
BUILDING TRUST ACROSS GENERATIONS

A Study of Community Life and Leadership in CMSM Member Institutes

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Table of Contents

Why This Study & Methodology	1
Executive Summary	2
Intergenerational Communal Life	
Appreciations & Hopes	3-4
Barriers to Thriving	5
Recommendations for Strengthening	6-7
Intergenerational Leadership Dynamics: Realities & Recommendations	8-9
Questions for Reflection	10

Why This Study & Methodology

Over the past few years, I helped design and facilitate CMSM's Young Religious Leadership Development program. This is a cohort-based, leadership certificate program for male religious within ten years of final profession. One thing my co-facilitators and I noticed early on was that no matter what topic we were discussing, inevitably a comment or question would come up about how to navigate a situation with confreres from older generations. We received these questions even when intergenerational dynamics seemed to have nothing to do with the topic at hand! We got curious about this trend and made more space within the program to discuss experiences of intergenerational dynamics in community life and leadership.

CMSM also noticed that relationships between generations is an important issue beyond the Young Religious Leadership Development program itself. Although such relationship dynamics have always been part of communal life, they have received relatively little study or attention compared with other areas, such as interculturality. The 2026 assembly theme, *One in Christ: Communal Life Today*, offered an opportunity to examine the issue from a broader perspective.

CMSM decided to conduct a study exploring intergenerational dynamics in community life and leadership across different generations and ways of life. I conducted 20 confidential interviews with CMSM members in order to provide a space where people could share their perceptions and experiences honestly and openly.

Participants in the study represented three different generations: eight members from Generation X, six baby boomers, and six millennials. (Respondents self-identified their generational cohort based on ranges from the US Census Bureau.) Those interviewed had been part of their respective religious communities from 10 to 61 years. As CMSM members at the time of the interviews, all respondents were serving in a leadership role for their religious community, either as major superior or councilor.

I asked members about what they most appreciate and hope for in intergenerational community life; barriers and contributing factors to thriving community life; and their experiences of leadership dynamics. I hoped these interviews would surface specific recommendations that might foster thriving intergenerational community and leadership to deepen communal life in Christ.

The pages that follow summarize the high-level themes that emerged from the interviews. I bear in mind, however, that each religious community's experience of intergenerational dynamics is distinct to the members of a community at a specific moment in time. Despite varying contexts, I hope this report can serve as a meaningful starting point to facilitate honest and prayerful reflection among confreres about what they feel thriving intergenerational community life and leadership looks like for their own religious community today and how they can best create the conditions to support it.

Executive Summary

Across generations, respondents expressed a vision for thriving, communal life where all community members are committed and feel welcomed to shared prayer, fraternal communion, and common works. Though there may be different visions or preferences for what exactly this looks like, respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged the gift of wisdom that comes through intergenerational diversity. They expressed a desire for intergenerational understanding, not uniformity.

The way respondents spoke about barriers to thriving community life suggested that it is actually not so much divergent religious practices or viewpoints themselves that are the root of intergenerational tensions within communities, but rather a lack of trust-based dialogue about differences. Without making space to collectively listen and share about where community members are coming from, others can sometimes be left filling in the blanks with their own guesses. Tensions may be palpable, but the conflict often stays beneath the surface.

Confreres can deepen their communal life in Christ by talking with one another openly about their hopes for community life as well as areas of perceived tension or conflict. Local community leaders can facilitate this by helping to systematize intergenerational conversation in community life. This might mean using a standing time, like a house meeting, for more intentional sharing and dialogue on a regular basis. It could also mean bringing in an external facilitator or using a more structured facilitation method. Provincial leaders can provide structured space for intergenerational dialogue at assemblies or other formal meetings. If community members can find ways to better understand one another, they will build deeper intergenerational trust. They will also help younger and future leaders learn how to have healthy dialogue and conflict, which can continue to serve future generations in their religious community.

Trust is also essential to strong intergenerational leadership dynamics. Some respondents shared skepticism of both younger and older generations' capability to lead their religious community into the future. Some members of older generations fear younger generations are not ready or willing to lead, or that if younger members are elected, this may lead to the loss of cherished ministries. Some members of younger generations fear that older generations do not believe they are able to lead. Some also expressed how older generations may negatively affect the religious community by not "letting go."

Trust deepens on all sides when confreres from younger generations are intentionally appointed to leadership roles before they are "ready" with formal support of more seasoned confreres. The capacity of the younger leaders grows, older members mentor and form younger members, and the collective wisdom across generations can be carried forward in service of the mission of the religious community and the Church.

"The wisdom of the old and the energy of the young. And we need both! For example, the elderly, the old, have the wisdom and the experiences to share which the younger ones need to learn and appreciate. And also for the older ones to appreciate the energy, the enthusiasm, and the vision that the younger ones have, because eventually they will be the one carrying forth the charism of the community."

(Gen X respondent)

"Wisdom from both sides. Cultivated wisdom from older generations and their perseverance. In younger generations you see courage and a familiarity with technology and so there's a beautiful way of moving between the cultivated wisdom and technological knowledge. If there's deep respect then they can learn from each other."

(Gen X respondent)

Intergenerational Communal Life: Appreciations & Hopes

Respondents named three main things they most appreciate about being part of an intergenerational jurisdiction: (1) **wisdom** that comes from both older and younger generations; (2) a **diversity of cultures and perspectives**; and (3) being reminded of the **transcendent quality of the Church and mission**.

The word "**wisdom**" was used most frequently to describe what members of different generations appreciated about each other. Respondents repeatedly shared their gratitude for the wisdom older generations bring to many areas of communal life — from practical wisdom related to areas like finances to spiritual wisdom on how to remain faithful and resilient in religious life to the institutional wisdom they hold about the community and charism. Respondents also highlighted the wisdom that emerges from having younger and older confreres together. This wisdom can be accessed and appreciated when members of generations respect one another and are able to receive the wisdom from the other openly, without defensiveness.

Multiple respondents also mentioned appreciating the **cultural diversity** that comes with generational diversity, as younger generations of religious tend to be more ethnically and culturally diverse.¹ Different ways of approaching matters in community life can prompt members to think beyond their own limited view and "*bring forth a whole new perspective someone never thought of*" (Boomer respondent).

Life in a community where there are different expressions of commitment to the mission and charism also helps members see and appreciate what was described as the "**transcendent**" **quality of the Church**. There is a sense of appreciation for commitment to a common mission, and the ability to listen and learn from one another when there are different "*ways of getting there*" or "*interpretations of what [the mission] is*" (Millennial respondent).

¹ Thu T. Do, LHC, and Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ, *Women and Men Entering Religious Life: The Entrance Class of 2025* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, March 2026), 15. CARA found that 82 percent of responding entrants to U.S.-based men's and women's religious institutes were born in the United States, while 18 percent were born outside the United States.

Not one respondent mentioned appreciating or hoping for community life where everyone is the same. Respondents did identify with broad strokes how their generation of religious men might characteristically approach visions of Church, with younger generations as more "traditional" and older generations (Gen X and baby boomers) as more "Vatican II," but nobody stated that they hoped other generations would share their vision of Church or become more like them.

Across generations, respondents shared that a **thriving intergenerational community would offer an intentional space where all members in the community feel welcomed and committed to shared prayer, fraternal communion, and a common ministry.** The emphasis here was that all were committed to and felt welcome in these three areas of communal life — not that one narrow, specific vision was needed in order for communal life to thrive.

Respondents also noted thriving intergenerational community life would require that members **trust each other, communicate about differences, and care for one another.** Special care is required for those who are aging and for younger generations who may feel a heavy workload is falling on them.

Broadly, hopes for thriving intergenerational community life did not vary much across generations. However, different points of emphasis were named. Multiple Gen X respondents highlighted that leaders are responsible for systems and structures that can support healthy intergenerational communities. Millennials emphasized their hope for openness and approachability on topics where there are diverse perspectives. More boomers than members of other generations noted the importance of a common ministry or project as essential to creating the conditions for thriving intergenerational community life.

Intergenerational Communal Life: Barriers to Thriving

While some respondents felt they were at an impasse around intergenerational dynamics, others did not experience this as a significant current challenge. One specific barrier unrelated to intergenerational questions that was mentioned by multiple respondents was the impact a disruptive or unhealthy member can have on the entire community. Respondents noted that leaders are responsible for addressing this directly with the person who needs accompaniment and that one member's personal difficulty should not be interpreted as representative behavior of a generation.

Common barriers related to intergenerationality that emerged across interviews included:

1. Perceived self-righteousness around Church and religious identity

Each generation can be perceived by others as inflexible about their religious practices and beliefs. Specific examples of this included: wearing a habit on an airplane; constantly retelling stories about Vatican II to the point of making community members want to "throw up"; casually sharing contentious views on matters of theology; or making choices when presiding at liturgy that "trigger" members of other age cohorts. The frustrations expressed on this topic were related to perceptions of pietism, rigidity, or self-righteousness across generations.

2. Fear of conflict and lack of direct communication about differences

Millennials, Gen Xers, and baby boomers were each specifically mentioned by at least one member of another cohort as a generation that is not able to communicate well. Respondents consistently mentioned the negative impact on a community when members are not able to talk about their differences or are afraid to have disagreement or conflict. Younger members can be perceived as not speaking up verbally and instead "waiting out" older members. Conflict may be felt by members and discussed by smaller groups within the community but not addressed with everyone involved. Respondents mentioned lack of transparency, backbiting, and discussion behind closed doors. These behaviors erode trust and a sense of community members' own value in the community.

3. Generational life-stage differences

Community members in different generational cohorts are in different life stages. While this may seem obvious, the generational preferences related to life stages can create community tensions when not discussed together openly. The youngest generations in community life tend to be more rowdy at dinner whereas older members seem to prefer a quieter environment. Younger members are perceived as busier; their ministerial commitments can be all-consuming and can conflict with community life. Middle generations can be experiencing mid-life crises, especially if they feel disappointed with their consecrated life. As one Boomer respondent said, these dynamics are a *"human problem, not just a religious problem"* and can impact intergenerational community life.

4. Demographic and structural realities

Some communities are not able to support a diversity of ages locally because of demographic realities like diminished vocations. Multiple respondents mentioned the impact of the "missing middle" of Generation X, which can put added stress on relationships between millennials and boomers. In fact, when asked to characterize another generation of religious they interact with, more boomers and millennials interviewed spoke more about each other than they did about Generation X. Another demographic divergence is that in recent times, many men who enter religious life do so at an older age with more life experience than was the norm in previous generations. Additionally, some ministries are not as welcoming to the elderly or are not accessible to members with mobility limitations.

Intergenerational Communal Life: Recommendations for Strengthening

Commonly shared suggestions for deepening intergenerational communal life include:

1. Institutionalize regular and direct communication among confreres about hopes for communal life and points of disagreement.

The most frequent response regarding both what has been effective in strengthening intergenerational community life and what could be done in the future was to make it easier to talk to each other about it.

Respondents mentioned the need to be able to dialogue with members of other generations within their community openly about their hopes for community life — for prayer, fraternal life, and shared works as a community. They also noted that members should talk with one another openly about challenges or areas of perceived disagreement early on as conflicts emerge. One baby boomer respondent suggested, for example, that perhaps they can make space to ask and learn about where younger members who wear a habit in more public settings may be coming from.

"Honest communication about hopes, about desires, about irritations — in a way that's not judgemental, but simply articulating: 'I would hope that we could have this or that in our community dynamic', versus holding it in and acting as if it doesn't bother you, from a sense of piety, maybe long-suffering. But in the end, it can easily lead to resentment and division."

(Millennial respondent)

Some respondents also expressed that while they know dialogue is crucial, they would not even know where to begin in talking about these areas. There is clearly anxiety around having these discussions. Other respondents who are part of culturally diverse religious communities noted that learnings about how to support culturally diverse communities in dialogue could also be applicable.²

Conversations among generations about hopes for their community life or areas where there are perceived differences require deep trust and vulnerability. To this end, multiple respondents suggested using formal mechanisms to — as one boomer respondent put it — “institutionalize the kind of dialogue we need to have.” These more institutional mechanisms could include: structured in-person conversations across communities about these topics; formal house process and discussion each time a new community member is added; using regular house chapter meetings as a place for discussion about more than just business can emerge; committing to one-on-one meetings with each member of the community every month; continuing to discuss this topic at assemblies and provincial chapters; using a facilitator or external councilor; practicing these type of conversations based on case studies; using more structured facilitation methodologies such as the Spiritual Conversation method.³

²United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers: Modules for Training Workshop, Bilingual Edition (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018), x, 15, 35. The USCCB resource offers practical frameworks to open authentic dialogue in group settings.

³Synod of Bishops, The Spiritual Conversation, 1–4, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf. This resource outlines the spiritual conversation method widely used during the synodal process. Respondents identified this method as a useful framework for structured conversations.

2. Create intentional spaces for members of different generations to be in physical proximity with one another.

Respondents noted how important it is in communities with generational diversity to ensure that these members are literally in the same physical spaces together. One respondent noted, for example, how having a retirement community in close proximity to their house of formation helped establish a long-standing relationship of trust between younger and older confreres. Other recommendations included: ensuring younger members are placed in houses with older members early on; pairing older and younger members together as prayer partners; moving house chapters to the nursing home where older community members live; relocating the snack room from the kitchen into the retirement center; asking people to intentionally sit with confreres from other generational cohorts at meals; and hosting intergenerational gatherings and retreats.

3. Find a common project.

Some house communities work together in a common apostolate or ministry where they interact with one another regularly. For these communities, ensuring that the mission apostolate is well ordered with the community life and that confreres are connected to each other through this apostolate can help strengthen intergenerational connections. When there is not already a shared work, having a common project that is beyond the social or fraternal dimension and is meaningfully connected to mission can be unifying for a community. *"The common mission and apostolate sustains a diverse community that would be difficult otherwise."* (Boomer respondent) And though multiple respondents offered this as a suggestion, it was also noted that even the act of talking about what this project might be feels challenging.

4. Local and provincial leaders should model and facilitate desired intergenerational dynamics.

On the local level, house superiors can help invite community members into greater dialogue and relationship with one another. They can also see and support confreres who may be hurting, hiding, or quiet and encourage practices like spiritual direction and counseling. At the council level, there is a call for leaders who are *"less bureaucratic and more human and Christian,"* and are able to practice and model what it looks like to pray and discuss matters together across generations.

5. Provide structures to support newly professed members.

One way multiple respondents recommended supporting intergenerational community life was by supporting the newest members to spend time with other young, religious men beyond their local community. This could be done by providing opportunities for younger members to meet up or to ensure there is a younger confrere in a community nearby. Other suggestions included assigning newly-professed members a mentor and spiritual director; ensuring formators can help younger members see perspectives of older generations; and providing tools to help younger members continue to connect with their vocational call.

Intergenerational Leadership Dynamics: Realities & Recommendations

Respondents were asked to speak about their experience of intergenerational leadership dynamics. While some spoke very positively about how their community is preparing younger members for leadership and perceptions around intergenerational leadership dynamics, others noted that this is an area of real friction, fear, and unknowns.

Common themes related to experience of intergenerational leadership dynamics included:

1. There can be a lack of trust that other generations are capable of leading their religious community where it needs to go.

Several respondents noted that they did not have many/any younger generations represented in leadership roles yet in their community. Others noted that their communities are unsure of who will be elected at upcoming chapter meetings. One major superior told a story of how he was elected the oldest major superior the community had ever had on the first ballot because the older generation did not see any leadership elsewhere. Whereas older generations may perceive that younger generations feel reluctant themselves to serve in leadership roles or not seasoned enough to be in charge, respondents from younger generations point to the negative impact on the community when the same people stay in formal leadership roles for too long.

"Boomers are ready to give over power but you want to give over power to people who willing accept it and embrace it. It would happen easier if there were better intergenerational trust."

(Boomer respondent)

Respondents from the millennial generation also noted how hard it can be on them to feel older confreres do not think their generation is capable of leadership. Several millennials currently in leadership positions told stories of being dismissed by older confreres when attempting to do things that were a formal part of their leadership role. Several people spoke of the time and intentionality in relationships required to deepen the trust between generations.

2. Communities with fewer Gen X or millennial members face pivotal decisions about governance and ministry.

In communities where there is an imbalance in generations with more members in the Boomer or Silent generation and few members in Gen X or millennial generations, models like open chapter become dominated by the preferences of an older generation. For some communities, and particularly for those with aging members in leadership, this may be about to tip the other direction. One boomer respondent shared, *"Because of the gap in the middle, we will cross a rubicon in the gap at our next provincial election ... that shift from leadership from old guard in leadership to a new generation will be a challenge."* As this changes, and there are fewer older members involved, younger generations may need to be mindful of how to ensure the perspectives of older generations are heard.

In communities where older members have held leadership roles for many years and where there are diminished numbers of Gen X or millennial members, electing a younger member into leadership may raise a question of closing ministries if there are not enough members to cover all apostolic areas. This dynamic was described by one millennial respondent as a *"shaky Jenga game."*

This also triggers perceptions of different generational preferences on how to deal with the question of fewer leaders with the same number of ministries. There's a perception that younger generations tend to be more open to closing ministries whereas older generations seem less willing to let go. Younger members express that religious life today has to be more intentional about what communities take on or see as charism-driven. Older generations encourage younger members to trust older members as mentors and holders of institutional memory.

3. Communities with stronger intergenerational leadership dynamics tend to provide intentional, formal, and early leadership opportunities with intergenerational support.

Those who spoke most positively about intergenerational leadership dynamics gave examples of older generations supporting younger members in leadership roles. They described this support as a way to prepare younger members for future leadership, rather than as a sign that they were already considered ready to lead. One provincial shared that he intentionally assigns younger people as local superiors because it is formative and evaluative; this provincial then also speaks with older members of the community to help them understand why a younger superior has been appointed and to invite them to help support their younger confrere.

Other respondents noted being very intentional about appointing different generations to leadership roles together: a millennial prior with a boomer sub-prior, for example, or ensuring a balance in generations on a provincial council. One respondent noted they created committees at the monastery related to different aspects of their ministry that were half elected and half appointed and included a mix of generations.

A millennial respondent told a story of when younger, non-voting members at chapter were assigned the role of small-group facilitators. This small structure helped establish trust that the younger members cared and were capable of helping and contributing. These kinds of structural-level decisions to support younger leaders from within the leadership positions allows an opportunity for older members to contribute through the leadership development and mentorship of younger members— and also deepens intergenerational trust.

"You don't become a leader today; it takes time to gain experience. At my age it was because I had a chance to be in it for 10 years before becoming Provincial. It starts much earlier! Encourage congregations to see there is grace everywhere and young people can learn, and in fact you are not young, you are an adult and can offer a lot. How to learn from the beginning and learn skills? It's much easier to assume leadership this way rather than kicking the ball down the road. I would encourage an open discussion about what best serves congregations about leadership."

(Gen X respondent)

Questions for Self-Reflection & Group Discussion in Intergenerational Communities & Councils

1. Questions for Self-Reflection

Local Communities

1. When have I been part of a community in the past where we were able to honestly talk about different visions and perspectives on important community matters? What helped make that possible?
2. How honest do I feel I can be with confreres from other generations about my hopes for communal prayer, fraternal life, and common works? Why?
3. What comes up within me that I need to be aware of as I consider talking more openly with confreres of a different generation who might see things differently from me? What might I need to let go or talk with a spiritual director about?

Councils

1. What comes up for me interiorly that I need to be aware of as I consider the intergenerational dynamics in our leadership structures?
2. Do I trust that the other generations represented in the council believe my generation is capable of leading us into the future? Why or why not? What might help deepen my trust in others?

2. Questions for Group Discussion

Local Communities

1. What does a thriving intergenerational community look like to each of us?
2. What are our hopes for common prayer, fraternal communion, and a shared ministry?
3. Is there a dialogue between generations in our community that we are not having but that would improve our communal life? What is it about? Why aren't we having it?
4. How might we "institutionalize the kind of dialogue" we need to have as a community? For example... what existing meetings and routines do we already commit to as a community where we might weave in a more intentional, standing time for dialogue?

Councils

1. What do we observe about the leadership dynamics on our council/governance body: Are members of different generations represented? Do all generations on the council speak openly in our meetings? How can we tell?
2. What can we be doing as a council to ensure our older and more experienced leaders' wisdom is formally honored, captured, and shared as we form newer leaders?
3. What are some ways we can appoint younger leaders to formal leadership roles with the mentorship of older confreres?