

John Roberto

**faith**  
**formation**  
with a **new**  
**generation**

with Lisa Brown, Tanya Eustace Campen, Lynn Barger Elliott, and Lee Yates



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# CHAPTER ONE

## A New Vision and Approach for a New Generation

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ We need a new vision and approach for engaging the new generation in growing as disciples and maturing in faith. Far too many churches are guided by a vision and approach that is not responsive to the needs of young people and their families and is woefully out of date in our contemporary world. Churches still have classrooms of children organized by grade levels using textbooks and Bible studies, and youth groups with a variety of high-energy activities conducted in the youth room, all scheduled on a weekly basis between September and May, and held at church. These programs operate as if nothing has changed in our world, and that we have not learned anything new about how children and young people learn and grow in faith.

The world around us has changed. The Internet and digital technology is transforming our lives; families in our communities come in a variety of forms and configurations; the religious practices and engagement of people have changed; and a new generation (Gen Z) of young people has emerged. Yet far too many congregations are using program models and educational approaches they inherited from the nineteenth or twentieth century, expecting them to address the lives of twenty-first century children, adolescents, and their families.

We need to change our approach. Imagine what faith formation with children, teens, and parents would look like if we “started from scratch.” What models and

approaches would we use? What types of faith formation opportunities would we offer? When? For whom? Where? What resources would we need? What technologies would we use? This chapter presents the essential features of a twenty-first century approach to faith formation with children, adolescents, and their parents. The following chapters elaborate on these essential features, providing ideas and practices to guide congregations in developing a new approach to faith formation.

## Why Is Faith Formation with Children and Adolescents So Important?

There are many reasons why it is important to invest in faith formation during the first two decades of life. In the National Study of Youth and Religion, Christian Smith and his colleagues found that young people committing to live their lives for God is one religious experience that is among the most important factors in leading teenagers into the highest levels of emerging adult religion. They found that almost 60 percent (58.8%) made their first commitment to live their lives for God before the age of fourteen. Most of them probably committed to God during the childhood years. Approximately 6 percent made a first commitment from ages fourteen to seventeen and another 5 percent from eighteen to twenty-three. Thirty-one percent of young adults reported never committing to God as a teenager or emerging adult. Smith says that one can expect few of them probably ever will. *So, 85 percent of young adults who have committed their lives to God appear to have made their first commitment before age fourteen.*

These findings complement and reinforce one of the larger stories of this research: that *the religious commitments and orientations of most people appear to be set early in life* and very likely follow a consistent trajectory from the early formation through the adolescent and into the emerging adult years. Some young people do make dramatic shifts into lower and higher religious commitments and practices later in life that would not be expected from their early life experiences and formation. But they are a minority. Most are set early in life to follow one religious trajectory or another—mostly formed by the religious lives of their parents and by social connections to their congregations and embraced in personal religious beliefs and practices—which they tend to follow as they grow into emerging adulthood. When it comes to commitment to God, it is not that experiences and changes during the teenage and emerging adult years do not matter religiously for people—they do, especially for some. It is instead simply that *what matters for most even more is what happens religiously before the teenage years, which powerfully conditions most of everything that happens thereafter* [emphasis added] (Smith and Snell, 247).

Two points are worth repeating: 1) religious commitments and orientations of most people appear to be set early in life; and 2) what matters most is what happens religiously before the teenage years, and that the early formative experiences powerfully condition everything that happens later.

To reinforce these key findings, Smith and Snell write:

The lives of many teenagers who are transitioning into the emerging adult years reflect a lot more religious stability and continuity than is commonly realized. Everything simply does not change. The past continues to shape the future. This is important to know, because it means that religious commitments, practices, and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities, matter—they make a difference. Appreciating the stabilities and continuities that usually override unpredictable changes also reinforces the basic sociological insight that people’s lives are profoundly formed by the social networks and institutions that socialize them, that the relational and social structures that compose and order life are not easily changed or inexplicably made irrelevant. Again, who people are is very much a product of where they are socially located, of what social and relational forces that have formed their lives. And who people are usually does not randomly and unaccountably change over time. *What people have been in the past is generally the best indicators of why they are what they are in the present and what they will likely be in the future* [emphasis added] (Smith and Snell, 256).

The flip side of the early commitment to live one’s life for God is that most Americans who leave their childhood religious identity to become unaffiliated generally do so before they reach their eighteenth birthday. More than six in ten (62%) religiously unaffiliated Americans who were raised in a religion say they abandoned their childhood religion before they turned eighteen. About three in ten (28%) say they were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. Only 5 percent say they stopped identifying with their childhood religion between the ages of thirty and forty-nine, and just 2 percent say age fifty or older (Jones and others, *Exodus* study, 5).

The results from the *Exodus* study by the Public Religion Research Institute survey are affirmed by a 2017 study of Catholic youth and young adults in *Going, Going, Gone* (Saint Mary’s Press): “The median age when formerly Catholic teens and young adults left the faith is thirteen. Nearly four in ten (39%) report leaving between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Only 5 percent say they left before age five and 18 percent between the ages of five and nine. About a quarter (24%) left between ages ten and twelve. Eleven percent left in the first few years of adulthood, between eighteen and twenty-two. Only 3 percent left from ages twenty-one to twenty-five.”

It’s worth repeating that the majority of unaffiliated Americans who were raised in a religion left before they were eighteen years old. When children and young

adolescents leave a religion, we can safely assume that their parents (or the whole family) have stopped practicing as well. We now have two generations of religiously unaffiliated: parents and their children.

It should be pretty clear that what we do in faith formation with children and adolescents can make a huge difference when they are young and most importantly as they grow into adulthood. Faith formation in the first two decades of life sets people on a trajectory toward adult faith. *What we do in faith formation and how we do it matters, a lot!*

## Who Is This New Generation?

We are learning from experience and research studies about the newest generation, *Gen Z*. It's important to remember that generations are cultural-historical ways of understanding people. They are social constructs—helpful descriptions, but never complete. Studies are emerging on some of the dominant themes or characteristics of this new generation born on or around 2000 (some observers put the date in the late 1990s, others in the early years of the 2000s) and continuing through at least 2015 if not 2020.

What's important for church leaders to know is that Gen Z brings new attitudes, perceptions, experiences, concerns, hungers, and interests that need to inform and shape the direction of faith formation. A 2018 study by Barna Research, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, identified nine important characteristics of Gen Z.

1. *Technology*. The Internet is at the core of Gen Z's development, a uniquely powerful influence on their worldview, mental health, daily schedule, sleep patterns, relationships, and more. Devices are almost constantly on their person and on their minds.
2. *Worldview*. The world of Gen Z (and in turn, their moral code) is highly inclusive and individualistic. This diverse, open-minded group of young people is sensitive to others' feelings and experiences and wary of asserting any one view as right or wrong.
3. *Identity*. Their views of gender identity and expression are just one way teens are wrestling with how to accept and affirm other people, to create "safe space" where each person can be herself or himself without feeling threatened or judged.
4. *Security*. Gen Z has come of age in a post 9-11 nation reeling from the 2008 recession, and many teens are anxious about their future. Their goals revolve around professional success and financial security, and a majority says their ultimate aim is "to be happy"—which a plurality defines as financial success.

5. *Diversity.* As the most racially, religiously, and sexually diverse generation in American history, Gen Z expects people to have different beliefs and experiences, and they seem to have a greater appreciation for social inclusiveness compared to generations before them.

6. *Parents.* As the offspring of mostly Gen X parents, many in Gen Z appear to have a complicated dynamic with their family. They admire their parents, but most don't feel family relationships are central to their sense of self—a major departure from other generations.

7. *Religious identity.* Engaged Christians are much more likely than average to consider their religious beliefs (and to a lesser extent, achievement and family background) very important to their identity. The one-third of teens with no religious affiliation is, by contrast, far less likely to say that religion (12%) or family (22%) are significant factors when it comes to their sense of self.

8. *Morality and values.* One-quarter of Gen Z strongly agrees that what is morally right and wrong changes over time based on society, and 21 percent believe each individual is his or her own moral arbiter.

9. *Faith and church.* Irrelevance is a key word for this generation when it comes to faith, truth, and church. Not only does Christianity stand in direct contrast with many of the beliefs and attitudes of Gen Z—on the existence of objective morality and spiritual truth, for example—but the practice of faith, especially as part of a Christian faith community, seems to many teens simply not to be relevant. It doesn't seem to have a bearing on their real day-to-day lives (Barna, 12, 13, 43, 55, 74).

Generation Z is also learning differently than past generations. Gen Z is searching for authentic and meaningful experiences. They are more independent in how they learn. They have an aptitude for self-reliance and an ability to self educate; they are adept at using the new digital tools and methods to learn. At the same time, Gen Z values face-to-face interaction and collaboration, and an environment where they can share and cocreate their education with their peers. The preferred way to engage a Gen Z group of learners is to provide authentic learning experiences using methods such as project-based learning, active learning, and activities that utilize their creativity, such as artwork, video presentation, and more. Generation Z loves videos and YouTube, especially short pieces of content that run from sixty to ninety seconds. For them, learning is one continuous, multifaceted, completely integrated experience.

## A Vision of Faith Maturing

We want a robust, life-giving, vital, and vibrant faith formation for children and adolescents that develops them as disciples of Jesus Christ and equips them to follow the way of Jesus. We want young people to develop a loving relationship with Jesus, embrace his good news, and follow him in their daily lives—becoming witnesses of God’s reign in the world. This type of faith formation is a way of the head, the heart, and the hands: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37–39). Jesus presented faith as a whole way of life.

The goal of all faith formation with children and adolescents (and their parents) is forming disciples of Jesus Christ and providing a foundation for lifelong growth in Christian faith and discipleship. There are six essential elements that shape our approach to forming young people as disciples of Jesus Christ. (These elements are adapted from the *Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*.)

1. *Disciples know Jesus Christ.* Discipleship is grounded in the teachings, life, death, resurrection, and Lordship of Jesus Christ alive and present. Disciples are in relationship with Christ, learn about Christ, and follow Christ’s leading. Congregations cultivate relationships with Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, community building, study, retreats, and service.

2. *Disciples know the Bible.* Discipleship is anchored in the study of the Bible. It is in the Bible that young people learn the story, the truth that shapes the life of faith. Congregations engage young people in experiential explorations of the Scripture texts where they can “hear” God speaking truth to their lives.

3. *Disciples know the Christian faith.* Discipleship is learning the Christian faith. The Christian faith has a history, traditions, beliefs, and values that are critical to its shaping and transforming power. Congregations guide young people in exploring the long and rich life of the people of God, creating more sturdy beliefs, engaging the tough questions, and assisting them in finding their own “faith voice.”

4. *Disciples make faith a way of life.* Discipleship is the “knowledge of faith” becoming a way of life. Discipleship is regularly described as much in languages of the “heart” and the “hands” as of the “head.” It is not enough for young people to know the content of Scripture or to understand the richness of Christian beliefs. They need to participate in faith as a way of life—“living into” faith that is simultaneously centered in God yet genuinely their own. All this is carried on with an eye on tradition and experience, text and context, and faith and life.

5. *Disciples are mentored.* Discipleship is formed in relationships with mentoring individuals and communities. Even though discipleship is primarily a faith relationship in which Christ is at the center, young disciples are formed in relationship with



other Christians. Congregations are intergenerational crucibles in which conversation, relationships, and practices wrap youth in a culture of “knowing and doing God.” Within these congregations, people walk intentionally and directly alongside young people providing diverse, concrete snapshots of following Jesus Christ as these mentors encourage and teach through their presence, speech, and action.

6. *Disciples are equipped.* A young person’s strengths and gifts of the Spirit are integral to discipleship. To follow Christ involves a call to witness and to serve others. To make disciples is to identify a young person’s spiritual gifts and equip children and adolescents for service in the church and the world. Congregations combine study, fellowship, personal strengths, and spiritual gifts discovery with service to equip young disciples to follow Jesus Christ in the church and into the world.

We can give shape to forming disciples and promoting faith growth through ten essential characteristics of Christian faith and discipleship that incorporate knowing and believing, relating and belonging, and practicing and living. We are proposing ten characteristics—drawn from the Christian faith tradition and from research on what makes a difference in people’s lives—that 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.

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 and ritual celebrations, and through 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.

In the approach we are proposing in this book, we build faith formation around the faith maturing characteristics and the spiritual-religious needs of young people and their families, and then develop program approaches and create and curate the

resources that are needed to foster faith growth. For each characteristic we ask questions such as: What do we need to do to help children and adolescents? How can we engage children and adolescents and their families in . . . ? How do we equip children and adolescents and their families for . . . ?

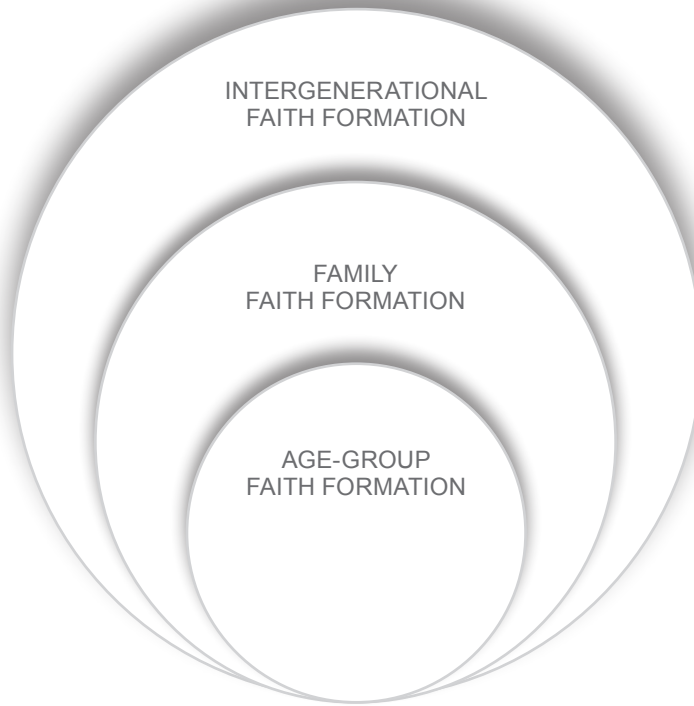
This change of emphasis reflects a significant shift from a provider-centered, program- and content-driven approach to a *person-centered approach* to faith formation. We need to focus on children and adolescents growing in faith and ask how can we accompany them relationally and programmatically. Instead of asking what program or textbook we need to adopt or what content we need to teach, we focus on the person growing in faith. We start asking how we promote growth in faith and discipleship from birth through the high school years—a faith that provides a foundation for adult faith.

These ten characteristics need to be contextualized within specific Christian traditions, within the specific ethnic-cultural traditions and identities of faith communities, and within the unique socio-cultural needs of faith communities. They serve as a guide for congregations to develop faith formation with children and adolescents (and their parents). They provide a way to direct energy and attention to specific goals or outcomes. They provide a way to develop a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through the first nineteen years of life.

## A New Approach to Faith Formation

This new approach to faith formation is more community centered, while at the same time being more person centered.

We know from research and practice that faith is formed in intergenerational faith communities, in family communities, and in life stage and affinity groups. A plan for faith formation with children and adolescents incorporates intergenerational faith forming experiences by engaging children and adolescents in faith community experiences (including worship) with all generations and family faith forming experiences by equipping parents to share faith at home and engaging in family faith practice. Age-group faith formation is then situated within this ecology of faith formation. The blend of intergenerational, family, and age-group settings makes for a comprehensive approach to faith formation.



## Fostering Faith Growth in the Intergenerational Community

We need to become intentional about strengthening the intergenerational character of our congregations and enhancing the faith forming influence of the whole community. Increasingly, Christian congregations are rediscovering the importance of intergenerational faith formation and are making cross-age relationship building a defining characteristic of their community life. Over the last two decades, congregations from a variety of Christian traditions have been developing and implementing new models of intergenerational faith formation and learning.

Intergenerational learning provides a way to educate the whole community, bringing all ages and generations together to learn with and from each other, build community, share faith, pray, celebrate, and practice the Christian faith. The key is that everyone is learning together—young and old, single and married, families with children, and empty-nest families—and it involves the whole family—children, parents, grandparents—in a shared experience of the Christian faith.

Research provides evidence of the enduring importance of intergenerational experiences for the faith formation in the younger generations, as well as for adults and the whole family. Involvement in all-church (intergenerational) worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation. We are learning the more

teenagers serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick. We are learning that when adults in the congregation show an interest in young people and build relationships with them, young people feel welcomed and valued, and the influence of adult-youth relationships continues into the college years. Young people who have at least five adults from church make a significant time investment in their lives—personally and spiritually—are more likely to keep attending church (see *Sticky Faith*).

Congregations whose basic ministries are intergenerational have a significant impact on the faith growth and commitment of young people. In these congregations young people are welcomed and expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship, outreach, and decision-making. At Sunday worship adults and youth greet each other, and groups of adults gather for informal conversation with young people before and after the services. Young people feel at home in these safe and nurturing communities where their participation, energy, concerns, questions, and faith life are valued. They turn to adults in the congregation for guidance and care. Young people come to know a living and active God through relationships in the community. They get to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Jesus. These young people are surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence and immersed in a larger, multigenerational community of quality relationships informed by faith in Jesus Christ (see *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*).

We can become more intentionally intergenerational by:

- 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 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.
- Infusing intergenerational experiences and relationships into existing ministries and programs, 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.
- 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.

Chapter two presents ideas for intergenerational faith formation.

## Fostering Faith Growth in the Family

We need to make parents and the whole family central to faith formation in the first two decades of life. We all know how important parents and the whole family are in the faith forming process. Research studies over the past twenty years continue to affirm this truth. The factors that make a significant difference in promoting faith in children and adolescents include: parents' personal faith and practice; a close and warm parent-child relationship; parents' modeling and teaching a religious faith; parents' involvement in church life and Sunday worship; grandparents' religious influence and relationship; family conversations about faith; and family faith religious practices including praying, reading the Bible, serving others, and celebrating holidays and rituals.

When Christian Smith and his colleagues (in the National Study on Youth and Religion) looked for the factors that produced highly religious emerging adults, they focused on parents and the family as the primary (but not only) influence. They reported that through the processes of religious socialization young people with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training sticks with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood.

Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely: 1) to have internalized their parents' religious worldview, 2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and 3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization (Smith and Snell, 256).

We need to empower and equip parents as faith formers of their children. The research is quite clear: *the single most powerful force in a child's religious formation is the spiritual personality of the parent*. In a study of Catholic parents—that can be easily generalized to all Christian parents—Christian Smith and Justin Bartkus 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 as 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).

We need to create new initiatives for family faith formation at each stage of life (young children, older children, young adolescents, older adolescents) and for equipping parents as faith formers of young people. We need to develop a comprehensive plan for family faith formation including initiatives:

- *At home:* discovering God in everyday life, forming faith practices (praying, reading the Bible, serving others), and celebrating milestones and rituals.
- *In the faith community:* celebrating seasonal events, encountering God in the Bible, connecting families intergenerationally (learning, service, community life), and offering whole family gatherings for learning, worship, service, and relationship-building that provide high-quality family experiences and model the types of faith practices families can do at home.
- *With parents:* developing a strong family life and empowering parents and grandparents as faith formers.

With 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.

Chapter three presents ideas for faith formation with families.

## Fostering Faith Growth in Age Groups

We need faith formation specifically targeted to the ways that Gen Z young people learn. 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. 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 personalized learning, blended learning, flipped learning, microlearning, and immersive learning. All of these new approaches and methods are enhanced by the use of digital technologies, methods, and media.

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. *Microlearning* experiences are short-form (five, ten, or fifteen minutes) learning experiences designed for anywhere, anytime learning that be combined into multi-part learning programs. These learning experiences are one response to short attention spans and mobile learning. We can curate a series of microlearning experiences (on a digital platform) to engage people in all types of faith formation content.

3. *Immersive learning* involves faith forming experiences that are interactive, participatory, experiential, visual, and multisensory. 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 need to expand our immersive learning opportunities (VBS, retreats, mission trips, and more) and focus our gathered settings on immersive faith formation in extended settings (half day, full day, weekend, week-long) offered throughout the year (but not weekly).

Chapter four presents ideas for faith formation with children and adolescents.

## Personalizing Faith Formation

With greater diversity in religious practice and engagement today, we need to tailor faith formation to the religious and spiritual journeys and needs of children, adolescents, and parents. Gone are the days of one-size-fits-all programs and groups. No one program, class, youth group, or resource can address the diverse religious and learning needs of young people today. There are at least four “religious-spiritual identities” in our young people and their parents around which we can fashion faith formation.

1. *People with a vibrant faith and relationship with God who are engaged in the faith community.* For these people religious faith is central to their lives. 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, and parents 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 as a family.

2. *People who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith is not central to their lives.* These are people who participate occasionally in church life—Sunday worship, seasonal celebrations, community events, and age-group programs. For parents transmitting a religious faith that often means bringing their children to educational programs at church and participating because of their children. Their spiritual commitment is not central to the way they live their lives, 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.

3. *People who are uninvolved in a church but spiritual.* These are people who are often called “spiritual but not religious.” They have left participation in an established church. Many believe in God, have a relationship with God, and are growing spiritually. Many practice their Christian faith unattached to a faith community or tradition. Parents, though not involved in a church, may send their children to church programs, and the parents may participate at times with their children.

4. *People who are unaffiliated and have left involvement in organized religion.* These are the “Nones.” They no longer believe religion is important in their lives. Many parents are “first generation Nones” and are raising their children in religiously uninvolved and unaffiliated homes creating a “second generation of Nones.” Many parents left organized religion because they stopped believing in the religion’s teachings (usually a top reason) or because their family was never that religious when they were growing up or because of their experience of negative religious teaching about or treatment of gay and lesbian people (*Exodus*, 2016).

Personalizing faith formation provides a way to address the diversity we are facing by tailoring the faith forming environment—the what, when, how, and where people learn—to address the spiritual and religious interests and needs of children, adolescents, and parents. It means providing variety and choice in faith formation programming, activities, and resources around the lives of people. Personalizing



faith formation uses the ten faith maturing characteristics to create *Pathways* to guide people in discerning their faith growth needs, and then creates *Playlists* of content and experiences that address their needs and interests.

Chapter five explores how to design personalized approaches to faith formation.

## Integrating Digitally Enabled Faith Formation Strategies

We need to design faith formation for the digital age, utilizing a variety of digital methods, media, and tools. The digital transformation of society is making possible new ways of learning and faith formation. Learning and faith formation are now mobile—anytime, anyplace, 24x7. People have the digital devices to stay connected and access learning and faith formation on the go. There is an abundance of high-quality digital content for faith formation—audio, video, print, websites, apps, online learning platforms, and more. New digital media and learning methods mean that we can provide multiple ways to learn and grow with activities and experiences that reflect different learning styles and multiple intelligences. Digital media and online activities, especially videos, mean that we can develop content in smaller units (microlearning) that better suit today’s learners who have shorter attention spans. A faith formation website can serve as an online learning center, a portal to activities and resources, and a connecting point for people. Online classrooms, like Edmodo, Schoology, and Google Classroom, provide safe spaces for young people, parents, and adult leaders to engage in faith forming experiences and interaction.

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, camp, or retreats with regular online content and activities.

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

Chapters four and five integrate digital strategies into faith formation with children and adolescents.

## Developing New Leadership Roles and Skills

To bring to life a twenty-first century approach to faith formation, leaders will need to develop new roles and skills. The traditional roles of faith formation leaders have included developing religious content, designing programs and activities, managing programs, and teaching or facilitating programs. These were essential skills in an era when resources were scarce or limited and the majority of programming was being done at church in gathered settings.

These three new leadership roles will enable us to design and implement new approaches to faith formation in the twenty-first century.

1. *Learning architects* who design and/or identify environments that can become settings for faith formation, for example, homes, workplaces, coffee shops, online communities, and more; and design content and experiences to “deliver” to that setting.
2. *Designers of digital platforms* (websites, social media, online classrooms) where people can connect with each other, access content, engage in learning activities, and more—providing 24x7 faith formation.
3. *Curators* of religious content and experiences who find and identify high-quality content in all formats, match it with the needs of people, provide the content and experiences in a variety of environments and on a digital platform, and connect and engage people with the content and experiences.

This new approach will blend the four traditional roles with the three emerging roles described above. The four traditional roles will continue into the future but in a much more limited way. We still will need to design programs and activities when we cannot curate them from other sources. We still will manage programs and activities in gathered settings, but increase the number environments for faith formation. Increasingly our time and energy will be spent designing learning environments, designing and managing digital platforms, and curating content and experiences.

## Conclusion

The flow of the book will guide you and your congregation in designing faith formation with children and adolescents using the features of this new approach. Each chapter provides ideas and practices for one of the features.

Chapter two explores how the intergenerational faith community provides rich resources for faith formation and guides you in identifying how to provide intergenerational faith forming experiences for children and adolescents.

Chapter three explores the central role of families in the faith community and guides you in utilizing five core strategies for family faith forming experiences for children and adolescents.

Chapter four explores how Generation Z is learning in new ways and guides you in reimagining and redesigning age-group faith formation with children and adolescents.

Chapter five integrates the ideas from your work in chapters two through four in designing a faith formation plan that personalizes faith formation with children, adolescents, and their families.

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### Online Resources

- For planning tools, activities, and resources go to the “New Generation” section of [www.LifelongFaith.com](http://www.LifelongFaith.com).

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