

Lifelong Faith

**FORMATION FOR ALL
AGES AND GENERATIONS**

John Roberto





1

Lifelong Faith Formation for Today's World

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:21–23)

You are probably very familiar with the famous opening sequence to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, intoned by Patrick Stewart as Captain Picard: “Space . . . the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.”

This message perfectly captures the challenge for leaders in faith formation today as we seek to give shape and form to the continuing mission given to us by Jesus Christ: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

The goal of nurturing Christian faith in all ages and equipping people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today has guided the Christian Church for two thousand years. The continuing mission of forming disciples for the

whole of their lives takes place in the “strange new worlds” we now inhabit. Church leaders face the challenge of finding new ways to form disciples who will live their Christian faith for a lifetime.

In 2010 I wrote *Faith Formation 2020* as a guide for churches to envision and design dynamic, engaging, and inspiring faith formation in the second decade of the twenty-first century. *Faith Formation 2020* addressed three key questions: “What could faith formation in Christian churches look like in 2020?” “How can Christian congregations provide vibrant faith formation to address the spiritual and religious needs of all ages and generations over the next ten years?” “How can churches envision the shape of faith formation in the year 2020 and design initiatives to respond proactively to the challenges and opportunities in the second decade of the twenty-first century?”

These questions still challenge us. The future of faith formation in congregations will, in large part, be determined by how well churches provide comprehensive, lifelong faith formation that is inclusive of all ages and generations, and responsive to the diverse life situations, and spiritual and religious needs of people today. Faith formation will need to be more responsive, resilient, flexible, and adaptable.

Embracing Lifelong Faith Formation

Robust, vital lifelong faith formation can renew and revitalize the faith life of all ages and contribute toward building a thriving congregation that lives its mission. How and what a congregation is learning is critical to building a vital congregation. The practice of lifelong faith formation can renew and revitalize the life of a church as well. When a church embraces lifelong faith formation as essential to its mission and makes a commitment to create and sustain faith formation with all ages and generations, the culture of the church is strengthened. From research studies and pastoral experience, we see churches that build a culture of lifelong faith formation where individuals of all ages and families are:

- experiencing God’s living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service
- learning who God is, coming to know Jesus Christ personally, and learning how to live as Christians in the world today
- experiencing a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love—characterized by hospitality, welcoming, love, and support
- participating in spiritually uplifting worship experiences that are fulfilling, inspiring, interesting, accessible, and relevant

- encountering the story of faith through the celebration of the feasts and seasons of the church year
- experiencing God's love through rituals, sacraments, and milestones that celebrate significant moments in people's lives and faith journeys
- experiencing the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and spiritual practices
- growing in understanding by learning the content of the Christian tradition, reflecting upon it, integrating it into their lives, and living its meaning in the world
- developing ethical/moral responsibility by learning about Christian perspectives on moral questions and how to apply their faith to decision-making
- serving those in need, working for justice, and caring for God's creation, locally and globally
- developing intergenerational relationships and community where the Christian faith is shared, modeled, and lived
- participating in intergenerational faith experiences and activities of worship, prayer, learning, and service as integral to congregational life
- engaging in experiences for the whole family in faith and discipleship, and teaching parents, grandparents, and caregivers how to nurture growth in Christian faith and practices at home

Through lifelong faith formation, churches are becoming centers of lifelong learning and growth for all people, bringing an abundance of meaningful and engaging experiences to the whole community, to families, and to people at each stage of the life span from childhood through older adulthood.

Responding to Challenges and Opportunities

There are significant challenges in creating a culture of lifelong faith formation. Even though they may feel overwhelming, each challenge presents an opportunity for churches to respond creatively and innovatively by investing in systematic and intentional lifelong faith formation. Here are six challenges that provide opportunities for making a significant impact on the lives of our people by embracing a lifelong faith formation approach.

We have become a ten-decade society. People are living into their nineties and even over one hundred. This expansion of the life cycle is changing society as a greater share of the population are sixty and over. Many churches

have most of their members in this age group. Churches that are intentional about creating faith formation for all ten decades, and especially the sixty-five and over population, will bring tremendous benefit to the lives of individuals and families, as well as the entire community. We should embrace this age group, recognize they are connected to three or four other generations in their families, and develop lifelong faith formation that puts them front and center.

We have become a society of lifelong learners. A recent Pew Research Center study showed the extent to which America is a nation of ongoing learners: 73 percent of adults consider themselves lifelong learners, 74 percent of adults are what we call personal learners—that is, they have participated in at least one activity in the past twelve months to advance their knowledge about something that personally interests them. These activities include reading, taking courses or attending meetings, or events tied to learning more about their personal interests. The study also found that 63 percent of those who are working (or 36 percent of all adults) are what we call professional learners—that is, they have taken a course or gotten additional training in the past twelve months to improve their job skills or expertise connected to career advancement (Horrigan 2016). These adult lifelong learners are members of our churches. We can now address the lifelong spiritual and religious needs of our adults and engage them in meaningful, faith-forming experiences that are easy to access and designed in multiple formats.

We have a capacity challenge in churches. High-capacity churches are well-resourced with professional leadership, ministry resources, and financial assets, but most midsize and small churches are experiencing capacity challenges. These churches want to provide comprehensive lifelong faith formation but feel that they have too few people and resources to respond effectively. 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. These churches need models of faith formation that are designed to utilize these abundant resources.

We have a religious participation challenge, and a corresponding religious socialization challenge. A 2020 Gallup study found that 47 percent of US adults belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50 percent in 2018 and 70 percent in 1999. This dramatic change is primarily due to the rise in Americans with no religious preference, and the replacement of older, actively practicing Christians, with younger generations who are less engaged in religious congregations and religious practice (Jones 2021). The religious participation decline and the rise of the unaffiliated is well documented, but one of the consequences of this trend is the decline in passing on faith from generation to generation. Many Christian denominations are urgently creating strategies to keep older teens and young adults in their twenties and thirties involved in churches and faith practice. While this is important, the deeper concern should be who is socializing the next generation into the Christian faith? Who is enriching the faith life of parents and grandparents and equipping them to transmit the Christian faith to the young? Churches that address this issue will develop the foundation for a life of faith in the new generation and their parents. The religious participation and socialization challenge is a huge opportunity to reimagine faith formation and develop a more comprehensive and systemic approach.

We have a hybridity challenge as Christian communities. The concept of hybridity is not new to us. We are already living hybrid lives. Every day we weave together a life that is lived both online (mediated) and offline (in-person). Churches and faith formation are catching up to the way people already live and interact every day. Angela Gorrell writes:

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, 2019, 47)

Far too many churches were slow to embrace their hybrid community life and found adapting to the disruption of the coronavirus pandemic overwhelming. Embracing hybrid faith formation creates new ways to blend faith formation

in physical and online spaces; and opens us up to a new world of tools, methods, and media to reach and engage all ages.

We have a generational connection challenge. There is a decades-long trend toward greater generational isolation in our society. 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 sometimes. 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 coronavirus 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” (Springtide Research 2021, 15).

The societal challenge today is creating generational connection and collaboration that benefit all ages, solve critical problems, and mend the fraying social fabric. Despite all the positive contributions of technology to keep people connected, 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 in every sector of the community. Connecting the generations—(re)building intergenerational community, relationships, and experiences—is a tremendous opportunity for every church community. This may be the moment when churches make a commitment to become more intentionally intergenerational in all that they do.

Elements of a New Approach to Lifelong Faith Formation

The mission of making disciples and forming faith for a lifetime can seem overwhelming. Leaders want to make lifelong faith formation a reality. They want to nurture, sustain, and deepen the Christian faith for a lifetime. *What if we could*

identify the essential elements that make lifelong faith formation work—key elements that could guide decision-making and planning in every single church?

My efforts to identify these essentials has been inspired by the marvelous book and Netflix series *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, by Samin Nosrat. The whole idea behind *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* is that if we can learn how to use those four elements—which play a role in everything that we cook—we can learn how, why, and when to use them, and make anything taste good with or without a recipe. The rest, she says, is just a combination of cultural, seasonal, or technical details, for which we could consult cookbooks and experts, histories, and maps. For her this insight was a “revelation.” (Lam 2017, 9) “I know you’re thinking ‘but I need recipes,’” Samin writes:

As I would teach classes to people, they would end up spending over the course of our curriculum 20 to 30 hours with me, four or five hours per element: salt, fat, acid, and heat. We did a lot of interactive cooking, tasting and adjusting. I would do everything I could to walk people through the philosophy of how to use the four elements. We wouldn’t have recipes in the classes. Then at the end of the fourth class—every single time—people would come up to me and say, “Could you send me the recipe packet please?” And I was like, “You guys, come on, I just taught you how to cook without them.” I came to realize that I couldn’t just throw people to the wolves. As much as I am trying to instill in you this philosophy of instinctual cooking, you also need training wheels; a good recipe can be training wheels as long as you also aren’t going to abandon your own common sense and your own sense of agency. (Lam 2017)

What if we took the same approach in lifelong faith formation? What if we could develop lifelong faith formation by using several essential elements that could be contextualized and customized in any setting? These elements would need to reflect the best thinking and practice in faith formation and education. They would also need to address the challenges we are facing today.

I propose seven elements that I believe are essential for developing lifelong faith formation. These are elements that every church can contextualize and customize to their size, location, and diversity of their people.

1. Goals—for Maturing in Faith for a Lifetime

The first element is foundational to all the others: a vision of lifelong maturing in Christian faith expressed in ten goals. 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 our lives (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 weekly, 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.

The ten goals are 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. This is a huge shift in emphasis from the current church-centric focus on providing curriculum, courses, classes, programs, and activities, to a person-centered approach to faith formation with all ages, developed around a lifelong vision of maturing in faith.

2. Practices—for Forming a Christian Way of Life

The practices of the Christian faith seek to answer the question: How shall we live? Spiritual practices form the essential content for discipleship and faith growth. Lifelong faith formation guides people in learning basic practices of the Christian faith, participating in them, and living them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill. We come to faith and grow in faith through the practices of the Christian community. And we learn to live these Christian practices not only through doing them ourselves, but through offering guidance, mentoring, and teaching them to others.

Christian practices include caring for creation, discerning, embracing diversity, finding God in everyday life, practicing forgiveness, healing, honoring the body, keeping Sabbath, praying, working for justice, fostering peace and reconciliation, reading the Bible, serving the poor and vulnerable, being generous, giving testimony, and worshipping.

3. Intergenerational Faith Formation through Christian Community

Integral to lifelong faith formation is the primacy of intergenerational community—relationships, and faith-forming experiences for developing and sustaining faith and discipleship in people of all ages and generations. When a church commits itself to building a culture of intergenerationality, it becomes a sign of and instrument for the full experience of the body of Christ by all ages and generations. Churches with a vibrant intergenerational faith-forming community create a welcoming environment of hospitality and care that is conducive to promoting faith growth and mutual support across generations. They build caring relationships among the generations through worship, learning, service, and community events and activities. They create intentional opportunities for bringing the generations together to build relationships and engage in shared activities. They involve *all* generations together in Sunday worship, and engage all generations together in learning experiences that teach the Bible and the Christian tradition and form disciples of all ages in Christian identity. They nurture the spiritual life of all generations together through the community's prayer life, rituals, and blessings. They engage all generations together in service to the poor and vulnerable, in the works of justice and advocacy, and in care for creation.

4. Family Faith Formation with Three Generations

A family is the first community and the most basic way in which God gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. The family is the primary mechanism by which Christian identity becomes rooted in the lives of young people through the day-to-day religious practices and the ways parents model their faith and share it in conversation, collaboration, and exposure to outside religious opportunities. Through the processes of religious socialization, young people with seriously religious parents come to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood.

Churches that make families a priority equip parents and grandparents with practices for forming faith at home (celebrating rituals and milestones, observing the seasons of the church year, praying, serving, learning the Christian faith, reading the Bible). They provide the knowledge and skills for parenting and grandparenting today. They provide experiences for the whole family that promote growth in faith and discipleship, and resources to strengthen the connection between what happens at church and Christian practice at home. Churches also involve families in congregational activities. Churches can create a plan for family faith formation designed around the specific life stage needs of families with young children (0–5) elementary school children (6–10), young adolescents (11–14), and older adolescents (15–19).

5. Networks for Forming Faith for All Ages

Lifelong faith formation is designed as a network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources—in physical places and online spaces—for children, adolescents, young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, older adults, and the whole family. A network approach transforms faith formation 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 their learning. In a network model, faith formation shifts from “one size fits all” curriculum and programming to religious content and experiences that connect with people’s spiritual and religious needs.

A network approach incorporates a variety of methods for and styles of learning. A variety of formats for learning are also provided—on your own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the church, and in the community and world—delivered in physical gathered settings and online settings. A network approach is designed in three modes: gathered programming in

physical places, online programming, and hybrid programming that integrates both. Synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (on your own time) offerings expanding the opportunities for people to engage in faith-forming experiences that are responsive to their time, commitments, and availability.

6. Pathways for Personalizing Faith Formation

Personalizing faith formation addresses the diverse faith growth needs of people by tailoring the environment—what, when, how, and where people learn and grow—to address the spiritual and religious interests and needs of all ages. Faith pathways help people find where they are in their journey and to chart a path for faith growth toward a deeper relationship with Jesus and the life and practices of the Christian community. People should be able to clearly understand where they are in their faith journey and find their next steps forward. A pathways guide is created around the ten goals for discipleship and maturing in faith so that people can discern their needs, and together with mentors and small groups, develop a personalized faith growth plan that accesses the offerings in the faith formation network a church has created and the activities in specially designed playlists of content (print, audio, video, online) and experiences (intergenerational, family, and age-group programming) to address those needs.

7. Playlists for Providing Personalized Faith Formation

Faith formation playlists provide a variety of curated experiences (in-person and online), published on a digital platform, that families, individuals, and/or small groups can use to address areas of faith growth identified in the pathways guide. Playlists can also be developed on life issues, biblical and theological topics, Christian practices, seasons of the church year, and more to provide faith-forming content for families, all ages, or specific groups or life cycle stages. Playlists incorporate intergenerational, family, age group, and online/digital faith-forming content, experiences, and activities. A learning playlist is similar in concept to a music playlist where people curate music from a variety of artists into a group of songs selected because they are favorites or represent a musical genre or theme.

Conclusion

Lifelong faith formation developed around these seven elements can transform the life of families, children, adolescents, adults, and the whole church community. We can address our significant challenges by embracing a lifelong approach. How and what a community is learning is critical to building a vital church

culture of lifelong faith formation that creates, sustains, and nourishes Christian discipleship. The next chapters provide the vision and practices for helping this become a reality in your church.

Works Cited

- Gorrell, Angela. 2019. *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Horrigan, John B. 2016. "Lifelong Learning and Technology." Pew Research Center. March 22, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/03/22/lifelong-learning-and-technology>.
- Jones, Jeffrey. 2021. "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time." Gallup Poll. March 29, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.
- Lam, Francis. 2017. "Samin Nosrat on Mastering Salt, Fat, Acid and Heat." The Splendid Table. May 5, 2017. <https://www.splendidtable.org/story/2017/05/05/samin-nosrat-on-mastering-salt-fat-acid-and-heat>.
- Nosrat, Samin. 2017. *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Springtide Research. 2021. *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority*. Bloomington MN: Springtide Research Institute.