

# Church Leaders Conference

## Reimagine Faith Formation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

John Roberto  
Vibrant Faith Ministries, Leadership Team  
([jroberto@lifelongfaith.com](mailto:jroberto@lifelongfaith.com))

### Handouts/Resources/PowerPoint Presentations:

- Lifelong Faith website: [www.lifelongfaith.com/lifelong-faith-formation.html](http://www.lifelongfaith.com/lifelong-faith-formation.html)

### Resources

- *Digital Cathedral*. Keith Anderson. Church Publishing, 2015.
- *Faith Formation for a New Generation*. LifelongFaith Associates, 2017.
- *Families at the Center of Faith Formation*. LifelongFaith Associates, 2016.
- *Generations Growing Together*. LifelongFaith Associates, 2014.
- *Intergenerational Christian Formation*. Holly Allen and Kristine Ross. Intervarsity Press, 2012
- *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. LifelongFaith Associates, 2015.
- *Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*. LifelongFaith Associates, 2015.

### Online

- *Lifelong Faith Formation* website: [www.lifelongfaith.com](http://www.lifelongfaith.com)
- *Families at the Center of Faith Formation* website: [www.FamiliesattheCenter.com](http://www.FamiliesattheCenter.com)
- *Seasons of Adult Faith Formation* website: [www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com](http://www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com)

## Part 1. Vision & Practices for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Faith Formation

---

We are on the doorstep of a new decade. So many of the trends and challenges we experience today were just emerging as this decade began: a ten-decade life span, the millennial generation starting families, baby boomers entering their “retirement” years, the younger generations leaving organized religion, multiple family structures and living arrangements, the diversity of ethnic cultures, the recognition of gender and sexual diversity, and more.

The arrival of a new decade is a good time to create an “agenda” for the future of faith formation. I am proposing seven areas for development on my agenda for the future. I believe these are important for the future of faith formation, and they are areas that I want to dedicate my time and energy. So here’s my agenda for action.

### 1. Developing a New Ecology of Christian Faith Formation

We know from research and practice that faith is formed in intergenerational faith communities, in families, in peer groups across the life cycle, and in missional settings where people are introduced to the Christian faith. We need to start thinking and acting ecologically in everything we do. For example, if we are creating a plan for children’s faith formation, we need to consider how we will engage children in faith community experiences with all generations (including worship), how we will equip parents to share faith at home and build families of faith practice, and how we will build relationships with and engage children and parents who are not involved in the faith community (e.g., baptized but not engaged). Once we have identified faith forming experiences in the broader ecology, we can identify the unique age-group experiences we need to provide children.

## 2. Focusing on Faith Maturing

We need to focus faith formation on the essential characteristics of lifelong growth in Christian faith and discipleship. These characteristics would incorporate knowing and believing, relating and belonging, practicing and living. With a lifelong vision of maturing faith we could address each characteristic in developmentally-appropriate ways at each stage of life. For example, if “*sustaining a personal relationship with Jesus Christ supported through regular prayer, faith sharing and Bible reading*” was one of these faith maturing characteristics, the task of faith formation would be to ask how we can accomplish this with children, youth, young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults. In this approach we would build our “curriculum” around the people and the faith maturing characteristics.

## 3. Personalizing Faith Formation

We need to tailor faith formation to the individual journeys of children, youth, young adults, adults, and families in order to address their increasing spiritual and religious diversity and life stage needs. One of the latest educational innovations is personalized learning, i.e., tailoring the educational environment—the what, when, how and where people learn—to address the individual needs and interests of each person. To personalize faith formation we need to create “faith growth pathways” that use the faith maturing characteristics and, with the help of a mentor or small group, guide people in discerning their faith growth needs. For example, if we took the characteristic “*seeking spiritual growth by actively pursuing questions of faith, learning what it means to believe in God, and what it’s like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ*” we could provide a tool that helps them discover their faith growth needs using a continuum from “exploring” to “getting started” to “making progress” to “going deeper” with short illustrations for each one. In this approach we would then develop a personalized faith growth plan—or what educators are now calling “playlists”—of content (print, audio, video, online) and direct experiences to address their needs.

### Spiritual-Religious Identities

**Vibrant Faith and Engaged in the Congregation.** A religious faith is central to the lives of the engaged. These are who are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith. These are parents who are transmitting this faith to their children and are actively engaged as a family in a church community. These are children, adolescents, adults, and parents/grandparents who are spiritually committed and growing in their faith. They have found their spiritual home within an established Christian tradition and a local faith community that provides ways for them to grow in faith, worship God, and live their faith in the world. They are practicing their faith at home and in daily life.

**Moderate Faith Practice and Occasionally Engaged in the Congregation.** These are adults and families, children, adolescents, and parents/grandparents who participate occasionally in church life—in seasonal celebrations, sacraments and milestones, major events, and age-group programs. For parents transmitting a religious faith primarily means bringing their children to educational programs at church. Some may even attend worship regularly and send their children to religious education classes. Their spiritual commitment is low and their connection to the church is more social and utilitarian than spiritual. While receptive to an established church, they do not have a faith commitment that would make their relationship with God and participation in a faith community a priority in their lives. Their occasional engagement in church life does not lead them toward spiritual commitment.

**Spiritual, but Not Religious.** These are adults who are spiritually engaged (relationship with God, meaningful spiritual life), but involved in organized religion and an established Christian tradition. Some may join a nondenominational Christian church focused on their spiritual needs, while others may find an outlet for their spiritual hunger in small communities of like-minded spiritual seekers, in local or global acts of service, or in online spiritual resources and communities. The Spiritual but Not Religious reflect a growing minority of the American population, especially among young adults.

**Unaffiliated.** For the unaffiliated religion is not personally important in their lives (and their family's life). They are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches. The Unaffiliated reject all forms of organized religion and reflect a steadily increasing percentage of the American population, especially among young adults. Many adults (Millennials and Gen X) left organized religion because they stopped believing in the religion's teachings (top reason) or their family was never that religious when they were growing up or their experience of negative religious teaching about or treatment of gay and lesbian people (PRRI research, 2016). Many parents are "first generation Nones" and are now raising their children in religiously uninvolved and unaffiliated homes creating a "second generation of Nones."

#### 4. Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational

We need to become intentional about strengthening the intergenerational character of our congregations and faith formation experiences. We can create a plan that (1) *utilizes* the intergenerational events and experiences of church life (community life events, worship and the lectionary, seasons of the year, service and mission projects, prayer and spiritual formation) as a primary "content" in faith formation by *preparing* people with the knowledge and practices for participating, by *engaging* people in the event, and by *reflecting* upon the meaning of the event and how to *live/practice* in daily life; (2) *infuses* intergenerational experiences and relationships into existing ministries and programs, such as age group programs; 3) *connects* the generations through new intergenerational programs and experiences that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshipping. One area ripe with possibilities is to develop grandparent-grandchildren programming, such as a VBS, summer camp, service/mission projects, field trips, and more.

#### 5. Empowering and Equipping Parents and the Family

We all know how important parents and the whole family are in the faith forming process. Today's families—of Gen Z children and teens, and Millennial and younger Gen X parents—present new challenges and opportunities. We will need to create new faith formation initiatives for the home, and learn from them what approaches and practices work best. There are proven strategies that can guide the development of comprehensive plan for family faith formation including: (1) *At Home*: discovering God in everyday life, forming faith practices, and celebrating milestones and rituals; (2) *In the Faith Community*: celebrating seasonal events, encountering God in the Bible, and connecting families intergenerationally (learning, service, community life); and (3) *With Parents*: developing a strong family life, and empowering parents and grandparents as faith formers. With the new digital tools and media we have the ability to reach today's parents and families anywhere and anytime with engaging and interactive faith forming content. (See *Families at the Center of Faith Formation* for the strategies.)

## 6. Designing Twenty-First Century Learning Experiences

We can dramatically improve our effectiveness in promoting faith growth and learning by using the new approaches and methods that are being designed by educators for twenty-first century learners of all ages—children, youth, and adults. We know today’s younger generations learn best in environments that are interactive, participatory, experiential, visual, and multi-sensory. Among today’s most promising educational innovations are *personalizing learning* (see #3), *blended learning* and *flipped learning*, *micro-learning*, and *immersive learning*. All of these new approaches and methods are enhanced by the use of digital technologies, methods, and media.

- ▶ **Blended Learning** integrates learning in physical and online settings where a person has some control over time, place, path, and/or pace of the learning experience. One form of blended learning is *Flipped Learning* in which the content moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space (usually online), and the group space is transformed into an interactive learning environment for discussion and application. Congregations are already flipping confirmation preparation (learning online plus interactive group activities in gathered settings), extending gathered events with online content for continued learning, and providing online faith formation or live webinars for individuals or groups.
- ▶ **Micro-learning** experiences are short-form—5, 10, 15 minute—learning experiences designed for anywhere, anytime learning that be combined into multi-part learning programs. Micro-learning experiences are one response to short attention spans and mobile learning. We can curate a series of micro-learning experiences (on a digital platform) to engage people in all types of faith formation content.
- ▶ **Immersive learning** is faith-forming experiences that are interactive, participatory, experiential, visual, and multi-sensory. With the rise of anytime, anywhere faith formation content we need to ask: “What is the role of gathering people for faith formation?” Today children (and their parents), youth, and adults can access online most of the content that we teach at church. We have already been offering these types of experiences. What if we expanded our immersive learning opportunities (VBS, retreats, mission trips, and more) and focused our gathered settings on immersive faith formation in extended settings (half-day, full day, weekend, weeklong) offered throughout the year (but not weekly).

## 7. Embracing New Leadership Roles

We need to develop new leadership roles to match with the new approaches to faith formation in the twenty-first century. We are blending “traditional” roles like developing religious content, designing programming, managing programming, and teaching/facilitating programming with three new roles: *Architect*, *Curator*, and *Digital Designer*. We are becoming *learning architects* who design and/or identify environments which can become settings for faith formation, e.g., homes, workplaces, coffee shops, online communities, and more. We can design content and experiences to “deliver” to that setting. We are becoming *designers of digital platforms* (websites, social media) where people can connect with each other, access content, engage in learning activities, and more. These platforms provide 24x7 faith formation. While we may not personally possess these new digital skills, our congregations most likely have people who do. We are becoming *curators* of religious content and experiences. When there is an abundance of content, our role shifts from creator to curator. Curators are engaged in finding and identifying high quality content in all formats, matching it with the needs of people, providing the content on a digital platform (and often in gathered settings), and engaging people with the content.

## Part 2. Elements of Lifelong Faith Formation

---

### 1. Intergenerational

Congregations can enhance the power of intergenerational faith formation experiences in three connected ways.

1. **Utilizing** the intergenerational events and experiences of church life (community life events, worship and the lectionary, seasons of the year, service and mission projects, prayer and spiritual formation) as a primary “content” in faith formation by *preparing* people with the knowledge and practices for participating, by *engaging* people in the event, and by *reflecting* upon the meaning of the event and how to *live/practice* in daily life
2. **Infusing** intergenerational experiences and relationships into existing programs and activities, such as bringing mature adults into children and youth programs for interviews, storytelling, and mentoring; and transforming age-group programs (vacation Bible school, service projects) into intergenerational experiences
3. **Connecting** the generations through new intergenerational programs and experiences that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshipping. For example, developing grandparent-grandchildren programming—VBS, summer camp, service/mission projects, field trip; and/or creating new intergenerational learning programs, service programs, retreat experiences, camp experiences, and much more.

### Intergenerational Learning Model

1. Gathering and opening prayer
2. All-ages learning experience: intergenerational learning begins with a multigenerational experience of a theme that all generations can share together.
3. In-depth learning experience: through structured learning activities each generation—families with children, adolescents, and other adults—explores the biblical and theological understanding of the topic, using one of three possible formats:
  - The *Age Group Format* provides parallel, age-appropriate learning for groups at the same time. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic—utilizing specific learning activities that are designed for their life cycle stage: families with children or children alone, adolescents, young adults, and adults.
  - The *Whole Group Format* provides a series of facilitated learning activities for everyone at the same time using intergenerational or age-specific small groups or table groups.
  - The *Learning Activity Center Format* provides structured intergenerational and age-specific learning activities at a variety of stations or centers in a common area.
4. Sharing learning reflections and application: in intergenerational groups participants share what they learned and prepare for applying their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or online.
5. Closing prayer service

## 2. Family Faith Formation

Research studies over the past twenty years continue to affirm this truth. We know the factors that make a significant difference in promoting faith in children and adolescents:

- parents' personal faith and practice
- a close and warm parent-child relationship
- parent modeling and teaching a religious faith
- parent involvement in church life and Sunday worship
- grandparent religious influence and relationship
- family conversations about faith
- family faith religious practices including praying, reading the Bible, serving others, and celebrating holidays and rituals.

### Nurturing Family Faith Practices

*Equipping and resourcing families to practice their faith at home through prayer, devotions, reading the Bible, rituals, milestone celebrations, service, learning, and more.*

The family at home is the community where Christian faith practices are nurtured and practiced. We have discovered through research that certain faith practices make a significant difference in nurturing the faith of children and adolescents.

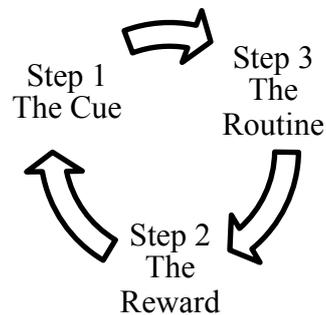
1. Reading the Bible as a family and encouraging young people to read the Bible regularly
2. Praying together as a family and encouraging young people to pray personally
3. Serving people in need as a family and supporting service activities by young people
4. Participating regularly in Sunday worship as a family
5. Being involved in a faith community and serving in church as a family and as young people
6. Eating together as a family
7. Celebrating rituals and holidays at home
8. Having family conversations
9. Talking about faith, religious issues, and questions and doubts
10. Ritualizing important family moments and milestone experiences
11. Celebrating holidays and church year seasons at home
12. Providing moral instruction

Faith practices are learned and practiced as they woven seamlessly into the fabric of daily life. They can become “habits of faith.” Consider this when you woke up this morning, what did you do first? Did you hop in the shower, check your messages, put on your sneakers and workout or go for run, or have breakfast? Did you tie the left or right shoe first? What did you eat for lunch? What did you do when you got home in the evening?

Most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they're not. They're habits. Charles Duhigg, in *The Power of Habit*, writes that at the core of every habitual pattern is a habit loop. The habit loop can be broken down into three basic steps. First, there is a cue, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode. The cue can be internal, such as a feeling or thought, or external, such as a time of day or the company of certain people (which is why it's easier to exercise among our running buddies, but harder to study when our friends are in the library). The second part of the habit loop is the routine, the behavior that leads to the reward. The routine can be physical (eating a donut), cognitive (“remember for the test”), or emotional (“I always feel anxious in math class”). The third part is the reward. Not surprisingly, the reward can also be physical (sugar!), cognitive (“that's really interesting”), or

emotional (“I always feel relaxed in front of the TV.”). The reward determines if a particular habit loop is worth remembering.

Here is the process of creating a habit, drawn from Charles Duhigg’s *The Power of Habit*.



**The Cue:** Every habit has a trigger.

- What time will this habit occur?
- Where will you be?
- What else will be around?
- What will you have just finished?
- What emotion do you think you will be feeling?

People do not need all these to create a habit. Only one of them is needed to become a cue. But the more people test out, the faster the habit takes hold.

**The Reward**

- What reward will you give yourself at the end of the behavior?
- Do you actually enjoy this reward? After a few days, ask: Do you crave this reward when you are exposed to the cue? After two weeks ask: Do you crave the intrinsic reward of the habit (how it makes you feel) more than the extrinsic reward (what you give yourself as a treat)?
- If yes, people have created a powerful habit. If not, people need to choose a new reward.

**The Routine:** This is the behavior you want to become a habit.

Studies show that the easiest way to implement a new habit is to write a plan:

“When \_\_\_\_ (cue) \_\_\_\_\_, I will \_\_\_\_ (routine) \_\_\_\_\_ because it provides me with \_\_\_\_ (reward) \_\_\_\_\_.

People should post their plan where they will see it. Try it for a week. Eventually, studies say the new behavior will become automatic)

We can help families integrate the faith practices into their daily routine by designing activities that present the faith practices in a way that will lead toward making the practice a habit. We can design activities for a particular practice (like reading the Bible) that only take 5 or 10 minutes, suggest a variety of ways to integrate the activity into daily life, have people create a plan, and invite people to reflect on the benefits of the practice after their experience.

One example of helping families form “habits of faith” comes from Traci Smith who proposes a 7-day start up plan for integrating faith practices into daily life using the activities in her book *Faithful Families: Creating Sacred Moments at Home*. This approach provides an immersion experience for

families out of which habits can develop. Explore the other programming ideas at the end of this section.

## **Celebrating Milestones**

*Celebrating one-time milestones and annual milestones through experiences at home and in the congregation that activities of naming, equipping, blessing, gifting, and reinforcing*

A milestone is an action or event marking a significant change or stage in development. These life and faith markers can provide important times for engaging families when they are most open to change and growth. Milestones are significant moments in life's journey that provide the opportunity for families to experience God's love and grow in faith through events in the life of the church community and family life. Milestones faith formation provides a natural opportunity to create a partnership between the congregation and the home. Here is a plan from Milestones Ministry (<https://milestonesministry.org>):

### **Children & Youth**

- Birth and Baptism
- Anniversary of Baptism: Remembering our way of life
- Prayer: Relationships with God and family
- Welcoming young children to worship: An intentional invitation
- Beginning faith formation at church: First steps for a young child
- Kids and money; Good stewards of God's gifts
- Blessing of the backpacks: A Fall milestone for all ages
- Communion: learning more about the Lord's Supper
- Bible: Placing Scripture in hands and homes
- My Body, God's Gift: Sexuality as God's good gift
- Middle school: Created in God's image
- Beginning confirmation: Walking with youth in their faith journeys
- Confirmation: An evening of honor
- Driver's license: Driver's license as rite of passage
- Mission trip: Community blessings at home and away
- High school graduation: Equipping graduates for the journey

### **Adults**

- New job: connecting God's presence at work
- New home: Affirming the physical, spiritual, and emotional transition to a new living space
- Empty Nest: affirming adults in a new season of life
- Return from military deployment: establishing a new norm
- Marriage
- Anniversary of Marriage: remembering our promises of love and life together
- Becoming a parent: nurturing and safeguarding a child
- Faith community: life together as the people of God
- Affirming spiritual gifts: connecting passion with service
- Aging parent: affirming primary care givers
- Grandparents: From generation to generation
- Retirement: A major life transition
- Loss of a loved one: remembering God's promises for us all

Milestone faith formation can be developed around five elements: *naming*, *equipping*, *blessing*, *gifting*, and *reinforcing*.

1. *Naming* the sacred and ordinary events that take place in daily life—beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage, and creating rituals and traditions that shape our identities and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
2. *Equipping* brings people together for learning, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides information. A family or intergenerational learning program—at church or home or in the community—prepares the individual and the whole family for the milestone and for living faith at home.
3. *Blessing* the individual and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home says that it is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred. Offer a prayer to bless the lives of those involved in the milestone moment: a prayer during worship for those participating in the milestone moment and a prayer at a small group or with family at home.
4. *Gifting* offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life.
5. *Reinforcing* the milestone with a follow-up gathering of those involved in the milestone moment to help it gain deeper roots in the life of faith of those who participated.

## Practical Strategies for Enhancing Family Faith

Here are several practical suggestions for implementing the four faith forming strategies in a congregation.

1. **Develop a family faith formation website.** Develop a family website with engaging family faith forming activities—print, audio, video, apps, and more—tailored to families with children and adolescents (and with parent content as well). The website serves as the resource center with content and activities and as a portal to family activities online. This is essential element of all of family strategies.
2. **Seasonal family festivals and gatherings.** Develop family gatherings or festivals around the four seasons—fall, winter, spring, and summer—or around the church year—Advent-Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost. Select a theme for each gathering such as a faith practice and/or seasonal event and/or Scripture readings. Schedule these as part of the annual calendar. Connect Sunday worship with the family festival.
3. **Connect to Sunday worship.** Find ways to connect faith practices and seasonal formation at home to readings in the Lectionary or in a sermon series, provide a short intro to living faith at home, and show people the at-home activities on the family faith formation website.
4. **Schedule a yearlong plan for milestones.** Integrate milestones formation and celebration that can be schedule into a yearly plan of church-based faith formation for each age group. For example:
  - August: Blessing of the backpacks
  - September: Beginning faith formation at church
  - October: Bible: Placing Scripture in hands and homes
  - November; Kids and money—being good stewards of God’s gifts
  - February: My body, God’s gift
  - March: Drivers license (for those who have and are about to receive a license)
  - April: Communion

May: High school graduation

June: Mission trip

5. **Make faith practices a seasonal focus.** Make a Christian practice the focus of a season or individual months through all family or intergenerational learning, worship and preaching, and service/action. For example, during the Lenten season the congregation and family can focus on one or more practices that reflect the theology and liturgies of the season, such as forgiveness, discernment, prayer, or transforming the world.
6. **Create family immersion experiences.** Design an extended time programs (half-day, full day) that teach faith through immersion experiences—at church or out in the community—where families can experience a practice first hand, such as hospitality at a homeless shelter or serving a meal at a soup kitchen or caring for creation by planting a garden.

## Equipping Parents and Grandparents as Faith Formers

*Equipping parents and grandparents with the knowledge and skills necessary for faith-forming: how to transmit faith and values to their young people, how to become a Christian role model, and how to build a community of faith at home that nurtures faith growth in the young.*

There are three components of a parent and grandparent strategy: 1) promoting their spiritual and religious growth, 2) developing their faith forming skills, and 3) equipping them with the knowledge and skills for parenting today.

**Spiritual and religious growth.** This content will need to be tailored to the four spiritual-religious identities of parents—active, occasional, spiritual/uninvolved, and unaffiliated; and to the traditions, beliefs, and practices of the particular Christian tradition. This content includes, but is not limited to: developing a relationship and commitment to Jesus, experiencing the presence of God in daily life and relationships with others, praying, having Christian moral and ethical values to decide what is right or wrong, serving those in need and applying faith in the world, growing spiritually, reading and studying the Bible, and developing a well-informed Christian faith (Christian beliefs).

**Faith-forming skills and practices.** This content would include, but is not limited to: having family conversations about religious topics, reading and discussing the Bible, prayer as a family and as individuals, participating in Sunday worship, celebrating family rituals and milestones, celebrate holidays and seasons, engaging in actions of service, justice, and care for creation, talking about faith and the religious tradition, and providing moral instruction and discussing moral issues.

A helpful framework for thinking about the parent faith forming skills and practices is contained in the research study by Christian Smith and Justin Bartkus. They identify three primary roles parents play in transmitting religion.

1. *Sponsor of the Faith:* Parents are the point of access between the church and their children. If children are not initially exposed to the Christian faith by their parents, they usually will not be exposed to it at all.
2. *Gatekeeper of the Faith.* Parents have nearly total control over how much and what sorts of religious content their children encounter—whether prayer, reading the Bible, or receiving Communion will occur regularly in their lives; whether they will be exposed to relationships and communities that have a religious dimension, and so forth. Parents are thus the

“gatekeeper” of religious content for their children. To use another metaphor, parents are like a faucet, determining whether religious content will arrive in children’s lives at an occasional drip or in a regular flow.

3. *Interpreter of the Faith.* Parents are definitive role models, mentors, who embody a specific manner of being Christian. They teach children how to apprehend the world, how to understand what is good and what is evil, how one ought to affectively, intellectually and practically engage with the world, and so on. They do not just “represent” the faith; in many cases, they are the only meaningful embodiment of that faith in the lives of children. Parents render faith a matter of flesh and blood rather than a lifeless mishmash of doctrines and teachings. If children do not “see” the Christian faith in the “face” of their parents, they will likely never gain sufficient familiarity with it to commit to practicing the faith in the long run. (Adapted from Smith and Bartkus, 15)

**Knowledge and skills for parenting.** Based on the Developmental Relationships research from the Search Institute we can identify important practices for effective parenting. This content includes, but is not limited to:

- expressing care to young people by listening to them, being dependable, encouraging them, and make them feel known and valued
- challenging young people by expecting them to do their best and live up to their potential
- providing support for my young people by encouraging their efforts and achievements and guiding them to learn and grow
- treating young people with respect, hearing their voice, and including them in decisions that affect them
- inspiring young people to see possibilities for their future, expose them to new experiences and places, and connect them to people who can help them grow
- demonstrating a warm and affirming parenting approach
- creating a warm, caring supportive family environment.
- practicing effective communication skills
- managing “screen time” and social media use
- learning effective discipline practices
- creating a warm, caring supportive family

## **Suggestions for Parent Programming**

Here are a variety of ideas for developing programming around the three content areas of parent and grandparent formation.

1. **Parent website.** A parent or family faith formation website can provide online learning experiences (workshops, webinars, courses, audio podcasts, video programs). A website can provide parents with resources in all three content areas in a variety of media. The website can also extend learning from gathered parent programs. The website can include original programming created by the congregation and curated programming from other sources. Digital initiatives, such as the website or webinars, provide a way to reach a wider audience of parents in the community. A great example of a website designed for parents is ParentFurther (<http://www.parentfurther.com>).
2. **Parent programs.** In gathered settings (large group or small group) or online (webinars, online courses, video programs) parent programs can be created and/or curated using the content suggested earlier.

- Incorporate parent formation and education into congregational events that already engage parents, such as parent preparation programs for baptism, first communion, or confirmation, as well as the celebration of milestones
  - Add a parent-only component to family-intergenerational learning programs that addresses parent faith formation or skills development while their children are participating in child-focused activities. Gather the groups together for a shared experience to put into practice what they learned.
  - Add a parallel parent program to the existing children and adolescent program where parents can gather occasionally while their children are in age-specific programs.
  - Add a parent component to vacation Bible school in the evenings or online.
3. **Laboratory experiences.** Immerse parents in hands-on experiences—with or without their children—that teach knowledge and skills for faith-forming and parenting. A family-centered worship experience can be an opportunity to teach parents about worship, reading the Bible, and how to do these things at home. A church-wide service day can be an opportunity to teach parents about the biblical basis of service and how to integrate service into family life. A church year seasonal celebration can be an opportunity to teach about ritual and how to celebrate rituals and church year seasons at home. These immersion experiences can be supported with online content for parents and for the whole family.
  4. **Parent mentors.** Provide guidance and support for parents and the whole family at each stage of life with mentors drawn from the grandparent generation who are actively engaged in church and bring decades of parenting and family life experiences. Congregations can identify and provide training for mentors (mentoring skills, understanding today’s family, learning how to access online resources and activities, and more). Developing relationships between parents and mentors can begin with birth/baptism. Mentoring can be life-cycle specific with mentors who focus on children or adolescents. Churches can also identify mentors (spiritual guides) who attend to people’s spiritual life, guiding them in growing in their relationship with God and learning more about the Christian faith.
  5. **Life cycle or affinity groups for parents.** Create gathered settings (church, home, community) and in online groups (such as a Facebook parents group) that provide opportunities for parents with children in the same age group to talk about parenting, get information and encouragement, discuss family life issues and challenges, and more. Congregations can also sponsor support groups for divorced parents, parents in blended families, parents of children with special needs, and other affinity groupings. An example of a life cycle support group is MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers).
  6. **Have parents practice new skills with their own children during program sessions.** This is in contrast to training programs where no practice takes place or where parents are asked to role-play with another parent or the group leader.
  7. **Design programs that engage parents in the learning experience.** Parent programs need to have content that is relevant to parents and processes that help parents learn and want to participate in new learning. Here are several tips for designing and leading effective educational experiences for parents.
    - Create a supportive, caring environment for learning. Greet parents, provide time for them to get acquainted with one another, and encourage mutual support during and after the experience.

- Actively engage parents in the learning. The amount they learn will be in direct proportion to how much they put into the experience.
  - Let parents be the experts. Show that you value their knowledge and experience by giving them opportunities to contribute to the learning experience.
  - Tie the learning activities around the parents' experiences and values so they know "this is for me and about my family."
  - Focus the content on real needs, issues, and concerns, not just on content that parents ought to know. If, for example, you want to help parents teach their child/teen about healthy concepts of right and wrong, first identify the ways this connects with parents' needs or concerns regarding moral values, then develop the experience to reflect those concerns.
  - Include information and skills parents can put into action immediately. Such application reinforces and helps parents internalize what they learn.
  - Demonstrate how to use skills and practices during the program so that parents have a direct experience of how to use the skills or practice at home.
  - Provide resources that parents can use for their own personal growth and with their family. Consider developing a parent website with resources and links to websites to enhance and expand the learning experience.
8. **Use a variety of environments and methods to engage all parents, anytime and anywhere.** Use a variety of settings—independent, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world—to offer a diversity of programs as well as to offer the same program content in multiple learning environments. This provides parents with more options to participate and broadens the scope of parent formation and education offerings.
9. **Use online platforms and digitally enabled strategies.** Utilize the abundance of digital media and tools for parent formation and education—to engage parents anytime, anyplace, and just-in-time—and extend and expand faith formation from physical, face-to-face settings into their daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems. Online platforms for parents (websites) integrate the content (programs, activities, resources), connect people to the content and to each other, provide continuity for people across different learning experiences, and make everything available anytime, anywhere, 24-7-365. Digital media tools and resources—social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more), webinars and online learning, video conferencing, videos, audio podcasts, and much more—provide more features in designing parent programs, more methods for delivering programs, and more ways to connecting parents to each other.
10. **Give parents a plan.** Reggie Joiner and the Think Orange team emphasize how important it is to give families a plan. "When parents show up at church, they are often asking silent questions that we must answer; questions they don't even know they're asking. To begin looking at parents through a different filter, imagine that every time a parent walks through the door, he or she is asking you to do three things:
- *Give me the plan.* Most parents are parenting reactively, yet many of them desire to be proactive. They want a plan that will give them a system of support, consistent influence, and a steady flow of relevant information. In essence, what they need from the church is a partner.
  - *Show me how it works.* Parents need to be influenced as much as children do, and they desire to be engaged in the process in a way that prompts them to take the best next step. Church leadership has the potential to challenge them collectively and give them a network of families to connect with personally.

- *Tell me what to do today.* If we are going to truly partner with parents, we have to give them specific instructions or resources to use this week. Sometimes parents have a lack of vision, but often they just don't know where to start. Give parents a map and a schedule. (Joiner 2010, 89–90)

### **3. Faith Formation across the Life Span—Childhood through Adulthood**

#### **Promoting Faith Maturity**

The goal of all faith formation is forming disciples of Jesus Christ and providing a foundation for lifelong growth in Christian faith and discipleship. We can form disciples and promote faith growth through ten essential characteristics of Christian faith and discipleship that incorporate knowing and believing, relating and belonging, practicing and living. These ten characteristics—drawn from the Christian faith tradition and from research on what makes a difference in people's lives—can form the basis of helping people discern their faith journey and needs, and help the congregation accompany people through relationships, programs, activities, and resources.

#### **Ten Faith Maturing Characteristics**

1. Developing and sustaining a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ
2. Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and making the Christian faith a way of life
3. Reading and studying the Bible—its message, meaning, and application to life today
4. Learning the Christian story and foundational teachings of the Christian faith and integrating its meaning into one's life
5. Praying—together and by ourselves, and seeking spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines
6. Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and values
7. Living the Christian mission in the world—serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace.
8. Worshipping God with the community at Sunday worship, ritual celebrations, and the seasons of the church year
9. Being actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the faith community
10. Practicing faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world

We can adopt a new approach to faith formation that is more community-centered, while at the same time being more person-centered. We can develop a plan for faith formation with children and adolescents that incorporates intergenerational faith forming experiences—engaging children and adolescents in faith community experiences with all generations (including worship), and family faith forming experiences—equipping parents to share faith at home and engaging in family faith practice. We are proposing that age group faith formation is situated within this ecology of faith formation. The blend of intergenerational, family, and age group settings makes for a comprehensive approach to faith formation.

<b>Faith Maturing Characteristic</b>	<b>Intergenerational</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Age Group</b>
1. Developing and sustaining a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ			
2. Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and making the Christian faith a way of life			
3. Reading and studying the Bible—its message, meaning, and application to life today			
4. Learning the Christian story and foundational teachings of the Christian faith and integrating its meaning into ones life			
5. Praying—together and by ourselves, and seeking spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines			
6. Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and values			
7. Living the Christian mission in the world—serving those in need, caring for God’s creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace.			
8. Worshipping God with the community at Sunday worship, ritual celebrations, and the seasons of the church year			
9. Being actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the faith community			
10. Practicing faith in Jesus Christ by using one’s gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world			

## **Personalize the Faith Formation Offerings**

Offer a variety of content, experiences, and activities developed around the ten characteristics or the program’s content, and tailored to the different faith growth needs of people (getting started, growing, going deeper). For example, to help children, adolescents, parents, or the whole family read and study the Bible, we can offer three different types of Bible content and experiences for those who are getting started, growing, and going deeper. These activities can be intergenerational, family, age group, and online. All of the content and experiences are published on a digital platform for people to access.

### **Example of a Playlist: Reading the Bible (Families with Children)**

(See [www.familiesatthecenter.com](http://www.familiesatthecenter.com))

#### **Getting Started**

- Participate in the Bible workshop for parents that is offered twice a year
- Watch the “Reading the Bible with Children” video and/or listen to the podcast on the family website
- Begin the practice of a weekly Bible story reading and/or video viewing using the resources on the family website
- Use the online Guide to select and purchase a recommended children’s Bible, and an adult study Bible for parents
- Engage the children in the summer vacation Bible school program

## Growing

- Continue the weekly Bible story or video practice
- Practice the FAITH5 each day: Share the highs and lows of the day every night; read a key Bible verse or story every night; talk about how the Bible reading might relate to your highs and lows; pray for one another's highs and lows aloud every night; bless one another before turning out the lights of the day.
- Participate in the family scripture reflection after Sunday worship each week
- Learn how to pray with the Bible by watching the video online and using the prayer activities online
- Participate in the church wide "30-Day Bible Experience" of reading one gospel at home.
- Engage the children in the summer vacation Bible school program

## Going Deeper

- Continue the FAITH5 daily practice
- Join an adult Bible study group offered by the church
- Engage the whole family in a 365 day "read the whole Bible" experience using the resources on the family website
- Develop a personal Bible study plan using the resources on the family website
- Participate in the family scripture reflection after Sunday worship each week
- Engage the children in the summer vacation Bible school program

## Develop Playlists of Content & Experiences

A faith formation playlist is a curated group of digital (online, video, audio, print) and gathered (church, home, small groups, etc.) faith forming experiences and resources that are tailored to the specific faith growth needs of people around a particular characteristic of faith maturing or theme/topic. Playlists are developed for each "stage" on the discernment continuum, such as Inquiring, Getting Started, Growing, Going Deeper. Each playlist provides a variety of ways for people to learn and grow in faith.

### Developing a Playlist

1. **Select content and experiences** to address each faith maturing characteristic with activities for each category of discernment, e.g., Inquiring, Getting Started, Growing, Going Deeper.
  - Incorporate intergenerational experiences
  - Incorporate family experiences
  - Incorporate age-specific experiences
2. **Using a variety of settings** or environments for faith growth: independent/individualized, mentored, at home, small group, large group, intergenerational /whole church, and world
3. **Address the ways people learn** through a variety of activities: verbal-linguistic (word / book smart), logical-mathematical (number / logic smart), visual-spatial (art / picture smart), bodily-kinesthetic (body / movement smart), musical-rhythmic (music / sound smart), naturalist (nature / environment smart), interpersonal (people / group smart), intrapersonal (self / introspection smart)
4. **Use a variety of methods**
  - Read

- Write/keep a journal
- Engage in storytelling and create stories
- Feature films, TV shows, videos
- Create a media project or video
- View or create art
- View or take photographs
- Watch or engage in drama
- Listen to or create a podcast
- Listen to or create music
- Conduct a demonstration
- Experience games, simulations, video games
- Analyze or create a case study
- Develop an apprenticeship or internship
- Create an exhibit
- Experience prayer and rituals
- Take a field trip
- Participate in a mission trip
- Engage in or create a service / action project
- Develop a mentor relationship

## Publish Playlists

Publish the Playlists on a digital platform and use social media for connection, interaction, and sharing learning reflections. You can add the playlists to your existing church website or create a website just for faith formation and link it to your 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](http://www.weebly.com)), *Wix* ([www.wix.com](http://www.wix.com)), and *Squarespace* ([www.squarespace.com](http://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.

## Designing using 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Methods

1. **Blended learning** integrates learning in physical and online settings where a person has some control over time, place, path, and/or pace of the learning experience. One form of blended learning is *Flipped Learning* in which the content moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space (usually online), and the group space is transformed into an interactive learning environment for discussion and application. Congregations are already flipping confirmation preparation (learning online plus interactive group activities in gathered settings), extending gathered events with online content for continued learning, and providing online faith formation or live webinars for individuals or groups.
2. **Micro-learning** experiences are short-form—5, 10, 15 minute—learning experiences designed for anywhere, anytime learning that be combined into multi-part learning programs. Micro-learning experiences are one response to short attention spans and mobile learning. We can curate a series of micro-learning experiences (on a digital platform) to engage people in all types of faith

formation content. Breaking content into small learning units, micro learning, will enhance comprehension and retention of knowledge, skills and practices. Generation Z loves videos and YouTube, especially short pieces of content that run from a minute to 90 seconds.

3. ***Immersive learning environments*** involve faith-forming experiences that are interactive, participatory, experiential, visual, and multi-sensory. With the rise of anytime, anywhere faith formation content we need to ask: “What is the role of gathering people for faith formation?” Today children (and their parents), youth, and adults can access online most of the content that we teach at church. We have already been offering these types of experiences. We can expand our immersive learning opportunities (VBS, retreats, mission trips, and more) and focused our gathered settings on immersive faith formation in extended settings (half-day, full day, weekend, weeklong) offered throughout the year (but not weekly).
4. ***Multiple ways of learning*** addresses the eight multiple intelligences into learning experiences, providing a greater variety of ways for young people to learn: verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart), logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart), visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart), bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart), musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart), naturalist (nature smart, environment smart), interpersonal (people smart, group smart), and intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart). While not every program can incorporate activities for all eight intelligences, having a greater variety of ways to learn promotes more effective learning and engages teens more fully in the learning experience.
5. ***Multisensory learning*** means utilizing all of the senses in a learning experience where young people can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session. Gen Z thinks of the world as a canvas to paint with words, sights, sounds, video, music, web pages, and anything they can create. Multimedia means using multiple modalities to engage young people. They are also a generation of “content creators” who live to create, and given the chance to do so they will merge multiple media into one complex but comprehensive whole.
6. ***Project-based learning*** involves completing complex tasks that typically result in a realistic product, event, or presentation. Project-based learning is 1) organized around driving questions that lead young people to encounter central concepts or principles; 2) focused on a constructive investigation that involves inquiry and knowledge building; 3) learner-driven, in that the young people are responsible for making choices and for designing and managing their work; and 4) authentic, by posing problems that occur in the real world and that people care about.
7. ***Collaborative learning*** involves young people in small, non-competitive groups where they can discuss and process together what they are learning, work together on projects and activities, and practice and present what they are learning. Learning spaces are organized for learners’ participation in a “learning community”—recognizing that learning takes place in a social context and relies on communication and interaction with others. Gen Z learns best in an environment where they can share with and co-create their education with their peers. Collaborative learning requires creating an environment that is safe, caring, accepting, and trustworthy so that young people feel free to share, discuss, question, and apply.
8. ***Visual learning*** guides young people in learning to “read” or interpret visual images and how to use visual images to communicate. Visual literacy includes: 1) interpreting, understanding, and appreciating the meaning of visual images, 2) communicating more effectively by applying the

basic principles and concepts of visual design, 3) producing visual images using computers and other technologies, and 4) using visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems.

9. **Practice-oriented learning** means incorporating real-life application activities into the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it. Research is demonstrating that young people learn more deeply when they apply knowledge to real-world problems and when they take part in projects that require sustained engagement and collaboration.
10. **Storytelling** makes learning stick. Tell relevant stories, present case studies and show examples. Talk about your own mistakes and your own successes. Allow young people to respond to stories and case studies. Let them exchange stories with each other.

## Digital Strategies for Faith Formation

We need to design faith formation with digital strategies embedded in them. We need to design faith formation that is mobile; that takes advantage of the abundance of content so we can personalize faith formation; that provides an activity or program in multiple formats so that people can learn in the way they learn best; that utilizes a website as a hub for faith formation and online classrooms for programming; and that provides micro-faith forming activities/experiences that connect together into a seamless faith formation program.

Here are five strategies for using digitally enabled strategies in faith formation.

1. **Extend Programming:** We can extend gathered events and programs into people's daily lives by providing online content that helps people to go deeper. For example, we can extend Sunday worship into the home and daily life with daily Bible readings, prayer activities, learning activities, faith conversations, and more.

We can extend an age group program with online activities that deepen knowledge and provide application activities or projects. We can extend intensive programs like VBS or camp or retreats with regular online content and activities.

2. **Flip Programming:** 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.

We can redesign 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.

We can design 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. One example of the type of video content for adolescents is the

Video Catechism, produced by the Catholic Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, WV (vcat.org), that provides short videos for the major teachings in the Catholic Catechism. There are similar types of video program in all Christian traditions.

3. **Online Programming:** We can develop a complete online faith formation experience with faith forming content and experiences. For example we can build an online “forty-day Lenten curriculum” that connects the Lent events at church with online content for experiencing and practicing Lent in daily and home life. We can include prayer activities, daily Bible readings, daily devotions, Lent study resources, videos, service activities, and more.

We can use video conferencing with services like Zoom.us to create webinar programming for adolescents, parents, and the whole family. For example we can create a monthly one-hour parent formation webinar program delivered to parents at home using a video conferencing program like Zoom. We can build the program around the knowledge, skills, and practices for effective parenting and for parent as faith formers. Invite a guest presenter and invite parents to participate online. Sponsor two or three parent dinners during the year (with babysitting) for parents to gather in-person to meet each other, discuss the webinars, etc.

We can also set up online faith formation centers with resources for people to access 24x7. For example, we can 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.

4. **Multiple-format Programming:** We can develop multiple formats for gathered programs by video and/or audio recording programs and then developing small group and independent programming using the video or audio content. Produce a webpage with the video or audio content and the programming for small groups and independent learning. Use social media (like a Facebook group) or an online classroom to facilitate online interaction and discussion. This provides a great way to offer other ways for people who cannot participate in the fixed time program to access the content and engage in learning at a time that works best for them.
5. **Prepare and Follow-Up Programming:** We can utilize online formats to prepare people for an event or program, such as the celebration of a sacrament or milestone, or participation in a mission trip. This is an especially helpful process when it is difficult to gather people for the preparation and/or follow-up. Use the online platform to *prepare* people for the event with the appropriate content (experiences, activities, video/audio, and resources). *Engage* people in the event or program. Use the online platform to *sustain and apply* the learning and growth with appropriate content (experiences, activities, video/audio, and resources). Use social media (like a Facebook group) or an online classroom (like Edmodo or Google Classroom) to facilitate online interaction and discussion.

## 4. Missional Faith Formation

### Missional Outreach

Designing missional faith formation *expands and extends the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with people where they live—moving faith formation out into the community*. This involves developing targeted approaches and strategies designed around the particular needs and life situations of the unchurched and unaffiliated. These approaches and strategies need to be contextual—built around the congregation, community, and the needs of people. For example:

1. Develop community settings for church ministries and faith formation by celebrating weekly worship in a community center, offering courses and workshops in a school or community center or coffee shop, and more.
2. Open church events and programs to the whole community such as vacation Bible school.
3. Create a vibrant and inviting website and an active Facebook page to connect with people.
4. Connect with people's life issues and situations by offering career mentoring, job referrals, parenting courses, life skills courses, and more.
5. Connect with people during transitions and milestone moments such as marriage, birth of a baby, graduations, funerals, and more.
6. Develop high quality, relationship-building events designed to draw people from the wider community into relationships with people from your church such as social events, concerts, service projects, and children's programs.
7. Organize small groups on a variety of themes from life-centered to faith-centered that meet in a variety of locations (homes, coffee shops, community centers), for example: life situation groups (moms, dads), interest or activity groups, discipleship groups, spiritual sharing groups, Bible study groups, theology study groups, service groups, prayer or spiritual disciplines groups, support groups, and study-action groups.
8. Sponsor community-wide service days and service projects that are open to everyone.
9. Create digital initiatives that reach everyone such as conducting parenting webinars that are offered online.

### Examples

- Lifetree Café ([www.lifetreecafe.com](http://www.lifetreecafe.com))
- Messy Church (<http://www.messychurch.org.uk>; <http://messychurchaustralia.com.au>)
- Dinner church: St. Lydia's, Brooklyn (<http://stlydias.org>)
- Slate Project: <https://www.slateproject.org>

### Pathways

Create *pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the good news, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community*. Missional faith formation guides people as they move from discovery to exploration to commitment. The catechumenal process provides one example of a pathway with its ritual stages and formational content—participation in the life of the faith community, education in Scripture and the Christian tradition, apprenticeship in the Christian life, intimate connection with the liturgy and rituals of the church, moral formation, development of a life of prayer, and engagement in actions of justice and service. Programs like *The Alpha Course* cover the basics of Christianity in a multi-session course in a supportive small group environment.

These types of programs and processes provide pathways for people to grow toward a life of discipleship and lifelong faith.

## **The Unbinding the Gospel Project (GraceNet: [www.gracenet.info](http://www.gracenet.info))**

The process and integrated set of resources from Unbinding the Gospel Project empower the faith community—people of vibrant faith and active engagement—to share their faith with those are not engaged in the church community and/or not growing in faith. This process and the accompanying resources help the whole church change its habits to reflect practices of members and leaders of highly effective churches. They begin to pray daily, to talk about their faith with each other, and to take steps toward significant faith conversations with friends without a faith/church relationship.

The process was developed based on a four-year, Lilly Endowment study of superb evangelism that included over 1200 interviews, fifty site visits, and a major survey of congregations doing the best job reaching unchurched people. The study found fascinating things about churches that are doing a wonderful job with all different types of evangelism: (1) evangelistic churches exist all along the theological spectrum; (2) all sizes of churches are doing great evangelism—throughout the country; (3) leaders and members love Jesus—their spiritual lives keep growing; (4) these churches help their people articulate their faith—they encourage faith sharing; and (5) pastors maintain a laser-like focus on evangelism, on reaching out to people beyond church walls.

The process moves through the following steps:

Step One. Church Leader’s Study: Unbinding the Gospel. Designed for pastors, key congregational leaders and evangelism teams Unbinding the Gospel helps committed leaders deepen and start sharing their own faith, understand their cultural context, and begin to plan for authentic congregational faith-sharing. It works best as a seven- to ten-week small group study. Each chapter concludes with questions, scripture suggestions and group exercises.

Step Two: All-Church Saturation Study: Unbinding Your Heart: Forty Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing. This is a six-week, churchwide , small group E-vent! that can be conducted during Lent, summer or fall study for all established classes and small groups, and new ones formed just for the E-vent. The purpose of an all-congregation is to help people strengthen their own faith and to learn to talk about it with each other first, and then others outside the community. Each week, for forty days, people will (1) pray each day’s scripture and prayer exercise and work with a prayer partner; (2) study a chapter of the book with their small group, and (3) worship with sermons, music, and prayers centered on the week’s chapter. Unbinding Your Heart enriches the church’s community life. It helps individuals risk face-to-face encounters with God. The entire congregation begins to talk about their faith. The E-vent creates momentum in the church.

Step Three: An Experiment in Prayer and Community: Unbinding Your Soul. Many people who aren’t connected with a church would love to try a no-obligation experience of substantial spiritual discussion, prayer and community. Unbinding Your Soul prepares church members to invite their friends into a four-week small group experience with short study chapters, an individual prayer journal, prayer partner activities, and group exercises. Groups can choose an additional four-week segment: “Faith and Courage.”

Reese, Martha Grace. *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*. Saint Louis: Chalice, 2006.