



# WHAT IF...

## *Imagining Possibilities*

### Fashioning Faith Formation around the Faith Journeys of People – Part Two

*(Fifth in a series on developing a lifelong learning paradigm)*

John Roberto

In Part One of this article we explored the concept of *personalizing* faith formation—guiding families and individuals toward greater maturity in faith. Personalizing faith formation gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Personalizing and fashioning faith formation involves the following elements:

1. Helping families and individuals at every stage of life discern where they are in their religious and spiritual journey, and then tailoring faith formation experiences to fit their needs.
2. Identifying key characteristics of growing in the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping families and individual discern their faith growth needs.
3. Developing a *pathways guide* to help people chart their growth in each of the essential characteristics of growing in the Christian faith.
4. Guiding people in creating a *faith growth plan* with the experiences, programs, activities, and resources that best match with their faith growth needs.
5. Helping people discover a variety of resources that can help them take their next best steps in their spiritual and religious journey.
6. Incorporating discernment and a faith growth plan into family and age group formation, and into milestones and sacramental moments, such as marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation, graduations, retirement, etc.
7. Accompanying people through mentoring (one-on-one or in small groups) to discern their faith growth needs and create a plan.

# Designing a Process for Personalizing Faith Formation

The centerpiece of the personalizing process is to create a **Pathways Guide** for a particular audience. A Pathways Guide is created around characteristics of maturing in faith that can be used to help people discern their faith journey and chart a path for growth.

A **Life Stage Pathways Guide** can be created for every of stage life: children and families (0–10), adolescents (11–19), young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid-50s–mid-70s), and older adults (75+). The Guide can be used at the beginning of a new year of faith formation programming to provide a personalized experience for people as they select faith growth experiences from the church’s gathered programs and online experiences. It can be used at parent meetings and family programs to discern parents’ faith growth needs as well as the faith growth needs of the whole family. It works best in an environment where you can guide people in discerning their faith growth needs and connecting them to faith formation. It’s helpful to create a faith formation catalog (print, digital) with all of the faith formation experiences, programs, activities, and resources that people can access to create their personal or family faith growth plan.

A **Milestones Pathways Guide** can be created for the preparation of individuals and families for a significant life milestone, life transition, or sacrament. Milestones pathways guide can be created for Christian initiation and new member formation, marriage preparation, parent formation for the baptism of their child, family preparation for first communion, preparation of adolescents for confirmation, and more. It’s helpful to create a catalog that is specific to the milestone with faith formation programs, activities, and resources (online and in-person) that people can use to create their faith growth plan.

## Design Process

**Step 1.** Identify a target audience for the *Pathways Guide*: life stages or milestones or another audience.

**Step 2.** Develop the characteristics of growing in the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping discerning faith growth needs. A Life Stage Guide can use the ten goals I have proposed for lifelong faith formation as a starting point. A Milestones Guide can use the ten goals or can use the “content” of the milestone to be more specific.

### Characteristics of Growing in Faith

- ◆ Personal relationship and commitment to Jesus
- ◆ Living the Christian faith in daily life
- ◆ Reading and studying the Bible and its application to living today
- ◆ Understanding and integrating the Christian story and tradition into one’s life
- ◆ Worshipping God on Sunday, in rituals, and through the church year

- ◆ Praying, together and lone, and growing spiritually
- ◆ Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and moral values
- ◆ Serving people in need, caring for creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace
- ◆ Being engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community
- ◆ Using one’s gifts and talents in service to the church and world

**Step 3.** Develop a stages of growth discernment rating to help people identify where they are currently in their faith journey. The stages of faith growth should be designed as a continuum of deepening faith practice and commitment. Try to incorporate at least three categories. Use age-appropriate language as you determine the names for each category. Here are several examples of growth ratings.

- ◆ Searching—exploring—beginning—growing—maturing
- ◆ Inquiring—learning—growing—sharing
- ◆ Exploring—growing—maturing—rooted
- ◆ Beginning (getting started)—growing—maturing (going deeper)—sharing (ministering)

**Step 4.** Create a *Pathways Guide* for your target audience that combines the stages of growth with each item (goal or description). You can develop the *Guide* by creating a grid with goals listed in one column and the stages of growth in the other columns, like the example below.

Goals or Characteristics				
Growing in a personal relationship with Jesus	1	2	3	4

**Rating Scale**

- 1 = I’m a beginner in this aspect of my faith.
- 2 = I’m growing in this aspect of my faith.
- 3 = I’m maturing and going deeper in this aspect of my faith.
- 4 = I’m sharing my faith and gifts with others.

Your *Pathways Guide* can also include short descriptions to illustrate the stages of growth for each goal. Here is an example for the Bible:

**Goal:** Reading, studying, and applying the Bible to my life

1. *Beginning:* I feel drawn to the story of God in the Bible and want to learn how to read the Bible and be open to God.
2. *Growing:* I am reading the Bible regularly and learning how to interpret the Bible and its meaning for today.
3. *Maturing:* I am reading and praying with the Bible and studying the books of the Bible and their message for today.
4. *Sharing:* I am sharing my understanding of the Bible and leading Bible activities and programs.

**Step 5.** Add questions to *Guide* people in reflecting on their future growth in faith. For example:

- ◆ Areas Where I Need to “Get Started”
- ◆ Areas Where I Need to “Grow”
- ◆ Areas Where I Want to “Go Deeper”
- ◆ Areas Where I’m Ready to Share My Faith and Gifts

**Step 6.** Develop the format for introducing and using the *Guide* to help people discern their faith growth needs. For example, it could be introduced in a large group setting with time for discernment and small group interaction, or in small groups facilitated by a guide or mentor, or in a one-to-one setting with the guidance and support of a mentor. Provide time for people to reflect on the results of their discernment using the questions in Step 5.

**Step 7.** Guide people in matching faith formation programs and experiences (the catalog) with faith growth needs and creating their *Faith Growth Plan*.

**Step 8.** Provide continuous support (small groups, mentors, and more) and opportunities for people to reflect on their progress in fulfilling their *Faith Growth Plan*.

## Next Steps

Develop a pilot project to personalize faith formation by identifying a target audience, designing a Pathways Guide, and providing mentoring or small group support.

Check out the examples of pathways guides on the *See All the People* website and download “Developing a Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations” at [www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system](http://www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system) .

Check out examples of pathways guides created by Rev. Kathy Pittenger, Director of Children’s Initiatives for the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church on the Lifelong Faith website: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/oct-5-2021.html>.