



Ten Ideas for Family Faith Formation Developed by John Roberto

We know how important parents and the whole family are in forming the faith of young people. We know that the family is “is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world” (*Follow the Way of Love*. United States Catholic Bishops, 1994). We know that the primary way by which Christian identity becomes rooted in children’s lives are the day-to-day religious practices of the family and the ways parents model their faith and share it in conversation, collaboration, and exposure to outside religious opportunities (*A Report on American Catholic Religious Parenting*. Justin Burkus and Christian Smith. University of Notre Dame, 2017. page 7). Parents are simply the most significant influence on the religious and spiritual outcomes of young people.

The family is the community where Christian faith practices are nurtured and practiced. We have discovered through research that certain faith practices make a significant difference in nurturing the faith of children and adolescents at home. Among the most important practices are:

1. Reading the Bible as a family and encouraging young people to read the Bible regularly.
2. Praying together as a family and encouraging young people to pray personally.
3. Serving people in need as a family and supporting service activities by young people.
4. Eating together as a family.
5. Having family conversations.
6. Talking about faith, religious issues, and questions and doubts.
7. Ritualizing important family moments and milestone experiences.
8. Celebrating holidays and church year seasons at home.
9. Providing moral instruction.
10. Being involved in a faith community and participating regularly in Sunday worship as a family.

Here are several strategies for nurturing faith practices at home that involve both infusing practices into our current programming and creating new initiatives to equip and support family faith practice.

1. **Create a digital platform** by using the church website or building a family faith formation website. To reach parents we need to use digital tools and methods, and a website focused on families is essential today. The website is the resource center and portal (i.e., links to other online resources)

for the faith forming content (resources and activities in print, audio, and video) for families to engage in a practice at home. A church can develop a family faith formation website that features each of the faith practices with engaging activities—print, audio, video, apps, and more—tailored to families with young children, older children, young adolescents, older adolescents, and the whole family, including “how to” information and videos for parents.

2. **Provide “how-to” assistance to parents** so they feel confident and competent to engage in faith practices at home with their children and teens. Provide parents with online practical information (print, audio, video) on the practices with actual activities to do at home. One simple way to do this is to create a short video of the children or teens experiencing the practice or activity, and then make it available on the website and/or on a special YouTube channel for your families.
3. **Communicate regularly with parents** using a family email newsletter or texting to highlight activities and videos online. Use social media to reinforce and spread the practice. For example, set up an Instagram account for faith formation and photos of the children and teens engaging in the practice in the program or class; and then invite them to post photos of their family engaging in the practice.
4. **Incorporate faith practices throughout the year** by teaching the practices through experiential activities in children and youth programs, and then inviting parents to reinforce the practice through continued at-home experiences that you provide online for easy access. This strategy can reap huge rewards from childhood through the teen years. Imagine families focusing on one Bible stories each month or one prayer practice each month for ten years. What a difference this simple strategy can make. Here are two examples:
 - **Reading the Bible:** Develop the “Bible Story of Month” plan to introduce children and teens to important stories and teachings in the Bible by teaching then the practices for reading, interpreting, praying, and applying the Scriptures to their lives. Select 12 of the most relevant and developmentally appropriate Bible stories for each age—from age 5 to 18. Integrate the Bible teaching into one session or program each month; use videos to assist you (Check out the animated videos at The Bible Project: <https://thebibleproject.com> and at Jelly Telly: <https://www.jellytelly.com>). Then provide online resources for parents to reinforce the Bible story online: reading the story, watching the video, discussing the story. Be sure families of children have a good Bible: *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (ZonderKidz) and *The Catholic Children's Bible* from St. Mary's Press are great resources. Here is another free resource to help: *Reading the Bible – Family Guide and Children's Workbook* from *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life* (Go to: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/faith-formation-in-christian-practices.html>).
 - **Praying:** Develop the prayer life of children, teens, and families by focusing on learning prayers, teaching the different forms of prayer, and/or experiencing a prayer practice each month during the class or program. Have children and teens experience the different types of prayer: contemplative, Scriptural, intercessory, praise (adoration), and thanksgiving. Develop a short video of the children or teens praying so that parents can see prayer in action. Provide prayer activities and resources online for parents to continue the “prayer of the month” at home. There are excellent online prayer resources to make available to parents. Here is a free

resource to help: *Praying – Family Guide and Children’s Workbook* from *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life* (Go to: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/faith-formation-in-christian-practices.html>).

5. **Celebrate the seasons of the year** at home by identifying a monthly seasonal event, reflecting the calendar seasons and the church year seasons, and publish the activities on the family website. Incorporate Scripture, prayer, learning, service/action, ritual, and family conversation into each seasonal event. Highlight a Christian practice that will be communicated and experienced through the event. each event, for example:

- January: Martin Luther King Jr. (working for justice and peace, serving)
- February: Valentine’s Day (loving)
- March: Lent (praying, serving/almsgiving, forgiving)
- April: Earth Day (caring for creation)
- May: Mother’s Day (honoring parents, loving caring)
- June: Father’s Day (honoring parents, loving, caring)
- July: Independence Day (working for justice)
- August: Back to school (celebrating new beginnings)
- September: Fall harvest (being grateful, generosity, caring for the earth)
- October: St. Francis (caring for creation, caring for animals, living simply)
- November: Thanksgiving (being grateful, serving, living hospitality)
- December: Advent and Christmas (celebrating rituals, praying, serving)

A church can develop seasonal family festivals and gatherings to support the seasonal plan using the four seasons—fall, winter, spring, and summer—or the church year seasons—Advent-Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost.

6. **Connect families to Sunday worship** by incorporating preparation and/or reflection for Sunday in children and teen programs, and then deepening the Sunday worship experience at home through activities, practices, and resources from a variety of age-appropriate and whole-family digital content on the website. These activities can include family conversation questions, weekly table ritual, podcast or video of the sermon with a study guide for the parents, children’s creative Bible activities, storybooks, videos presenting the Bible story, daily prayer, and weekly family devotion.

7. **Create family immersion experiences** on faith practices. Design extended time programs (half-day, full day) that teach faith practices through immersion experiences—at church or in the community—where families can experience a practice first hand, such as hospitality at a homeless shelter or serving a meal at a soup kitchen or caring for creation by planting a garden. Combine the at-church experience with activities for families to do at home. Substitute an age group program for a family program or add three or four family programs throughout the year that teach a practice by having the whole family experience it together.

8. **Develop family life skills** by adding a parent-child/teen component to age group faith formation or by adding special parent-child/teen programs throughout the year. Focus on the types of skill-building that will strengthen family life, and parent-child/teen relationships, such as: communicating effectively, discussing tough topics, making decisions and solving problems as a

family, learning how to build strong relationships and express care for each other, supporting each other (encouraging and praising, giving feedback, standing up for each other), and treating each with respect and dignity. Many of these skills can be developed using movies selected for their positive messages. An example of a movie that provides a foundation for follow-up activities is Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* about the emotional life of child growing up.

9. **Create family (and intergenerational) service programs** that engages all ages in serving those in need, caring for creation, and working for justice. There are so many local, national, and global organizations that provide educational resources and action projects your church can use to create new projects. Service is a great way to integrate families into the whole faith community and creating intergenerational relationships and community.
 - **An Annual Church-Wide Service Day.** Create a four-week, church-wide campaign that culminates on a Sunday where the entire congregation engages in service projects in and with the community. As an individual church or with churches in your area, select a local and global project already developed by a justice or service organization. Then develop an annual theme, such as poverty, care for creation, peacemaking. Prepare the whole community for the service engagement, utilizing the resources developed by the partner organizations. Include 1) worship and prayer experiences focused on the particular theme or project; 2) educational sessions including social analysis of the issues and reflection on the teachings of scripture and the Christian tradition; 3) household activities on the theme or project such as prayers, learning resources, and action suggestions; 4) a website with the resources, activities, action projects, and features to allow people to share what they are doing; and 5) special presentations by experts on the issues and by people engaged in action on the issue.
 - **A Monthly Family (Intergenerational) Service Project.** Using the same design as the church-wide service day, a congregation can develop a monthly service project that addresses one particular need or issue (local and/or global) each month. Each month's project can include a short educational program of the topic, an action project, and reflection on the project. Themes for the service projects can correspond with calendar events and seasons, as well as church year seasons. Examples include Back to School (September) and school kits for students, Thanksgiving (November) and feeding the hungry, Lent (February or March) and serving the poor, and Earth Day (April) and caring for creation.
 - **Family (Intergenerational) Service Nights at Church.** Service Nights are simple, self-contained programs at church that feature five to ten service activity stations that engage all ages in doing a simple project for the benefit of a group in need. At one station people might create greeting cards for the elderly or for sick church members. At another booth they might make blankets for a homeless shelter. At another booth they might bake cookies or make sandwiches for a soup kitchen. Many organizations provide the organizational logistics a church needs to a service project, for example Feed My Starving Children provides the resources for people to pack food that will be shipped to people in need.
10. **Create family (intergenerational) learning programs** that engage the whole family and/or all ages in learning together. We know from the research that family-intergenerational learning

strengthens parental and family faith by encouraging the whole family to participate—children, teens, parents, and grandparents. It equips parents (and grandparents) to be faith formers of their children by developing their competence and confidence through such faith-forming experiences as sharing stories, celebrating rituals, praying together, reading the Bible, and more. Family-intergenerational learning provides activities that model the practices that churches want parents and families to live at home. The research findings also revealed that families *enjoy* opportunities to pray, learn, and be together (even if parents may resist participating initially). Here are four models of family-intergenerational learning:

Model #1. Generations of Faith

The Generations of Faith intergenerational model is based on the work of James White in his book *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988). White identified four patterns of relationships that shape the four components of an intergenerational religious education learning experience: 1) in-common experiences, 2) parallel learning, 3) contributive occasions, and 4) interactive sharing. The Generations of Faith model can be used for all ages intergenerational faith formation or for family faith formation with children, adolescents, and their parents (and grandparents).

1. Gathering and opening prayer
2. All-ages learning experience: intergenerational learning begins with a multigenerational experience of a theme that all generations can share together.
3. In-depth learning experience: through structured learning activities each generation—families with children, adolescents, and other adults—explores the biblical and theological understanding of the topic, using one of three possible formats:
 - The *Age Group Format* provides parallel, age-appropriate learning for groups at the same time. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic—utilizing specific learning activities that are designed for their life cycle stage: families with children or children alone, adolescents, young adults, and adults.
 - The *Whole Group Format* provides a series of facilitated learning activities for everyone at the same time using intergenerational or age-specific small groups or table groups.
 - The *Learning Activity Center Format* provides structured intergenerational and age-specific learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area.
4. Sharing learning reflections and application: in intergenerational groups participants share what they learned and prepare for applying their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or online.
5. Closing prayer service

(For more information see: *Intergenerational Faith Formation*. Mariette Martineau, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber. New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008.)

Model 2. LOGOS and LIFT

A second model of family-intergenerational has been created by *GenOn Ministries* (www.genonministries.org) and includes weekly intergenerational experiences for children and/or youth that creates an intentional arena where all ages can learn about and practice the art of Christian relationships. In the LOGOS model everyone eats together, plays together, studies

together, and prays together. These four parts, plus weekly congregational worship, make up the whole, providing everyone involved a cross-generational arena in which to have a complete, holistic experience of Christian nurture. In addition, young people also lead in congregational worship on a regular basis.

Model 3. Messy Church

A third model of family-intergeneration learning is *Messy Church* (<https://messychurchusa.org>, and <http://www.messychurch.org.uk>), which started in 2004 in the UK with a simple question: “How can our small church reach the many families in our community?” Messy Church was created for those outside the church, and became church for them, not a steppingstone to Sunday morning church. Messy Church is church for families who may not find other forms of church appealing and who don’t yet belong to a church. There are now thousands of Messy Churches all around the world in most denominations. A typical Messy Church meets monthly and includes four parts: 1) a flexible, relaxed arrival time with drinks and snacks; 2) creative exploration of a Bible story or theme through many creative experiences for people of different learning styles and of all ages; 3) a short but explicit time of worship with story, music and prayers that builds on the creative exploration that has already occurred; a generous welcome and hospitality is expressed through an invitation to share a delicious home-cooked, sit-down meal with others.

Model 4. Intergenerational Vacation Bible School

A fourth, emerging model is family-intergenerational vacation Bible school. Congregations have begun to re-think vacation Bible school, redesigning a child-only experience into a family or intergenerational experience. One approach to intergenerational VBS has all ages participating for three or four evenings in the summer with food, fun, music, learning, and games. The program incorporates typical VBS Bible content and interactive learning, but everything is intergenerational. A typical evening design (3 hours) could look like this: registration, light meal, opening /music, Bible story, outdoor activity/inside craft, and snacks and closing. A second approach begins each evening with a family-style meal. Then the children participate in Bible stories and activities, while the adults (parents, grandparents) participate in an adult-themed session. Families then reunite in the church for music and prayer to close the evening.

Other Models

For additional models of family-intergenerational faith formation check out the case studies in the three volumes of *Let’s Kill Sunday School and Birth Cross+ Gen Ministries* from Faith Inkubators at <https://store.faithink.com/collections/books>.