

# Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## Union Presbyterian Seminary

Facilitator: John Roberto, LifelongFaith Associates  
jroberto@lifelongfaith.com

### Part 1. Four Big Challenges Facing Faith Formation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

1. **Diversity:** the increasing diversity throughout American society in the length of the lifespan, in generational identities, in family structures and marriage patterns, and in ethnic makeup
2. **Digital Technology:** the rise of new digital technologies that are reshaping society, and the emergence of a connected, networked society
3. **Religiosity:** the dramatic changes and increasing diversity in the religious beliefs, practices, and affiliation of Americans
4. **Religious Transmission:** the decline in religious transmission from generation to generation

### Part 2. Faith Forming Processes

We can discern at least *eight essential processes of forming faith*, informed by Scripture, theology, research, and contemporary reflection, that promote faith growth and discipleship with age groups, families, and the whole faith community. The eight essential faith forming processes – involving knowledge and practices of the Christian faith – facilitate faith growth *and* make a significant difference in the lives of children, youth, adults, and families. These eight faith forming processes are central to Christian lifelong faith formation. They provide a foundation to address the challenge of religious transmission from generation to generation, and promote lifelong growth in faith and discipleship. The eight processes include:

1. **Caring Relationships.** Growing in faith and discipleship through caring relationships across generations and in a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love – in the congregation and family.
2. **Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons.** Growing in faith and discipleship by experiencing the feasts and seasons of the church year as they tell the story of faith through the year in an organic and natural sequence of faith learning.
3. **Celebrating Rituals and Milestones.** Growing in faith and discipleship by celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones that provide a way to experience God’s love through significant moments in one’s life journey and faith journey .
4. **Reading the Bible.** Growing in faith and discipleship by encountering God in the Bible, and by studying and interpreting the Bible – its message, its meaning, and its application to life today.
5. **Learning the Christian Tradition and Applying It to Life.** Growing in faith and discipleship by learning the content of the tradition, reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one’s faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world.
6. **Praying, Devotions, and Spiritual Formation.** Growing in faith and discipleship through personal and communal prayer, and being formed by the spiritual disciplines.

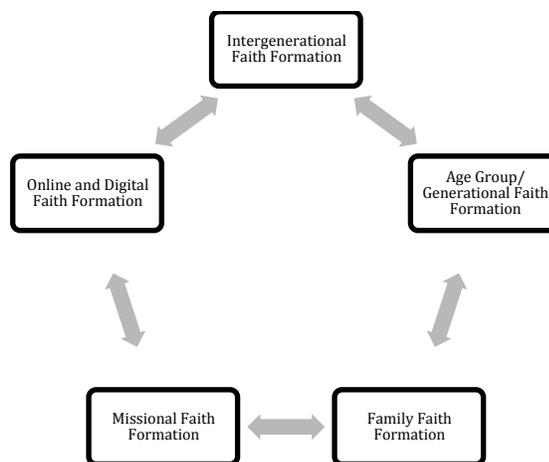
7. **Serving and Justice.** Growing in faith and discipleship by living the Christian mission in the world – engaging in service to those in need, care for God’s creation, and action and advocacy for justice.
8. **Worshipping God.** Growing in faith and discipleship by worshipping God with the community of faith – praising God; giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world; bringing our human joys and dilemmas to God; experiencing God’s living presence through Scripture, preaching, and Eucharist; and being sent forth on mission.

### Part 3. A New Faith Formation Ecosystem

For well over 100 years in the United States, Christian churches had a highly integrated religious ecosystem. It was comprised of multigenerational family faith practice and religious transmission at home; strong congregational community relationships and church life, especially participation in Sunday worship; weekly Sunday school for children and youth (and in many cases adults); and church groups (youth, men, women). Many Christian traditions relied heavily on the ethnic faith traditions of their people to transmit faith from generation to generation – at home and at church. *And* all of this was surrounded by an American culture that explicitly or implicitly supported the Christian value system and Christian practices.

There is no way to go back to this older ecosystem – it has eroded over the past several decades because of all the changes in the culture and society, the family, technology and communication, and more. The environment has changed, and the relationship between congregational faith formation and its environment has changed. *We need a new faith formation ecosystem that reflects this changed context.* This new ecosystem incorporates five, essential, interconnected components:

1. *Intergenerational faith formation in the congregation*
2. *Age group and generational faith formation in a variety of physical places and online spaces*
3. *Family faith formation at home*
4. *Missional faith formation to the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated*
5. *Online and digital faith formation*



### Part 4. Characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Faith Formation

1. Faith formation is developed around the eight faith forming processes – caring relationships, celebrating liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, serving people in need and working for justice and caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community. These eight process provide both a *framework* for a comprehensive curriculum with age groups, generations, and families; and the *content* – knowledge and practices – of the Christian faith.
2. Intergenerational faith formation and whole community faith experiences are at the *center* of all faith formation networks, engaging all ages and generations in the life and events of church life and the Christian faith and participation in intergenerational faith experiences.

3. Age group and generational faith formation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of people at each stage of life.
4. Family faith formation nurtures family faith, develops the faith life of parents and grandparents, strengthens family life, and builds the parenting knowledge and skills of parents.
5. Faith formation provides a variety of learning experiences that can engage the whole person in learning.
6. Faith formation provides a variety of experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections that are available anytime and anywhere, in physical places and online spaces, and conducted in variety of settings – self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world.
7. Faith formation incorporates formal and informal learning.
8. Faith formation provides the opportunity for personalized and customized learning and faith growth, giving people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. People are guided by trusted guides who find the right programs, activities, and resources to match with their learning needs.
9. Faith formation recognizes that learning is a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing within the individual. Faith formation networks recognize that the motivation for learning is intrinsic to the person and is driven by a need for autonomy (self-directedness), mastery, and purpose and meaning.
10. Faith formation incorporates digital platforms (websites) that integrate all of the content (programs, activities, resources), connect people to the content and to each other, provides continuity for people across different learning experiences, and is available anytime, anywhere, anyplace, 24x7x365.
11. Faith formation integrates online and face-to-face learning, blending them in a variety of ways from online programs with minimal interaction in physical settings to programs in physical settings that utilize online content or extend the program using online content.

## Part 5. Reimagining Curriculum

The word “curriculum” is derived from the Latin verb *currere*, which means to run. In literal terms, a curriculum is a course to be run, it is a *journey*. A *faith formation curriculum is a lifelong journey of discipleship – a process of experiencing, learning, and practicing the Christian faith as we seek to follow Jesus and his Way in today’s world*. A faith formation curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is. . .

1. **Holistic:** envisioning Christian faith as a way of the head, the heart, and the hands – informing, forming, and transforming people in Christian faith and identity.
2. **Comprehensive and Balanced:** developed around the eight primary faith forming processes that facilitate faith growth and incorporate essential knowledge and practices of the Christian faith: caring relationships, celebrating liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, serving people in need and working for justice and caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community.
3. **Systemic:** providing a curriculum for the new faith forming ecosystem – an intergenerational faith formation curriculum centered in church life and events, an age group and generational faith formation curriculum, a family faith formation curriculum for the home, and a missional faith formation curriculum for the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated.

4. **Lifelong:** spanning ten decades of life and addressing the uniqueness of each stage of life.
5. **Contextual:** addressing the needs, hungers, interests, and concerns of people today, and their unique spiritual and faith journeys by embracing an approach that moves from *life to Faith to life*.
6. **Digitally-Enabled:** complementing the gathered community settings with online learning environments and utilizing the abundance of digital media and tools for learning and faith formation.
7. **Connected:** linking church life, age groups/generations, daily/home life, and online life through continuous faith formation – connecting participation in church life and events with daily/home life by using online content and connections or reaching people at home and in daily life with online faith formation content and experiences that connect to church life and events.
8. **Multi-platform:** delivered and conducted in multiple settings – self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community and world; and in physical and online learning environments.

*How can we design a lifelong faith formation curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that embodies these eight features?*

## **The Curriculum of Lifelong Faith Formation**

### **Intergenerational Church Life and Events**

Central to 21<sup>st</sup> century faith formation is guided participation in a community of practice. Joyce Mercer makes the key point that this is not just “doing.” It includes fully and actively practicing our faith in everyday life and making theological meaning out of the stuff of everyday life. Theological themes and faith practices are embedded in the experience of church life throughout the year and are an integral element of the curriculum. This includes *the feasts and seasons of the church year; the Lectionary cycle; ritual, milestone, and sacramental celebrations; acts of service and justice*.

### **Age Group and Generational Faith Formation**

Age group and generational faith formation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of age groups and generations across the whole lifespan. The eight faith forming processes are the framework for an age-specific or generationally-specific curriculum, which also includes life issues appropriate to that stage of life and missional initiatives to engage the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated and uninterested. Age group and generation faith formation needs to be connected to the events of church life and to family life. For example:

- People learn about worship and how to worship; experience Sunday worship with the faith community and practice worshipping; and live the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives.
- People learn about the Bible and how to read it, interpret it, and apply it to their lives; experience the Bible at Sunday worship and at home; and develop their own practice of Bible study and reading.
- People learn about Jesus and the Christian tradition – teachings, history, practices, what it means for life today, and how to live the Christian faith today; and experience the life of Jesus and the Christian tradition through participation in the events of church life, especially church year feasts and seasons.
- People learn about prayer and spirituality, and how to develop their spiritual lives through prayer and spiritual discipleship; and experience the prayer life of the faith community; and develop their own practice of prayer and the spiritual disciplines.
- People learn about the justice issues of our day and the biblical and church teachings on justice, service, and care for creation; experience acts of justice and service with the faith community – locally and globally; and engage in the practices of serving those in need,

caring for creation, and working for justice – as individuals, with their families, and with their church and other groups and organizations.

### **Family Faith Formation at Home**

Congregations equip families to become centers of learning and faith growth at home by nurturing family faith and developing the faith life of parents and grandparents, strengthening family life by focusing on family asset-building, and developing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents (and grandparents) for parenting. There are five elements in a family faith formation curriculum for the home:

1. *Nurturing family faith at home* by utilizing the eight faith forming processes as the primary content – knowledge, experiences, practices, and resources – developed from events of church life, as well as specially designed family resources.
2. *Building strong families* by developing family assets: 1) *nurturing relationships* (positive communication, affection, emotional openness, encouragement for pursuing talents and interests), 2) *establishing routines* (family meals, shared activities, meaningful traditions – holidays, rituals, celebrations, dependability), 3) *maintaining expectations* (openness about tough topics, fair rules, defined boundaries, clear expectations, contributions to family), 4) *adapting to challenges* (management of daily commitments, adaptability problem-solving, democratic decision-making), and 5) *connecting to the community* (neighborhood cohesion, relationship with others in the community, participating in enriching activities, supportive resources in the community). (*The American Family Asset Study*, Search Institute)
3. *Parent faith formation* through participation in intergenerational faith formation at church and church life, and through targeted programs of theological and biblical formation for parents and grandparents.
4. *Parenting for faith growth training* to equip parents with knowledge, skills, and resources to develop the faith life of their children and practice faith at home as a family.
5. *Parenting education* that develops the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents (and grandparents) for parenting children and teens, with a special focus on parent practices such as love and affection, stress management, relationship skills, respect, promoting and modeling learning, life skills, behavior management, healthy lifestyle, supporting spiritual and religious development and practice, and protection and safety.

### **Missional Faith Formation**

The mission curriculum includes two types of “content.” The first involves expanding and extending the church’s presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with people where they live – engaging with people around their life situation (needs, interests, concerns), their quest for meaning and purpose in life, their drive to make a difference in world and in lives of others, and more. This first type of missional curriculum provides a safe environment for people to explore life-centered and spiritual-centered activities.

The second type of curriculum content provides pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the Good News, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community. Missional faith formation guides people as they move from discovery to exploration to commitment. The catechumenal process with its ritual stages and formational content – participation in the life of the faith community, education in Scripture and the Christian tradition, apprenticeship in the Christian life, intimate connection with the liturgy and rituals of the church, moral formation, development of a life of prayer, and engagement in actions of justice and service. Programs like *The*

*Alpha Course* covers the basics of Christianity in a multi-session course in a supportive small group environment.

## Online Faith Formation

Digital media and the online environment provide the means to connect church life, age groups/generations, and daily/home life through continuous faith formation—connecting participation in church life and events with daily/home life by using online content and connections or reaching people at home and in daily life with online faith formation content and experiences that connect to church life and events. For example:

1. Extend and deepen people’s experience and participation in church events and programs with online content for daily and home life. Consider the possibilities for extending Sunday worship, church year feasts and seasons, intergenerational and family programs, classes, youth meetings, mission trips, retreat experiences, vacation Bible school, and more
2. Provide a complete faith formation experience online connected to the life of the church, e.g., forty-day Lent “curriculum” that connects the Lent events at church with online content for experiencing and practicing Lent in daily and home life. For example:

### Church Life Events

Ash Wednesday  
Lent Sunday liturgies  
Stations of the Cross  
Lent prayer  
Lent retreat  
Lent service  
Lent soup suppers

### Daily and Home Life Activities

Fasting activities  
Praying activities  
Service/ Almsgiving activities  
Lectionary reflections  
Lent study resources and videos  
Lent devotions  
Daily Bible readings

3. “Flip the classroom or program” by creating a digital platform to provide the content that people would learn in the gathered setting in an online learning space using print, audio, video, and more. And then transform the gathered program using interactive activities, discussion, project-based learning, and practice and demonstration. One example is redesigning children’s faith formation so that children and their parents are learning online at home and doing activities together, and then refocusing “class time” to engage children in creating projects and activities that demonstrate their learning. Another example is designing a high school confirmation program that provides the content that used to be taught in the weekly sessions in an online platform for individual learning— watching videos, reading short materials, and writing a reflection journals; engages the young people in small groups during the month to discuss their online learning; and then meets monthly in a large group gathered session for discussion, interactive activities, and application of the content to living as a Christian today. During the year retreats, worship, and service projects offer additional gathered sessions.
4. Offer opportunities for individuals, families, and small groups to utilize the digital platform as their primary learning setting and provide opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings or in a web conference format, such as a Google+ Hangout. One example is offering six, one-hour parent webinar programs delivered to parents at home in four-month semesters: three webinars followed by a parent gathering at church; three more webinars and concluding with a parent gathering at church. Another example is developing an online Bible study where groups can meet regularly in a physical setting or virtually through Skype or a Google+ Hangout for sharing their learning.
5. Provide high quality and easily accessible online religious content— courses, activities, print and e-books, audio and video programs, and content-rich websites— on the faith formation website or with links to select websites. One example is offering adults a variety of online Bible and theology

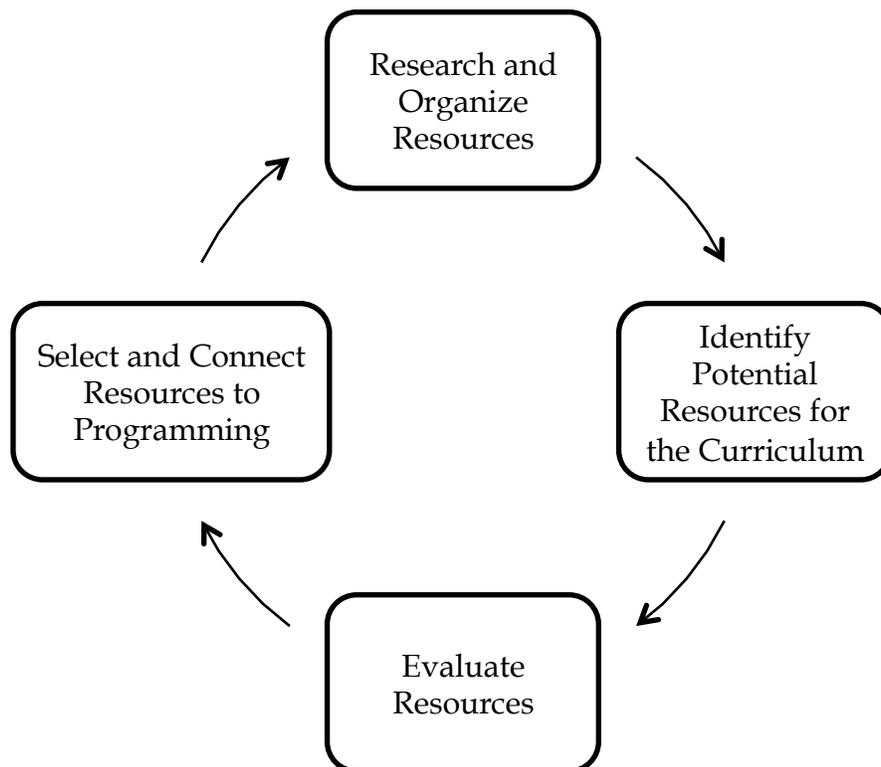
courses for individual study using online courses from colleges, and seminaries, video programs on YouTube, online programs and webinars from religious publishers and organizations. Another example is providing an online prayer and spirituality center where people can access daily prayer reflections and devotions, offer prayer intentions, pray for others, learn about spiritual practices, download prayer activities for the home, and more.

### Blended Faith Formation Continuum

Online			Face-to-Face	
<b>5. Fully Online</b>	<b>4. Mostly Online</b>	<b>3. Online and Gathered</b>	<b>2. Gathered and Online Content</b>	<b>1. Gathered with Online Content</b>
An online program with all learning done online and limited face-to-face, gathered learning settings	A mostly online program with opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings	Online learning focused on presenting the content of the program <i>combined with</i> face-to-face, gathered sessions using active learning methods to discuss, practice and apply the content.	A gathered event or program that provides online content and activities to extend and expand the learning from the gathered program	A gathered event or program that uses online content as part of the design of the event or program

## Part 6. Curating Religious Content

### The Process of Curating



# A Lifelong Curriculum Plan

*The subject matter and processes that engage people in learning, experiencing, and practicing the Christian faith*

	Church Life & Events	Family at Home	Children & Parents	Youth & Parents	Young Adults	Mid-life Adults	Mature Adults	Older Adults	Digital & Online
Caring Relationships									
Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons									
Celebrating Rituals and Milestones									
Learning the Christian Tradition and Applying It to Life									
Praying and Spiritual Formation									
Reading the Bible									
Serving People in Need, Working for Justice, Caring for Creation									
Worshipping God within the Faith Community									
Life Stage 1. Individual 2. Family Assets 3. Parents									
Missional Activities • Outreach • Pathways									

# Curriculum Planning

## Intergenerational Faith Community

Faith Forming Processes	Church Life and Events
Caring Relationships	
Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons	
Celebrating Rituals and Milestones	
Learning the Christian Tradition	
Praying and Spiritual Formation	
Reading the Bible	
Serving People in Need, Working for Justice, Caring for Creation	
Worshipping God	

## Age Group Faith Formation

Faith Forming Processes	Age Group/Generational Programming	Connection to Church Life and Events
Caring Relationships: intergenerational and peer relationships, supportive communities		
Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons: feasts and seasons of the church year		
Celebrating Rituals and Milestones: celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones at significant moments in one's life journey and faith journey		
Reading the Bible: studying and interpreting the Bible – its message, its meaning, and its application to life today		
Learning the Christian Tradition: learning the content of the tradition (Trinity, Jesus, church, beliefs, morality and ethics), reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one's faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world		
Praying, Devotions, and Spiritual Formation: personal and communal prayer; being formed by the spiritual disciplines		
Serving and Justice: living the Christian mission in the world – engaging in service to those in need, care for God's creation, and action and advocacy for justice		
Worshipping God with the Faith Community: experiencing God's living presence through Scripture, preaching, and Eucharist; and being sent forth on mission		

## Family Faith Community

Content Areas	Programs, Activities, and Resources for the Home	Connection to Church Life and Events
Faith Practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrating the liturgical seasons</li> <li>• Celebrating rituals and milestones</li> <li>• Learning the Christian tradition</li> <li>• Praying</li> <li>• Reading the Bible</li> <li>• Serving, working for justice, caring for creation</li> </ul>		
Family Assets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurturing relationships</li> <li>• Establishing routines</li> <li>• Maintaining expectations</li> <li>• Adapting to challenges</li> <li>• Connecting to the community</li> </ul>		
Parent Faith Formation		
Parenting for Faith Growth Training		
Parenting Education		

## Missional Faith Formation

Target Audience	Expanding and Extending the Church's Presence through Outreach in the Community	Pathways to Jesus, Discipleship, and the Christian Faith