

A Guide to Building a Lifelong Faith Formation Network

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Building a Lifelong Faith Formation Network is not like writing a book where everything must be completed before publication. A Network is dynamic resource that is developed over time with new materials, revisions of current material, deleting material, and so on. A Network is in constant development as it addresses the spiritual and religious needs of people, finds new religious content and experiences, and utilizes new technologies to deliver content and experiences. Here are several suggestions for building a Lifelong Faith Formation Network in your church.

1. Developing a Website Platform

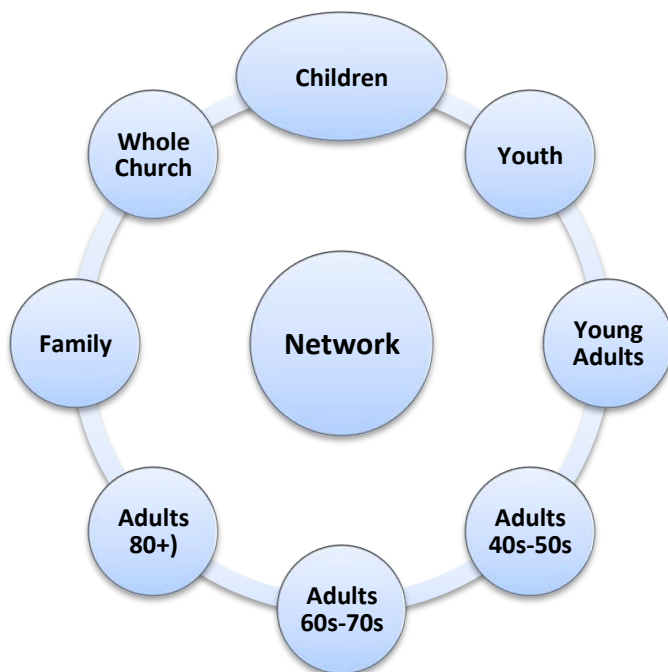
Determine if you need to build a dedicated website for your website. Many church websites are not equipped with the capacity to become a faith formation resource center. Sometimes it may be easier to developed a new dedicated website for faith formation that is linked to the parish website. If you are going to build a new website there are two free services that offer a variety of features you will need for a Network. The first is *Weebly.com*. The pre-designed templates make it simple to create a powerful, professional website without technical skills required. Content elements (like text, photos, maps, and videos) are added by dragging and dropping them into place. Text is edited just like in a word processor. Building a website is done in real time, right from within a web browser. Weebly.com is a free service that also includes free hosting your website with no ads (a premium upgrade is about \$50 per year). (Note: I have used Weebly.com to build the *LifelongFaith.com*, *FaithFormation2020.net*, and *FaithFormationLearningExchange.net* websites. I highly recommend its functionality and reliability.) *Webs.com* is a second free website provider whose site-builder is easy to use and has most of the same features as Weebly.com. To offset the costs associated with web hosting and maintenance, free websites are supported with advertising banners. In addition to the free site-building solutions, Webs offers optional Premium Service upgrades.

A great example of a fully-feature faith formation website is *MyJewishLearning.com*. Check out the site online. It has many of the features a congregational website would want.

2. Adding Current Programs and Content to the Network

Once you have a website service and design, add all of your current faith formation programming and resources onto the Network website. First, create a **catalog** all of the existing faith formation programming organized by age groups, interest groups, families, and whole church or intergenerational, with descriptions of each offering and a calendar of locations and times. Second, create a **library** by adding digital content that you have already created or purchased that can be published online, such as weekly Lectionary reflections and activities, Church Year seasonal reflections and activities, and so on. Many congregations have a treasure chest of content that can re-purposed and added to the Network library. Add audio and video podcasts of past presentations and programs at the church. This can become a regular website feature by videotaping church presentations and sermons.

Website Design



3. Building the Network Node-by-Node

Build your Lifelong Faith Formation Network node-by-node. Over time your Network grows as you add content and experiences for age groups, families, and the whole community. In a few short years your congregation will be able to provide faith formation for everyone, anytime, anywhere, 24x7x365, that customized and personalized faith formation around the lives of people, and that is delivered in a variety of formats and settings, physical and virtual.

There are a variety of ways to build your Network. Over the course of time you may use many of these ideas and create new ones of your own. Here are six examples:

1. Develop a comprehensive faith formation resource center (programs, activities, resources) for a particular group. (Example 6.)
2. Offer faith formation on one theme in a variety of formats. (Example 1)
3. Transform a “one-size fits-all” program with a variety of faith formation formats. (Example 2)
4. Extend Sunday worship into everyday life. (Example 3)
5. Extend monthly family or intergenerational faith formation through continuing learning and practice through the month. (Example 4)
6. Target a milestone or family life stage with comprehensive faith formation. (Example 5)

As you develop each node, it’s important to remember the seven faith formation formats so that you can offer people a variety of ways to learn and grow in faith:

1. On Your Own
2. With a Mentor
3. At Home
4. In Small Groups
5. In Large Groups
6. In the Congregation
7. In the Community and World

4. Finding the Resources

Today, as never before, a local church has access to an abundance of adult faith formation programming, resources, and networks that can address the diversity of adult learning needs.

Resources for learning abound in every environment. A primary task of a Lifelong Faith Formation Network is to identify these resources and link learners with them effectively.

Consider these categories of resources in your research: 1) congregational programs and activities; 2) community-based programs and activities; 3) people resources in your congregation, community, and region; 4) print resources in all forms from books to articles; 5) audio and video programs; 6) art, drama, and music; 7) websites; 8) online courses and faith formation activities; and 9) apps and other forms of digital content.

Consider developing an “inventory” of the gifts, talents, skills, and knowledge of your community using a survey format, such as SurveyMonkey.com, to administer an inventory. Invite people to go online to take the survey and then compile the results using the SurveyMonkey tools.

See Tools #2 and #3 for worksheets to assist you in identifying resources and developing content for the Lifelong Faith Formation Network.

4. Promoting Your Network Offerings

It is important to promote the offerings and resources on your Lifelong Faith Formation Network continuously. Many times you will have “built-in” promotion because a Network node is directly connected to an event or program in the congregation. To reach a wider audience of people, use communication and social media tools such as e-newsletters (check out services such as Constant Contact and Mail Chimp), Facebook, and Twitter. Don’t use one tool, use them all. Oftentimes they reach different audiences.

Create a compelling message. You may need to develop several “messages” for each target audience. Be sure to pay careful attention to the titles so that they capture people’s interests. Develop descriptions that are positive in tone, indicate clearly the content or focus. Here are several questions to consider:

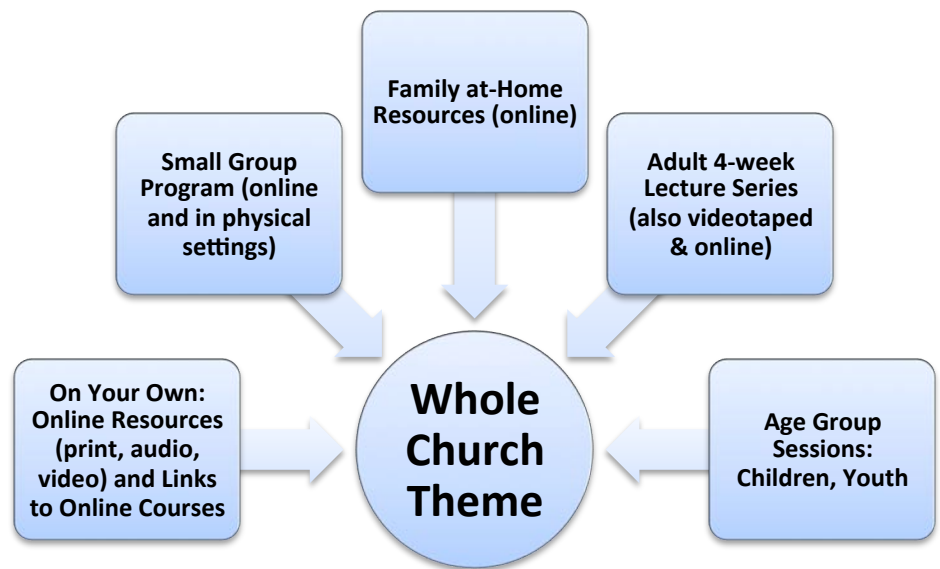
- What’s interesting in your project? How does it respond to something within the lives of people?
- What are the major benefits in participating? Why should people respond?
- How will you get people’s attention and interest?
- How will you explain to people how to use the Network and what they need to do.

Use as many promotional methods as you can. Consider the following ideas:

- Use your church’s website to promote the *Network*, post regular announcements, new program offerings, calendar, etc.
- Establish a Facebook page for your project and include a calendar of events with descriptions, locations, times, a link to your church’s website, current news, stories from people who are participating, etc.
- Send email or regular e-newsletters to targeted groups.
- Have the pastor share the benefits and information about the *Network* at Sunday worship.
- Host information sessions to describe the *Network* and how to use it after Sunday worship, at the beginning of a program, and so on.
- Promote the *Network* in the community: coffee shops, YMCA/YWCA, gyms, bookstores, theaters, schools/colleges, and so on.
- Include information about the *Network* in new member packets. Send a personalized invitation to new members.
- Promote the *Network* at all gathered programs and events in the church.

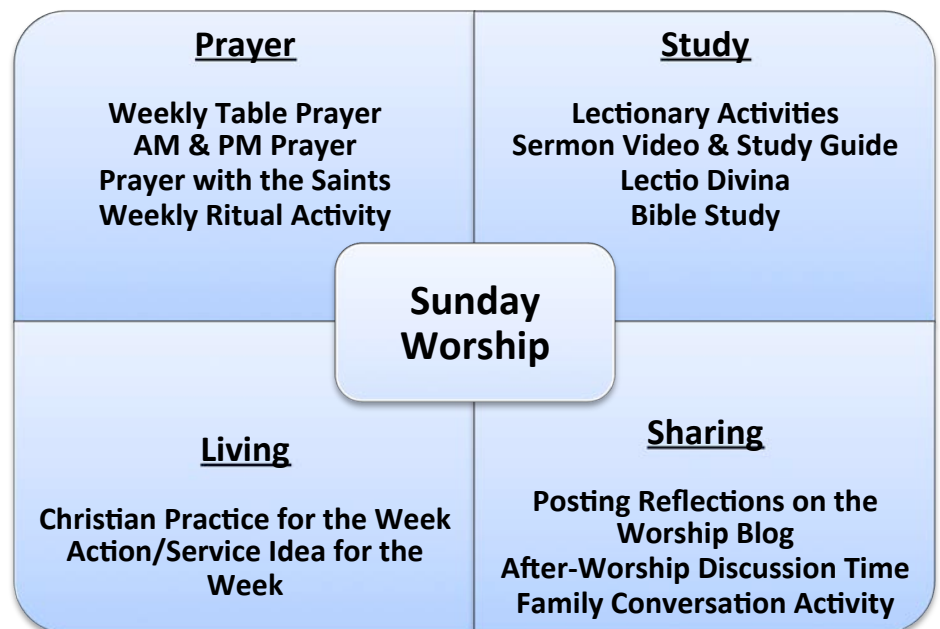
Example 1: Offer Faith Formation on One Theme in a Variety of Formats

Imagine offering a variety of options for faith formation on one theme. For example, a congregation can prepare all of its people for the start of a new Lectionary cycle in October and November using a variety of formats, face-to-face and virtual, that might culminate in a whole church gathering to share learning, pray, sing, eat, and celebrate the end of one Lectionary cycle and the beginning of a new one. A congregation can build a node on their Lifelong Faith Formation Network for the new Lectionary cycle—and once this node is built it is always available and can easily be updated in the future.



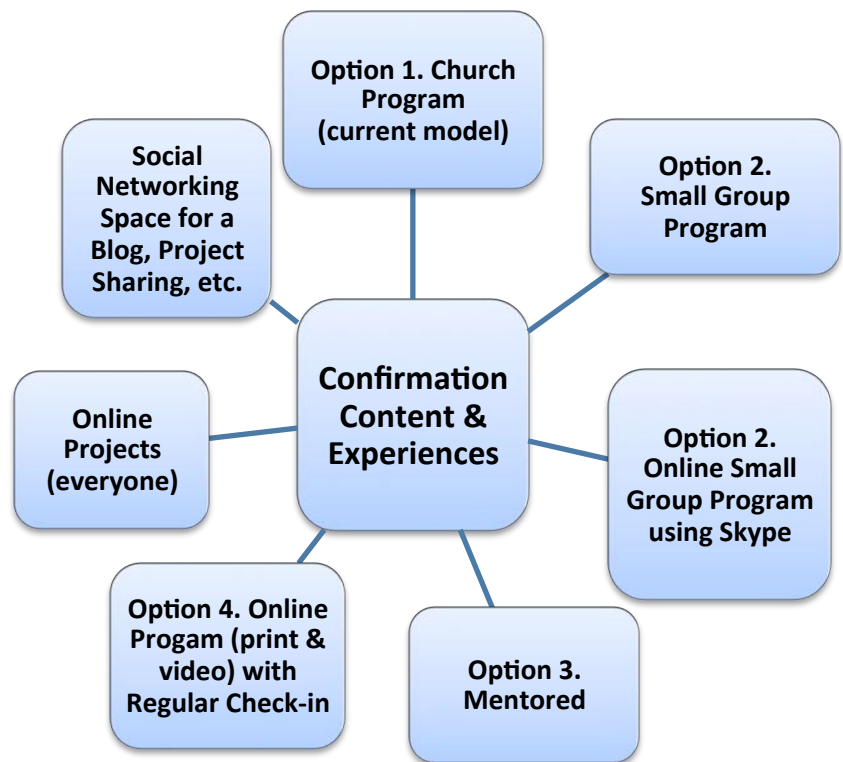
Example 2: Extend Sunday Worship into Everyday Life

Imagine a congregation extending Sunday worship throughout the week using a variety of formats, face-to-face and virtual. A congregation can build a node on their Lifelong Faith Formation Network for Sunday Worship. Once this node is built it can be updated every week with new content for that particular Sunday's Scripture readings and Church Year season. The prior Sunday's content goes into the online library and can be used again at another time.



Example 3: Transform a “One-Size-Fits-All Faith” Program

Imagine transforming a “one-size-fits-all” program by offering a variety of options in the Lifelong Faith Formation Network to engage people with the program’s content and experiences. Using this approach a congregation can differentiate faith formation by addressing the religious and spiritual needs of people through certain formats. This approach also addresses issues such as time constraints, scheduling, and location by offering a variety of options for faith formation. If confirmation is “required,” then it is likely that a congregation will find all four profiles (4 scenarios) in a typical group of adolescents. Using a network approach a congregation can differentiate faith formation by addressing the religious and spiritual needs of young people through different content and formats.



All Youth

- Sunday Worship
- Service projects
- Confirmation blog & online confirmation projects
- Celebration of confirmation

Scenario 1 (In-depth Experience)

- In-depth faith formation in theology, Bible, spirituality, and Christian practices offered in different formats, customized to the needs of the young people: small group program, online courses and resources, and mentors
- Spiritual formation experience (retreat) on spiritual practices and disciplines
- Whole group confirmation-specific content

Scenario 4 (Foundations Experience)

- Foundational program in Christian life essentials offered as a whole group experience, integrating confirmation-specific content
- Experience of Christian practices and spiritual disciplines

- Active participation in the activities of church life and ministries; apprenticeships with ministries and leaders to experience church life as “insiders”
- Mentors to guide growth and participation in church life
- Whole group confirmation-specific content

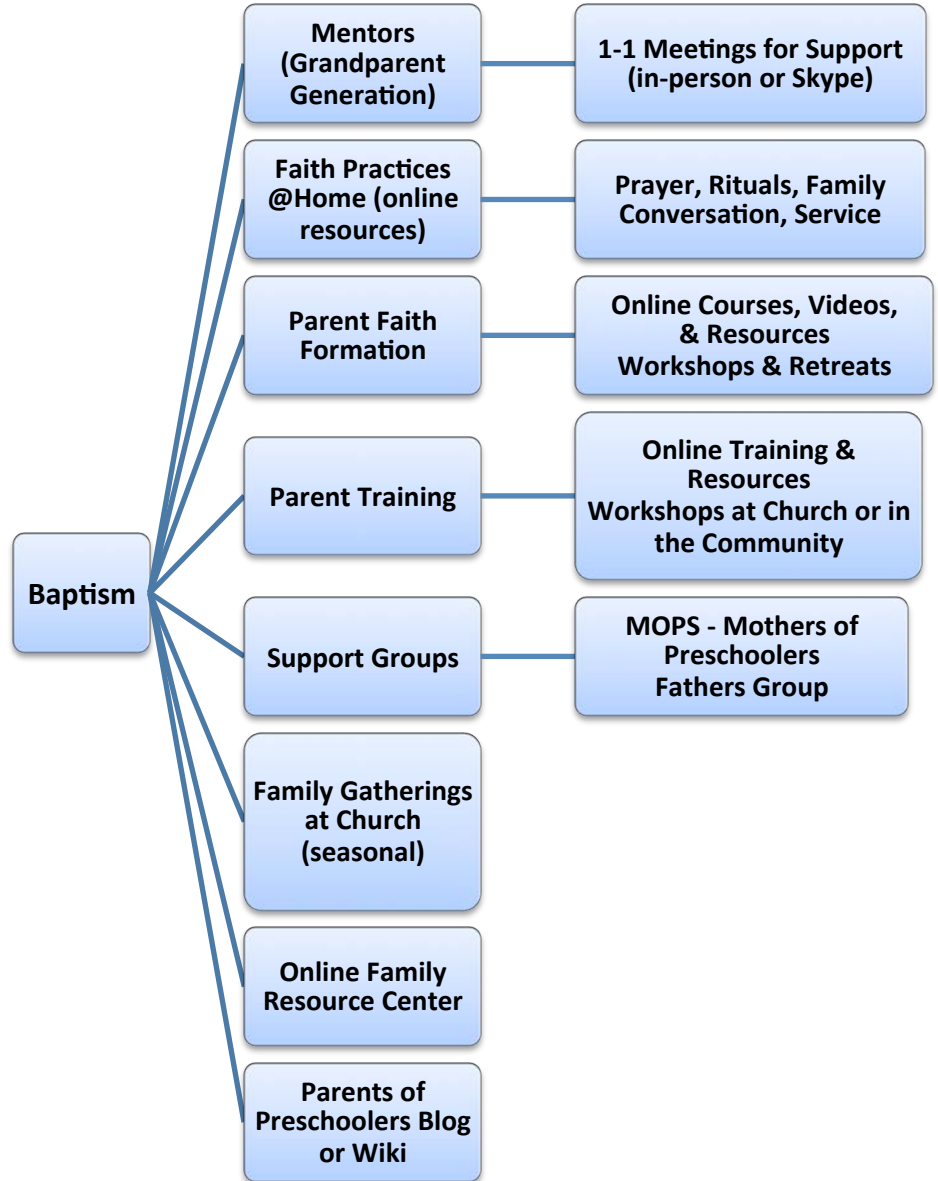
Scenarios 2 and 3 (Exploration Experience)

- Exploration experience to investigate the claims of the Christian faith in an informal, no pressure, non-judgmental, and friendly environment, offered in small group settings with a meal and including topics such as: Who is God? Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus die? Who is the Holy Spirit? How can we have faith? Why and how do I pray? Why and how should I read the Bible? How does God guide us? How can I resist evil? What about the Church? How can I make the most of the rest of my life?
- Introductory experiences of Christian life through participating in Christian practices, service, worship, and so on.

Example 4: Target a Milestone or Family Life Stage with Comprehensive Faith Formation in a Variety of Formats

Imagine developing a Network just for parents of young children, beginning with the baptism of their child, blending faith formation in virtual and physical settings and using the seven faith formation formats to provide a diversity of content and activities.

1. **Mentors:** provide 1-1 mentoring by connecting parents to adults in the grandparent generation who can meet with them regularly: in person, by phone or video conference
2. **Faith Practices @Home:** provide parents with faith practices resources geared to the age of their growing child and family
3. **Parent Faith Formation:** offer a variety of formation opportunities for parents to grow in faith: workshops, presentations, retreats; and online courses, videos, and print resources
4. **Parent Training:** offer a variety of programs at church or through community organizations; and online training and resources using websites such as ParentFurther.com and Tumblon.com.
5. **Support Groups:** organize groups in the church, host community groups, or connect parents to existing support groups.
6. **Family Gatherings:** 3 or 4 times per year
7. **Parent Blog or Wiki:** give parents the opportunity to connect, share ideas, and ask for assistance online



Example 5: Extend Monthly Family or Intergenerational Faith Formation through Continuing Learning and Practice throughout the Month

Imagine a congregation with a monthly intergenerational or family program extending the theme of the monthly gathering throughout the month using a variety of formats, face-to-face and virtual. A congregation can build a node on their Lifelong Faith Formation Network for their intergenerational or family program. It also provides a way to engage people who are not participating to experience the content of the monthly program on their own. Each month the intergenerational or family program adds another node with new content and experiences to extend the new theme throughout the month.



Example 6: Develop Comprehensive Adult Faith Formation

Imagine developing an online resource center for adult faith formation around the life issues, transitions, and spiritual and religious needs of adults. With the great diversity among the ages of adulthood (20s-90s+), adult faith formation needs to provide a wide variety of content, experiences, and faith formation formats. Instead of trying to first organize programming in physical spaces, why not begin with an online resource center and then create church-based programs that utilize the online resource center. Think of the possibilities for an adult faith formation resource center. Even the smallest churches can offer a great diversity of adult faith formation opportunities. Here are a few ideas.

- **Online Courses:** Develop a “course catalog” of online courses and webinars (with descriptions and website links) from seminaries, universities, and publishers, religious organizations, iTunes University, and other online course providers. These courses can be offered for “on your own”

study or small group study (online or face-to-face), as well as the primary content for a course at the church with a facilitator.

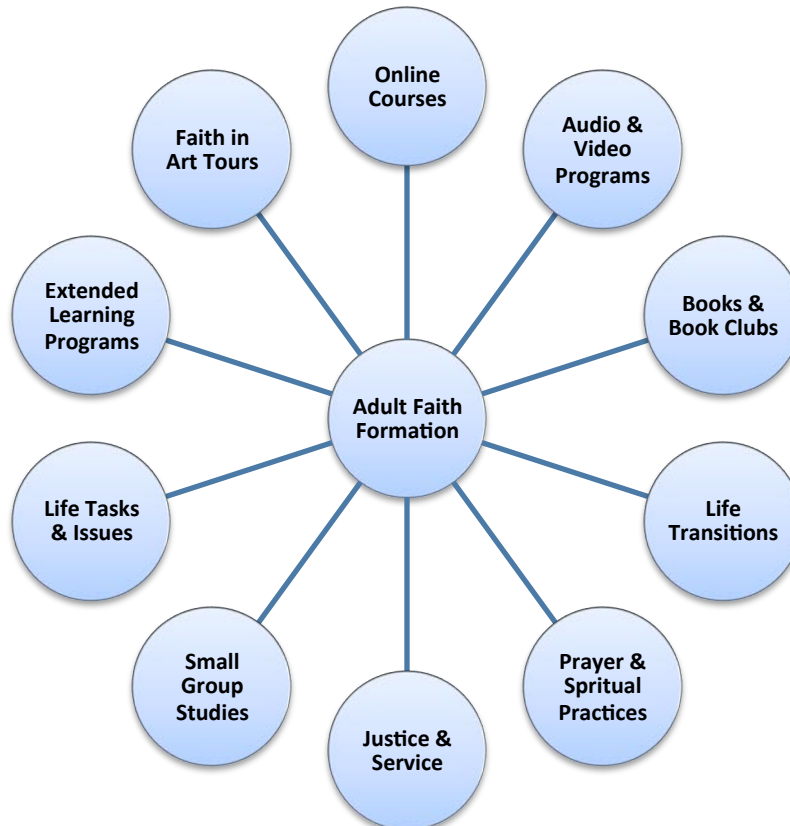
- **Audio and Video Programs:** Develop a library of audio and video programs (with descriptions and links) from iTunes, YouTube, Vimeo, and other providers, organized into categories such as Bible, theology, life issues, and so on. In addition to individual use, audio and video programs can be organized into the primary content for small group study (online or face-to-face) or a course at the church with a facilitator.
- **Books:** Develop a library of books and e-books and invite people to form in-person and online book groups. Check out the social networks for book lovers which let people create a virtual bookshelf to catalog their collection, post reviews or recommendations, see what others are reading, make a reading wish list, or join an

online book discussion. Popular sites include Shelfari (www.shelfari.com), LibraryThing (www.librarything.com), and Goodreads (www.goodreads.com).

- **Prayer & Spiritual Practices:** Develop a spiritual life center with content from online sources: daily prayer online (e.g., 3-minute Retreat from Loyola Press), spiritual life reflections, spiritual life videos (e.g., Mindy Caliguire’s YouTube videos), prayer forms (e.g., Ignatian prayer), daily liturgy of the hours, praying with the saints, daily Bible reading, lectio divina, links to retreat centers, online spirituality courses (Spirituality& Practice), and so much more.
- **Justice & Service:** Develop a clearinghouse of mission and service opportunities: local, national, and international. Develop links to websites with content on social issues and with Bible and church teachings.
- **Small Group Studies:** Offer opportunities and resources for small groups to organize for faith sharing, Bible study, and book discussions. You can develop small groups around audio and

video content and link people to online Bible studies, topical small group programs.

- **Life Transitions:** Create an adult milestones and life transitions center for rituals, blessings, commentaries, personal stories, a blog for sharing stories and ideas, and links to websites with information about adult transitions.
- **Life Tasks and Issues:** Connect people to websites and online programs and resources that address adult life tasks and issues, such as marriage (TwoofUs.org), finances (Financial Peace University, www.daveramsey.com), and retirement (AARP.org).
- **Extended Learning Programs:** Link to resources for adult learning experiences such as *Road Scholar* by Elderhostel (RoadScholar.org).
- **Faith in Art Tours:** Offer online “tours” of religious art at museums around the world, as well as a trip to art museums to experience faith in art. (See Museum of Online Museums, Vatican Museum, Smithsonian Museum, The British Library: Gallery and Virtual Books, and Museum of Biblical Art.



Example 7: Faith Formation with Young Adults

Imagine developing a network approach to young adult formation around the life issues, transitions, and spiritual and religious needs of adults. With the great diversity among young adults, faith formation needs to provide a wide variety of content, experiences, and faith formation formats, balancing programming in physical spaces with an online resource center. Faith formation can be offered in the six formats: on your own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, and in the community and world. Each offering can be tailored to one of the four scenarios, e.g., the Alpha Course for Scenario 2, the Third Place Café for Scenarios 2 and 3, etc.



1. **Small Group Studies:** Opportunities and resources for small groups to organize for faith sharing, Bible study, and book discussions. You can develop small groups around audio and video content and link people to online Bible studies, topical small group programs, and more.
2. **Weekly Gathering and Worship Experience:** A weeknight worship experience, designed by and for young adults (art, music, environment, worship experience), that provides a time for young adults to worship and celebrate, apply the Scriptures to their lives, make new friends, enjoy live music, and connect with a God.
3. **Life Tasks and Issues:** Programs, workshops, online programs, and website resources that address young adult life tasks and issues, such as relationships, career and vocation, marriage, finances, life planning, and more.
4. **Online Courses:** A “course catalog” of online courses and webinars (with descriptions and website links) from seminaries, universities, and publishers, religious organizations, iTunes University, and other online course providers. These courses can be offered for “on your own” study or small group study (online or face-to-face), as well as the primary content for a course at the church with a facilitator.
5. **Online Audio and Video Programs:** A library of audio and video programs (with descriptions and links) from iTunes, YouTube, Vimeo, and other providers, organized into categories such as Bible, theology, life issues, and so on. In addition to individual use, audio and video programs can be organized into the primary content for small group study (online or face-to-face) or a course at the church with a facilitator.
6. **Prayer and Spiritual Practices:** A spiritual life center with content from online sources: daily prayer online, spiritual life reflections, spiritual life videos, prayer forms, daily liturgy of the hours, praying with the saints, daily Bible reading, Lectio Divina, links to retreat centers, online spirituality courses, and more.
7. **Justice and Service:** A clearinghouse of mission and service opportunities: local, national, and international with links to websites with content on social issues and with Bible and church teachings; and a place online for young adults to share their thoughts and reflections on justice issues and service experiences.
8. **Third Place Café:** A café in the community sponsored by the church for young adults that offers hospitality, builds relationships, hosts spiritual conversations, provides programs and activities, and nourishes the spiritual life of people, especially those who are “spiritual but not religious” (Scenario 2) or “unaffiliated and uninterested (Scenario 3).” (See www.LifetreeCafe.com)
9. **Alpha Course:** (<http://alphausa.org>): An opportunity to explore the meaning of life in a relaxed, friendly setting in a ten-session program with a one-day or weekend getaway. The Alpha course investigates questions about the existence of God, the purpose of life, the life and teachings of Jesus, prayer, evil, the Bible, the church, and more. The emphasis is upon exploration and discovery in a relaxed and informal environment.
10. **Social Network and Blog :** An online setting to connect, share ideas, and ask for assistance.
11. **Cross-Generational Relationships.** Ways for young adults to connect with the whole community through worship, service, and other church ministries or events; and to connect with adults in the community through mentoring, small groups, programs, and events.