

Foundational Vision: A New Faith Forming Ecosystem

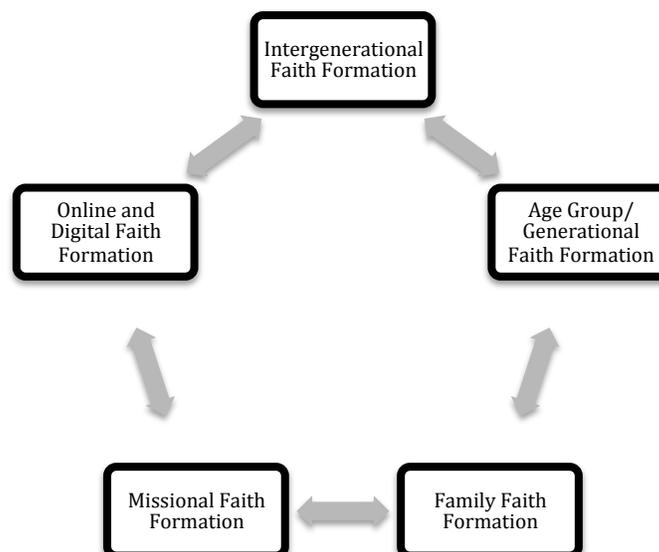
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Among the most important tasks for 21st century faith formation is to create a new faith formation ecosystem for the continuing mission of making disciples and forming faith across the whole life span. What is an ecosystem? “An ecosystem is a system formed by the interaction of a community of living organisms with each other and their environment” (Dictionary.com). It is any system or network of interconnecting and interacting parts. As an example of interconnecting and interacting parts, think about Apple’s “ecosystem” of hardware and software integration – how you can move seamlessly across Apple devices (computers, phones, tablets) using the same applications and accessing your content.

For well over 100 years in the United States, Christian churches had a highly integrated religious ecosystem. It was comprised of multigenerational family faith practice and religious transmission at home; strong congregational community relationships and church life, especially participation in Sunday worship; weekly Sunday school for children and youth (and in many cases adults); and church groups (youth, men, women). Many Christian traditions relied heavily on the ethnic faith traditions of their people to transmit faith from generation to generation – at home and at church. *And* all of this was surrounded by an American culture that explicitly or implicitly supported the Christian value system and Christian practices.

This ecosystem has eroded over the past several decades because of all the changes in the culture and society, the family, technology and communication, and more. The environment has changed, and the relationship between congregational faith formation and its environment has changed. *We need a new faith formation ecosystem that reflects this changed context.*

The new faith formation ecosystem must be faithful to our mission of making disciples and lifelong faith growth, and, at the same, responsive to the challenges of the 21st century and the religious and spiritual needs of people today. This new ecosystem incorporates five, essential, interconnected components: 1) intergenerational faith formation in the congregation, 2) age group and generational faith formation in a variety of physical places and online spaces, 3) family faith formation at home, 4) missional faith formation to the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated, and 5) online and digital faith formation.



Intergenerational Faith Community

At the heart of the new 21st century faith forming ecosystem is the rediscovery of the power of intergenerational relationships, and the events and experiences of the whole faith community. Throughout the Biblical tradition there is a pervasive sense that all generations – from the youngest to the oldest – were typically present when faith communities gathered for worship, learning the tradition, reading the Bible, celebrating rituals, praying, serving those in need, and supporting each other.

Joyce Mercer, author and professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, writes that the “best curriculum for forming children, youth, and anyone else in Christian faith is *guided participation in a community of practice* where people are vibrantly, passionately risking themselves together in lives of faith in a world crying out for the love of Christ. . . . We become Christian, taking on the identity of one who is a disciple of Jesus, by acting the way Christians act, and by talking the way Christians talk. Over time through practice, even our hearts and minds are formed in this way of life.”

Congregations need to be *intentionally* intergenerational – making it a priority to foster intergenerational relationships, faith sharing, and storytelling; to incorporate all generations in worship; to develop service projects that involve all ages; and to engage all generations in learning together.

Intergenerational faith formation and whole community faith experiences are at the *center* of the new faith formation ecosystem. Becoming intentionally intergenerational would:

- Form and deepen Christian identity and commitment as people develop relationships and actively participate in faith communities that teach, model, and live the Christian tradition and way of life.
- Provide a curriculum for the whole community – Sunday worship, the lectionary and church year seasons, learning, service, ritual and sacraments, prayer, and more – that is a shared experience in faith and belonging for everyone.
- Strengthen relationships, connections, and community across generations; enhance their sense of belonging in the faith community; and provide valuable adult role models for children and adolescents.
- Support families by surrounding them with a community of faith and engaging the whole family in a variety of faith-forming experiences together (caring relationships, celebrating, learning, praying, serving); and providing parents with opportunities to learn from Christians who are practicing their faith and raising faithful children.
- Strengthen the ability (confidence and competence) of parents and grandparents to promote religious socialization at home; be role models of faithful practice; and engage in faith practices at home and develop warm, affirming, and unconditionally supporting relationships between parents (and grandparents) and their children, teens, and young adults.

Family Faith Formation

The family is the single most important influence on religious transmission and faith practice – a truth demonstrated in research studies, the Christian tradition, and pastoral experience. The faith of parents and grandparents, their role modeling, their teaching, their warm and affirming parenting style are key factors in religious transmission and developing highly religious

children, youth, and young adults. In the new faith forming ecosystem, congregations need to equip families as centers of faith formation developed around three essential elements.

1. Nurturing family and parental faith

We can nurture family and parent faith through their participation in church life and family/intergenerational program that immerses them in the Christian tradition, Christian practices, and Christian way of life. Intergenerational participation creates a shared experienced of families developing caring relationships, learning together, sharing faith, praying together, serving, and celebrating rituals and traditions, and helps to develop the faith of parents and grandparents – increasing their confidence and competence for engaging in faith practices at home.

We can nurture family faith through a variety activities and resources developed around eight essential faith-forming processes – *caring relationships, celebrating liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, serving people in need and working for justice, and worshipping God*. With the abundance of high quality digital faith formation content and activities, we can now reach families in the context of their daily lives – anytime and anywhere – through their mobile devices.

We can nurture parental faith and develop their faith forming skills through targeted programs of theological and biblical formation at church and online, and by providing training that teaches how to parent for faith growth and be a role model for children – all offered in a variety of learning formats to make it easy to access the programs and content.

2. Developing parenting skills

We can develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents (and grandparents) by utilizing the best research on effective parenting, including how a close, warm, and affirming parenting style facilitates religious transmission, and how certain parenting characteristics and skills facilitates the development of a strong parent-child bond and children’s happiness, health and success: *love and affection, stress management, relationship skills, autonomy and independence, promoting education and learning, life skills, behavior management, healthy lifestyle, support for spiritual or religious development, and protection and safety*.

We can provide programs (gathered and online), a variety of digital resources, and support to help parents develop effective parenting and child-rearing practices that are conducive to building strong families and promoting faith transmission – offered in a variety of learning formats to make it easy for parents and grandparents to participate.

3. Strengthening family life

We can strengthen family life by focusing on the assets that build strong families. In *The American Families Asset Study*, The Search Institute identified 21 key qualities or *assets*, which help all kinds of families become strong.

1. *Nurturing relationships*: positive communication, affection, emotional openness, encouragement for pursuing talents and interests
2. *Establishing routines*: family meals, shared activities, meaningful traditions (holidays, rituals, celebrations), dependability

3. *Maintaining expectations*: openness about tough topics, fair rules, defined boundaries, clear expectations, contributions to family
4. *Adapting to challenges*: management of daily commitments, adaptability problem-solving, democratic decision-making
5. *Connecting to the community*: neighborhood cohesion, relationship with others in the community, participating in enriching activities, supportive resources in the community (*The American Family Asset Study*, Search Institute)

These assets can be utilized as the foundation for whole-family programs, parent programs, online resources and training, mentoring for parents, and much more – all directed toward building healthy and strong family life.

Age-Specific Faith Formation

The twentieth century approach to faith formation focused on children and teens with developmentally-appropriate biblical and doctrinal content. Curriculum was reduced to the selection of a textbook series or a program from a religious publisher, and focused on instruction in the content of the Christian faith.

In the 21st century a faith formation curriculum needs to be seen as *a lifelong journey of discipleship – a process of experiencing, learning, and practicing the Christian faith as we seek to follow Jesus and his Way in today’s world*. If we imagine a faith formation curriculum as a lifelong journey of growing in faith and discipleship, then we can think of curriculum as the subject matter and processes that engage people in learning, experiencing, and practicing the Christian faith along this journey.

The new faith forming ecosystem integrates age group and intergenerational faith formation. Intergenerational faith formation provides whole-community experiences and learning, focused on the central events of church life and the Christian faith, and age group and generational faith formation address the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of age groups and generations across the whole lifespan.

A faith formation curriculum for the 21st century needs to be:

1. *Holistic*: envisioning Christian faith as a way of the head, the heart, and the hands – informing, forming, and transforming people in Christian faith and identity.
2. *Comprehensive and Balanced*: developed around the eight primary faith forming processes that facilitate faith growth and incorporate essential knowledge and practices of the Christian faith: caring relationships, celebrating liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, serving people in need and working for justice and caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community.
3. *Contextual*: addressing the needs, hungers, interests, and concerns of people today, and their unique spiritual and faith journeys by embracing an approach that moves from *life to Faith to life*.
4. *Digitally-Enabled*: complementing the gathered community settings with online learning environments and utilizing the abundance of digital media and tools for learning and faith formation.
5. *Connected*: linking church life, age groups/generations, daily/home life, and online life through continuous faith formation – connecting participation in church life and events with daily/home life by using online content and connections or reaching people at home and in

daily life with online faith formation content and experiences that connect to church life and events.

6. *Multi-platform*: delivered and conducted in multiple settings – self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community and world; and in physical and online learning environments.

Missional Faith Formation

The new faith forming ecosystem incorporates a *missional* emphasis by focusing on the spiritual and religious needs of the “unchurched” and “de-churched” – those who are spiritual but not religious or unaffiliated and uninterested in religion.

First, 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 dechurched. These approaches and strategies need to be contextual – built around the congregation, community, and the needs of people. For example:

- 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.
- Open church events and programs to the whole community such as vacation Bible school.
- Create a vibrant and inviting website and an active Facebook page to connect with people.
- Connect with people’s life issues and situations by offering career mentoring, job referrals, parenting courses, life skills courses, and more.
- Connect with people during transitions and milestone moments such as marriage, birth of a baby, graduations, funerals, and more.
- 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.
- 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.
- Sponsor community-wide service days and service projects that are open to everyone.
- Create digital initiatives that reach everyone such as conducting parenting webinars that are offered online.

Second, missional faith formation *provides 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.

Digitally-Enabled Faith Formation

The digital revolution has transformed almost every aspect of society. No facet of this revolution has more potential than its ability to change the way people learn. The availability of a vast array of knowledge and resources at the click of a mouse or the touch of a screen, together with the ability to connect instantaneously with peers and mentors across the street and around the world, make possible completely new learning environments and experiences. These opportunities are highly engaging and collaborative, and they are based on learners' own interests and strengths. People can truly learn any time, anyplace, and at any pace today.

We have never had access to better technologies and resources for nurturing growth in Christian faith with all ages and equipping people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today. The new technologies and resources of the digital era provide tremendous opportunities for congregational faith formation to thrive in the twenty-first century. Just as an earlier era adopted the new technologies of the day – schooling and the printing press – to produce educational models using classrooms and teachers, catechisms and textbooks, the twenty-first century has digital technologies, tools, and media that can be utilized to create new models that will transform faith formation in a congregation.

We need to create new models of digitally-enabled faith formation that utilize the digital technologies and digital media to engage people with faith-forming content anytime, any place, just-in-time; and that can extend and expand faith formation in physical, face-to-face settings into people's daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems. We can develop blended models of faith formation that incorporate physical settings and online settings. These settings can be seen as a continuum: ranging from fully online programming to gathered programming in physical settings that use online resources.

1. **Gathered Program with Online Content:** We can design a gathered program using online content from websites, videos from YouTube or other video sites, and blogs and other social media. With an abundance of high quality digital content, this first option is the easiest way to bring the digital world into a gathered program.
2. **Gathered Program and Online Content:** We can connect church programs or events with online content that extends and deepens the experience through learning, prayer, ritual, action, etc. Gathered events and programs such as Sunday worship, church year feasts and seasons intergenerational and family programs, classes, youth group meetings, mission trips, retreat experiences, and vacation Bible school would all benefit from extending the experience with digital content for learning, praying, celebrating, having faith conversations, acting/serving, and more.
3. **Online and Gathered:** 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.
4. **Mostly Online:** We can offer opportunities for individuals, families, and small groups to utilize the digital platform as their primary learning setting and provide opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings or in a web conference format.
5. **Fully Online:** The rise of high quality and easily accessible online religious content – courses, activities, print and e-books, audio and video programs, and content-rich websites – has made designing online faith formation feasible.