Jesus said in the Great Commission. This is one way we can be intentional about doing it.”

Blessing Buddies, she explained, allows members to live out their baptismal vocation: “The church is meant to be a community where we raise our children in the faith, especially in a secular world.”

The adult buddies, who receive training before being paired with younger members, are often gratified by the companionship and the ability to share their faith, Wilson said, adding, “It’s about loving somebody.”

The program helps young people grow in their faith, Wilson said, and some of them have gone on to become active in campus ministries. One young woman was inspired to study vocal music by her Blessing Buddy, a voice enthusiast. Wilson said the young woman now



Photos: Courtesy of Christ the King

Christ the King Lutheran Church, West Chester, Ohio, organizes a summer drama camp that unites multiple generations to produce a musical. Matt Byrd, pastor of the congregation, said the camp brings kids and adults together to offer and share their creative talents.

#### Faithful friends

Kimberly Wilson, pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church in Glen Head, N.Y., started a program for members called Blessing Buddies, which pairs children with adults who can serve as mentors and friends. After seeing a lot of children and grandparents separated by distance, as well as older members becoming less mobile and active, Wilson thought Blessing Buddies would be a

sings and helps out at church during summers at home.

Blessing Buddies are encouraged to call one another or exchange a card or email once a month. Before the pandemic halted in-person events, the participants would meet at the church several times a year for activities such as arts and crafts. The buddies at Our Savior have partnered with the local Lutheran high school to pack meals for people in need, and Wilson

encourages them to incorporate a service project into Blessing Buddies activities.

#### Grand connections

Lutheran outdoor ministries support intergenerational programs, with several offering camps for grandparents and grandkids. Jon Halvorson,

**“Just because you’re older and retired doesn’t mean you don’t have a lot to offer to the younger generations.”**

together, with grandparents bringing one grandchild at a time for a special experience, or as many as six,” he said.

The families share the typical camp experiences: lake activities, ropes courses, team-building, crafts, games, Bible study, devotions and campfires. This time together is important, Halvorson said, because families are scattered across the country and some grandparents and grandchildren can’t see each other regularly.

“It’s an important time for families to grow together in their relationship with one another, and to create space for family and faith conversations,” he said. “A quarter of our grandparents remember coming to camp themselves. We create a space to share stories and memories.”

Halvorson thinks that Grandparents Camp breaks down walls in an age when online technology sorts people into homogeneous communities. “We don’t spend time talking to people outside our own groups,” he said. “It’s nice for youth and adults to talk to each other.”



Photos: Courtesy of Metigoshe Ministries



Metigoshe Ministries in Bottineau, N.D., has hosted Grandparents Camp for 15 years. The three-day camp gives grandparents and grandkids a chance to participate in typical camp activities together while having intentional time for faith conversation.

executive director of Metigoshe Ministries in Bottineau, N.D., identified Grandparents Camp as one of its most popular programs: “It’s our first camp to fill up.” The camp has offered this three-day experience for 15 years.

“It’s a time for grandparents and kids to come

David Jarvis, executive director of Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp in Hillside, Colo., agreed. He has seen interest in family camps grow over his 31 years at Rainbow Trail. The camp even offers a “camp grandparent” program in which adults 55 and older attend camp to serve as grandparent figures for a week.



## The 7 living generations in the United States

- **Greatest generation:**  
Born from 1901 to 1926
- **Silent generation/traditionalists:**  
Born from 1927 to 1945
- **Baby boomers:**  
Born from 1946 to 1964
- **Generation X:**  
Born from 1965 to 1980
- **Millennials/Generation Y:**  
Born from 1981 to 1996
- **Generation Z/iGeneration:**  
Born from 1997 to 2012
- **Alpha generation:**  
Born from 2013 to 2025



Photo: Linda Staats

At Iglesia Luterana San Gabriel in Alvarado, Texas, small groups of unrelated people talk about faith across the generations during a workshop for the Generosity Project.

“Camp plays out in so many ways,” he said. “It’s comforting for homesick kids who need the older generation; grandparents can do things that other people can’t.” The adults decide where they can do the most good during the day, Jarvis said, whether that

means participating in an arts-and-crafts activity or just talking with kids.

“It’s cool to watch the relationships grow,” he said. “It’s a win-win when kids get to experience the other generations. Everyone has something to offer; that’s the real kick to make it all work. Just because you’re older and retired doesn’t mean you don’t have a lot to offer to the younger generations.”

All this underscores Staats’ primary message to congregations: “If you want to feel the power of the Holy Spirit, it’s when all generations are gathered. It’s very natural. If we’re going to have whole, healing, grace-filled, sustainable communities, it’s about gathering all the generations into the life and witness.”

## Resources

- HomeGrown Faith: [homegrownfaith.net](http://homegrownfaith.net)
- The Generosity Project: [thegenerosityproject.net](http://thegenerosityproject.net)
- Faith Inkubators: [faithink.com](http://faithink.com)
- InterGenerate Conference: [intergenerateconference.com](http://intergenerateconference.com)
- Lifelong Faith: [lifelongfaith.com](http://lifelongfaith.com)
- Milestones Ministry: [milestonesministry.org](http://milestonesministry.org)
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