

Becoming a Faith Formation Curator

John Roberto

We live surrounded by an abundance of content. Just imagine how many blogs are written and published daily (there over 150 million blogs), how many websites add significant content each (we've stopped counting the number of websites), how many courses are now available online (MIT has over 1600 courses online), and how many videos are uploaded to YouTube (actually 20 hours of video every minute). Many experts estimate that all of the information on the Internet is doubling every 72 hours. As author Clay Shirky says we are shifting from an era of content scarcity to one of content abundance.

A lot of this content is religious content—Bible studies, prayer and spiritual practices, daily devotions, online courses, to name only a few examples. And this is only the online content! Think of all the religious content created each day by religious publishers and organizations, seminaries and universities, congregations, and individuals.

In this world of content abundance it becomes possible for a congregation to provide faith formation for everyone, anytime, anywhere, 24x7x365. It is now possible to customize and personalize faith formation around the life tasks and issues, and religious and spiritual needs and interests of people of all ages. It is now possible to offer a wide variety of programs, activities, and resources that incorporate a variety of ways to learn—on your own, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, in the community and world—in a blended approach to faith formation integrating physical gathered settings and virtual online settings.

To make this vision of a “lifelong network” of religious content and experiences a reality, the role of the leader in faith formation is shifting from *providing* religious content and programming to *curating* religious content and experiences for all ages. We are all familiar with curating and curation—museum curators collect art and artifacts and identify the most relevant or important to be displayed in an exhibit for the public. Museum curators are subject-matter experts that guide an organization’s overall art collection.

A content curator is someone who continually finds, groups, organizes, and shares the best and most relevant content on a specific subject to match the needs of a specific audience. Content curators can provide a personalized, qualified selection of the best and most relevant content and resources available. They do not create more content, but make sense of all the content that others are creating. Curation is an evolving idea that addresses two parallel trends: the explosive growth in information, and our need to be able to find information in coherent, reasonably contextual groupings.

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In *Curation Nation*, Steven Rosenbaum describes how curation is both an old and new concept.

In the past we lived in a world of disciplines. The senior editorial leadership at magazines were known as editors. The folks who chose which TV shows played on a TV network were programmers. The people who picked which things would be on the shelves of your local stores were retailers. Each of these professions involved choosing the right things, putting them in the proper order, and creating a collection that was appealing to an audience or consumer. Oh, and there was that rarified individual who selected objects of art to present in a museum or gallery: they were called curators.

Today, curation is the coin of the realm. Film Festivals curate their program. Web sites curate their editorial. The team at the shopping site Gilt Group curates the items it offer for sale. *Curation* was once a word that seemed to mean highbrow, expensive, out of reach of mere mortals. But today museum curators must compete with media curation at Newser, collections of handmade crafts at Etsy, or the curated collection of the best roll-on luggage at Squidoo. Certainly curation means quality, but now quality is in the eye of the beholder. (Rosenbaum, 3)

Content Curation in Practice

The best way to understand content curation and what it produces is to see it in practice. Visit the following websites for a view of content curation and how content is identified, organized (described and presented), and delivered (published).

- The **NYTimes.com Topics** employs content managers who sift through *The Times*' archive to create new meaning by grouping articles and resources that were filed away (or distributed to library databases). The site also produces exceptional multimedia pieces akin to "special exhibitions," which offer a documentary and reflective aspect to news content. Each topic page collects all the news, reference and archival information, photos, graphics, audio and video files published on that topic This treasure trove

is available without charge on articles going back to 1981. Visit the *New York Times* website: <http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/time-stops>.

- **Hulu** is an online video service that takes videos sourced from multiple networks and then rearranges them into collections that give a new perspective to the collection as a whole. Hulu's mission is to help people find and enjoy the world's premium video content when, where and how they want it. Hulu brings together a large selection of videos from over 260 content companies. Visit their website: www.hulu.com
- **NPR Music** celebrates great music in every genre and is an industry leader in music discovery. The multimedia site offers more than 300 new features monthly and an extensive archive, in collaboration with NPR's newsmagazines, 12 public radio member stations and the passionate NPR community. NPR Music creates and distributes inventive music coverage across multiple platforms—from web, to radio, to podcast, to mobile, to social media, to live events—with first-listens to new albums, live performances, concerts at the Tiny Desk, interviews, reviews and blogs. Its newest addition: All Songs 24/7, a non-stop stream of every song ever played in 10 years of the show. Visit the NPR website: www.npr.org/music.
- **Patheos** is the online site to engage in the global dialogue about religion and spirituality and to explore and experience the world's beliefs. Patheos is the website of choice for people looking for credible and balanced information or resources about religion. Patheos brings together the public, academia, and faith leaders in a single environment, and is the place where people turn on a regular basis for insight into questions, issues, and discussions. Patheos is designed to serve as a resource for those looking to learn more about different belief systems, as well as participate in productive, moderated discussions on some of today's most talked about and debated topics. Visit the Patheos website at: www.patheos.com.
- **Faith and Leadership**, sponsored by Duke University Divinity School, incorporates a website with print, audio, and video resources; a

daily e-newsletter; and blogs with a diversity of nationally recognized bloggers (*Call and Response*) designed for Christian leaders to reflect, connect, learn, read, discuss, and imagine. The team at *Faith and Leadership* creates new content and makes available existing content from a wide variety of sources relevant for Christian leaders. Visit their website at: www.faithandleadership.com.

- **Ministry Matters**, developed by the United Methodist Publishing House, is designed as a community of resources for church leaders—a place to brainstorm, research, and plan; a place to collaborate with colleagues across the office or across the country; a place to connect with others with the same responsibilities and concerns, hopes and dreams. Users of the site can do sermon research with the Bible commentaries, find the perfect video to discuss with a class, select prayers and music for a transformative worship experience, listen to an inspiring sermon, read an invigorating leadership article, or chat with other leaders about what’s keeping you up at night. Visit their website at www.ministrymatters.com

Shifting from “One Size Fits All” to Personalized & Customized Faith Formation

With both an increasing diversity of religious and spiritual needs across all ages and generations *and* an abundance of faith formation resources, faith formation leaders in churches will increasingly need to become *content* and *experience curators*.

Faith formation is no longer about offering “*one size fits all*” curriculum or programming for a whole age group or generation—assuming that everyone is at the same point in their spiritual and religious growth. Churches can now meet people at the point of their spiritual, religious, and learning needs and offer personalized opportunities for faith growth. Today, as never before, churches have access to faith formation programming, activities, and resources that can be personalized and customized to address the diversity of people’s religious and spiritual needs. The new reality is that churches can offer activities that cater to niches— individuals, families, and small groups with a particular spiritual or

religious need, interest, passion, concern, or life issue.

As religious content and experience curators, faith formation leaders will become less focused on providing “one size fits all” curriculum *for* people, *and* become more focused on addressing people’s spiritual and religious growth by offering a wide *variety* of religious content and experiences. In the education world this is known as differentiated instruction—focusing education around the learning needs of the students. We might call this approach *differentiated faith formation*.

Churches will be able to offer faith formation in a variety of models, providing a variety of ways for people to learn and grow in faith that respects their preferred styles of learning, their life situations, and their time constraints. For example:

- *Faith Formation on Your Own*: reading, online courses, audio and video programs, movies, television programs
- *Faith Formation at Home*: Bible reading, storytelling and caring conversation, prayer and devotions, rituals and traditions, service
- *Faith Formation in Small Groups*: Bible and theology study groups, social issues study groups, faith sharing groups, lectionary-based groups, service/mission action groups, support groups, special interest groups
- *Faith Formation in Large Groups*: courses, speaker series, workshops, film festivals, retreats, conferences, intergenerational programs
- *Faith Formation in the Congregation*: Sunday worship, church year events and celebrations, service/mission activities, ministry and leadership in the church and community
- *Faith Formation in the Community and World*: programs, courses, clinics, workshops, and presentations at universities, retreat centers, YMCAs, libraries, bookstores, regional church programs; through engagement in community action, and local and global service and justice projects

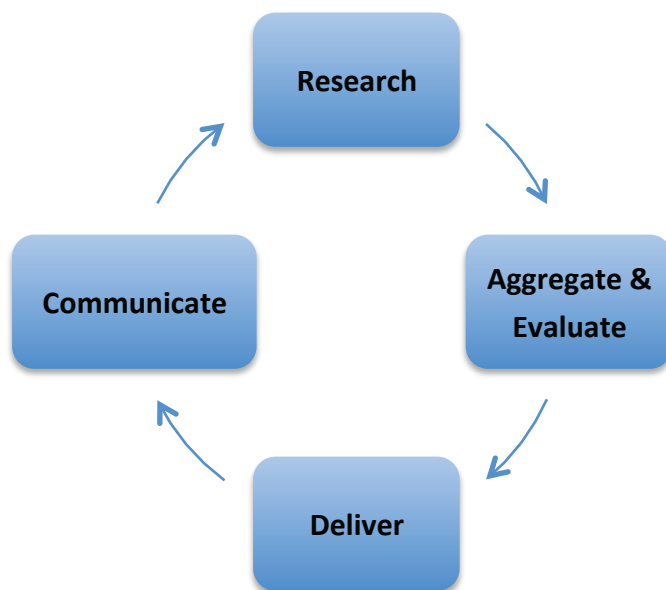
Faith formation can take place in physical places and virtual spaces (online). Online websites, social networking services, and digital technologies (iPod Touch, smart cell phones, iPad) mean that churches can deliver faith formation experiences and

resources anytime and anywhere, reaching people wherever they go online (home, work, school, vacation, coffee house).

The emerging role of the *faith formation curator* is to research a wider variety of content and experiences available from a great diversity of sources, assess and evaluate its quality and appropriateness, organize the content, and then make available the content and experiences to people (delivery).

Curating Religious Content

How does content curation work? Just as librarians help us make sense of the overwhelming number of books and periodicals available in a library, content curators identify, organize, and share information that will be most relevant to their prospects. Each of the following elements of curating religious content are year-round tasks. The process of curating is continual.



1. Research Resources & Stay Up-to-Date

The best librarians have access to hundreds, if not thousands, of information resources that deliver ongoing, real-time information on specific topics of interest to information patrons. Faith formation curators will need to develop sources they can trust for high quality religious content and experiences.

Consider the following sources for uncovering faith formation programs, activities, and resources.

- **People Resources:** Research the people resources in your church, community, church agencies, colleges and seminaries, church-related organizations, and so on. Consider people who teach courses or specialized programs, guest presenters on specialized topics, leaders for small groups and Bible studies, prayer guides/spiritual directors, leaders for service/mission programs, and so on. Develop a list of people resources and the knowledge and skills they offer.
- **Faith Formation Programs and Activities in Physical Places:** Research programs and activities within your own congregation, in the surrounding religious congregations, church agencies, religious organizations, retreat and conference centers, religious camps, colleges and universities. Develop a list of the resources, indicating the faith formation model(s) used in each program or activity: on your own, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, and/or in the community and world.
- **Faith Formation Print and Media Publications:** Research print and media publications from publishers and religious organizations. Use print catalogs and websites to develop a list of relevant print and media resources.
- **Faith Formation Programs, Activities, and Resources in Virtual Places (Online):** Research online faith formation programs, activities, social networks, and resources that address spiritual and religious needs. Consider online sources such as: *books* (see Google Books), *courses* and *podcasts* (see iTunes University), *videos* (see YouTube and God Tube), *age-specific sites* (see Busted Halo, Kids Spirit Online), *small group studies* (see The Thoughtful Christian), *multi-faceted religious content* (see Patheos), and so much more. These types of online programs, activities, and resources can become an integral element of learning programs and faith formation offerings for all ages and for

families. Research the online resources of your own denomination or religious tradition, and online courses and webinars offered by colleges, universities, seminaries, and religious organizations. Develop a list of online resources, programs, and activities.

Develop ways to stay informed on the latest resources as they become available, for example joining mailing lists (email or RSS feeds) or the Facebook pages and websites of publishers, colleges/seminaries, religious and community organizations, and online resource centers so that you receive regular updates on the publication and dissemination of new resources.

2. Aggregate & Evaluate

Aggregation is the act of bringing together the most relevant religious content and experiences on a particular topic or religious/spiritual need into a single location, such as a website or blog or printed catalog. Religious content and experiences can be aggregated in a variety of ways such as 1) topically (Bible, theological themes), 2) age-appropriate faith formation themes and life issues, 3) milestones and life transitions, 4) individual Christian practices, 5) social justice issues, and so on. There are dozens of ways to aggregate content to address people's spiritual and religious needs.

Librarians must consume and curate information in order to interpret and best understand how it addresses their patrons' information needs. Expert librarians can quickly process hundreds of documents daily, using tools that organize and automatically tag content, deliver summaries, and rank content as needed.

Faith formation curators find the best resources to address a target audience or particular spiritual or religious needs. They develop standards for evaluating faith formation activities and resources, such as biblical and theological content, developmental appropriateness, ethnic-cultural responsiveness, ease-of-use, quality of learning experience, and so on.

Faith formation curators highlight the relationship between the content and the spiritual and religious needs of people so they can see how it addresses their particular spiritual or religious needs, interests, passions, concerns, or life issues.

3. Deliver

Faith formation curators now have available an array of delivery systems for providing religious content and experiences to people. Today's digital and online technologies make it possible to deliver content via websites, blogs, iPods, iPads, iPhones and smart phones. The extended faith formation models make it possible to deliver the content in different formats: on your own, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, and in the community and world. ***Faith formation curators can literally provide faith formation for everyone, anytime, anywhere, 24x7x365.***

One of the best ways to connect people with religious content and experiences (in physical and virtual settings) is via an online center at your church's website or on a new dedicate website or on social networking platform.

Even if a congregation is not able to incorporate an online faith formation center into an existing website, faith formation curators can create a new, dedicated website for faith formation using a service such as Weebly which even provides free hosting and tools for creating a website (see www.weebly.com) or use a social networking platform like Ning (www.ning.com) which has a low annual fee.

A church can also create an annual or seasonal faith formation catalog in print format. The catalog includes descriptions for every faith formation activity (in physical settings or online), indicating clearly the content or focus of the program and the particulars, such as date, location, cost, time, website location, and so on. Ginghamburg Church develops seasonal catalogs for children, youth, adults, and service/mission programs. Visit their website at: <http://ginghamsburg.org>. Holy Infant Catholic Church develops an annual faith formation catalog with offerings for all ages. Visit their website and search for their faith formation handbook at: www.holyinfantchurch.org.

4. Communicate

Develop a communications/marketing plan to keep people continually informed of all of the faith formation content and experiences offered by your congregation. Keep in mind a few key insights about communication.

- Demonstrate how the faith formation offerings respond to something within the lives of people. Connect to their religious and spiritual needs, interests, passions, and so on.
- Describe the 2-3 benefits of participating in faith formation?
- Get people's attention by connecting to things that interest people.
- Explain how people can access the resources.

- Use lots of approaches to communicate: print catalog, brochures, church website, online ads, e-newsletter, email, Facebook page, Twitter messages, and so on.

Works Cited

Rosenbaum, Steven. *Curation Nation: Why the Future of Content is Context*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2011.

Curating Spiritual Formation

These are examples of existing resources organized in a variety of models, in physical and virtual settings, for age groups, families, and all generations.

On Your Own

- Daily prayer online and on mobile devices: www.sacredspace.ie, www.taize.fr, www.upperroom.org, www.loyolapress.com
- Fixed hour prayer online: www.explorefaith.org/prayer/fixed/hours.php
- Spiritual guides and mentors (drawn from congregation and prepared for their role)
- Spiritual reading: a list of recommended books on the church website
- Spiritual podcasts: "Soul Care" by author Mindy Caliguire (www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCepcaOFWJo)
- Online retreat: A Thirty-Four Week Retreat for Everyday Life (Creighton University, <http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/cmo-retreat.html>)
- Online spirituality course: forty-day retreats with spiritual guides like Thomas Merton, Joyce Rupp, Henri Nouwen, and Joan Chittister (www.SpiritualityandPractice.com)

At Home

- Daily family prayer resources (online and print)
- Liturgical year prayers and celebrations for the home
- Prayers for milestones and life transitions

In Small Groups

- Prayer groups: age-specific, multigenerational, and family or parent prayer groups

- Spiritual formation course: *Companions in Christ: A Small-Group Experience in Spiritual Formation* (adults), *The Way of Pilgrimage* (youth), and *Companions in Christ: The Way of the Child* (children) (Upper Room, www.companionsinchrist.org)
- Spiritual book clubs: monthly meetings (physical or online) to discuss the book-of-the-month

In Large Groups

- Intergenerational learning programs on prayer: monthly sessions for all ages on prayer practices
- Retreat experiences (for age groups, families, or multiple generations) at church or a retreat center
- Workshops and courses on the spiritual disciplines: lectio divina, silence, contemplation, the Examen, meditation, spiritual reading, fixed hour prayer, etc.
- Monastery trip to experience monastic life and prayer

In the Congregation

- Church-wide retreat experience
- Prayer room with resources for prayer and spiritual practices
- Prayer through the year: liturgical seasons, devotions, and celebrations

In the Community & World

- Prayer experiences and programs in other congregations
- Courses and programs at colleges, seminaries, retreat centers
- Interfaith prayer experiences and programs