



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Envisioning Lifelong Maturing in Faith

(Second in a series of articles on a lifelong learning paradigm in churches)

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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.