## Families at the Center of Faith Formation

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#### Changing the Questions

* *What does a vibrant and vital family faith look like in a 21st century world?*
* *How do we meaningfully engage/connect with today’s families?*
* *How do we empower/equip/resource families to transmit faith at home - to practice a vital and vibrant faith?*
* *How do we reach families who are not involved in a faith community or feel religion is not important?*

#### What is Changing in Families

* Diversity of Family Forms: no dominant family form in U.S.
* Generational Parenting: Gen X—Protecting Parenting; Millennia—*Responsive Parenting*
* Diversity of Ethnicities: ethnic identities, histories, and religious traditions and practices
* Diversity of Spiritual-Religious Identities: *Engaged-------Occasionals--------Spirituals-------Unaffiliated*

#### What Makes a Difference in Faith Growth

1. Parents’ personal faith and practice
2. Parent-child relationship: close and warm
3. Parents’ modeling and teaching a religious faith
4. Parents’ involvement in church life
5. Grandparents’ religious influence & relationship
6. Religious tradition a child is born into
7. Parents of the same faith
8. Family conversations about faith
9. Embedded family religious practices: praying, reading the Bible, serving, celebrating holidays and rituals

#### Families at the Center of Faith Formation: Changing the Narrative

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | The *Family-at-the Center Approach* recognizes that parents and the family are the most powerful influence for virtually every child and youth outcome—personal, academic, social, and spiritual-religious; and that parents are *the* most important influence on the social and religious lives of children, youth, and emerging adults. Given the central role of families in shaping the lives of children and youth, the value of engaging, supporting, and educating families should be self-evident to all of us.  |

1. See the home as the essential and foundational environment for faith nurture, faith practice, and the healthy development of young people.
2. Reinforce the family’s central role in promoting healthy development and faith growth in children and youth, and enhancing the faith-forming capacity of parents and grandparents.
3. Express care with the families in our congregations and communities, including listening to them, showing interest in their lives, and investing in them.
4. Provide support and advocacy when families really need it.
5. Share power with families, treating them as true partners by giving them voice in things that matter to them and collaborating with them to solve problems and reach goals.
6. Build faith formation around the lives of the today’s families and parents, rather than having the congregation prescribe the programs and activities that families will participate in.
7. Address the diversity of family life today by moving away from “one size fits all” programs and strategies toward a variety of programs and strategies tailored to the unique life tasks and situations, concerns and interest, and religious-spiritual journeys of parents and families.
8. Offer regular gatherings of all families for learning, worship, service, relationship-building, and more throughout the year.
9. Engage families together with the whole community for learning, worship, service, relationship-building, and more throughout the year.
10. Find ways to reach families at home with support, resources, and activities to develop family life and grow in faith.
11. Strengthen families by helping them develop the practices and skills for healthy family life.
12. Equip parents with the knowledge and skills for effective parenting and forming faith in young people.

#### Families at the Center of Faith Formation: Strategies

1. Discovering God in Everyday Life
2. Forming Faith at Home through the Life Cycle
3. Forming Faith through Milestones
4. Celebrating Seasonal Events through the Year
5. Encountering God in the Bible
6. Connecting Families Intergenerationally
7. Developing a Strong Family Life
8. Empowering Parents and Grandparents

#### Forming Family Faith: Processes & Content

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. **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.
5. **Praying, Devotions, and Spiritual Formation.** Growing in faith and discipleship through personal and communal prayer, and being formed by the spiritual disciplines.
6. **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.
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.

#### Families at the Center of Faith Formation: Programming

1. A **variety** of relationships, content, experiences, and resources
2. New **methods**: immersive, multimedia, multi-sensory, highly visual, participatory, experiential
3. New **formats**: episodic engagements and experiences, micro-learning, on demand, mobile, 24x7
4. New **digital** media and digital platforms; connect with parents/families through social media; redesign programming with digital connections and extensions; address new needs through online experiences
5. **Multipleenvironments**: self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world.
6. **Multiple versions**: design a program once and offer it in multiple formats and environments, e.g., a gathered program that is recorded and can be used for individual study or small group study

#### Digitally Enabled and Digitally Connected Faith Formation

 **Online Face-to-Face**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  **Fully Online**An online program with all learning done online and limited face-to-face, gathered learning settings |  **Mostly Online**A mostly online program with opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings | **Online and Gathered**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.  | **Gathered and** **Online Content**A gathered event or program that provides online content and activities to extend and expand the learning from the gathered program | **Gathered with Online Content**A gathered event or program that uses online content as part of the design of the event or program |

#### Websites

1. [www.LifelongFaith.com](http://www.lifelongfaith.com/)
2. www.ReimagineFaithFormation.com
3. www.CuratingFaithFormation.com
4. www.FamiliesattheCenter.com
5. www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com
6. [http://vibrantfaithathome.org](http://vibrantfaithathome.org/)

#### Books

*Families at the Center or Faith Formation*. John Roberto, editor. (LifelongFaith, 2016).

*Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century*. John Roberto (LifelongFaith, 2015).

## *Catholic Profile:* CARA & Holy Cross Family Ministries

## (http://www.hcfm.org/en/AboutUs/FamilyResearch.aspx)

#### Importance of Catholic Faith

About half of parents (49 percent) say that their Catholic faith is either the most important part of their life or among the most important parts of their life

 Parents All adults

The most important part of your life 15% 14%

Among the most important parts of your life 34% 27%

Important, but so are many other areas of your life 39% 40%

Not too important in your life 9% 13%

Not important in your life at all 3% 6%





## *What’s Your Congregation’s Approach to Families?*

Identify your congregation’s approach with families using the following questions. (See Chapters 1 and 3 in *Families at the Center of Faith Formation* for background.) For each question, identify your congregation’s current practice with parents and/or families using the rating scale:

**1 = not at all 3 = often 5 = a lot.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. We *express care* with the families in our congregations and communities, including listening to them, showing interest in their lives, and investing in them.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We *challenge growth* in families by expecting them to live up to their potential and helping them learn from their mistakes.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We *provide support* and advocacy when families really need it.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We *share power* with families, treating them as true partners by giving them voice in things that matter to them and collaborating with them to solve problems and reach goals.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We encourage families to *expand possibilities* by connecting them with other people, ideas, and opportunities to help them grow.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We offer regular *gatherings of all our families* for learning, worship, service, relationship-building, and more throughout the year.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We engage families *together with the whole community* for learning, worship, service, relationship-building, and more throughout the year.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We find ways *to reach families at home* with support, resources, and activities to develop family life and grow in faith.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We *strengthen families* by helping them develop the practices and skills for healthy family life.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We equip parents with the *knowledge and skills* for effective parenting and forming faith in young people.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We engage parents *as leaders and contributors* in the congregation and in the community.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We design ministries, projects, and activities that *complement and reinforce* the role of families in faith formation.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We recognize the *family as the epicenter* of faith formation across the generations.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. We celebrate the evidence of *vibrant faith at work* in the everyday lives of families and their young people.
 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

### *Family Faith Practices*

**1. Please select up to 10 practices from the list below that you consider the most important family faith practices for helping children and teens grow in faith (place a check mark in the left column). In the right column, please check the practices that your family actually does – today or in the past.**

**Most Important In Our Family**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1. Praying as a family (meal time, bedtime)
 |  |
|  | 1. Praying as a family during times of struggle or crisis
 |  |
|  | 1. Encouraging teens to pray alone or with peers
 |  |
|  | 1. Reading the Bible as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Encouraging teens to read the Bible alone or with their peers
 |  |
|  | 1. Celebrating rituals and holidays at home
 |  |
|  | 1. Serving people in need as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Serving people in need as individuals (parents, teens)
 |  |
|  | 1. Eating together as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Having family conversations
 |  |
|  | 1. Talking about faith as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Watching videos, movies, or TV shows with religious content or themes
 |  |
|  | 1. Encouraging teens to talk about their doubts and questions about faith
 |  |
|  | 1. Talking about faith and your religious tradition with your children and teens
 |  |
|  | 1. Asking your teenager's perspectives on faith, religion, social issues, etc.
 |  |
|  | 1. Providing moral instruction
 |  |
|  | 1. Demonstrating a warm and affirming parenting approach
 |  |
|  | 1. Taking time to growing in your own faith as a parent
 |  |
|  | 1. Engaging in positive communication with children and teens
 |  |
|  | 1. Encouraging children and teens to pursue their talents and interests
 |  |
|  | 1. Spending one-on-one time with children and teens
 |  |
|  | 1. Participating in Sunday Worship as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Inviting friends of your teen to join in family practices (Sunday worship, service, prayer)
 |  |
|  | 1. Celebrating the church year seasons at church (Advent/Christmas, Lent/Easter)
 |  |
|  | 1. Celebrating rituals and sacraments at church as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Participating in church life activities as a family
 |  |
|  | 1. Encouraging and supporting your teen to participate in church activities with peers
 |  |

**2. Are there other faith practices that your family engages in (or engaged in) that were not listed above.**

**3. What are two or three of the biggest challenges your family faces (or faced) in trying to live these faith practices? Please share these challenges.**

## Designing Family Faith Formation

(See Chapter 7 in *Families at the Center of Faith Formation*)

### Design Process

### Design Steps

#### Build the Family Faith Formation Network Design

Begin building the family faith formation network by determining the content areas appropriate for the target audience. Use the eight faith-forming processes as the basic framework for the network and then add new content areas to family life issues and parent issues. Diagram your network on a sheet of newsprint. Be comprehensive even if it looks overwhelming. You can always combine content areas or modify them later in the process. See the diagram earlier in this chapter.

#### Planning Step 5: Generate Programming for the Network

Begin generating programming by reviewing the eight strategies in Chapter Six before you begin planning new ideas. How many of these strategies will you incorporate in your network plan? What ideas can you incorporate in your network plan from these eight Strategies?

1. Discovering God in Everyday Life
2. Forming Faith at Home through the Life Cycle
3. Forming Faith through Milestones
4. Celebrating Seasonal Events through the Year
5. Encountering God in the Bible through the Year
6. Connecting Families Intergenerationally
7. Developing a Strong Family Life
8. Empowering Parents and Grandparents

Generate a list of all the possible programs, activities, and resources that *could* be included in the network.

1. Correlate the most important needs from the research into the appropriate content areas of the network design you have just created.
2. Add programs that will continue to be offered for parents and/or families into the appropriate content areas of the network.
3. Add events, ministries, and programs from the intergenerational faith community into the appropriate content areas of the network.

Generate ideas for new programming for each content area.

* Be sure to utilize a variety of *different learning environments* and/or one program in multiple learning environments: on your own (self-directed), with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, in the community, in the world.
* Try to implement a program idea with a *blended (digital) faith formation* strategy: gathered program with online content, gathered program andonline content, online and gathered in one program, mostly online, and fully online.

Use the template below to compile a report of the results. This report presents all of the ideas you can use to design seasonal plans for January–April, May–August, and September–December.

**Family Network Programming**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Network content areas | Current programming | Intergenerational events | New program ideas |
|  |  |  |  |

#### Design a Season of Family Faith Formation Programming

The most manageable way to program a faith formation network is to develop a three-season approach: January–April, May–August, and September–December. This means launching new programming three times and year and completing updating your website three times a year with the new programming as well as recurring programming. For an example of a season of a family faith formation network go to: http://holytrinityfamilies.weebly.com.

All of the network content areas do not need to be introduced in the first season of programming. Over the course of a year (three seasons) network content areas and programming can be added so that the complete plan is finally implemented in the fourth season. Some of the programming will be consistent in every season, while other programming will be specific to a season. Programming from a completed season is archived online (on the website) so that it can be reused in another season or re-introduced a year later.

Here is a guide to developing one season of programming. Develop a first draft of the season and then review all of the programming and make final choices about what to include in the season. Use the form (after the planning steps) to record the information to get a overall view of the season.

1. Identify the season: January 1–May 1 or May 1–September 1 or September 1–January 1.
2. Add continuing programs to the seasonal plan. Use the seasonal plan template to record the results: list the network content areas and then add the programs to the appropriate month.
3. Add intergenerational events and programs to the seasonal plan.
4. Add new programming to the seasonal plan. Try to provide new (or current) programs in *different learning environments* and/or one program in multiple learning environments: on your own (self-directed), with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, in the community, in the world. Try to implement a program idea with a *blended (digital) faith formation* strategy: gathered program with online content, gathered program andonline content, online and gathered in one program, mostly online, and fully online.
5. Develop the final version of the seasonal plan. Select the program ideas for each network content area. Some content areas may have too many programs to launch in one season. Select the ones that will be included in this season and save the other program ideas for another season.
6. Schedule programming in each network content area. Some of the programming flows through multiple months in a season, such as a weekly Bible study group. Some programs are monthly, while other programs are seasonal—Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter—and therefore anchored in one or more months. Still other programming/resources are always available, such as an online course or a video program or Bible study resources.

One way to manage the variety of programming is to focus on one month of major programming in the network content areas. For example the “Learning the Tradition” content area might select one month to schedule its theology enrichment series with four presentations from guest experts and options for small group study and online study using the video recordings. The Bible area might focus its programming in different month, perhaps around a church year season, such as Lent. This approach reduces the overlap among major programming and helps people participate in multiple experiences.

1. Develop *faith formation playlists*. This is similar to a music playlist where we curate and gather our favorite songs into our own “albums” for listening. A faith formation playlist curates content around a theme into an integrated learning plan that provides a variety of programming and a vareity ways to learn.
2. Develop specific plans for each program (when needed): date or month, programming environment(s), digital strategy(s), resources, leaders, and cost.

**Seasonal Plan**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Network Content Area | Programming & Dates |
|  | Month 1 | Month 2 | Month 3 | Month 4 |
|  |  |  |  |  |

#### Build the Digital Platform for Family Faith Formation

This digital platform provides the primary way to connect parents and families to the network’s offerings and to connect parents and families 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).

1. Choose a domain name (URL) for the family 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://holytrinityfamilies.weebly.com.
2. 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.
3. 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. There may be a need to consolidate several content areas of the network to accommodate the website design template. This involves creating submenus (secondary navigation) under the main menu items. In the new mobile-responsive designs it might be better to have a “home page” for each content area, which introduces all of the experiences, programs, activities, and resources for that content area and has buttons or links to individual pages with the content. It is harder to view and select submenus on mobile devices. It’s much easier to navigate from a “home page” with links.
4. Build each webpage to incorporate all of the programs, activities, and resources for the particular network content area in 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 major content area can be constructed as a *playlist* that provides an integrated plan with a variety of media..
5. Design the website specifically for parents and families 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 and indicate clearly the content or focus of an activity. Describe how your offerings respond to something within the lives of parents and families. Highlight the relationship between the content and the particular spiritual or religious needs, interests, passions, concerns, or life issues of parents and families. Describe the two to three benefits of participating or engaging in faith formation.

#### Test the Seasonal Plan and Web Design

Begin by identifying parents within the target audience to test the website and give feedback on the seasonal programming. Invite them to a focus group meeting. Use a deliberate procedure when you test. Create a “testing process” so that you can gain important feedback. Here are four suggestions:

1. Let your user experience the network online. Show; don’t tell. Let them review the website and the programming. Provide just the minimum context so they understand what to do. (Have computers or tablets available for people to use or ask them to bring a device to the focus group.)
2. Have them talk through their experience. For example, when appropriate, ask “Tell me what you are thinking as you are doing this.”
3. Actively observe. Watch how they use (and misuse!) the website. Don’t immediately “correct” what your user is doing.
4. Follow up with questions, such as: “Show me why this would (or would not) work for you.” “Can you tell me more about how this made you feel?” “Why? “ “Do you find things that interest you and connect with your life?” “Are there things you would have liked to see?”

Based on the feedback from the focus group(s), determine what revisions to make in programming and website design. Consider inviting members of the focus group(s) to become reviewers throughout the season of programming. Stay in regular communication with them, asking for feedback on their experience of the website and the programming.

### Programming

#### Guides

1. A **variety** of relationships, content, experiences, and resources
2. New **methods**: immersive, multimedia, multi-sensory, highly visual, participatory, experiential
3. New **formats**: episodic engagements and experiences, micro-learning, on demand, mobile, 24x7
4. New **digital** media and digital platforms; connect with parents/families through social media; redesign programming with digital connections and extensions; address new needs through online experiences
5. **Multipleenvironments**: self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world.
6. **Multiple versions**: design a program once and offer it in multiple formats and environments, e.g., a gathered program that is recorded and can be used for individual study or small group study

#### Life Cycle Specific Approach

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **At Home** | **With Families** | **Intergenerational**  | **At Church** |
| Caring relationships |  |  |  |  |
| Celebrating the liturgical seasons  |  |  |  |  |
| Celebrating milestones  |  |  |  |  |
| Learning the Christian tradition |  |  |  |  |
| Praying and spiritual formation |  |  |  |  |
| Reading and studying the Bible |  |  |  |  |
| Serving and justice |  |  |  |  |
| Worshipping God |  |  |  |  |
| Family Life Development |  |  |  |  |
| Parenting Formation  |  |  |  |  |

#### Multiple Stages of Family Life Approach

Examples: Forming faith through milestones, Reading the Bible & Encountering God in the Bible

#### Church-Based Family-Intergenerational Programming Approach

Examples: Learning programs; Seasonal workshops; Family life workshops; Service programs

#### Parent (Grandparent) Formation Approach

Content: Parenting competencies and skills; faith growth of parents; faith forming skills of parents

Program Ideas: Workshops, webinars, and/or courses for each stage of the lifecycle; laboratory experiences—immersion/hands-on experiences; parent mentors; lifecycle support groups for parents; parent catechumenate—around key milestone experiences and “moments of return”

#### Digitally-Enabled & Digitally Connected Approaches

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  **Fully Online**An online program with all learning done online and limited face-to-face, gathered learning settings |  **Mostly Online**A mostly online program with opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings | **Online and Gathered**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.  | **Gathered and** **Online Content**A gathered event or program that provides online content and activities to extend and expand the learning from the gathered program | **Gathered with Online Content**A gathered event or program that uses online content as part of the design of the event or program |