Faith Formation for the Generations & Seasons of Adulthood

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The typical parish adult faith formation program is a "one-size-fits-all" program—a Lenten speaker series, a small group renewal program, a Bible study program, a retreat experience, to name a few examples. The offerings are designed to address the needs of all adults. This approach—while it may represent the best a parish can do with limited resources, staff, and time—no longer fits the reality of today's adults.

One of the key features of twenty-first century adult faith formation is addressing the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual and faith journeys at each stage of adulthood: young adults (20s-30s), midlife adults (40s-50s), mature adults (mid 50s-mid 70s), and older adults (75+). Each of these groups today reflects both a developmental stage of adulthood and a generational identity. We have this interesting convergence of life stage and generations which will be true for the next decade or so.

* Young Adult Life Stage & Millennial Generation (born 1980-99)
* Midlife Adult Life Stage & Generation X (born 1961-1979)
* Mature Adult Life Stage & the Baby Boom Generation (1946-60)
* Older Adult Life Stage & the Builder Generation (before 1946)

We are well aware of the developmental uniqueness of each stage of adulthood. Generations also provide unique identities formed by cultural, social, and historical forces. Think about the differences between the four generations in these categories:

* Generational relationship to institutions
* Relationship to authority in every institution
* Family relationships
* Work-life balance
* Communication style
* Technology usage
* Learning style
* Spiritual and religious expression
* Worship style

Consider the changes over the four generations in areas such as:

Builders	Millennials
Institutions/Organizations --People/Causes/Issues
Loyal to Institutions --- Suspicious/Critical of Institutions
Leader Influenced--Peer Influence
Group-Centered --- Network-Centric
Local/Parochial ---Global/Inclusive
Word Culture --- Image/Visual Culture
Analog Culture --- Digital Culture
One Size Fits All --- One Size Fits One

We also know that there is an increasing diversity of religious-spiritual identities among adults, of participation in church life, of religious practice, and of the importance and significance of religion and faith in the lives of adults today. There is a spectrum of religious-spiritual identities (and corresponding needs): those who are religiously/spiritually committed and engaged in the faith community; those who are who are less religiously committed and participate occasionally in the faith community; those who have left established churches and religion, but are still spiritual and spiritually committed; and those who unaffiliated, uninvolved, and claim no religious identity.

Generationally the highest levels of religious practice and engagement are found in older adults (Builders) and mature adults (Boomers), with decreasing engagement among midlife (Gen X) and young adults (Millennials). Approximately one in four Generation Xers and over one-third of Millennials are not religious affiliated and the number of unaffiliated Millennials is growing. They are participating less in church life and Sunday worship. Religion and spirituality may be important to them, but it is not usually expressed by participation in churches.

Given this great diversity across the adult stage of life, it is imperative that adult faith formation programs, activities, and resources are *targeted* and *tailored* to the lives of adults—at each stage of life and in each generation.

Principles and Practices for 21st Century Adult Faith Formation

First, adult faith formation needs to be ***person-centered***, not content- or program-centered. The content, experiences, programs, methods, and delivery systems need to be designed around the lives of the adults. While this may sound self-evident, it is not. So much of adult faith formation is developed from a provider-centered, program-driven model where denominations, publishers, and churches determine and deliver the content and programming.

The days of the "one size fits all" mentality are over. We can no longer focus on how to get every adult to participate in a small faith sharing group or to come to the Lenten series or to study the Bible. Adult faith formation is no longer about finding *the* program to attract all adults. It is about addressing the diversity of adult learning needs with a variety of faith formation content, experiences, activities, programs, and resources. In this way, adult faith formation intentionally nurtures *communities of learning and practice* around the shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities of adults today.

We now need to develop four types of adult faith formation—tailored to the four seasons and generations of adulthood: young adults (20s-30s), midlife adults (40s-50s), mature adults (mid 50s-mid 70s), and older adults (75+). With the abundance of print, audio, and video content and the easy accessibility of digital media and platforms for learning, churches can a greater variety of adult faith formation topics and activities tailored to the needs of each season and generation. The digital world has give us technologies and resources that allow build faith formation around individuals and groups with a particular spiritual or religious need, interest, passion, concern, or life issue. We no longer have to worry about reaching a "mass audience."

Second, adult faith formation needs to be ***comprehensive and balanced***. It needs to be developed around eight primary faith forming processes that facilitate faith growth and incorporate essential

knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. These eight have developed out of the Christian tradition and from research of the processes that make a difference in promoting discipleship and faith maturity across the life span:

1. caring relationships
2. celebrating liturgical seasons
3. celebrating rituals and milestones
4. learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life
5. praying and spiritual formation
6. reading and studying the Bible
7. serving people in need and working for justice and caring for creation
8. worshipping God with the faith community

These eight process provide both a *framework* for faith formation and the *content*—knowledge and practices—of the Christian faith. (Note the connection with the six interrelated tasks of catechesis.) Adult faith formation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of each season of adulthood through these eight faith forming processes.

Third, adult faith formation provides a *variety* of content, methods, formats, and delivery systems to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of people across the life span. Adult faith formation *content*—experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections—can be available anytime and anywhere, in physical places and online spaces, tailored to the lives of adults. Adult faith formation can be *multiplatform* incorporating seven environments: self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world (in online spaces and physical places)—to provide a variety of ways for people to learn and grow in faith that respects their preferred styles of learning, their life situations, and their time constraints.

Fourth, adult faith formation recognizes that learning is a *process of active inquiry* with the initiative residing within the individual. Faith formation recognizes that the motivation for learning is intrinsic to the person and is driven by a need for autonomy (self-directedness), mastery, and purpose and meaning. Connected to this reality is that adult faith formation needs to provide the opportunity for personalized and customized learning and faith growth, giving people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth—with trusted guides who find the right programs, activities, and resources to match with their learning needs.

Fifth, adult faith formation is *digitally-enabled*—blending gathered community settings with online learning environments and utilizing the abundance of digital media and tools for learning and faith formation; and *digitally-connected*—linking intergenerational faith community experiences, peer experiences and programs , and daily/home life using online and digital media *and/or* reaching people at home and in daily life with online faith formation content and experiences that connect to church life and events.

Adult faith formation can now utilize digital technologies and digital media to engage people with faith-forming content anytime, anyplace, just-in-time—and extend and expand faith formation from physical, face-to-face settings into people's daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery

systems. Online platforms for adult faith formation (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, 24x7x365. (For an example go to: www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com.)

Sixth, adult faith formation needs to be designed as a network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources—in physical places and online spaces—that can offer adults "playlists" of engaging and interactive content and experiences tailored to their needs and interests—all offered on a digital platform that makes it easy for adults to find and follow pathways for growth in faith.

A network approach enables congregations to become centers for adult learning and faith growth by utilizing the best of the new digital technologies to bring an abundance of meaningful and engaging faith forming experiences—in the congregation and the world, and in a variety of media—to all adults.

A network approach not only offers a variety of content but also variety of settings for experiencing the content—self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world. This diversity of offerings is facilitated by the creation of an online platform (website and social media platforms) that integrates, delivers, and communicates the content and programming, and provides an online platform for people to learn and connect with each other. (For an example go to: www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com.)

Seventh, adult faith formation is increasingly *curated*. In order to expand faith formation offerings, leaders will need to become skilled at *curating* content, experiences, programs, activities, and resources from a variety of sources—especially online and digital media—and becoming matchmakers by matching content with adult needs. We are moving *from* an emphasis on developing religious content, designing and managing programming, and teaching/facilitating learning *to* designing faith forming environments, designing digital platforms for faith forming content, and curating religious content and experiences.

Designing Faith Formation the Four Seasons and Generations of Adulthood

Using the seven principles and practices as a guide, here is a checklist for designing adult faith formation that can be customized to the four seasons and generations of adulthood.

1. Focus the Content

* Use the eight faith forming processes as an organizing framework for developing adult faith formation.
* Connect the life issues (developmental, generational) of an season/generation of adulthood to the eight faith forming processes. In the words of Tom Groome faith formation moves from "from *life to Faith to life*.
* Develop specific topics you want to address in each faith forming process that address the lives of the adults. Specific how the topic address the unique needs of the adults.
* Curate content—programs, activities, resources (print, audio, video), online and digital media— that addresses each topic.

2. Address the Learning Styles

In curating and creating adult faith formation take into consideration the distinct ways each generation of adults likes to learn. One example of the difference among the generations is the length of a learning program or activity. Training in the corporate world is emphasizing microlearning and episodic learning—smaller units of learning that can be combined into extended learning programs. For example a microlearning unit could be 5, 10, or 15 minutes in length. This style appeals more to the younger generations than older generations. (Just think of how the typical YouTube video is 3-5 minutes in length today, but ten years ago was typically 10-15 minutes or longer.)

In general, we can say that each generation has the following preferences (which does not mean they won't learn in other ways).

Builders
* lecture and expert presentations
* activities that take into account their age-related abilities to hear, see, and move
* connect their experience to the topic
* structure and predictability (no surprises); low-risk learning environment
* independent skill practice time
* still like printed resources and books for study

Boomers
* group interactions and discussions
* storytelling
* chances to try new skills independently
* stable, risk-free environment but want to interact with others
* experiential, practical, and fun activities that allow for team exercises
* use technology as means for learning
* blend of people who prefer printed books and those who learn online

Gen Xers
* learn by doing
* experiential with lots of direct experience activities
* shorter, episodic learning experiences
* visual learning (images, videos)
* practical and relevant (What will I do with this learning?)
* discretion to complete tasks their own way
* prefer independent self-directed learning, including individual projects
* use technology where possible, including online learning, video, etc.
* will turn to digital resources over the printed resources

Millennials
* microlearning and episodic learning experiences
* lots of activity-based group work
* fast-moving, interactive activities
* visual learning (images, videos)

* technology enabled learning using their own devices for learning
* collaborative learning environments with peer interaction
* entertainment and learning at the same time

3. Provide a Variety of Ways to Experience the Content

* Offer adult faith formation in multiple environments: self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world
* Design a program for multiple environments—offer it as a gathered program at church, as a small group program in variety of locations, and as a self-directed program. For example video record a gathered presentation and then use the video to create a small group program and an independent learning program.
* Build a digital platform (faith formation website) to present all of the opportunities for faith formation—in physical settings and online spaces.
* Use social media (a Facebook group) to connect people participating in a common program, activity, or experience. Social media platforms can help create *communities of learning and practice* around the shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities.

Conclusion

It is possible to move from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to adult faith formation designed around the lives of adults from young adulthood through older adulthood. Apply the ideas in this article (and resources suggested below) by developing a small scale pilot project focusing on one season of adulthood.

Resources

Roberto, John. *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century*. Naugatuck: LifelongFaith Associates, 2015.
Roberto, John, editor. *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*. Naugatuck: LifelongFaith Associates, 2015. (available at www.LifelongFaith.com)
Lifelong Faith Journal: Fall 2015 & Winter 2016 Special Issues on Adult Faith Formation. Available for free at: http://www.lifelongfaith.com/journal.html.
Seasons of Adult Faith Formation website: www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com.

A Guide to the Life Tasks of the Four Seasons of Adulthood

Here is a summary of key life tasks for the four seasons of adulthood. (This is drawn from Chapter Eight in *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, edited by John Roberto, LifelongFaith Associates, 2015.)

Key Characteristics of Young Adults
- ✓ exploring their identity: trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work, developing an individual sense of autonomy, and stabilizing a self-concept and body image
- ✓ "tinkering"—putting together a life from the skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand
- ✓ developing and maintaining intimate relationships with trust, love, and caring
- ✓ transitioning from their family of origin toward establishing independence in living arrangement, finances, career, and other aspects of their lives
- ✓ differentiating self without repudiating or replacing their family of origin—sorting out emotionally what they take from their family of origin, what they leave behind, and what they will create for themselves
- ✓ developing a career and occupational identity and working to establish a work-life balance.
- ✓ adjusting to the expectations and responsibilities of the "adult" world
- ✓ committing to a marital partner, defining and learning the roles of married life
- ✓ starting families and having children; establishing a new family with its own rules, roles, responsibilities, values, and traditions, and developing parenting roles and skills
- ✓ engaging in a religious-theological reevaluation and, sometimes, reinvention

Key Characteristics of Midlife Adults
- ✓ exploring how the self is adjusted in the context of committed family, work, and civic relationships and to the roles of parents, colleagues, leaders, team members, and more.
- ✓ anchoring themselves in a particular way of life filled with commitments and relationships
- ✓ maintaining intimate relationships with other midlife adults while developing the capacity for new kinds of relationships with those younger and older than themselves.
- ✓ caring and guiding the next generation and often caring for the older generation
- ✓ building extensive personal networks for themselves and their families—traditional networks around their families, coworkers, churches, and other organizations, supplemented by digital social networks that allow more frequent conversations
- ✓ evaluating their lives at its midpoint and often growing beyond the pressures of the present moment toward an appreciation of the deeper meanings symbolized in religious tradition.
- ✓ reflecting on "What are we spending and being spent for? What commands and receives our best time and energy? What causes, dreams, goals, or institutions are pouring out our life for? To what or whom are we committed in life and in death? What are our most sacred hopes, our most compelling goals, and purposes in life?"
- ✓ engaging in family life and parenting children, adolescents, and, often, young adults: working to allow for the increasing independence of adolescents while maintaining enough structure to foster continued family development; adjusting patterns of family communication, traditions, and celebrations for adolescent and young adult children; adapting to an empty-nest household and redefining the marriage relationship and roles now that children are no longer at home full-time

- ✓ seeking a religion that emphasizes personal identity, religious experience, and a quest for religious identity in community; seeking an authentic religious experience that acknowledges the ambiguities, trials, and successes of life

Key Characteristics of Mature Adults
- ✓ addressing the challenge of generativity (or its failure, stagnation)—establishing and guiding the next generation, striving to create or nurture things that will outlast them through caring for others, and creating and accomplishing things that make the world a better place
- ✓ addressing the challenge of integrity—reflecting on the life they have lived and coming away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair
- ✓ experiencing physical changes and decline, coming to terms with the cognitive changes related to a changed perspective on time and a personal, existential awareness of death; seeking to stay physically and mentally fit
- ✓ thinking about, planning for, and disengaging from their primary career occupations, launching second or third careers, and developing new identities and new ways to be productively engaged
- ✓ retiring from full-time work and planning for sufficient income that will last into their later adult years
- ✓ blending (part-time) work, volunteering and civic engagement, pursuit of new interests, travel, and their role as grandparent into a new lifestyle for the mature adult years
- ✓ having adequate health care into later life and providing for their own or a spouse/partner's long-term care needs
- ✓ establishing new patterns of relating to spouses, children, siblings, parents, and friends; and leaving some existing relationships and beginning new ones
- ✓ experiencing changes in the marital relationship now that parenting responsibilities are minimal, developing adult-to-adult relationships between grown children and their parents, becoming grandparents, realigning relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren, and caring for the older generation and dealing with disabilities and death.
- ✓ moving to the very core of their faith tradition, while appreciating other religious traditions; seeking a self-reflective quest for individual wholeness, a search for depth and meaning, as well as guidance for living one's life; recognizing that spirituality must be cultivated through sustained practice
- ✓ seeking to be in service to others that is mission driven and can make a difference; doing things that give their lives purpose, meaning, and fulfillment
- ✓ seeking spiritual growth in a time of significant life transitions and in a time when they are searching for meaning and purpose in life as they enter the second half of life and evaluating the things that really provide lasting fulfillment; connecting with others to talk about spiritual and life issues
- ✓ seeking intergenerational relationships to share their lives, stories, and faith across generations, and to be united with the whole faith community

Key Characteristics of Older Adults
- ✓ remaining vital and actively engaged in the lives of their community, church, social network, and family well into their 80s and 90s

- ✓ experiencing changes in their body and a decline in mental and physical ability, such as a loss of hearing or vision or dexterity
- ✓ continuing to learn and process new information, and many live well into their 90s with memory and logic intact
- ✓ addressing the challenge of integrity—reflecting on the life they have lived and coming away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair. They are cultivating wisdom in which one's perspective on the world and human relationships reflect an inner sense of liberation from the rules, roles, and rituals of the past
- ✓ taking on new roles as senior citizens and adjusting to the role of mentor and sage in their extended family
- ✓ experiencing losses of friends and loved ones: death of a spouse, family members, and close friends
- ✓ facing the growing and continuous challenge of maintaining their independence and desiring to stay in their own homes ("aging in place") or coming to accept being cared for by their family and moving from their own home into other living arrangements (with their children or in senior living or assisted living situations)
- ✓ becoming reconciled to their impending death and accepting their personal mortality; dealing with questions coming from the nearness of death: What is life about? How do we want to die?
- ✓ growing into a deeper, more personal faith that is clearly their own and desire ways to continually enrich their faith life
- ✓ being engaged in the life of faith communities with a more traditional worship experience
- ✓ valuing the Bible and the Christian tradition and desiring to continue their learning as Christians