Designing a Digital Platform for 21ˢᵗ Century Faith Formation
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Websites
1. www.LifelongFaith.com
2. www.21stcenturyfaithformation.com
3. www.intergenerationalfaith.com
4. www.curatingfaithformation.com
5. http://holytrinityadults.weebly.com
6. http://holytrinityfamilies.weebly.com
7. www.weebly.com
8. http://vibrantfaithathome.org

Online Faith Formation
We need to create new models of digitally-enabled faith formation that utilize the digital technologies and digital media to engage people with faith-forming content anytime, any place, just-in-time; and that can extend and expand faith formation in physical, face-to-face settings into people's daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems. We can develop blended models of faith formation that incorporate physical settings and online settings. These settings can be seen as a continuum: ranging from fully online programming to gathered programming in physical settings that use online resources.

1. **Gathered Program <u>with</u> Online Content:** We can design a gathered program using online content from websites, videos from YouTube or other video sites, and blogs and other social media. With an abundance of high quality digital content, this first option is the easiest way to bring the digital world into a gathered program.
2. **Gathered Program <u>and</u> Online Content:** We can connect church programs or events with online content that extends and deepens the experience through learning, prayer, ritual, action, etc. Gathered events and programs such as Sunday worship, church year feasts and seasons intergenerational and family programs, classes, youth group meetings, mission trips, retreat experiences, and vacation Bible school would all benefit from extending the experience with digital content for learning, praying, celebrating, having faith conversations, acting/serving, and more.
3. **Online and Gathered:** We can "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.
4. **Mostly Online:** We can 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.
5. **Fully Online:** The rise of high quality and easily accessible online religious content—courses, activities, print and e-books, audio and video programs, and content-rich websites—has made designing online faith formation feasible.

Blended Faith Formation Continuum

Online   Face-to-Face

Fully Online	Mostly Online	Online and Gathered	Gathered and Online Content	Gathered with Online Content
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 *combined with* 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

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 <u>or</u> reaching people at home and in daily life with online faith formation content and experiences that connect to church life and events.

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	Daily and Home Life Activities
Ash Wednesday	Fasting activities
Lent Sunday liturgies	Praying activities
Stations of the Cross	Service/Almsgiving activities
Lent prayer	Lectionary reflections
Lent retreat	Lent study resources and videos
Lent service	Lent devotions
Lent soup suppers	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.

Designing a Digital Platform—A Faith Formation Website

This digital platform provides the primary way to connect people to the network's offerings and to connect people with each other. A faith formation website provides the platform for publishing and delivering the experiences, content, programs, activities, and resources of the network. A website provides the platform for *seamless* learning across a variety of experiences, resources, locations, times, or settings. The website, together with social media, provides continuity between faith formation in the congregation, at home, in daily life, and online. And it is available to people anytime, anywhere, and any device (computer, tablet, smart phone).

It is important to build a website dedicated to faith formation. There can be a website for each target audience and their faith formation network, or a website that integrates several target audiences such as family, children, and teens website, or a website for all ages with specific sections for each age group. Most church websites are not equipped for this task. They lack the features, ease-of-use, capacity, or focus on faith formation to become the digital platform for a network. Today it is much easier to develop a new dedicated website for faith formation and then link it to the church website.

Building a website is made much easier today by the availability of online website builders that provide predesigned website templates, drag-and-drop features to create webpages, and hosting for the website. Three popular website builders to explore are: *Weebly* (www.weebly.com), *Wix* (www.wix.com), and *Squarespace* (www.squarespace.com). All three have easy to use features and very reasonable subscription fees. For advanced users *WordPress* (http://wordpress.org) provides thousands of predesigned templates, lots of customization features, and ready-to-use apps. *WordPress* does require an understanding of web design and some programming ability.

Here are several suggestions for web usability from Steve Krug's excellent and easy-to-use book *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*, Third Edition (Berkeley: New Riders, 2014).
1. Don't make the user think—make web pages self-explanatory so the user hardly has any perceived effort to understand them, or example, clear choice of labels, clearly "clickable" items, simple search.
2. People generally don't read web pages closely; they scan, so design for scanning rather than reading.
3. Create a clear visual hierarchy and menu system (main menu, submenus).
4. Make it very clear how to navigate the site, with clear "signposts" on all pages.
5. Omit needless words.
6. The home page needs the greatest design care to convey site identity and mission.
7. Promote user goodwill by making the typical tasks easy to do, make it easy to recover from errors, and avoid anything likely to irritate users.

Design Suggestions

First, choose a domain name (URL) for the faith formation website. The congregation can either purchase a new domain name for the faith formation website from one of the companies that sell and register domain names or use a free domain name provided by the website builder, e.g., *Weebly* provides hosting and a free website URL with the weebly.com extension, such as http://holytrinityadults.weebly.com.

Second, select a website template that is mobile-responsive, which means that the website will automatically size-itself correctly on a computer, laptop, tablet, or phone. The template should do this automatically.

Third, create the primary navigation (main menus) for the website directly from the network content areas. Be sure to select a website template that allows enough room for all of the menu items to be seen. Today's website design favors horizontal menus (running across the webpage), rather than vertical menus (running on the left side of the webpage). Select the template that provides enough room for the menus. There may be a need to consolidate several content areas to accommodate the website design template. This involves creating submenus (secondary navigation) under the main menu items. A well-designed site with clear and easy to understand navigation will increase engagement and the time people spend on the website.

Fourth, build each webpage to incorporate all of the programs, activities, and resources for a particular network content area for the seasonal plan. A well-designed site with quality content will increase engagement and create a positive experience for the user—all of which encourages continuous learning. Each webpage includes content that is uploaded to the website for people to use—audio podcasts, videos, articles, blog posts, interactive features—as well as descriptions and links to programs, activities, and resources that reside on other websites, such as online courses. Webpages can include stable content that is going to be available in every season and seasonal or calendar-specific content.

Each webpage is a "learning page" where people can learn online, download resources, and connect to activities and resources across the web. Here are two examples of webpage design—one for adults and one for parents. For more examples online go to http://holytrinityadults.weebly.com and http://holytrinityfamilies.weebly.com.

Adult Learning Page: November Scripture Enrichment

Focus: Gospel of the New Lectionary Cycle beginning in Advent
Programming:
1. Three-session speaker series on major themes in the gospel: Thursday from 7:30–9:00 pm at the church center.
2. Video presentations of the three sessions online for self study.
3. Video presentations of the three sessions online for small group study with accompany study guide.
4. Scripture study groups using a four-session introduction to the major themes of the gospel conducted at church, in homes, and in the community.
5. Gospel self-study using links to Scripture websites such as www.enterthebible.org from Luther Seminary.
6. Online course on the gospel with one or more links to existing online courses at a seminary or university or on iTunes U in the Apple iTunes Store..

Family Learning Page: For Parents Only

Focus: Parenting Education
Programming:
1. "First Wednesdays" parent webinar series: 9:00–10:00 pm online with guest presenter. Each month presents a topic of interest for parents, such as positive parenting, communicating well, raising responsible children and teens, celebrating rituals and milestones, and more.
2. "Learn More About. . . ." resources on parenting topics with links to expert websites and videos, such as www.ParentFurther.com from The Search Institute.
3. "Secrets of Happy Families" five-session book group using Bruce Feiler's book of the same name with study groups organized at church, in homes, in a Google+ Hangout, and by parents in self-organized groups. Study group and supportive resources available on the For Parents Only page.
4. Parent videos on a variety of topics available for viewing on the For Parents Only page or with descriptions and links to YouTube or other websites.
5. List of valuable websites and online resources for parents such as the Boys Town Parenting Center with a national hotline just for parents available 24 hours a day (www.boystown.org/parenting).

Fifth, design the website specifically for your target audiences and write the content for them in their language with titles and examples that connect to their lives; select images (photo or short video) that reflect their life situations. Engage the target audience and tell them what they need to know and do.

Be sure to pay careful attention to the titles and descriptions so that they capture people's interests. Develop descriptions that are positive in tone, indicate clearly the content or focus of an activity. Describe how your offerings respond to something within the lives of people. Highlight the relationship between the content and the particular spiritual or religious needs, interests, passions, concerns, or life issues of people. Describe the 2-3 benefits of participating or engaging in faith formation.