LIFELONG FAITH

Planning Faith Formation Collection

(Articles from the *What If...* Series from Lifelong Faith)

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WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

Planning Faith Formation for 2022 and Beyond
A Time for Creativity, Experimentation, Innovation

John Roberto

This article presents an approach to planning faith formation that guides you in thinking systemically about what we need to do in faith formation to address the challenges of today. The article suggest three perspectives to guide planning and implementing, and then several examples of systems-level suggestions for creating faith formation that addresses the big challenges we face today.

Part One. Three Planning Perspectives

#1. Think Systemically about Faith Formation

Systems thinking is a way of helping us view the challenges we face in faith formation from a broader perspective that includes seeing the whole life span and the context of people's lives today, rather than seeing only a specific issue or concern in isolation, for example: "We've got to solve the youth problem" or "We've got to get families back to church." Our immediate response to the problem or challenge is to create a targeted program or strategy to solve the problem that has surfaced: *How can we keep our teens involved in church? How do involve young adults who have left our churches? How do we make sure our families are practicing their faith at home and bringing their children to church and classes?* Etc.

While the initiatives that are created may be excellent, they are <u>not</u> systemic. They make us think the problem lies with the people – teens or young adults or parents – and all we need to do is design something to "fix" the problem. In large part, the changing religious participation and practice trend is a failure of the whole system of faith forming in churches.

Systems thinking sees individual problems or challenges as connected to a larger system of faith forming that might not be working well. By focusing on the entire system of faith formation, we can attempt to identify solutions that address as many problems as possible in the system. The positive effect of those solutions leverages improvement throughout the system. Thus, they are called "leverage points" in the system. This priority on the entire system and its leverage points is called whole systems thinking.

One important way to think systemically is to adopt a goal-centered mindset, rather than a program-centered one. Envision your church's goals for maturing in faith for lifetime and design faith formation to make these goals a reality in people's lives. By starting with goals, you can develop multiple ways (approaches, programs, activities) to help people grow in faith. Consider:

- ✦ What is your vision of maturing in faith and discipleship for a lifetime?
- ✦ Toward what ends or goals are your church's faith formation efforts directed?
- ✦ What is your church try to accomplish in the lives of people at each stage of life from childhood to older adulthood?

- ❖ Read more about goals in the article: "Goals for Maturing in Faith" on the Lifelong Faith website: www.LifelongFaith.com.

A second way to think systemically is to develop a lifelong mindset. See every age and stage of life connected to the whole life span and the other five generations. Don't try to design or improve faith formation with adolescents without considering their family's faith, childhood faith formation, and the challenges that teens will face living their Christian faith in their 20s. Don't try to design or improve faith formation with adults in their 60s and 70s without considering their connections to other generations in the church and in their family (e.g., many are grandparents).

#2. Plan in a Three-Year Timeframe

It's helpful to think about planning faith formation initiatives in two ways: 1) How do we enhance and/or expand current faith formation approaches and programming to address new challenges? and 2) How do we create new projects to address the new challenges we are facing?

Think about project planning in a three-year timeframe: short term (within one year), mid-term (within one-two years), and long term (over a three year span). This approach allows implementation of new projects to be sequenced over time.

Short-Term Planning: ideas that can be integrated into existing plans and programs or can be designed and implemented quickly in the first year. This would be especially true for initiatives that are enhancements or an expansion of a current program or activity.

Mid-Term Planning: ideas that need more design time and that can be implemented within one or two years. These initiatives need to be seen over a one-two year timeframe with a more sequenced implementation that might involve piloting the new initiative first before expanding it to a wider audience.

Long-Term Planning: ideas that need design time, piloting and testing, and then implementation over the next several years. The initiatives are long term projects that require more time for planning and building capacity, and need to be introduced in stages over multiple years.

#3. Build Capacity

Capacity building is the process of developing an organization's strengths and sustainability. Capacity building refers to activities that improve and enhance an organization's ability to achieve its mission and sustain itself over time. In the nonprofit world, this includes identifying a communications strategy, improving volunteer recruitment, identifying more efficient uses of technology, and engaging in collaborations with community partners. When capacity building is successful, it strengthens an organization's ability to fulfill its mission over time and enhances the organization's ability to have a significant, positive impact on lives and communities.

The good news in the 2020s is that churches now have access to an abundance of resources available to them at little or no cost. Technical expertise is available from websites, blogs, and online groups. Faith formation resources are available in digital formats (websites, video, podcasts, apps, and more). Training is available for free or low-cost through online webinars and courses. The digital transformation of society and church is giving midsize and small churches access to the same resources and expertise that was once reserved for high-capacity churches. And they have faith communities with gifts, talents, skills, and abilities ready to be tapped.

One example of capacity building is utilizing the abundance of high quality video presentations, webinars, and digital content—theological, biblical, social issues, and life issues—created by colleges, seminaries, and religious organizations that are available online for free. The abundance of these free (or almost free) resources allows for the development of a variety of programming – in multiple formats (large group, small group, independent) at church, at home, on digital platforms, and more.

A second example is accessing the variety of programming offered in your community—courses, events, and programs sponsored by local religious congregations, continuing education programs, and community organizations that can become part of a faith formation plan. For example, imagine partnering with the YMCA/YWCA on a parenting course or with a youth-serving agency on a life skills course for teens.

A third example is connecting to retreats sponsored by regional retreat centers and conferences and workshops offered by denominational offices/agencies. For example, adding a retreat program for midlife adults or a retreat for adults in their 70s and 80s to your church's adult faith formation offerings.

Capacity building also includes developing the leadership for faith formation. The basics of volunteer leadership development – identifying or calling, matching, preparing, and supporting – have not changed. But the lives of our leaders have changed! Traditionally, faith formation programming has relied on a core of dedicated teachers who taught classes for thirty weeks a year and adults who led youth group meetings and classes weekly. Finding leaders who will commit to weekly service for a whole year is increasingly difficult because people's lives, work, schedules, and commitments have dramatically changed and become much more complex.

It's time to rethink leadership roles and designing commitments to be more people friendly. We need to build programming around what people can do given their availability, not what we want or need them to do. We need to design (or redesign) programming around the leaders. How can you develop more leader-friendly roles and commitments? Here are a few ideas to spark your creativity in building programming around leader schedules and commitments.

- ✦ *Work with the time commitments that fit people's schedules*. If leaders can serve for one day or one weekend per year, then have an opportunity ready for them. If leaders can serve for a month (four weeks) in the fall and again in the spring, have four-week program options for them.
- ✦ *Offer a variety of roles*. Many people don't want to teach or lead a program but would like to mentor or guide people one-to-one or in a small group. Develop mentoring relationships for people to learn how to pray, to serve those in need, and much more.
- ✦ *Develop leadership roles with fewer tasks and divide up a large leadership role into smaller responsibilities*. It's easier to find and prepare people for a more limited and clearly defined leadership role, than to find a leader to do a large job. It is also a way to involve more leaders in a project or program.
- ✦ *Design a program with a primary leadership role (teaching, presenting, facilitating activities) and support roles*. For example, a children's program might have a lead teacher (or two) and adults or youth who serve as small group activity leaders. Small group activity leaders make a four-week commitment each year. The same could apply to any other program where there are lead presenters or facilitators and small group leaders.
- ✦ *Design programming in shorter units of time*. Rather than a twenty-four- week program with one leader, create four, six-week minicourses—each with a different leader. Eight-week programs can be conducted in two four-week minicourses.

As you build a leadership system, remember that you can build the system around the leadership roles that are needed and find the leaders you need. And you can build it around the gifts of your people and create opportunities for them to utilize their gifts. Be sure to conduct a church-wide

gifts discernment process to discover the gifts, talents, and time of people in your community (there's a sample gifts inventory in the article below).

❖ Read more about building capacity in the article: "Building Capacity for Faith Formation" on the Lifelong Faith website: www.LifelongFaith.com.

Part Two. Ideas for Enhancing and Expanding Faith Formation

There are several ways we can introduce systemic initiatives into lifelong faith formation

✦ By expanding *hybrid approaches* we involve more people with time- and schedule-friendly programming, reach more people through different learning formats, promote more engaged learners, and find multiple ways to use the programming we create.
✦ By creating *seamless family faith formation* from birth to high school graduation we strengthen the primary faith forming community and support parents in providing religious socialization at home.
✦ By *strengthening the intergenerational fabric* of our faith community we create relationships and faith forming experiences among all generations, providing an important context for all ages to grow in faith and discipleship.
✦ By creating a *menu of faith forming experiences* we address the diversity of people's learning needs and religious-spiritual needs, overcoming the limitations of the one-size-fits-all approach.
✦ By building *"front porch" experiences* we provide spaces to engage with people and build relationships out in the community.

Systemic Idea #1. Expand Hybrid Approaches to Faith Formation

Since the early 2010s we have had the tools, methods, media, and models to do faith formation in **Online** models and in **Hybrid** models that blend the physical and online spaces. Over the past three years churches accelerated their adoption of online and hybrid models of faith formation. Now churches have three modes of programming: gathered in a physical space, online in a digital space, and hybrid in both spaces together.

Church have adopted – and many are expanding – hybrid models that integrate in-person gatherings at church or in family groups or in small group meetings with online content such as playlists that provide a menu of learning experiences on the theme of the program, and online meetings for discussion and more in-depth learning.

The creation of online and hybrid models of faith formation means that faith formation programming can be **synchronous** (real time) and **asynchronous** (on your own time)—thereby

expanding the opportunities for people to engage in faith forming experiences that are responsive to their time, commitments, and availability. We deliver synchronous faith formation using physical gatherings, live streaming, video conferencing, online courses, and online small groups. We deliver asynchronous faith formation using online playlists, video and audio programs, online discussion groups, online learning platforms, websites, and more.

Now is the time to expand hybrid faith formation to address the time constraints of gathered participation for those who are engaged in our church community and to (re)engage those who participate occasionally or who have stopped participating in the church community. Hybrid models hold together two important values in faith formation: the importance of in-person relationships and faith forming experiences, and the importance of being responsive to the complexity of people's lives and their religious-spiritual needs. Hybrid models expand faith formation opportunities for everyone. We can become much more strategic and careful about when, where, how, and for what we gather people because we can now integrate online with in-person faith forming. *Hybrid models of faith formation are more resilient, flexible, and adaptable—just what we need to respond to the challenges of change in our world and in lives of our people!*

Hybrid programming provides a way to offer one program in multiple formats. With multiple ways to program in physical, online, and hybrid spaces, one program or experience can be designed in all three spaces, increasing the availability to a wider audience of people. The choice is no longer whether to participate or not, but which option best suits a person's time, schedule, and learning preferences. Here is an example of a video-based program that is conducted in multiple formats – same program, multiple ways to experience it.

✦ *Large group physical gathering*: People gather at church and a leader facilitates the program—showing a video, providing time for people to read and reflect, and guiding small groups in discussing the content.
✦ *Small group physical gathering*: People gather in small groups in homes or coffee shops or other conducive setting, watch the video, read and reflect on the content, and discuss the content.
✦ *Small group hybrid*: People gather online in a small group (Zoom or other video conferencing platform) to watch the video together, read and reflect on the content, and discuss the content.
✦ *Online with interaction*: People complete the sessions on their own and share reflections in a Facebook group (asynchronous) or meet on Zoom to discuss the program (synchronous).
✦ *Online independent*: People complete the learning program on their own.

Design a three-year plan for expanding hybrid faith formation with a mix of expanding current efforts, reinventing current programs, and creating new hybrid programs. Consider how the following aspects of faith formation can be strengthened through a hybrid approach: formation for church year seasons, marriage preparation, baptism preparation for new parents, formation with families with young children, at-home family component in children's faith formation, First

Communion preparation for parents and the family, confirmation preparation, almost any adult faith formation program (Bible study, theology study), and outreach initiatives to the uninvolved.

Resources
- ❖ Read more about hybrid faith formation in the article: "A Hybrid Future for Faith Formation" on the Lifelong Faith website: www.LifelongFaith.com.
- ❖ For videos and articles on hybrid faith formation go to the "hybrid" section of the Lifelong Faith website: https://www.lifelongfaith.com/hybrid.html.

Systemic Idea #2. Create Family Faith Formation from Birth through Adolescence

Faith formation needs to start early in life and engage the whole family (three generations: children, parents, and grandparents) throughout the childhood years. We need to start early in the family and build a foundation for a life of faith in the new generation if we hope to address the decline in passing on faith from generation to generation. In most churches, it would be a systemic change to shift priorities and energies to focus on families with young children (0-5 years old) and families with grade school children – moving beyond a "classroom" approach to engage the whole family—at church and at home. We know that the research leads us to this priority:

- ✦ Parents are the most significant influence on the religious and spiritual outcomes of young people.
- ✦ The primary way by which a religious 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.
- ✦ The family is the primary community where Christian faith practices are nurtured and practiced.
- ✦ The quality of a parent's relationships with their children or teens and the parenting style they practice make a significant difference in faith transmission.

Family faith formation is designed to *encourage* parents to grow in faith and become faith formers, *equip* parents to incorporate faith practices into family life at home, and *engage* parents in education and formation, as well as the whole family in faith forming experiences and program.

Over the next three years design and implement a plan for forming the faith of families that incorporates four stages of life: young children, grade school children, young adolescents, and older adolescents. Develop a template that you can use for each stage of life and then design or select age-appropriate programs, activities, and resources. A template can include the following elements:

- *Family faith practices*: reading the Bible, praying together, serving people, working for justice, caring for creation, eating together, having family faith conversations, providing moral instruction
- *Celebrating Milestones*: ritualizing important family moments and milestone experiences
- *Celebrating church year seasons*—at church and home: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, and more
- *Parenting practices and skills* appropriate to the stage of life
- *Parenting for faith* programs, videos, and activities
- *Family-centered gatherings and programs* at church
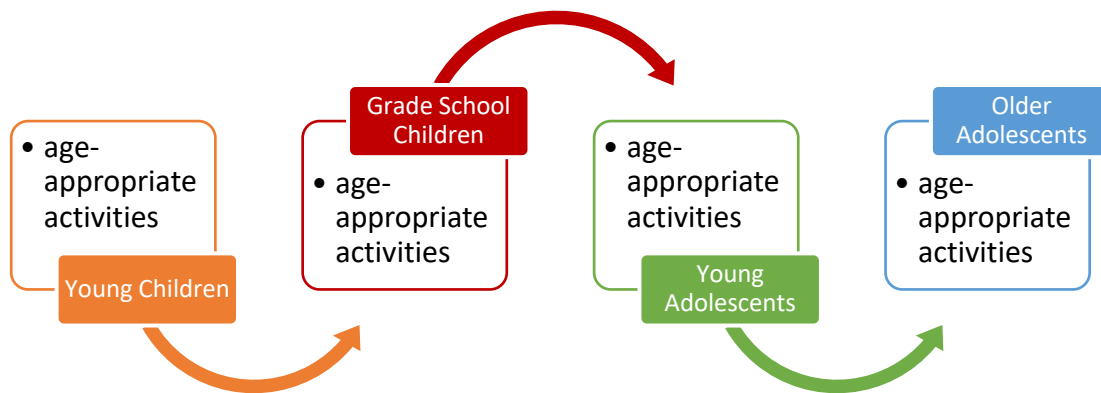
To create a plan for families with young children we could include the following types of activities that would be offered on a website designed for families, and supported by a monthly e-newsletter highlighting activities that are especially relevant in that month. Activities can be structured in a way that identifies what's appropriate for each year of early childhood: 0-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, and 4-5. The goal is to provide a comprehensive formation process at church and at home with the parents-only and with the whole family.

1. *Baptism preparation* that engages the parents in their own faith growth and prepares them for nurturing faith in young children
2. *Mentors* from the church community (e.g., grandparents) to accompany parents on the journey from Baptism to start of school (5 years old)
3. *Faith practices* such as Bible stories, prayers, meal rituals, moral values
4. *Seasons of the year* including activities for the church year seasons, holidays, and the four seasons
5. *Milestones* such as birthdays, baptism anniversaries, "first" milestones, entry to preschool and kindergarten
6. *Parenting knowledge* such as understanding young child development and practices for effective parenting of young children
7. *Parenting for faith skills* such as reading a Bible story, praying with a young child, having faith conversations
8. *Online group* for parents of young children (e.g., Facebook group)
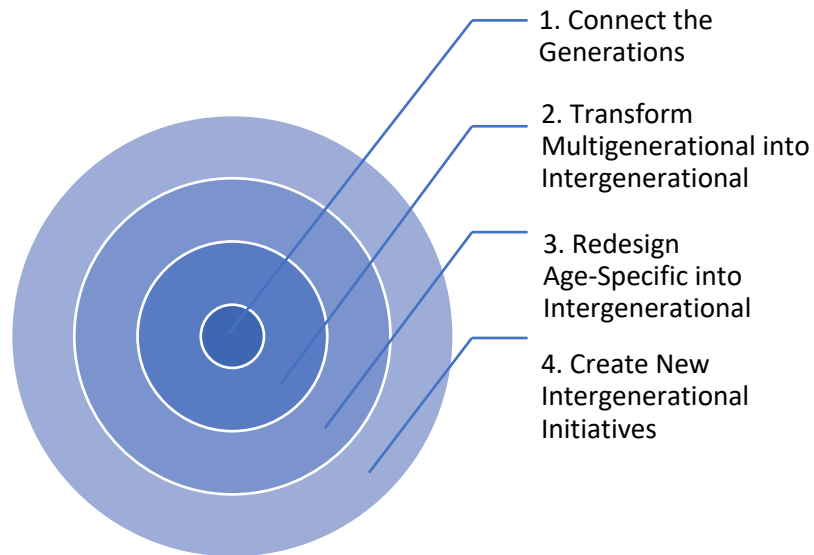9. *Gatherings for parents and for families* at church

Resources

- ❖ For videos and articles on family faith formation go to the "family" section of the Lifelong Faith website: https://www.lifelongfaith.com/family.html.
- ❖ For video-based training to design family faith formation go Lifelong Faith Training: https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/family-faith-formation.html.
- ❖ For an example of a family faith formation website go to the Family Faith Practice website at https://www.familyfaithpractice.com.
- ❖ For curated resources for families go to the Lifelong Faith Studio website and find the "family resources" for each content area: https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com.
- ❖ For free family programs go to the Intergenerational Faith website: https://www.intergenerationalfaith.com

Systemic Idea #3. Strengthen the Intergenerational Fabric of the Church Community

It is well documented now that there has been a decades-long trend toward greater generational isolation in our society, now accelerated by the pandemic. A study by Springtide Research, *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority*, found that nearly 70 percent of young people ages thirteen to twenty-five report having three or fewer meaningful interactions per day. Nearly 40 percent say they feel they have no one to talk to and that no one really knows them well, at least some- times. More than one in four young people say they have one or fewer adults in their lives they can turn to if they need to talk. As the number of trusted adults in a young person's life increases, their reported feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and stress decrease. The pandemic heightened the experience of isolation and loneliness across generations. Individuals and families shifted so many social things to home—work, school, shopping, food, fitness, and even church—that they lost social connection. Older adults dramatically reduced their outside interactions. Families with children and teens worked hard to limit outside exposure, and often selected particular family members or a few local families to create a safe "pod."

People have a tremendous hunger for in-person relationships and shared experiences, like celebrating holidays, birthdays, and milestones with other generations. One of the best ways to overcome the loneliness and isolation people have experienced during the pandemic is to increase the number of opportunities for intergenerational relationships, experiences, and activities. Connecting the generations—(re)building intergenerational community, relationships, and experiences—is a tremendous opportunity for every church community.

A systemic response is to build a church culture of intergenerationality – to make a commitment to become more intentionally intergenerational in everything we do. Faith formation can take a lead in strengthening an intergenerational culture in four ways with increasing depth and scope:

1. Connect the Generations

2. Transform Multigenerational into Intergenerational

3. Redesign Age-Specific into Intergenerational

4. Create New Intergenerational Initiatives

Here are ideas to spark your own creativity for each of the four ways to strengthen an intergenerational church culture:

1. *Connect the Generations*: Creating small actions to build relationships, trust, and respect by praying for other generations; mixing generations in leadership and ministry teams; developing mentoring relationships between generations (old to young, young to old); and encouraging generations sharing and contributing at worship.

2. *Transform Multigenerational Settings into Intergenerational Experiences* by including relationship building activities; engaging in storytelling; praying for each other; participating in shared activities as mixed-generation groups; sharing leadership roles appropriate to gifts, abilities, and age; and making people feel welcome, respected, valued, and recognized by other generations.

3. *Redesign Age-Specific Programs into Intergenerational Experiences* by incorporating another generation to share their life story, faith, wisdom (interviews, storytelling, presentations, demonstrations); adding mentors or spiritual guides such as grandparent mentors for young parents and spiritual guides for young people in confirmation; adding regular intergenerational gatherings into age group programs throughout the year; and redesigning an age-specific program such as camp or vacation Bible school into a grandparent-grandchild program and a service program or mission trip into an intergenerational activity.

4. *Create New Intergenerational Initiatives* that will contribute toward building an intergenerational culture in your congregation by celebrating milestones throughout life as intergenerational experiences at church and home, conducting intergenerational learning programs—weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or seasonally—for the whole faith community;

offering intergenerational models of vacation Bible school, camp programs, Bible study programs; retreat programs (in a variety of time formats); and intergenerational local and global service projects, actions for justice, care for creation.

Develop a three year plan for strengthening the intergenerational fabric of your church community through faith formation by creating strategies for the four ways described above. Move from *connecting* and *transforming* into the more challenging *redesigning* and *creating* over three years. No one action brings about an intergenerational church culture. It is the cumulative effect of becoming intentional using these four ways that leads to strengthening the intergenerational fabric of your church community.

Resources
- ❖ For videos and articles on intergenerational faith formation go to the "intergenerational" section of the Lifelong Faith website: https://www.lifelongfaith.com/intergenerational.html.
- ❖ For video-based training to design intergenerational faith formation go Lifelong Faith Training: https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/intergenerational-faith-formation.html.
- ❖ For free intergenerational programs go to the Intergenerational Faith website: https://www.intergenerationalfaith.com

Systemic Idea #4. Create Menus of Faith Formation Experiences for All Ages

A significant systemic change in faith formation programming is the move from one-size-fits-all programming to multiple approaches and programming for each season of life (children, teens, young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults) that provide a variety of experiences, activities, content, and resources for diverse needs and interests; in a variety of formats (on-your-own learning, mentored, small group, large group, church-wide, in the community); with gathered in-person, online, and hybrid modes of faith formation.

The assumption of the one-size-fits all approach is that people of a certain age or stage of life learn in the same way, are in a similar place in their faith journey, have similar religious backgrounds, share common interests and learning needs, and, therefore, have the same religious and spiritual learning needs that can be addressed by one program. This mentality focuses churches on how to get everyone (whoever the audience might be) to participate in the one program.

Even though we all recognize the diversity of people's religious experience and practice, churches continue to design "one-size-fits-all" programming because that mindset is so deeply ingrained in our practice. We know that the one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and programming does not address the diverse spiritual-religious identities and needs of people. No one program, class, or resource can do that. Churches can offer a *menu of experiences* with wider variety of content,

experiences, and activities if we are going to help people grow and mature in faith and discipleship.

At every stage of life we can build a *menu of experiences* that include intergenerational, family, and age group activities. People can select programs, activities, and experiences from the menu to create their own learning plan for the year or for a season of the year. You can establish participation guidelines so that each year or season children (and their families) and youth would select a certain number of intergenerational experiences, family at-home activities, and age-specific programs at church. This approach puts the learner at the center of faith formation and gives them choice over what and when and where they will learn.

The menu approach can transform current one-size-fits-all marriage, baptism, first communion, and confirmation preparation programs. We can create a menu of faith-formation experiences—intergenerational, family, and age group-specific—tailored to the religious experience and practice of the people (i.e., people who are actively engaged in practicing their faith, who are minimally engaged, who are not engaged but want to participate in a significant milestone or sacrament). Use a menu approach to structure learning with experiences, programs, and activities designed to promote growth in faith for people who want to grow deeper in the faith, for those who are inquiring or aren't sure the Christian faith is for them, and for those who don't need God or religion in their lives.

At every stage of life – children (0–10), adolescents (11–19), young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+) – we can offer people faith-forming experiences in intergenerational, family, and life stage settings with (1) a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources; (2) a variety of formats—on your own, mentored, small groups, and large groups; (3) a variety of scheduling—synchronous and asynchronous; and (4) in hybrid, online, and gathered modes of programming.

Resources
- ❖ Read more about the menu approach to faith formation in the article: "Networks of Faith Formation" on the Lifelong Faith website: www.LifelongFaith.com.
- ❖ For an example of an adult menu approach go to the Seasons of Adult Faith website at www.SeasonsofAdultFaith. See especially the Bible and Prayer and Spiritual Life sections for illustrations of a menu of faith forming experiences.
- ❖ For an example of a family menu approach go to the Family Faith Practice website at https://www.familyfaithpractice.com. See especially the Just for Parents section for an illustration of a menu of faith forming experiences.

Systemic Idea #5. Building "Front Porch" Faith Forming Experiences

Churches are feeling the impact of the dramatic rise of disaffiliation from organized religion, and the challenge of greater diversity in religious practice. We know that people's participation in church life and Sunday worship has been declining for the past two decades and has only accelerated during the pandemic. Many churches are expending a lot of time and energy on getting people "back to church" for worship and faith formation programming. This focus on "bringing back" needs to be balanced with an emphasis on "going out."

What if churches and faith formation began to focus on "bringing the church to people"? What if we created "front porch experiences" – spaces, programs, and experiences that expand the scope and reach of the church into the lives of people in the neighborhood and community? What if we made a special effort to reach and engage people who are not involved or have given up on church or were never affiliated with any church or religion?

One way to build a "front porch" is to move some of the at-church programs and activities into community settings, such as Bible study offered in a café or a prayer/retreat experience offered at a retreat house or other quiet setting. Changing the location of a program opens up the possibility of inviting people to join in a "neutral" setting.

A second way is open-up programs currently sponsored by the church to the whole community, such as a vacation Bible school offered for all of the children in the community, and service projects and care for creation projects that welcome people from the community to get involved.

A third way is to offer activities directed to the needs, hungers, and interests of people sponsored by the church in a variety of settings and spaces so that everyone feels comfortable participating. We have seen examples of this type of outreach in the variety of "theology on tap" or "God on tap" programs offered for young adults in pubs. A church could offer a variety of projects targeted to different ages or audiences, for example:

- ✦ Workshops, resources, and support groups targeted to <u>all</u> parents of young children, grade school children, middle school and high school adolescents
- ✦ Family events for the whole community such as concerts, movie nights, games day
- ✦ Programs and activities designed for older adults at the senior center or adult living center or nursing home.
- ✦ A Dinner Church ministry (https://dinnerchurch.com) that brings people together over a meal to share stories, build relationships, and engage with each other spiritually.
- ✦ Career and life mentoring or coaching, especially for young adults
- ✦ Life skills courses for teenagers and young adults
- ✦ An arts program such as art exhibits or arts workshops
- ✦ A music program such as concerts, opportunities to join a musical group, and music workshops
- ✦ Community-wide service days, service projects, and mission trips
- ✦ And much more

Conclusion

The five suggestions in this article – expanding hybrid approaches, creating seamless family faith formation, strengthening the intergenerational fabric of the faith community, creating menus of faith forming experiences, and building front porch experiences – are offered as a way to think and act systemically in faith formation. They are intended to spark your own creativity and help you to launch innovations in your church. Be sure to check out the resources suggested in this article to assist you in designing new initiatives.

WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

Envisioning Lifelong Maturing in Faith

John Roberto

In the first article of this series "Embracing a Lifelong Learning Paradigm" we explored how the paradigm of education has shifted from an *instructional, schooling paradigm* focused primarily on children and youth in age-graded classroom settings **to** a *lifelong learning paradigm* focused on people learning in a diversity of settings for the whole of life. The shift to a lifelong faith formation paradigm can enable churches to become centers of lifelong learning for every season of life from young children through older adults—providing a way to engage people in learning and practicing their faith at every stage of life. I believe the shift to lifelong paradigm is a systemic way to address so many of the challenges that church communities face today.

The shift to a lifelong faith formation paradigm in churches begins with a vision of maturing in Christian faith. In order to develop a lifelong paradigm a church needs of lifelong vision of faith maturing that can guide its practice of faith formation. I would suggest that this vision be expressed through goals for maturing in faith that apply to the whole life span. Faith formation in each stage or season of life would be guided by one vision of faith maturing expressed through specific goals and life stage appropriate faith formation.

I am proposing ten goals for maturing in faith—informed by the Christian tradition and supported by research on faith maturing. Each goal incorporates knowing and understanding more fully the Christian faith (informing), developing and deepening a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community (forming), and living the Christian faith in every aspect of one's life (transforming).

1. To develop and sustain a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and make the Christian faith a way of life.
3. To read and study the Bible and apply its message and meaning to living as a Christian today.

4. To learn the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular faith tradition and integrate its meaning into one's life.
5. To worship God with the community at Sunday worship, in ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year.
6. To pray, together and alone, and seek spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines.
7. To live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and apply Christian moral values to decision-making.
8. To live the Christian mission in the world by serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally.
9. To be actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community.
10. To practice faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world.

Guided by the ten goals, churches can ask what they can do to help faith and discipleship flourish in the lives of people from childhood through older adulthood. The ten goals can be thought of as a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+). The goals provide a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. Churches (and individuals) can visualize how faith can mature from childhood through older adults.

Focusing on goals for maturing in faith reflects a significant shift from a provider-centered, program- and content-driven approach to a *person-centered* approach to faith formation. In the church-centric focus on providing curriculum, courses, classes, programs, and activities, there was often little reference to how we see faith flourishing at each stage of life. Becoming goal-centered opens multiple ways (activities, methods, programs) to promote faith and discipleship through developmentally appropriate faith-forming experiences at each stage of life. We build faith formation around the maturing in faith goals and then create and curate programs, activities, and resources that are needed to foster faith growth.

At each stage of life, people experience faith-forming experiences with the whole community (intergenerational), with the whole family, and with their life stage (peer) groups. Faith formation at each stage of life blends intergenerational, family, and age group settings into a holistic approach, centered around the ten characteristics of maturing in faith. This reflects a significant shift from the age-segregated or siloed approach where faith formation with children, adolescents, and adults is primarily age-group-only without significant intergenerational and family faith-forming experiences.

Faith formation designed around these goals for maturing in faith needs to be responsive to the diversity of people's religious practice and engagements. We can identify four distinct spiritual-religious identities in people of all ages: the *Engaged* who demonstrate a vibrant faith and

relationship with God and are actively engaged in the faith community, the *Occasionals* who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith and practice is less central to their lives, the *Spirituals* who are living spiritual lives but not involved in a church community, and the *Unaffiliated* who are not affiliated with a church or religious tradition and have little need for God or religion.

The ten goals are a starting point. They need to be contextualized within each specific Christian tradition, the identity and mission of a local church community, and the unique social, cultural, and ethnic make-up of the community. Every church needs a shared vision and goals for maturing in the Christian faith.

Bringing a Lifelong Vision of Faith Maturing to Life

To bring the vision of maturing in faith to life, develop a six-season (ten decades) plan for lifelong faith formation. Each season can have a particular focus or theme reflecting the most essential content and experiences, designed around the unique developmental characteristics, life tasks and issues, and religious and spiritual needs of people in each season of life. No decade would be viewed in isolation—each would be seen as part of a ten-decade view of faith growth and maturing in faith. Use the following process to explore how faith formation in your church today works toward achieving your goals for maturing in faith with all the seasons of life.

Step 1: Formulate Goals for Maturing in Faith

What are your church's goals for maturing in faith and discipleship? What does maturing in faith look like? Use the ten goals presented in this article as a starting point for developing your church's goals.

Step 2: Develop a Profile Using the Goals for Maturing in Faith

What is your church trying to accomplish in the lives of people at each stage of life from childhood to older adulthood? Using the ten goals (or the goals you have developed for your church), identify how your church implements the goals through experiences, programs, activities, and resources in each season of life.

- ✦ Childhood (0–10)
- ✦ Adolescence (11–19)
- ✦ Young Adults (20s–30s)
- ✦ Midlife Adults (40s–50s)
- ✦ Mature Adults (60s–70s)
- ✦ Older Adults (80+)

Step 3: Analyze Faith Formation through the Lens of the Goals

Analyze the ways that your church nurtures faith growth through the six seasons and stages of the life cycle by reflecting on these three questions:

- ✦ Which goals are being addressed most effectively through programs, activities, and experiences?
- ✦ Which goals need to be addressed more effectively by strengthening or improving programs, activities, and experiences?
- ✦ Which goals need new initiatives so they can be addressed effectively?

Step 4: Explore New Ways to Strengthen and Expand Faith Formation for Each Season of Life

There are several ways to strengthen and/or expand faith formation based on your analysis. Here are two approaches to get you thinking:

You might find one or two goals that need attention with all ages. Make these goals a "whole church" focus for a year of faith formation—planning intergenerational, family, and life stage programs, activities, and experiences.

You might find one or more life stages that need attention. Develop a multiyear plan for developing faith formation with each life stage. Begin with a few new initiatives that you want to test in the first year (guided by the goals). Evaluate their effectiveness and expand them in years two and three. Continue to develop new programs, activities, and experiences for year two and year three. Evaluate and expand.

Conclusion

The ten goals provide a vision and a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+).

They provide a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. They are a great way to begin the move toward a lifelong learning paradigm in your church.

To assist your planning be sure to check the resources on the www.LifelongFaith.com website. If you have questions or need assistance finding resources, you can email me at jroberto@lifelongfaith.com.

Fashioning Faith Formation around the Faith Journeys of People

John Roberto

You may be thinking that the title of this article is stating the obvious: *Isn't all faith formation fashioned around the faith journeys of people?* To fashion faith formation around the faith journeys of people means putting people at the center of all that we do. It means addressing the actual lives of people—their struggles and joys, needs and hungers, life tasks and issues, social and cultural context, and more. It means addressing the diversity of their spiritual and religious commitments, engagements, and practices. There are churches that have made this vision the guiding light for all of their faith formation practice. Unfortunately, this is not the common practice.

It is still commonplace in churches to develop faith formation in a one-size-fits-all approach. Churches purchase a curriculum resource that provides an age-graded program for grade school, middle school, and high school young people, assuming that because they are of a certain age or life stage they have similar experiences of religious socialization, lived faith practices, and engagement in church life. *How true is this assumption today with your young people?*

The one-size-fits-all approach is still used in adult faith formation. Even with all the life stage and religious diversity in adulthood, from those in their twenties to those in their nineties, churches still try to get everyone to participate in one type of small faith-sharing group or one Lenten series or one Bible study. Churches with processes and programs for Christian initiation and new member formation often use a one-size-fits-all design that assumes every convert or new member has the same religious background, interests, and experiences; and therefore needs the same topics and content. *How true are these practices in your church?*

I wonder if one of the major reasons people of all ages "give-up" on church is that we are not addressing their personal relationship with God, their personal spiritual and religious journey, and their real life situation. Is

our current practice of one-size-fits-all faith formation contributing to the decline in engagement of people of all ages? Are we actually working against promoting lifelong growth in faith?

There is another way! Imagine would it would be like to fashion faith formation around the faith journeys of families and individuals at every stage of life.

✦ **What if** we could help families and individuals at every stage of life *discern* where they are in their religious and spiritual journey, and then tailor faith formation experiences to fit their needs?

✦ **What if** we could develop descriptions of *key elements* of the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping families and individual discern their faith growth needs? We could help people reflect on:

1. their relationship with Jesus
2. the ways they live their faith in daily life
3. the importance of the Bible for their lives and growth in faith
4. the importance of the Christian story and their own faith tradition in their lives
5. the ways they worship God on Sunday, in rituals, and through the church year
6. their prayer life and how they are growing spiritually
7. the ways they live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and moral values
8. the ways they seek to live their faith by serving others, caring for creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace
9. the ways they are engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community
10. the ways they use gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world

✦ **What if** we could develop a *pathways guide* for families and individuals that helps them chart their growth in each of the ten essential elements of the Christian faith using a simple tool with four ways to reflect on their journey?

1 = I'm a beginner in this aspect of my faith.
2 = I'm growing in this aspect of my faith.
3 = I'm maturing and going deeper in this aspect of my faith.
4 = I'm sharing my faith and gifts with others.

✦ **What if** we could guide people in creating an annual (or seasonal) *faith growth plan* with the experiences, programs, activities, and resources that best match with their faith growth needs?

✦ **What if** we could help people discover a *variety of resources* that can help them take their next best steps in their spiritual and religious journey? **What if** we could create an annual (or seasonal) *faith formation catalog* with all of the faith formation experiences, programs,

activities, and resources that people could access to create their personal or family faith growth plan?

✦ **What if** we could incorporate discernment and the creation of a faith growth plan into the start of the program year for families or age groups (children, youth, adults), and into milestones and sacramental moments, such as marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation, graduations, retirement, etc.

✦ **What if** we could accompany people through *mentoring* (one-on-one or in small groups) to discern their faith growth needs and create a plan. What if we could utilize a mentor approach for the new couple at marriage, for parents and the family at baptism and first communion, for teens at confirmation, and much more.

The process I am describing is *personalization*. It's guiding each person in his or her growth toward greater maturity in faith. It's fashioning faith formation around the spiritual and religious journeys and needs of our families and individuals at each stage of life. It's moving from one-size-fits-all to a much more personal approach to faith growth that uses all of our resources—our people who will serve as mentors, our community life, our programs and activities, our online resources, and more.

Personalization gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. People should be able to clearly understand where they are in their faith journey and their next steps in faith growth Personalization allows the time, resources, and support needed to master knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. A personalized approach offers more time for those who need it to achieve mastery, while allowing those who want to move ahead or dive more deeply into the Christian faith to do so when they are ready.

Designing a Process for Personalizing Faith Formation

The centerpiece of the personalizing process is to create a **Pathways Guide** for a particular audience. A Pathways Guide is created around characteristics of maturing in faith that can be used to help people discern their faith journey and chart a path for growth.

A **Life Stage Pathways Guide** can be created for every of stage life: children and families (0–10), adolescents (11–19), young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid-50s–mid-70s), and older adults (75+). The Guide can be used at the beginning of a new year of faith formation programming to provide a personalized experience for people as they select faith growth experiences from the church's gathered programs and online experiences. It can be used at parent meetings and family programs to discern parents' faith growth needs as well as the faith growth needs of the whole family. It works best in an environment where you can guide people in discerning their faith growth needs and connecting them to faith

formation. It's helpful to create a faith formation catalog (print, digital) with all of the faith formation experiences, programs, activities, and resources that people can access to create their personal or family faith growth plan.

A **Milestones Pathways Guide** can be created for the preparation of individuals and families for a significant life milestone, life transition, or sacrament. Milestones pathways guide can be created for Christian initiation and new member formation, marriage preparation, parent formation for the baptism of their child, family preparation for first communion, preparation of adolescents for confirmation, and more. It's helpful to create a catalog that is specific to the milestone with faith formation programs, activities, and resources (online and in-person) that people can use to create their faith growth plan.

Design Process

Step 1. Identify a target audience for the *Pathways Guide*: life stages or milestones or another audience.

Step 2. Develop the characteristics of growing in the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping discerning faith growth needs. A Life Stage Guide can use the ten goals I have proposed for lifelong faith formation as a starting point. A Milestones Guide can use the ten goals or can use the "content" of the milestone to be more specific.

Characteristics of Growing in Faith
- ✦ Personal relationship and commitment to Jesus
- ✦ Living the Christian faith in daily life
- ✦ Reading and studying the Bible and its application to living today
- ✦ Understanding and integrating the Christian story and tradition into one's life
- ✦ Worshipping God on Sunday, in rituals, and through the church year
- ✦ Praying, together and lone, and growing spiritually
- ✦ Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and moral values
- ✦ Serving people in need, caring for creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace
- ✦ Being engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community
- ✦ Using one's gifts and talents in service to the church and world

Step 3. Develop a stages of growth discernment rating to help people identify where they are currently in their faith journey. The stages of faith growth should be designed as a continuum of deepening faith practice and commitment. Try to incorporate at least three categories. Use age-appropriate language as you determine the names for each category. Here are several examples of growth ratings.

- ✦ Searching—exploring—beginning—growing—maturing
- ✦ Inquiring—learning—growing—sharing
- ✦ Exploring—growing—maturing—rooted
- ✦ Beginning (getting started)—growing—maturing (going deeper)—sharing (ministering)

Step 4. Create a *Pathways Guide* for your target audience that combines the stages of growth with each item (goal or description). You can develop the *Guide* by creating a grid with goals listed in one column and the stages of growth in the other columns, like the example below.

Goals or Characteristics				
Growing in a personal relationship with Jesus	1	2	3	4

Rating Scale
1 = I'm a beginner in this aspect of my faith.
2 = I'm growing in this aspect of my faith.
3 = I'm maturing and going deeper in this aspect of my faith.
4 = I'm sharing my faith and gifts with others.

Your *Pathways Guide* can also include short descriptions to illustrate the stages of growth for each goal. Here is an example for the Bible:

Goal: Reading, studying, and applying the Bible to my life
1. *Beginning*: I feel drawn to the story of God in the Bible and want to learn how to read the Bible and be open to God.
2. *Growing*: I am reading the Bible regularly and learning how to interpret the Bible and its meaning for today.
3. *Maturing*: I am reading and praying with the Bible and studying the books of the Bible and their message for today.
4. *Sharing*: I am sharing my understanding of the Bible and leading Bible activities and programs.

Step 5. Add questions to *Guide* people in reflecting on their future growth in faith. For example:

- ✦ Areas Where I Need to "Get Started"
- ✦ Areas Where I Need to "Grow"
- ✦ Areas Where I Want to "Go Deeper"
- ✦ Areas Where I'm Ready to Share My Faith and Gifts

Step 6. Develop the format for introducing and using the *Guide* to help people discern their faith growth needs. For example, it could be introduced in a large group setting with time for discernment and small group interaction, or in small groups facilitated by a guide or mentor, or

in a one-to-one setting with the guidance and support of a mentor. Provide time for people to reflect on the results of their discernment using the questions in Step 5.

Step 7. Guide people in matching faith formation programs and experiences (the catalog) with faith growth needs and creating their *Faith Growth Plan*.

Step 8. Provide continuous support (small groups, mentors, and more) and opportunities for people to reflect on their progress in fulfilling their *Faith Growth Plan*.

Next Steps

Develop a pilot project to personalize faith formation by identifying a target audience, designing a Pathways Guide, and providing mentoring or small group support. Check out the examples of pathways guides on the *See All the People* website and download "Developing a Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations" at www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system. Check out examples of pathways guides created by Rev. Kathy Pittenger, Director of Children's Initiatives for the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church on the Lifelong Faith website: https://www.lifelongfaith.com/oct-5-2021.html.

Conclusion

Personalizing faith formation gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. As we've seen in this article personalizing and fashioning faith formation involves the following elements:

1. Helping families and individuals at every stage of life discern where they are in their religious and spiritual journey, and then tailoring faith formation experiences to fit their needs.
2. Identifying key characteristics of growing in the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping families and individual discern their faith growth needs.
3. Developing a *pathways guide* to help people chart their growth in each of the essential characteristics of growing in the Christian faith.
4. Guiding people in creating a *faith growth plan* with the experiences, programs, activities, and resources that best match with their faith growth needs.
5. Helping people discover a variety of resources that can help them take their next best steps in their spiritual and religious journey.
6. Incorporating discernment and a faith growth plan into family and age group formation, and into milestones and sacramental moments, such as marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation, graduations, retirement, etc.
7. Accompanying people through mentoring (one-on-one or in small groups) to discern their faith growth needs and create a plan.

WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

Networks of Faith Formation
John Roberto

In an earlier era of faith formation if you wanted to learn more about the Bible or a theological topic, you could take a course at a fixed time—at a church, seminary, college, or other education provider, or read a book—perhaps recommended by your pastor and borrowed from your church library or you could watch a video—on VHS of course! Your options would have been limited by both time and space. In the twenty-first century if you want to learn more about the Bible or a theological topic, or just about any other topic or interest, your options have greatly expanded.

Today, among many options, you can engage in any combination of the following learning experiences:

- ✦ Take a course at church or at a college or a seminary.
- ✦ Take a course online—at a scheduled time with a group or at your own time and pace—using a resource like Yale Bible Study (https://yalebiblestudy.org) .
- ✦ Read and view videos online for every book of the Bible at Enter the Bible from Luther Seminary (www.entertheBible.org).
- ✦ Join an online Bible study group at another church or in a Facebook group.
- ✦ Watch a video series on YouTube from a scripture scholar, such as N. T. Wright, as you read his book, or watch a video series produced by another church that is available for free on their website.
- ✦ Find a mentor in your church or online who will guide your self-directed Bible study.
- ✦ Listen to audio versions of your book as you commute to work each day.
- ✦ Develop your own course of study using the videos and podcasts on The Bible Project website (https://bibleproject.com).
- ✦ Download a Bible app (such as YouVersion: https://www.bible.com) to study the Bible, engage in daily Bible readings and reflections, and share your reflections with others who are studying the Bible using the app.

- ✦ Create a blog to post your thoughts on what you are learning and invite others to offer their insights.
- ✦ Organize your own learning group by gathering a group of people who are interested in learning more about the Bible and using print, audio, video, and/or online resources to guide your small group.

This example illustrates the dramatic shift in how we learn today. We now have the ability to construct our own networks of learning, utilizing a variety of new technologies and the abundance of high-quality print, audio, video, and online resources that are readily available to us. Learning networks not only provide access to a virtually endless array of opportunities that also offer us multiple points of entry, providing individualized pathways of learning and faith growth.

We are witnessing a transformation in the way we think about learning, reflecting the convergence of new technologies, digital media and tools, and network thinking. We are shifting from education to learning—digital media and technologies enable learning anywhere, anytime; from consumption of information to participatory learning—organized around learners' interests, enabling them to create as well as consume information; and from institutions to networks—where people of all ages can learn from a variety of sources in a variety of settings.

These key transformations need to be central to lifelong faith formation: putting learners at the center of our thinking, enabling and trusting them to be cocreators of their learning experiences, connecting learning authentically to life concerns and real world issues, making room for new modes of learning and new methods of teaching, fostering collaboration, and organizing structures around learners' needs.

Networks of Faith Formation

We live in the age of networks. We are all part of networks—families, schools, workplaces, religious congregations, social circles, and more. Networks— collections of people (and their resources) connected to each other through relationships—aren't new. They are as old as human society. Over the past two decades, facilitated by digital technology and tools, societies have become more connected. Network thinking and design now permeate social life. Increasingly education is being viewed and designed as a network of learning resources— people, experiences, content, activities, and more—fashioned around the learning needs of people.

The concept of learning networks is not new. In 1975 Malcolm Knowles, the renowned adult educator, proposed a "lifelong learning resource system" in his book *The Adult Learner*. The model was based on the following assumptions:

- ✦ Learning in a world of accelerating change must be a lifelong process.
- ✦ Learning is a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing in the learner.
- ✦ The purpose of education is to facilitate the development of the competencies required for performance in life situations
- ✦ Learners are highly diverse in their experiential backgrounds, pace of learning, readiness to learn, and styles of learning; therefore, learning programs need to be highly individualized.
- ✦ Resources for learning abound in every environment: a primary task of a learning system is to identify these resources and link learners with them effectively.
- ✦ Learning (even self-directed learning) is enhanced by interaction with other learners.
- ✦ Learning is more efficient if guided by a process structure (a learning plan) rather than a content structure (a course outline). (Knowles 1975, 171–72)

He wrote this in 1975, but it sounds like it could have been written today! What Knowles called a "lifelong learning resource system" we would call a lifelong learning network today. What if we imagined lifelong faith formation as a network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources—in physical places and online spaces—for every stage of life organized around goals for maturing in faith for a lifetime? A network approach to faith formation moves us from a provider-centered, program-driven model to a learner-centered model where the content and experiences are designed around the people and where they have control over the what, when, how, and where of their learning. In a network model, faith formation shifts from "one size fits all" curriculum and programming to a variety of religious content and experiences that connect with people's spiritual and religious needs.

This represents a huge shift for churches where faith formation programming is still designed in a one-size-fits-all style. The assumption is that people of a certain age or stage of life learn in the same way, are in a similar place in their faith journey, have similar religious backgrounds, share common interests and learning needs, and, therefore, have the same religious and spiritual learning needs that can be addressed by one program. This mentality focuses churches on how to get everyone (whoever the audience might be) to participate in the *one* program.

Even though we all recognize the diversity of people's religious experience and practice, churches continue to design "one-size-fits-all" programming because that mindset is so deeply ingrained in our practice. We know that the one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and programming does not address the diverse spiritual-religious identities and needs of people. No one program, class, or resource can do that. Churches need to offer a wider variety of content, experiences, and activities—guided by goals for maturing in faith—if we are going to help people to grow and mature in faith and discipleship. A network approach enables this to happen.

The most widespread approach to children's faith formation, even today, is a fixed time, weekly, age-graded program, usually using a textbook or curriculum resource that assumes that all learners at a grade level have the same spiritual, religious, and learning needs. Children

in the same grade level or grouping are learning the same content with the same learning methods and resource.

Imagine creating a children's faith formation network with a wide variety of developmentally appropriate faith formation experiences that utilize the faith maturing goals as the framework and integrate intergenerational, whole family, and age group activities. Children would have intergenerational faith-forming experiences (Sunday worship, seasonal celebrations, intergenerational learning, mentoring relationship with older members, ministry opportunities in the church), and family faith-forming experiences (whole family programs at church, grandparent- grandchild activities, activities for faith practices at home), and age group faith-forming experiences (classes, courses, retreats, Vacation Bible School, Christmas play, service activities).

In a network approach, families with children could select from a menu of faith formation experiences to create their plan for the year or for a season of the year. The menu would include intergenerational, family, and age group activities. Churches could establish participation guidelines for families and children, so that each year or season they would select a certain number of intergenerational experiences, family at-home activities, and children's programs at church. This approach puts the learner (families and children) at the center of faith formation and gives them choice over what and when and where they will learn. Churches provide the network of faith-forming activities that reflect their goals for maturing in faith and provide holistic formation in intergenerational, family, and age group settings.

This same approach—with different content and activities—can transform the one-size-fits-all confirmation program, where one program is assumed to address the wider spectrum of adolescent religious practice and interests. Churches can create a network of faith formation experiences—intergenerational, family, and age group-specific—tailored to the religious experience and practice of the young people participating (those who are actively engaged in practicing their faith, those who are minimally engaged, those who are not engaged but participating because of their parents). For most churches it's not possible to offer three different programs. A network approach can offer enough variety to address diverse needs and provide pathways for adolescents to grow in faith in ways appropriate to their faith journey. A network provides a structure for offering experiences, programs, and activities designed to promote growth in faith for young people who want to grow deeper in the faith, for those who are inquiring or aren't sure the Christian faith is for them, and for those who don't need God or religion in their lives.

Even with all the diversity in adulthood, from those in their twenties to those in their nineties, churches still try to get everyone to participate in one type of small faith-sharing group or one Lenten series or one Bible study on one book of the Bible. In the network approach it is no longer about finding the "right" program to attract everyone. It is about addressing the diversity of the audience with a variety of content, experiences, and activities. It is about offering faith formation that is varied in content, expectations, depth, involvement, and timing.

By expanding the options—a "something for everyone" approach—churches can engage more adults in faith formation, even if some of the offerings involve only one person (reading, watching videos, taking an online course). The new reality of adult faith formation programming is that churches can offer activities that cater to niches—individuals and small groups with a particular spiritual or religious need, interest, passion, concern, or life issue. They no longer have to worry about reaching a "critical mass."

The one-size-fits all mindset permeates everything. Churches with processes and programs for Christian initiation and new member formation often use a one-size-fits-all design that assumes every convert or new member has the same religious background, interests, and experiences; and therefore need the same topics and content. A network approach can address this diversity and provide pathways for people to grow in faith and discipleship that is suited to their own journey.

The movement from one-size-fits-all to a variety of faith formation offerings is made possible by the abundance of religious content and programming—print, audio, video, online, and digital—that is now available. And this abundance can now be made accessible to people by the creation of online platforms (websites and social media) and digital playlists that integrate, deliver, and communicate the content and programming with a variety of ways to learn that is easily available, anytime and anywhere.

Designing Networks of Faith Formation

We now have the ability to design faith formation networks to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of families and individuals at each stage of life: childhood (0–10), adolescents (11–19), young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+). At every stage of life, we can offer people a wide variety of faith-forming experiences in intergenerational, family, and life stage settings; a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources; and a variety of formats: on your own, mentored, small groups, and large groups—all designed around goals for maturing in faith..

A network approach is designed around the vision and goals of lifelong maturing in Christian faith.

A church's goals for lifelong maturing in faith can be thought of as a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+). Lifelong goals provide a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. Each goal needs to incorporate knowing and understanding more fully the Christian faith (informing), developing and deepening people's relationship with Jesus Christ

and the Christian community (forming), and equipping people to live the Christian faith in every aspect of their lives (transforming). I am proposing ten goals to guide faith formation:

1. To develop and sustain a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and make the Christian faith a way of life.
3. To read and study the Bible and apply its message and meaning to living as a Christian today.
4. To learn the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular faith tradition and integrate its meaning into one's life.
5. To worship God with the community at Sunday worship, in ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year.
6. To pray, together and alone, and seek spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines.
7. To live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and apply Christian moral values to decision-making.
8. To live the Christian mission in the world by serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally.
9. To be actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community.
10. To practice faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world.

A network approach is person- or learner-centered, placing the individual or family at the center of faith formation.

Making this shift from program to person highlights the need for sensitivity to the individual differences among people. People differ in many ways: prior knowledge, ability, learning styles and strategies, interest, and motivation, as well in linguistic, ethnic, and social background. People also differ in their spiritual and religious practices and commitments: the Engaged who demonstrate a vibrant faith and relationship with God and are actively engaged in the faith community, the Occasionals who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith and practice is less central to their lives, the Spirituals who are living spiritual lives but not involved in a church community, and the Unaffiliated who are not affiliated with a church or religious tradition and may have little need for God or religion.

A network approach embraces learning and faith growth as a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing within the individual.

Motivation for learning is intrinsic to the person and is driven by a need for autonomy (self-directedness), mastery, and purpose and meaning. The traditional model of schooling conditioned people to perceive the proper role of learners as being dependent on teachers to make decisions for them as to what should be learned, how it should be learned, when it should be learned, and if it has been learned. Today people are accustomed to searching out

what they want to know, when they want and need to know it. People are becoming more and more self-directed in their learning, and they have almost unlimited access to information through the internet and the wide variety of print and media learning resources available.

A network approach provides the faith-forming experiences to personalize learning and faith formation around the lives of people.

Personalization means tailoring faith-forming experiences around each person's spiritual and religious strengths, needs, and interests. It enables faith formation to be individualized and differentiated. Personalization gives people choice in what, how, when, and where they learn; and equips them to make decisions about the direction of their learning and faith growth, which gives people more ownership over their learning and faith growth. Personalizing faith formation gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Personalization allows the time, resources, and support needed to master knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. A personalized approach provides more time to achieve mastery for those who need it, while allowing those who want to move ahead or dive more deeply into a topic to do so when they are ready. (See the previous articles in this series on personalizing faith formation.)

A network approach provides a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of people of all ages.

A network approach provides a variety of methods for learning, ways to learn, and styles of learning.

A network addresses the whole person and how people learn best by offering programs, activities, and resources that incorporate different ways to learn (multiple intelligences: word-centered, verbal- linguistic, logical, musical, visual, intrapersonal, interpersonal, naturalist, and bodily-kinesthetic); and different styles of learning (hands-on experiences, reflective observation, exploration and analysis, and active experimentation).

A network approach incorporates a variety of formats for learning—on your own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the church community, and in the community and world—delivered in physical gathered settings and online settings.

A network approach provides a way to offer a diversity of programs in different formats and to offer one program or experience in multiple formats, expanding the scope of faith formation offerings and providing people with more options to participate

A network approach is built on a digital platform for faith formation.

People are connected to the content (programs, activities, resources) and to each other. There's continuity for people across different learning experiences, and it's available anytime, anywhere. The digital platform provides for seamless learning across a variety of experiences, resources, locations, times, or settings; and fosters a strong connection between faith formation at church, at home, in daily life, and online.

A network approach nurtures communities of learning and practice around shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities.

People can connect with each other through these shared activities, programs, or experiences. With a diversity of programs and activities targeted to different needs and life stages, groups will form naturally as people connect with others who share their interests, life issues, or religious and spiritual needs. Participation in these groups and their shared activities develop relationships, provide a supportive community, promote learning, and encourage the application of learning in practice.

Examples

I have created two demonstration networks to illustrate the key features of a network approach. Check out: www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com and www.FamilyFaithPractice.com.

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WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

A Hybrid Future for Faith Formation
John Roberto

For decades faith formation has relied on in-person, fixed-time programming offered in physical spaces—church facilities, schools, camps, retreat centers, mission trip locations, and more. The working assumption was that we needed to gather people in physical settings at fixed times in order to conduct faith formation effectively—build relationships, teach, experience activities, etc. The pandemic disrupted this "default" programming model, and pushed us to experiment with new models.

Since the early 2010s we have had the tools, methods, media, and models to do faith formation differently—in **Online** models and in **Hybrid** models that blend the physical and online spaces. For example, we are designing **Online** models for adult faith formation by producing website pages of curated resources (courses, videos, readings, podcasts, etc.); for seasonal programming such as experiences and activities for the forty days of Lent; for streaming presentations and demonstrations to families, teens, and adults; and much more. We are designing **Hybrid** models that integrate in-person gatherings at church or in family groups or in small group meetings <u>with</u> online playlists that provide a menu of learning experiences on the theme of the program.

The creation of online and hybrid models of faith formation means that faith formation programming can be **synchronous** (real time) and **asynchronous** (on your own time)—thereby expanding the opportunities for people to engage in faith forming experiences that are responsive to their time, commitments, and availability. We deliver synchronous faith formation using physical gatherings, live streaming, video conferencing, online courses, and online small groups. We deliver asynchronous faith formation using online playlists, video and audio programs, online discussion groups, online learning platforms, websites, and more.

I believe the future of faith formation is *hybrid*. Hybrid models hold together two important values in faith formation: the importance of in-person relationships and faith forming

experiences, and the importance of being responsive to the complexity of people's lives and their religious-spiritual needs. Hybrid models expand faith formation opportunities for everyone. We can become much more strategic and careful about when, where, how, and for what we gather people because we can now integrate online with in-person faith forming.

Hybrid models of faith formation are more resilient, flexible, and adaptable—just what we need to respond to the challenges of change in our world and in lives of our people!

We Already Live Hybrid Lives

We are already living hybrid lives. Every day we weave together a life that is lived both online (mediated) and offline (in-person). Faith formation is catching up to the way people already live and interact every day. Angela Gorrell, author of *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (another must-read for everyone in faith formation), writes that we now live hybrid lives—online and offline.

> Recognizing online actions as meaning-filled helps Christian communities to consider our current online and in-person reality in terms of its hybridity, rather than in terms of digital dualism (think of online as virtual and in person as real). "Hybridity," describes "the coming together of online and offline, media and matter, or more dynamically. . . . the interplay between the online and offline dimension." Most Americans live hybrid lives because our online and offline lives have been integrated. Interactions online shape offline experiences, and offline communication and practices shape people's online engagement. (Gorrell 47)

Angela Gorrell writes that not only do we live hybrid lives, but we now live in hybrid Christian communities.

> Hybrid Christian communities embody God's love and "make the message believable" through meaningful conversations and faithful habits that are both in person and mediated, that take place at various times, and that happen in both physical and digital spaces.

> I do not think it is too daunting for Christian communities to think about their community as being hybrid, given Paul's letters and specifically his use of the metaphor of the "body of Christ." Paul's letters are a clear example of hybrid Christian communities, since his letters were extensions of his in-person ministry within particular communities and also provided mediated guidance for those communities.

> It is possible to nurture a hybrid Christian community. Many Christian communities *are* hybrid Christian communities (though they would probably not use this terminology) because they are nurturing relationships, growing spiritually, and engaging in ministry in-person and online. Through social media, members are cultivating connections online that

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are not that different from the relationships that prevailed before the internet and mobile phones. (Gorrell 50-51)

A Hybrid Future

The key to hybrid faith formation is the integration of in-person faith forming with online faith forming into <u>one</u> holistic integrated experience.

A program design can begin online and then move to in-person and back to online <u>or</u> it can begin in-person and continue online. There are a variety of ways to integrate the two components.

In-Person Formation ⟳ Online Formation
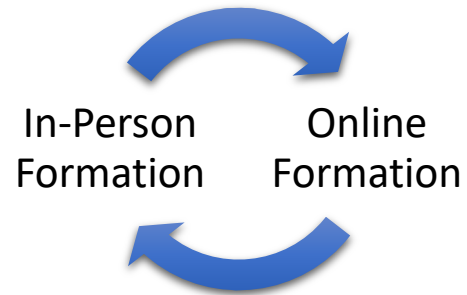
One way to develop a hybrid model is by beginning with in-person faith formation and then deepen it with online faith formation. We can extend the theme of an in-person event or program by curating a variety of faith forming experience that provide more depth and application of the theme through images, video, audio, readings, etc. We can deliver the content using a multi-media newsletter, social media posts, and/or a playlist on a website. Here are several examples you can adapt. In addition, consider designing programs like mission trips, vacation Bible school, and summer camps into hybrid models.

Worship & Online Formation
- Participate in weekly worship (in-person or live streamed).
- Engage in faith forming activities using an online playlist on Sunday's theme: prayers, readings, video, podcast, art, music, creative activities, conversations, action ideas, etc.

In-Person & Online Formation
- Meet in-person once per month (or every other week).
- Engage in online faith formation for the other weeks using a playlist on the theme.

In-Person & Online & Video Meetings
- Week #1: Meet in-person for the program.
- Week #2: Engage in online faith forming experiences using a playlist on the theme.
- Week #3: Continue with the playlist learning on the theme.
- Week #4: Conduct a video meeting (Zoom) for small groups or age groups or families to discuss and apply the online learning.

In-Person & Live Streamed or Video & Online
- Week #1: Meet in-person for the program.
- Week #2: Engage in online faith forming experiences using a playlist on the theme.

- Week #3: Conduct a livestream presentation or demonstration or prerecorded video (using Zoom, Facebook Live, or YouTube Live) on the theme of the month's program.
- Week #4: Continue with the playlist learning on the theme.

A second way to develop a hybrid model is to begin with online faith formation, leading to in-person experiences. This approach is known as **Flipped Learning** in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space online, and the group space is transformed into a dynamic interactive learning environment where the leader/teacher guides participants as they creatively discuss, practice, and apply the content.

Here is a basic outline of a 4-week model that can be applied to children and youth programs, as well as adult Bible studies and short courses.

Online & Small Group Gatherings
- Week #1: Engage in online learning using Playlist #1 on the theme.
- Week #2: Participate in a small group gathering to discuss and apply the learning (in-person or through video conferencing)
- Week #3: Engage in online learning using Playlist #2 on the theme.
- Week #4: Participate in a small group gathering to discuss and apply the learning (in-person or through video conferencing)

The Flipped Learning Model is very helpful when it is difficult to gather people, such as preparation for a sacrament or milestone. We can *prepare* people online with the appropriate content (experiences, activities, video/audio, and resources); then *engage* them in-person for the event or program; and *sustain and apply* the experience through online faith formation.

A good example of this is an adolescent confirmation program. Here is a Flipped Model illustrated in a monthly format for young people that can be woven into a yearlong program.

- **On Your Own**: Engage young people with a monthly learning playlist—watching videos, reading short articles, praying, writing reflections in a journal—on the theme.
- **In a Small Group**: Have young people participate in one small group experience (online) to discuss the content in the playlist and what they are learning.
- **In a Large Group**: Involve young people in a monthly meeting with all groups for community sharing, interactive activities, short presentations, and ideas for living faith.

Hybrid models of faith formation are the future of faith formation—more resilient, flexible, and adaptable. Now we must learn the skills necessary for designing hybrid models of faith formation and creating playlists of faith forming content and experiences. *Watch for upcoming What If… articles and new content on the LifelongFaith.com website to help you.*

Works Cited
Gorrell, Angela. *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media World.* Baker Academic, 2019.

WHAT IF. . .
Imagining Possibilities

Building Capacity for Faith Formation
John Roberto

Capacity is "the ability of a person or organization to do something (Cambridge Dictionary); "the ability to understand or to do something, such as the intellectual capacity for something, the work capacity for doing something, or the capacity to do something to enjoy life" (Oxford Dictionary).

It is not an overstatement to say that most churches today have capacity challenges. Leaders find it increasingly more difficult to sustain and expand their ministries due to what they experience as a lack of resources (capacities)—professional staffing, finances, volunteer leaders, program materials, and more. These churches may want to provide more robust ministries, and a more comprehensive lifelong faith formation but feel that they have too few people and resources to respond effectively. The challenge to build capacity points to a new role for all pastoral leaders

One of the essential roles of all pastoral leaders today is to develop the mindset, the processes, and the skills for becoming capacity builders.

What is capacity building? *Capacity-building* is the process of developing an organization's strengths and sustainability. Capacity building refers to activities that improve and enhance an organization's ability to achieve its mission and sustain itself over time. In the nonprofit world this includes identifying a communications strategy, improving volunteer recruitment, identifying more efficient uses of technology, and engaging in collaborations with community partners. When capacity building is successful, it strengthens an organization's ability to fulfill its mission over time and enhances the organization's ability to have a significant, positive impact on lives and communities.

Pastoral leaders today need to become *capacity-builders*. The good news in the 2020s is that churches now have access to an abundance of resources available to them at little or no cost. Technical expertise is available from websites, blogs, and online groups. Faith formation resources are available in digital formats (websites, video, podcasts, apps, and more). Training is available

for free or low-cost through online webinars and courses. The digital transformation of society and church is giving mid-size and small churches access to the same resources and expertise that was once reserved for high capacity churches.

A Capacity Building Mindset

All of this abundance will go untapped unless leaders develop a *capacity building mindset*. A mindset is our way of thinking, a mental attitude or frame of mind. A mindset is our collection of thoughts and beliefs that shape our thought-habits. And your thought-habits affect how we think, what we feel, and what we do. Our mindset impacts how we make sense of the world, and how we make sense of ourselves.

In my experience church leaders have two different mindsets about capacity. One group of leaders has a **scarcity mindset**—not enough volunteers, money, resources, facilities, and so forth. These leaders often limit the scope of their ministry to fit their scarcity mindset. "We can't try anything new because we don't have enough people, money, and resources to continue what we are already doing." The scarcity mindset hinders leaders from adapting approaches, expanding ministries, reaching new audiences, and developing innovations to address new needs. The scarcity mindset has a direct impact on creating, sustaining and enhancing church vitality. Practiced long enough, the scarcity mindset is a prescription for church decline.

Another group of pastoral leaders embrace an **abundance mindset**. They start with the belief that their community has assets and strengths to uncover and build on. They believe that there are an abundance of resources they can access for ministry and faith formation. Their primary job is to discover resources in the people of their community, in community organizations, in the wider church, online, and much more. They believe that they will be able to discover the resources necessary for adapting approaches, expanding ministries, reaching new audiences, and developing innovations to address new needs. *They are capacity-builders*.

Capacity building is designed to improve and enhance the church's ability to achieve its mission and sustain itself over time. Among the essential capacities needed in churches today are leadership (professional and volunteer), financial sustainability, facilities, communication, technology, collaborations with other churches and community organizations, and programmatic resources in all forms—print, audio, video, digital, and online.

A good practice for capacity-building is to conduct an annual **Capacity Assessment** (for the whole church or for a particular ministry like faith formation). Review the plans for each ministry and ask, *"What do our ministry plans require in order to be implemented effectively and successfully?"* Use questions like the following to guide your assessment. Customize these questions for individual ministries.

1. What capacities do we require to implement our ministry plans for the coming year?
   - What will our plans require of the pastor and professional ministry leadership (competencies, skills, processes and procedures)?
   - What volunteer leaders will be required for our plans, and what competencies (knowledge and skills) and resources will they need to perform effectively (tools and resources)?
   - What material resources (facilities, communication, technologies, print and digital resources) will our plans require?
   - What financial resources will our plans require?

2. What capacities (resources) do we already have available to us for the coming year within our church community (people, programs, resources, finances), and outside our church in other religious congregations, schools and colleges, community organizations, denominational agencies—regional and national?

3. What capacities (resources) do we need to develop or enhance in order to implement our plans and flourish as a community (or ministry)?

Create a "Capacity Report" that presents what is required this year, what we already have, and what we need to develop. This can form the blueprint for develop a plan of action.

In the next two sections we will explore how to build capacity by curating resources and developing leaders. These are only two of the key capacities churches need to develop, along with finances, technology, communication, facilities, and partnerships or collaborations. Developing capacity through curating resources and developing leaders has a special relevance to the work of lifelong faith formation.

Curating Resources for Faith Formation

Faith formation leaders build capacity by curating a variety of resources for their faith formation plans and programming. The Oxford Dictionary defines a curator as "a person who uses their knowledge to select and present information or items such as pictures, video, music, etc. for people to use and enjoy, especially on the internet." The role of curator has emerged as an essential skill to respond to the wider the scope of faith formation across the whole life span and to the dramatic increase in digital, print, audio, and video resources for faith formation with all ages.

Faith formation leaders are now curators of religious content and experiences. They research and organize resources, evaluate resources, and connect the best and most relevant resources to programming. Leaders no longer need to create most of their programming. They can now access technical expertise from websites, blogs, and online groups; *and* digital faith formation resources

from websites, videos, podcasts, apps, and more. They can access training for free or low-cost through video programs, and online webinars and courses.

In the new digital world of abundant resources, the role of the faith formation leader is shifting from *providing* religious content and programming to *curating* religious content and experiences for all ages from a variety of trusted sources in print, audio, video, digital, and online formats. By curating programs and resources well, leaders find that they can address current needs as well as well as expand faith formation programming. With an abundance mindset leaders discover new resources that can be mobilized to implement faith formation plans. Here are a few examples of the abundance that is available.

✦ Consider the abundance of high quality video presentations and webinars—theological, biblical, social issues, and life issues—created by colleges, seminaries, and religious organizations that are available online for free. Curate the video presentations into an integrated "speaker series" or course or small group program with supportive online materials and activities.

✦ Consider the abundance of *free* online faith formation programming to offer programs to adults of all ages. One example is Yale Bible Study with dozens of online courses taught by Yale professors (https://yalebiblestudy.org). You can use this resource for independent, small group, and large group programming—one resource, multiple program options. (For a list of curated resource centers, go to www.LifelongFaith.com.)

✦ Consider designing a course or learning playlists using *free* online audio and video programs. One example for Bible study is the "Reflections Bible Study" from the Bible Project which features a short podcast or video and reflection questions to help people create space for the biblical story in their lives (https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/all). You can design a variety of learning experiences around a resource like this.

✦ Consider design a parenting program using the content and activities already available online. One example is the *Keep Connected* website from the Search Institute, which includes information on the five developmental relationships, quizzes, discussion starters, and interactive activities (https://keepconnected.searchinstitute.org/bringing-out-the-best-in-your-family).

✦ Consider courses, events, and programs sponsored by local religious congregations, continuing education programs, and community organizations that can become part of a faith formation plan. Imagine partnering with YMCA/YWCA on a parenting course or with a youth-serving agency on a life skills course for teens.

✦ Consider retreats sponsored by regional retreat centers and conferences and workshops offered by denominational offices/agencies. Imagine partnering with a retreat center on a retreat for midlife adults or a retreat for adults in their 70s and 80s.

- ✦ Consider offer courses, workshops, and conferences sponsored by the community colleges and universities in your area who that can become part of your faith formation plan.

The Curating Process

There are three steps in the process of curating resources for faith formation: (1) research and organize resources, (2) evaluate resources, and (3) connect the resources to programming.

Step 1. Research and Organize the Resources

The first step in the curation process is researching and reviewing resources. This is the collection phase. There's no need to select or evaluate resources at this stage— the key is to collect as many high-quality resources for faith formation in all areas and age groups.

It is helpful to develop a list of trusted expert curators to assist you in researching and evaluating resources. We all know people in faith formation who make it part of their work to stay current with the best resources. Make a list of these people and invite them to be part of the curation support system.

It is also helpful to develop a list of high-quality online resource centers with high-quality content. Be selective—this does not have to be a long list of websites. Select resource centers with well-produced content. Review websites from national and regional denominational agencies, religious publishers, churches, and religious organizations. Here are two great examples of online resource center: *Building Faith* (www.buildfaith.org) from Virginia Theological Seminary and the *Congregational Resource Guide* (https://thecrg.org) from the Center for Congregations.

Be sure to subscribe to faith formation blogs and newsletters that review faith formation resources to make it easier for you to keep up-to-date on what's new. Check out blogs and newsletters produced by denominational offices, seminaries, religious organizations, and religious publishers. For lists of curated resources in lifelong faith formation, consult the Lifelong Faith website at www.LifelongFaith.com.

Here are several types of resources to research:

- ✦ People: teachers, mentors/guides, program leaders, small group leaders, guest presenters
- ✦ Community programs: churches, agencies, organizations,
- ✦ Educational institutions: colleges, seminaries, educational organizations
- ✦ Retreat and spiritual life centers, monasteries
- ✦ Regional and national denominational programs, events, and websites
- ✦ Museums
- ✦ Books (with study guides)
- ✦ E-books and audio books

- ✦ Apps
- ✦ Podcasts
- ✦ Videos and feature films
- ✦ Video learning programs
- ✦ Online courses
- ✦ Online activities

One of the easiest ways to develop a library of faith formation resources is to create homegrown resources by saving and archiving church programming. Develop a plan for recording presentations and programs at church in audio/and or video format. Think of all of the opportunities throughout the year for recording programs that can be used in other learning formats such as self-study or small group study. Consider weekly sermons, presentations, special events, concerts, and more. Develop a YouTube channel (https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/1646861?hl=en) or a Vimeo account (https://vimeo.com) for the church to store and categorize all of the video recordings.

Step 2. Evaluate Resources

All faith formation curators need standards for evaluating faith formation resources that reflect their Christian tradition and the needs of their church. A set of evaluation standards needs to be developed locally. Consult denominational resources for evaluating curriculum resources. Most denominations have evaluation standards for assessing educational resources or textbooks. This can serve as a basis for developing your church's evaluation standards.

Here are ten potential categories for developing a resource evaluation checklist. Add one or more focusing questions to each category. Try to keep the checklist short so that it is easy to use. Use the evaluation criteria to review the potential resources identified in Step 1 and develop a list of resources that meet the criteria.

- ✦ Biblical content and interpretation
- ✦ Theological content and emphasis
- ✦ Developmental appropriateness
- ✦ Ethnic-cultural appropriateness
- ✦ Inclusive of diversity
- ✦ Respect for diverse ways of learning
- ✦ Appearance and visual appeal
- ✦ Ease-of-use
- ✦ Quality of experience
- ✦ Ability to be incorporated into daily and home life

Step 3. Select Resources for Programming

The final step is selecting the best resources (programs, activities, experiences, materials) for the target audience.

Developing Leaders for Faith Formation

According to research studies, only about 10% of "registered" members are actively engaged in ministry leadership positions in most churches. This generally follows the 80-20 rule (also known as the Pareto Principle) which asserts that 80% of outcomes (or outputs) result from 20% of all causes (or inputs) for any given event. Other studies show that large parishes (defined as 2000 members or more) receive significantly lower support at all levels when calculated as a factor of participation, with people feeling that their participation won't be missed since there are so many "others" who will contribute talent and financial resources.

If only 10% of members are accomplishing more than 80% of what your church is doing today, imagine what 20% or 30% could do. If your church engaged just an additional 2% of your members over the next year, it could result in 20% more volunteer hours, which would allow the church to expand and deepen its ministries. *How can you make this a reality in your church?*

An Equipping and Empowering Mindset

The involvement of volunteer leaders is essential to a healthy, vibrant church life. Developing an effective strategy for engaging people in ministry gives meaning and purpose to the many tasks and responsibilities taken on by volunteer leaders. It will ensure that people who give of their precious time will experience an efficient process and feel they are adding value to a ministry or program.

Churches that are effective in developing leadership—inviting, preparing, and supporting leaders—first embrace an empowering mindset that guides their efforts. These values are rooted in the Christian tradition. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, and mirrored in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, we see a vision of *church* (body of Christ), of *ministry* (Spirit-led service to the church and world), of *gifts* (given by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the body of Christ), and of *mutuality* or *partnership* (complimenting gifts, given by the Holy Spirit, for the common good) that is essential for developing leaders.

1. The Church is the Body of Christ; and through our Baptism, we are members of the one Body.

Each person in the faith community is called to ministry and is blessed with gifts for ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism we celebrate the call of each person to ministry within

the church community and the ministry of the church to the world. Through Baptism, all Christians share in the mission of Christ and the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit at Baptism empowers us to fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ. All ministry serves this mission. The baptized serve this mission and share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office.

The presence of the Spirit of the risen Lord is the source of power in the ministry of the Christian Church. The Church and all its members emerge from and draw nourishment from the breaking of the bread, the reality of the resurrection and Pentecost, and the sending forth of the disciples to spread the good news. It is from this perspective that all followers of Jesus share in his ministry.

2. Individuals and the entire community are blessed with gifts for ministry.

Christian ministry is gift-based. Special charisms of the Holy Spirit, which flow from baptism, equip Christians for their special tasks within the church. In the first centuries of the Christian Church, as needs were recognized in the community, those who were discerned to be appropriately gifted by the Spirit were called forth to serve.

Each person is uniquely gifted for ministry and these gifts consist of more than one's talents. Other aspects of our giftedness include our interests, motivations, values, passions, hopes and dreams, and life journeys. Gifts discernment focuses on the whole person and the entire context of his or her life.

3. There is an abundance of gifts for ministry.

An abundance mentality means that there is diversity of gifts already present in the faith community. The Spirit has blessed the community with gifts. There is no shortage of gifts! The primary task of ministry leaders is to facilitate the discovery of these gifts and the utilization of these gifts on behalf of God's kingdom. Some of the gifts will be utilized within church-based ministries, while others will be exercised in the world.

4. Ministry leaders are called to empower and equip individuals and the entire community to utilize their gifts for the mission of the Christian Church.

Ministry leaders are servants to the needs of the community and stewards of the community's resources. They play an essential role in the church by helping identify the gifts of the community, developing these gifts for ministry, utilizing these gifts on behalf of God's kingdom and the mission of the church, and supporting the gifts of all church members.

A Leadership Strategy

What does an empowering mindset mean in practice for the development of a leadership strategy for lifelong faith formation? Here are five key principles and a process to guide the creation of a leadership development strategy.

Principles

Every leadership experience in the church deepens a leaders relationship with Jesus Christ. We recognize that leaders have an opportunity to grow in their faith through involvement in ministry. We are concerned about the spiritual growth of leaders *and* their knowledge and skills for the practice of ministry.

Leaders are respected as full partners in ministry. We give volunteer leaders responsibility and work with them as team members, sharing the decision-making and work.

The gifts, abilities, interests, and passions of the leader are honored. We take the time to discern the gifts and talents of leaders and see that their leadership role matches well with their gifts.

Leaders receive specialized training, resources, and support so that they can adequately perform their ministry, especially when the knowledge or skills involved are new to them. We ensure that volunteer leaders feel capable and confident that they can perform their ministry. We tailor the training and resources to the needs of the leader and his or her responsibilities.

Leaders are appreciated and recognized for the value of their contributions to their ministry and to the church. We take the time, formally and informally, to express the gratitude of the church for the work of the volunteer leaders. We create specific strategies, such as dinners, gatherings, rituals, and thank-you notes, to demonstrate appreciation and recognize the contributions of leaders.

Process

Step 1. Assess the way that your church currently engages in identifying or calling, matching, preparing, and supporting volunteer leaders. One way to do this is to use the five leadership development principles (above) as a reflection tool and describe how your church or ministry practices each principle.

1. Every leadership experience in the church deepens a leaders relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. Leaders are respected as full partners in ministry.
3. The gifts, abilities, interests, and passions of the leader are honored.
4. Leaders receive specialized training, resources, and support so that they can adequately perform their ministry.

5. Leaders are appreciated and recognized for the value of their contributions to their ministry and to the church.

The second way is to use the "Leadership System Checklist" (at the end of the article) to assess each aspect of your leadership development system, identify strengths and areas for growth, and develop action plans to improve.

Step 2. Create a *Ministries Guide* (in print, digital, and website versions) with the ways that people can be involved in the ministries of the church. Use or adapt the "Researching Ministry Opportunities in Your Church" worksheet (at the end of the article) to collect information.

Step 3. Develop a *Gifts Inventory* for all ministries (or for a particular ministry) by using or adapting the "Gifts Inventory" (at the end of the article) to help people identify their gifts and help the church community recognize and celebrate the abundance of the community's gifts. Have people complete the gifts list (left column) and then the list of ways they can be involved (right column). Be sure to add specific gifts (left column) from your analysis of leadership roles in the *Ministry Guide.* Add specific leadership opportunities from your *Ministry Guide* to the experience and interest list (right column).

Step 4. Engage the community in identifying their gifts, experiences, and interests using the *Gifts Inventory* and in finding ways to be involved using the *Ministries Guide*.

The *Gifts Inventory* can be conducted in gathered settings such as during or after Sunday worship or church events. Consider sponsoring a Stewardship Sunday with displays of ministries and volunteer leadership opportunities and presentation by leaders representing church ministries who can speak briefly speak about the ways people can get involved. Use church meetings and gatherings to present the opportunities for engagement and have people complete the *Gifts Inventory*. Be sure to distribute the *Ministries Guide* at all gathered events.

Make the *Gifts Inventory* and *Ministry Guide* part of new member welcome kits, and preparation programs for Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, and other program settings.

The *Gifts Inventory* can be designed into an online form or survey using SurveyMonkey (https://www.surveymonkey.com) or Google Forms (https://www.google.com/forms/about/). Send the invitation via email, e-newsletter, and social media to the whole community. Send personalized invitations, such as targeted e-mail to families with children and teens, adults who participate in programs, men's and women's groups, and more. Be sure to have the *Ministries Guide* available online for people to review.

If your church does not have a communication system to send invitations and directly communicate with those who are interested (matching gifts with ministries), this is the time to create one. There are three widely-used email systems, each with different annual subscription fees (and often nonprofit discounts): Constant Contact: https://www.constantcontact.com, Mail

Chimp: https://mailchimp.com, and Flocknote: https://flocknote.com. It's also a good time to select a group texting app to communicate with people.

Step 5. Develop a system to inventory people's gifts and match them with potential ministry leadership positions. If you use SurveyMonkey or Google Forms you can easily create individual profiles of people who have responded, as well as Google Sheets or Excel spreadsheets of all people.

Step 6. Meet with people (in-person, phone, video meeting) to interview them and match people with a ministry leadership position. Connect them to the leader who is responsible for coordinating the ministry or program or activity.

Step 7. Prepare people for their ministry leadership role with specialized training and resources so that they can adequately perform their ministry. First, provide an orientation to their ministry so they feel confident and knowledgeable about their leadership role. Second, provide them with the knowledge and skills for performing their role. Leaders bring experience, so it's important to discern what they need, rather than what we think they need. Here are several key insights to guide designing training experiences for leaders.

✦ Training needs to be *applicable* to the leadership role. We customize the training around the required knowledge and skills. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to training leaders. The scope and the depth of training are related to the requirements of the volunteer leadership position and the knowledge and skills the leader possesses. This approach focuses on what he or she *needs* to learn.

✦ Training needs to be *experiential* ("hands-on"), so that leaders develop both the knowledge and the practical skills for their ministry.

✦ Training needs to be *on-the-job*. The best context for training is the actual work the leader is doing. Learning and performing are intertwined. In this sense training is embedded in the doing of the ministry, such as planning meetings, individual preparation, conducting the program or activity, and evaluation meetings. Training is woven into every aspect of the ministry.

✦ Training needs to be *just-in-time* so that there is immediacy of application. This provides a way for the leader to see progress, immediate results, and some rewards for the time they put into training.

✦ Training needs to use a *variety of learning approaches*—independent learning, apprenticeship learning, group learning, and courses and workshops. There are lots of ways for leaders to develop the knowledge and skills they need.

Step 8. Support and encourage leaders continuously. First, recognize leaders as they begin their ministry. Sometimes this is done in a commissioning service where leaders are recognized and blessed. Second, provide leaders with easy access to the resources, information, and tools they need to accomplish their work. Third, gather information and evaluate the work of leaders through observation, consultation, group discussion, instruments, or other means; and guide leaders in creating plans for their continued growth. Fourth, express and celebrate the support of the church. There are many ways to do this throughout the year: public recognition (at worship, in a church bulletin or newsletter), support (child care while they provide their service), gatherings (an annual recognition dinner, an annual picnic), personal (notes of appreciation, praying for leaders), and enrichment (an annual retreat, support meetings, paying for workshops or conference fees).

Resources for Developing Leaders

Anderson, Leith and Jill Fox. *The Volunteer Church: Mobilizing Your Congregation for Growth and Effectiveness.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.

Ragasa-Mondoy, Jayne. *Cultivating Your Catechists: How to Recruit, Encourage, and Retain Successful Catechists.* Chicago: Loyola Press, 2017.

Searcy, Nelson. *Connect: How to Double Your Number of Volunteers.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012.

Urban, Judith. *New Life through Shared Ministry: Moving from Volunteering to Mission.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.

Young, Jason and Jonathan Malm. *The Volunteer Effect: How Your Church Can Find, Train, and Keep Volunteers Who Make a Difference.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2020.

Leadership System Checklist

Assess the leadership system in your church and identify areas for growth.

Part 1. Inviting People into Leadership

1. We list all the tasks and positions for which leaders will needed. Yes   No
2. We write a job description for each leadership position. Yes   No
3. We use a variety of targeted strategies for recruiting leaders. Yes   No
4. We use a variety of community-wide strategies for recruiting leaders. Yes   No
5. We survey the church community to discover leadership abilities and interests (gifts inventory). Yes   No
6. We search throughout the year for persons with leadership potential. Yes   No
7. We maintain an up-to-date database of potential leaders. Yes   No
8. We select each prospective leader based on a thorough knowledge of both the job and the person. Yes   No
9. We interview each person and explain the responsibilities involved. Yes   No
10. With each leader, we establish a clear agreement regarding the responsibilities and terms of his or her service. Yes   No

Part 2. Preparing and Training Leaders

11. We customize the training to each leader and leadership position. Yes   No
12. We use a variety of learning approaches including independent learning, apprenticeship, group learning, and courses and workshops. Yes   No
13. We provide an orientation program for all leaders. Yes   No
14. We develop a training plan to prepare for leaders. Yes   No
15. All leaders participate in the training they need. Yes   No
16. We evaluate the effectiveness of the training with leaders. Yes   No

Part 3. Supporting Leaders

17. We authorize leaders to begin their service. Yes   No
18. We provide all leaders with the resources and information they need for their work. Yes   No
19. We gather information and evaluate the work of leaders. Yes   No
20. We express and celebrate the community's appreciation for leaders. Yes   No

We need to strengthen or improve the following areas of our leadership system:

Researching Ministry Opportunities in Your Church

This tool is one way to gather information about the leadership roles and needs from each ministry, program, and organization in your church.

Ministry/Program/Organization
Please indicate the key leader or leaders in your ministry, program, or organization.

Leader/Coordinator	Leader/Coordinator	Leader/Coordinator
Name	Name	Name
Phone	Phone	Phone
Email	Email	Email

Volunteer Jobs for Your Ministry/Program/Organization
For each volunteer job please indicate the name of the job, a few key responsibilities, the abilities needed, where the job is done (in the parish, in the community, etc.), and the amount of time required. Please complete this information for each of your volunteer jobs.

Job
Name

Responsibilities

Abilities Needed

Where?

When?

How Long?

Job
Name

Responsibilities

Abilities Needed

Where?

When?

How Long?

Gifts Inventory

*Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others
the special gift he has received from God.* (1 Peter 4:10)

Each of us is like a gift package from God. Our combination of gifts is unique. Not one of us has ever been replicated on this earth! Our giftedness includes our talents and abilities, styles, interests, experiences, preferences, and passions for serving in the world. Our gifts are part of an abundant web of giftedness in our faith community. These gifts were given to us so that we might minister together as partners in God's work in the world. And our gifts are meant for us to enjoy too! When we live out our gifts, we discover the joys of an abundant life.

This inventory will help you identify your own gifts, and help our church community recognize and celebrate the abundance of our gifts. Complete the gifts inventory (left column) and then the list of ways you can be involved (right column). Equipped with a list of your gifts and talents, you can now consider the type of activities you want to be involved in. Think about which interests best match with your gifts and talents.

About You

Name:
Address:
City/State/Zip
Phone
Email
Age

❐	11-19	❐	50-59
❐	20-29	❐	60-69
❐	30-39	❐	70-79
❐	40-49	❐	80 and over

Special Information

❐ I am interested in becoming more involved in the ministries of our church. Notify me of opportunities that fit my gifts.
❐ I am interested in changing some of my current commitments.
❐ I prefer a one-time commitment (1 hour to 1 day).
❐ I prefer a short-term commitment (up to 6 months)
❐ I prefer a specific, longer term of service (1 year or more)
❐ I am satisfied with my current involvements in the ministries of our church.
❐ I am unable to take on additional commitments at this time.
❐ I would like to talk with a member of the team about my using my gifts.

Note: Add specific gifts you are seeking based on your analysis of leadership roles in the Ministry Guide.

My gifts are…
Check up to a dozen things you do well. Feel free to add other gifts not specifically listed.

- ❐ accounting/finances/budget
- ❐ acting/drama
- ❐ artwork/crafts
- ❐ caring and compassion
- ❐ carpentry/building
- ❐ child care
- ❐ clerical work
- ❐ communication
- ❐ computer skills
- ❐ cooking and serving food
- ❐ coordinating and organizing projects
- ❐ dancing
- ❐ decorating
- ❐ facilitating and working with groups
- ❐ faith-sharing
- ❐ fundraising
- ❐ gardening
- ❐ graphic design
- ❐ hospitality
- ❐ housekeeping
- ❐ legal services
- ❐ listening
- ❐ maintaining buildings/grounds
- ❐ mechanical work
- ❐ mediating and problem-solving
- ❐ medical/nursing care
- ❐ mentoring/tutoring
- ❐ music: instrumental or voice
- ❐ photography
- ❐ planning/visioning
- ❐ praying
- ❐ promotion/advertising
- ❐ public speaking
- ❐ researching
- ❐ social justice work
- ❐ sound recording/audio production
- ❐ teaching/training
- ❐ video and video production
- ❐ visiting others
- ❐ web design
- ❐ writing

Note: Add specific leadership opportunities from your Ministry Guide to this list.

I have experience or interest in these areas of involvement. . .

*Mark the 5 greatest areas of **experience (E)** with +*
*Mark the three greatest areas of **interest (I)** with ✓*

E	I	Potential Involvement
_____	_____	arts
_____	_____	children's ministry
_____	_____	care for and dignity of the elderly
_____	_____	consolation/grief ministry
_____	_____	communications
_____	_____	community outreach/service
_____	_____	data administration
_____	_____	disabilities / special needs
_____	_____	education: children
_____	_____	education: youth
_____	_____	education: adults
_____	_____	environment / care for the earth
_____	_____	family ministry
_____	_____	finance
_____	_____	global mission
_____	_____	grief and loss
_____	_____	health ministry
_____	_____	media (photography, videos)
_____	_____	music
_____	_____	new member welcome
_____	_____	pastoral care
_____	_____	prayer ministry
_____	_____	addiction and recovery
_____	_____	sacramental preparation
_____	_____	service to the poor and vulnerable
_____	_____	singles ministry
_____	_____	small faith communities
_____	_____	social justice
_____	_____	social/community life
_____	_____	spiritual growth
_____	_____	stewardship
_____	_____	web ministry
_____	_____	worship/liturgy
_____	_____	young adult ministry
_____	_____	youth ministry