



# WHAT IF...

## *Imagining Possibilities*

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### A Hybrid Future for Faith Formation

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For decades faith formation has relied on in-person, fixed-time programming offered in physical spaces—church facilities, schools, camps, retreat centers, mission trip locations, and more. The working assumption was that we needed to gather people in physical settings at fixed times in order to conduct faith formation effectively—build relationships, teach, experience activities, etc. The pandemic disrupted this “default” programming model, and pushed us to experiment with new models.

Since the early 2010s we have had the tools, methods, media, and models to do faith formation differently—in **Online** models and in **Hybrid** models that blend the physical and online spaces. For example, we are designing **Online** models for adult faith formation by producing website pages of curated resources (courses, videos, readings, podcasts, etc.); for seasonal programming such as experiences and activities for the forty days of Lent; for streaming presentations and demonstrations to families, teens, and adults; and much more. We are designing **Hybrid** models that integrate in-person gatherings at church or in family groups or in small group meetings with online playlists that provide a menu of learning experiences on the theme of the program.

The creation of online and hybrid models of faith formation means that faith formation programming can be **synchronous** (real time) and **asynchronous** (on your own time)—thereby expanding the opportunities for people to engage in faith forming experiences that are responsive to their time, commitments, and availability. We deliver synchronous faith formation using physical gatherings, live streaming, video conferencing, online courses, and online small groups. We deliver asynchronous faith formation using online playlists, video and audio programs, online discussion groups, online learning platforms, websites, and more.

I believe the future of faith formation is *hybrid*. Hybrid models hold together two important values in faith formation: the importance of in-person relationships and faith forming

experiences, and the importance of being responsive to the complexity of people’s lives and their religious-spiritual needs. Hybrid models expand faith formation opportunities for everyone. We can become much more strategic and careful about when, where, how, and for what we gather people because we can now integrate online with in-person faith forming.

*Hybrid models of faith formation are more resilient, flexible, and adaptable—just what we need to respond to the challenges of change in our world and in lives of our people!*

## We Already Live Hybrid Lives

We are already living hybrid lives. Every day we weave together a life that is lived both online (mediated) and offline (in-person). Faith formation is catching up to the way people already live and interact every day. Angela Gorrell, author of *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (another must-read for everyone in faith formation), writes that we now live hybrid lives—online and offline.

Recognizing online actions as meaning-filled helps Christian communities to consider our current online and in-person reality in terms of its hybridity, rather than in terms of digital dualism (think of online as virtual and in person as real). “Hybridity,” describes “the coming together of online and offline, media and matter, or more dynamically. . . . the interplay between the online and offline dimension.” Most Americans live hybrid lives because our online and offline lives have been integrated. Interactions online shape offline experiences, and offline communication and practices shape people’s online engagement. (Gorrell 47)

Angela Gorrell writes that not only do we live hybrid lives, but we now live in hybrid Christian communities.

Hybrid Christian communities embody God’s love and “make the message believable” through meaningful conversations and faithful habits that are both in person and mediated, that take place at various times, and that happen in both physical and digital spaces.

I do not think it is too daunting for Christian communities to think about their community as being hybrid, given Paul’s letters and specifically his use of the metaphor of the “body of Christ.” Paul’s letters are a clear example of hybrid Christian communities, since his letters were extensions of his in-person ministry within particular communities and also provided mediated guidance for those communities.

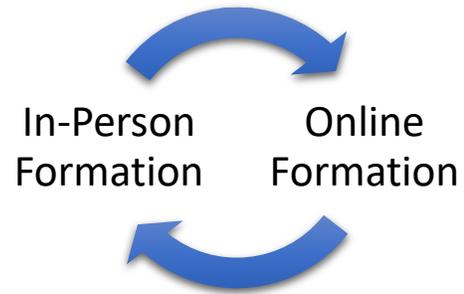
It is possible to nurture a hybrid Christian community. Many Christian communities *are* hybrid Christian communities (though they would probably not use this terminology) because they are nurturing relationships, growing spiritually, and engaging in ministry in-person and online. Through social media, members are cultivating connections online that

are not that different from the relationships that prevailed before the internet and mobile phones. (Gorrell 50-51)

## A Hybrid Future

The key to hybrid faith formation is the integration of in-person faith forming with online faith forming into one holistic integrated experience.

A program design can begin online and then move to in-person and back to online or it can begin in-person and continue online. There are a variety of ways to integrate the two components.



**One way to develop a hybrid model is by beginning with in-person faith formation and then deepen it with online faith formation.** We can extend the theme of an in-person event or program by curating a variety of faith forming experience that provide more depth and application of the theme through images, video, audio, readings, etc. We can deliver the content using a multi-media newsletter, social media posts, and/or a playlist on a website. Here are several examples you can adapt. In addition, consider designing programs like mission trips, vacation Bible school, and summer camps into hybrid models.

### **Worship & Online Formation**

- Participate in weekly worship (in-person or live streamed).
- Engage in faith forming activities using an online playlist on Sunday's theme: prayers, readings, video, podcast, art, music, creative activities, conversations, action ideas, etc.

### **In-Person & Online Formation**

- Meet in-person once per month (or every other week).
- Engage in online faith formation for the other weeks using a playlist on the theme.

### **In-Person & Online & Video Meetings**

- Week #1: Meet in-person for the program.
- Week #2: Engage in online faith forming experiences using a playlist on the theme.
- Week #3: Continue with the playlist learning on the theme.
- Week #4: Conduct a video meeting (Zoom) for small groups or age groups or families to discuss and apply the online learning.

### **In-Person & Live Streamed or Video & Online**

- Week #1: Meet in-person for the program.
- Week #2: Engage in online faith forming experiences using a playlist on the theme.

- Week #3: Conduct a livestream presentation or demonstration or prerecorded video (using Zoom, Facebook Live, or YouTube Live) on the theme of the month's program.
- Week #4: Continue with the playlist learning on the theme.

**A second way to develop a hybrid model is to begin with online faith formation, leading to in-person experiences.** This approach is known as **Flipped Learning** in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space online, and the group space is transformed into a dynamic interactive learning environment where the leader/teacher guides participants as they creatively discuss, practice, and apply the content.

Here is a basic outline of a 4-week model that can be applied to children and youth programs, as well as adult Bible studies and short courses.

### **Online & Small Group Gatherings**

- Week #1: Engage in online learning using Playlist #1 on the theme.
- Week #2: Participate in a small group gathering to discuss and apply the learning (in-person or through video conferencing)
- Week #3: Engage in online learning using Playlist #2 on the theme.
- Week #4: Participate in a small group gathering to discuss and apply the learning (in-person or through video conferencing)

The Flipped Learning Model is very helpful when it is difficult to gather people, such as preparation for a sacrament or milestone. We can *prepare* people online with the appropriate content (experiences, activities, video/audio, and resources); then *engage* them in-person for the event or program; and *sustain and apply* the experience through online faith formation.

A good example of this is an adolescent confirmation program. Here is a Flipped Model illustrated in a monthly format for young people that can be woven into a yearlong program.

- **On Your Own:** Engage young people with a monthly learning playlist—watching videos, reading short articles, praying, writing reflections in a journal—on the theme.
- **In a Small Group:** Have young people participate in one small group experience (online) to discuss the content in the playlist and what they are learning.
- **In a Large Group:** Involve young people in a monthly meeting with all groups for community sharing, interactive activities, short presentations, and ideas for living faith.

***Hybrid models of faith formation are the future of faith formation—more resilient, flexible, and adaptable.*** Now we must learn the skills necessary for designing hybrid models of faith formation and creating playlists of faith forming content and experiences. *Watch for upcoming What If... articles and new content on the LifelongFaith.com website to help you.*

### **Works Cited**

Correll, Angela. *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media World*. Baker Academic, 2019.