

Fifty-Five Intergenerational Ideas

(From “Intergenerational Christian Formation” By Allen, Lawton and Siebel.)

To help you get started with intergenerational formation, we’ve compiled topical lists of examples that have been tested by others exploring intergenerational ministry. Each list will give you several basic ideas or activities to focus your efforts; of course, they may require some adaptation to your particular context and ministry setting.

TEN IDEAS FOR DRAWING THE GENERATIONS TOGETHER THROUGH UTILIZING THE SENSES

1. Smell, taste, touch. Share a loaf of whole wheat bread and a loaf of white bread in an intergenerational setting. (Perhaps ask two people from an older generation and a younger generation to make the bread.) Discuss how the whole wheat bread is different from white bread (more substantial, more nutritious, more filling, healthier, etc.). Discuss how Jesus is our “whole wheat bread of life.” How is whole wheat bread like spiritual food?
2. Touch and taste. Offer a special intergenerational event to make unleavened bread together (as it doesn’t require rising time). While it’s baking, share the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and their need to bake quickly before they left. Enjoy the bread together when the teaching time is over.
3. Smell. After the new year (Epiphany Sunday for churches that follow a liturgical calendar), burn frankincense in the sanctuary and share about what it was used for. Likewise, invite all to dip their fingers in myrrh oil and smell its fragrance. Share how important myrrh was for burial rituals. Ask anyone wearing gold jewelry to hold it up for all to see. Teach about why the Magi offered these gifts to the Christ child.
4. Sight. Arrange an art-gallery-style gathering centered around paintings of Jesus from earlier centuries. Display an array of the paintings around the room, labeling what culture or period in history each come from. Invite intergenerational pairs to mingle about the show. Gather everyone at the end to share which pictures they like the best and to explain why.
5. Sight. Set up an intergenerational art gallery in your church. Invite all ages in your community to contribute paintings, sculptures, or other creative expressions around topic or no topic.
6. Sound. Ask a willing person from each generation—all six generations if possible—to share with the gathered faith community how they would “make a joyful noise” to the Lord (Ps 95:1 ESV). Encourage them to bring props if needed.
7. Sound. While reading Genesis 1, play Smetana’s “The Moldau.” Ask: Does this sound like music that goes with creation? What other music that you know would go beautifully with reading Genesis 1? (If you wish, look up the background on this symphonic composition; the Moldau is the river that flows through Prague.)
8. Sight, sound, movement. Ask someone who knows sign language to teach an intergenerational group (or the whole gathered faith community) the signs for God, Lord, glory, and holy. Then pray the prayer, “Lord, you are holy; God, we give you glory” with everyone signing the words that were taught.
9. Movement. Call two specific generations to set up for a potluck meal (e.g., teens and middle adults); call two specific generations to clean up after a potluck meal (e.g., emerging adults and [active] older adults).

10. Movement, taste. Encourage two from different generations to make a recipe together for a potluck or a small group gathering.

TEN IDEAS FOR ENGAGING ALL GENERATIONS IN THE SCRIPTURES

1. Read a Psalm antiphonally (alternating responses)—after each verse is read, a phrase is sung or recited. For example, read Psalm 136 verse by verse, and after each verse, invite everyone to proclaim, “His love endures forever!”
2. Study the wisdom of the Proverbs together. Divide your group into intergenerational clusters of two or three and give them a chapter in Proverbs to read together. Invite each cluster to collectively choose their favorite proverb from their chapter.
3. In an intergenerational gathering, ask those present to share their favorite memory verse—and why it is important to them.
4. Explore the generational emphasis in Scripture by reading Psalm 78:1-8 aloud. Invite all to count how many times the word, “generation(s)” is mentioned. Read it again, noting the different generational references as you go.
5. Select a narrative-based story in Scripture that has dialogue between several characters. Divide the larger group into clusters of six to ten people. Give each group a printout of part of the story from the chosen Scripture passage. Give the clusters ample time to prepare a skit or scene acting out their portion of the story. Then have each group perform their part of the story (in order).
6. Use the Jesus Storybook Bible (JSB) as your lectionary text (i.e., preaching guide) for a year. Instead of inviting kids forward for the “children’s moment,” read them (and the congregation) the Scripture from the actual storybook, instead of using a traditional Bible. (Note: the JSB uses excerpts straight from the Bible, so this can function as the reading of the Word for the service.)
7. Host a Bible trivia night and divide the groups into intergenerational teams. Encourage everyone at each table to collectively decide on answers, making sure to include those with less biblical knowledge (both younger and older).
8. Choose a narrative passage and have intergenerational groups of four to five paint a picture illustrating the story on a large framed canvas (available at most hobby stores in bulk packs). Insist that everyone in the group must contribute to the painting. Then, display the paintings in a prominent place in your church and invite the larger congregation to view the art.
9. During an all-age meal or an intergenerational Bible study, with various ages sitting together, ask participants to listen carefully to a Bible reading. Afterward, ask each to draw a picture or write words expressing the key ideas they heard in the reading. Then, have them share their drawings with others in their group.
10. Ask three or four people, from different generations, to share the Scripture(s) they turn to when they are lonely, sad, hurting, happy, or thankful.

TEN WAYS TO DRAW THE GENERATIONS TOGETHER THROUGH WORSHIP IN SONG

1. Choirs (vocal or hand bell) and music groups can easily be made intergenerational. Invite all ages to join these groups. Even people who do not read music can be paired with someone of another generation who does and who will guide them.
2. Teach an intergenerational group sign language to a familiar hymn or praise song. Tutorial videos for many well-known songs are available on video sharing sites like YouTube and Pinterest. Invite an intergenerational group to teach your congregation the signs and have everyone “sing” the song with sign language, while one person (or a choir) sings the song.
3. With a song or hymn that is familiar to most people present at your gathering and which uses the I (and me) pronoun in its lyrics, invite all to sing the song as written. Then sing the song a second time, replacing all instances of “I” with “we,” and “me” with “us.” After singing both versions, ask if the use of the plural pronouns communicated something different. Ask how people feel about that shift. The emphasis on this activity is to highlight the communal nature of our faith.
4. Invite a small group of people of different generations to select the hymns or praise songs for worship or a gathering that involves music.
5. Host an intergenerational worship gathering and choose well-known hymns or praise songs familiar to all generations present. Sing each song together, and after each, ask participants from different generations to share what the song means to them.
6. Invite children or teenagers who are learning to play instruments to be special guest musicians in a worship service or feature a duet with two people from different generations.
7. If your tradition uses liturgical dance, invite an intergenerational team of interpretive dancers to perform for the congregation during one of the songs in worship.
8. Choose a song all generations know and enjoy, then ask a younger person and an older person to share what this song means to them. (Ask ahead of time.)
9. Play a music video to provide pictures that illustrate the words of the worship song. All visual learners will enjoy this, but it will pull non-readers into the music as well.
10. Find a play (Christmas or Easter story or summer musical) that requires people of various ages to create an intergenerational cast and have them perform for the church.

FIVE ACTIVITIES FOR GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

1. Host an intergenerational “Show and Tell” event. Invite participants to bring an item from their life that they’re willing to share a story about.
2. Use a traditional icebreaker (like the type used in youth ministries) to introduce people to one another in an intergenerational gathering or during a worship service.
3. At an intergenerational gathering, offer a thoughtful prompt that is accessible to all ages and ask for volunteers to share their answers, or have everyone at each table share with the group. Be sure to ask questions that everyone can answer: something they are proud of, a time when they were sad, a favorite childhood memory, their second favorite fruit, their favorite Bible story, and so on.
4. Divide the group into partners of different generations and ask each pair to share some basic information about themselves (provide a handout with prompts). Then have each pair introduce the other person to the larger group.
5. Host an intergenerational “speed meeting” event (like speed dating). Set up a long table and seat people across each other down each side. Give each pair (sitting across from one another) one minute to get to know one another. Then, ring a bell (or shout “switch”) and have every one move one seat to their right. Continue this pattern until participants return to their original pairing.

FIVE IDEAS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL STORY SHARING

1. Host an intergenerational breakfast once a month and invite one or two people to share about their spiritual journeys. Conduct it like an interview with two seats facing the eating tables. Intentionally ask questions about how the person experienced their relationship with God at various points in their lives. Invite those listening to ask questions as well.
2. If you have families in your church with multiple generations present (e.g., grandmother, mother, and daughter), invite them to share about how faith was passed down to each successive generation. Although the youngest of the family might not have much to share, she will benefit from hearing how important faith was to her mother and grandmother.
3. Prior to an intergenerational event, ask participants to bring a physical reminder of God's work in their lives and be prepared to share the story that goes with it. During the event, read Joshua 4:1-7 (where the children of Israel build a twelve-stone marker to memorialize the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River) and ask participants to share their object and story in an intergenerational small group setting.
4. At an intergenerational event, ask participants to share about someone with at least a twenty-year age difference from them who taught them something important.
5. Biblical Story Prompts for Intergenerational Settings Guidelines for prompted intergenerational story sharing:

Choose a passage and share the prompt (see ideas below). Prayerfully consider whom to ask, then ask three or four persons from different generations to share a story from their lives that illustrates the prompt. Request written responses and choose those that fit; if someone you ask is unable to recall such a story, ask another.

Passage: Genesis 29:31-35 (Leah shifts the focus of her trust from Jacob to God). Prompt: Share how you learned not to depend on human approval and to rest in God's approval alone.

Passage: Philippians 4:8 (Whatever is true, right, noble, pure, admirable, praiseworthy, lovely, excellent, "think about such things"). Prompt: Share a time when you were dwelling on harmful, destructive thoughts, and God taught you how to focus instead on "these things."

Passage: Joshua 4:1-7 (where the children of Israel build a twelve-stone marker to memorialize the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River). Prompt: Bring a physical reminder of God's work in your life and share the story that goes with it.

Passage: Isaiah 61:1-2 (Jesus applied these verses to himself in Luke 4:16-20; he is the one who has come to bind up the brokenhearted, set captives free and comfort those who mourn). Prompt: Share a time when Jesus bound your broken heart, set you free or comforted you.

Passage: Isaiah 61:3-4 (Jesus applied these verses to himself in Luke 4:16-20: he is the one who has come to bestow a crown instead of ashes; a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair; and to rebuild, restore, and renew). Prompt: Share a time when Jesus replaced your ashes with a crown; exchanged your despair for thanksgiving; or has rebuilt, restored, or renewed in your life.

TEN EASY-TO-IMPLEMENT IDEAS TO MAKE YOUR CHURCH MORE INTERGENERATIONAL

1. Create a new Sunday school class that is explicitly intergenerational. Invite grandparents, parents, and their children to participate in an experimental intergenerational education class. If doing a year-long class is too much for your church, consider doing a limited-time class that lasts for several weeks only.
2. Hospitality teams, greeters, and ushers can include all generations. Kids love handing out bulletins and provide a genuine enthusiasm when folks are arriving at your worship service or formational gathering. Pair an older more experienced adult with children or youth.
3. Use different generations to collect the offering. Pair different generations in teams to cover a section of the sanctuary.
4. Create an intergenerational worship prep team. Lighting candles, making sure the pews or chairs are in order, and checking sound equipment are great tasks to include multiple generations.
5. Cleaning up after service is a great opportunity to invite several generations to work together. The simple task of collecting papers, tidying hymnals or song books, and picking up general debris around the church is a simple way to serve the whole community while building intergenerational connections.
6. Assemble an intergenerational bulletin folding team. If your church uses paper bulletins that need folded or stuffed each week, invite multiple generations to share in this important task.
7. At your next potluck or communal meal, award mini-prizes for the tables that have the most generations present. Encourage intergenerational seating as people come in.
8. Host an intergenerational game night and encourage different generations to play games together. There are dozens of games that multiple generations can play together.
9. Host an intergenerational service event. The easiest to begin with will be things you can do at your own church. Cook meals for people in need, clean the inside/outside of the church property, or pack "Operation Christmas Child" shoeboxes. Put people in intergenerational work teams. As you gather at the end of the day, invite participants to share something they learned while serving alongside one another.
10. Host a church event that will be of interest to various ages: a picnic with intergenerational teams playing games; an all-age fishing day out; a ride on a local steam train; or a barbeque with a hoedown.

FIVE BONUS IDEAS FOR CONNECTING THE GENERATIONS TOGETHER

1. Host a one-day intergenerational Sunday school. Mix up the ages at various tables and ask each participant to answer questions about their Sunday school experience. What is their favorite part of Sunday school? What is something you learned that surprised you? What did you learn that has changed the way you think about Jesus or church?
2. Consider turning your Vacation Bible School into an intergenerational VBS. Use the “rotation model” and create stations or stops around your church where different types of activities can be experienced. For example, stations could include storytelling, games, music, arts and crafts, mini-service projects, and snacks. Divide the participants into intergenerational groups and have them rotate between the different stations every thirty minutes.
3. Welcome a particular age cohort each week. Announce to the congregation, “We are so delighted to have our (children, youth, young adults, families, or older adults, etc.) with us today. You bring such (hope, enthusiasm, energy, love, wisdom, etc.) into our faith community. We want you to know that you are (valued, cherished, loved, etc.).”
4. Rewriting Psalm 136 activity: Divide the group into cross-generational pairs (or triads or small groups). Provide fifteen minutes for each pair/group to produce one, four-verse Psalm that reflects key aspects of Psalm 136 (God’s nature, vv. 1-3; God’s creative power, vv. 4-9; God’s mighty deeds on Israel’s behalf, vv. 10-25; God’s current care, v. 25). For God’s nature, write in those aspects of God’s nature or character that are especially meaningful to your group. For God’s creative power, write down those things in creation that you find particularly awesome. For God’s mighty deeds, write down ways God has worked mightily in your history. For God’s current care, write down the ways he is currently caring for those in your group. Afterward, ask each group to share their four-line Psalm with the whole group, with everyone repeating “His love endures forever” after each verse.
5. Either in one setting or four (for example, the four weeks in Advent), lead intergenerational small groups in becoming more comfortable praying aloud by learning and practicing the ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) method of prayer. Provide examples of each type of prayer from Scripture, possibly through asking members of the congregation to portray biblical characters who wrote the various types of prayers (teenage Mary and the Magnificat for adoration; David and Psalm 51 for confession; a musician singing Psalms of thanksgiving; Jesus and John 17 for supplication/intercession). Have small groups pray aloud each type of prayer together.