

Faith Formation for the 21st Century

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Most Christian churches have similar goals for faith formation. Churches want faith formation that helps people grow in their relationship with God throughout their lives; live as disciples of Jesus Christ at home, in the workplace, in the community and the world; develop an understanding of the Bible and their faith tradition; deepen their spiritual life and practices; engage in service and mission; relate the Christian faith to life today; and participate in the life and ministries of the faith community. Churches want faith formation that informs, forms, and transforms; and immerses people into the practices and way of life of a tradition-bearing community where they can be transformed spiritually. And churches want faith formation that engages all ages and generations in a lifelong process of growing, experiencing, celebrating, and living the Christian faith throughout life.

Churches are finding it more and more difficult to accomplish these goals in the 21st century world. First, the religious landscape has changed dramatically over the past two decades and we see this in our congregations and in our families. Consider the following trends and how they impact your congregation and your family or household:

- A growing *generational* diversity in America and in our church as a result of people living longer. We now have five distinct generational profiles, each with their own religious and spiritual needs, and unique learning preferences and styles: the iGeneration (born since 2000), Millennials (1980-1999), Generation X (1961-1979), Baby Boomers (1946-1960), and Builders (born before 1946).
- An increasing number of people in America (and many of family and former church member who are *no longer affiliated with any religion*). This represents 15% of all Americans and almost 25% of those in their 20s. ¹
- An increasing number of people in American who are *spiritual but not religious* – many with a vibrant relationship with God and living a spiritual life, but not engaged in an established church (denomination). This representing almost 20% of all those in their 20s and 30s. ²
- A much greater *acceptance and embrace of diversity* among the younger generations (40s and younger) – ethnic-cultural, religious, sexual – that is transforming American society at large, especially the attitudes of the older generations.
- A much greater acceptance in America of the *diversity of family structures* today: married couples with children, married couples with children, single parents with children, unmarried couples with children, same-sex couple with children, same-sex couple without children, and unmarried couple without children. ³
- A *declining participation* in Sunday worship and sacraments/rites of passage (marriage, baptism) among all generations, but especially those who are 40 and younger.
- A *declining level of family faith practice and socialization at home* – reflecting the increase in parents who are non-affiliated or spiritual but not religious, and the lack of continuous connection to a faith community among young adults, young married couples, and parents with young children.

A second reason it is more difficult to accomplish these goals is that churches continue to use models of faith formation that were developed for the 19th and 20th century world. Most current programming makes assumptions about the world that are no longer true. For example, the Sunday School model

grew up in a very different world than the one we live in today. The 30-40 hours that children and youth are involved in Sunday School assume that faith is still being transmitted from generation to generation at home and in the congregation; that families are practicing their faith at home – reading the Bible, praying together, celebrating rituals and traditions (often drawn from their ethnic heritage), etc., that families are involved in the life of the congregation, especially Sunday worship. The Sunday School model also relies on the assumption that people are more alike than diverse, so a “one size fits all” model works effectively, i.e., every 3rd grader comes from a similar family, with similar formation, and has the same religious and spiritual needs.

What happens when these basic assumptions are no longer true? What happens when we realize that every congregation, large or small, experiences tremendous diversity in their people, when it is not a “given” that families are practicing their faith at home and socializing their children, when parents drop-off their children for Sunday School but don’t attend worship (except at Christmas and Easter and other big church events); when children experience more media in a week than a year of Sunday School (8-18 year olds experience at least 7 ½ hours of media each day ⁴); and when people’s lives have become so complex and time-stressed that belonging to church is no longer at the center of their lives and priorities. You get the picture. The world has changed. Our people have changed. Yet the Sunday School model persists, but not effectively!

Churches have tried to “fix” the problems of Sunday School and the older “church-based” models – new curriculum, new resources, new facilities, new schedules. Yet most churches are frustrated that no matter what they do, it’s doesn’t work. Sunday School and the older models worked in their time when the assumptions upon which the model was developed were true. The world has changed and we need to begin with life today and develop models, practices, and resources for the 21st century.

The Growth of New Technologies and Resources

According to Lee Rainie and Barry Welman we are in the midst of a “triple revolution” – the rise of social networks, the personalized internet, and always-available mobile connectivity (see *Networked: The New Social Operating System*). In the past 10 years we have see the rise of new information and communication technologies: Google, Facebook, Wikipedia, Google+, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and blogging. People today have immediate access to the growing digital content. Consider that 88% of homes have broadband; over 75% of people 65 and younger use the internet (58% of those 66-74 use the internet); over 71% of those 49 and younger are involved in a social network (52% of those 50-64); over 50% of those 18-46 have smartphones (and 35% of 47-56 year olds); and 67 million iPads have been sold since 2010 with an additional 120 million tablets projected to be purchased in 2012. ⁵ The best part of these new technologies is that people already own them – computers, smart phones (iPhone), and tablets (iPads) – and they know how to use them!

Together with the growth of information and communication technologies, we are experiencing the growth of new digital resources that utilize these technologies: online resource centers, online courses, digital books, videos, apps, blogs, wikis, to name a few. Universities, such as MIT and Harvard (www.edxonline.org), are making all of their courses available online for free; the Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org) is providing over 3000 instructional videos for elementary and high school education for free, Ted (www.ted.com) is making available the videos of all their world-class presenters for free and developing TedEd (<http://ed.ted.com>) as a platform for creating customized lessons around Ted Talks and any video presentation.

There has also been a tremendous growth of religious content and experiences in digital form – the Bible and Bible studies, prayer and spiritual practices, daily devotions, online courses, online marriage

preparation, online wedding planning, parenting skills and practices, family/household faith forming activities, to name only a few examples.

We are experiencing a *convergence* of new information and communication technologies with digital resources that are beginning to transform contemporary life and learning, *and* have the potential to transform faith formation. Just as an earlier era adopted the technology of schooling and the printing press to produce instructional educational models using catechisms and textbooks, the 21st century has new digital technologies, approaches, and content that can transform faith formation in a parish.

Faith Formation in the 21st Century

It is now possible, like never before, for a congregation to provide faith formation for everyone, anytime, anywhere, 24x7x365. It is now possible to customize and personalize faith formation for all ages around the life tasks and issues, interests, religious and spiritual needs, and busy lives of people. It is now possible to engage people in a wide diversity of programs, activities, and resources that incorporate a variety of ways to learn – on your own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, and in the community and world – delivered in physical gathered settings and virtual online settings. It is now possible to deliver religious content and experiences to people wherever they are, 24 x 7 x 365. It is now possible to connect people to each other whenever and wherever – in physical places and virtual spaces. *The basic shift means that we have the ability to fashion faith formation around the people; not to get people to “fit” into our programs and activities.*

Imagine the possibilities of the convergence of new technologies and the variety of learning formats with the diversity of religious content and experiences for lifelong faith formation. Today congregations can:

- Create an online faith formation center (website) where people of all ages and generations can find (and link to) high quality religious content and experiences – worship, prayer, spiritual practices, Bible study, Christian beliefs and traditions, rituals and milestones, music, and so much more.
- Offer a wide variety of online Bible and theology courses for individual and small group adult study by selecting the best offerings on iTunes University and from college and seminary continuing education programs, cataloging and linking to them on the church’s faith formation website, connecting adults who want to study a particular course together, and then creating a blog or wiki for people to share their reflections and learning with each other and whole church community.
- Give parents access to the best knowledge for parenting through their church’s website (print, audio, video) and starting a parenting wiki or blog to share their experiences and insights – and inviting all parents from the congregation (and around the world) to join them.
- Redesign children’s faith formation so that children are doing projects and activities with their parents online (at a secure site, such as Edmodo, www.edmodo.com), and then refocusing “class time” on presenting projects and demonstrating their learning.
- Offer “versions” of a confirmation program – with online and face-to-face activities – so that young people (with the help of a guide/mentor) can select the content and activities most appropriate to their religious and spiritual needs.

- Provide online Bible study to small groups of young adults who can connect virtually through Skype or Google+ each week, and share their written reflections in their Bible study blog.
- Offer a small group of young people who want to learn more about Christianity by taking an online college-level theology course using a free course from the “catalog” at iTunesU.
- Offer people who love art a way to explore Christian artwork by virtually studying art in the great museums of the world and meeting online and in-person to share their reflections.
- Offer a six-week program for youth or adults on understanding the history, tradition, and practices of world religions with guest speakers from around the country/world presenting live via Skype, Google+, or YouTube video, and using the Patheos world religions website (www.patheos.com) as a “text” for study.
- Develop a justice and service center where people of all ages can learn about pressing social issues, explore Biblical and church teaching on justice, and find ways to act together through local and global projects and organizations.
- Develop an online prayer/meditation center where people could access daily prayer experiences (e.g., 3-Minute Retreat from Loyola Press), offer prayer intentions, pray for others, learn about spiritual practices, download prayer activities for the home, and so on.

The amazing thing is that all of these resources and technologies already exist, most are *free*, and almost all children, adolescents, adults (and even mature adults), and parents already have the technology tools to make this possible. This is a revolution in the making.

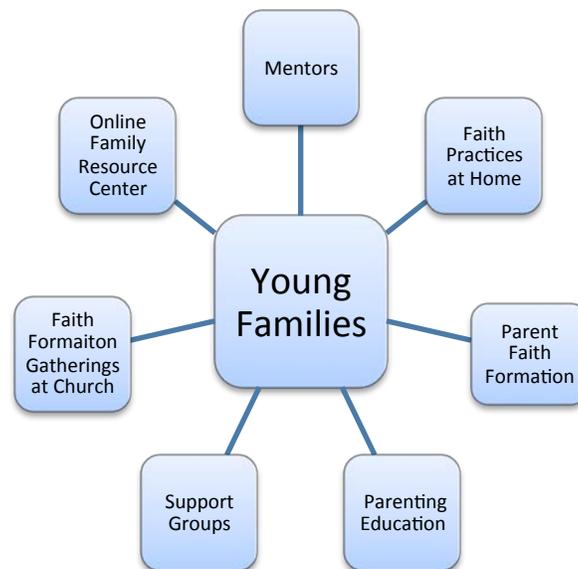
Networks of Faith Formation

The “organizing system” for the churches in the 21st century is a **faith formation network**. We live in the age of networks. We are all part of networks: our families, our schools, our workplaces, our religious congregations, our social circles. Networks – collections of people (and their resources) connected to each other through relationships – aren’t new. They’re as old as human society. What is new is that in the 21st century this understanding of networks has been expanded to include the digital network of the Internet and world wide web. (How many of you are on Facebook or use Twitter or participate in an interest-based online social network or taken an online course?) New tools and technologies – video chat and conferencing, blogs, wikis, Facebook, and Twitter – are changing the way we communicate and connect. Religious networks provide a rich set of connections each of us can make to people in both our online and offline worlds who can help us with our spiritual development and faith growth pursuits. Today we can turn to people, organizations, and resources anywhere in the world to help us answer questions, connect to relevant content and resources, or just share their own experiences with us.

Instead of being the center of faith formation experiences, programs, classes, and books now become nodes on a much broader faith formation network that is lifelong and lifewide. The shift to networks will be transformative in how we imagine and organize faith formation for all ages and generations. Congregations can create faith formation networks around 1) *ministries and activities* such as Sunday worship, service and mission projects, and programming (children’s faith formation, youth ministry, Vacation Bible School); 2) *age groups and generations*: children, adolescents, emerging adults, young adults, midlife adults, Baby Boomers, older adults; and 3) around *families and households* across the life cycle. Here are three illustrations.

Example 1: A Faith Formation Network for Families with Children

Congregations can create Faith Formation Network for families with children, beginning with the baptism of their child and extending through the first decade of life, which blends faith formation in virtual and physical settings and uses a variety of faith formation formats for content and activities: 1) on your own, 2) with a mentor, 3) at home, 4) in small groups, 5) in large groups, 6) in the congregation, and 7) in the community and world. Central to this network is an online faith formation center (website) where families can find the programs and resources, connect with others, and share their experiences.



1. **Mentors:** Connect new parents with experienced parents (the grand-parent generation) who can meet with them regularly – in person, by phone or video conference – to support them as parents and as people of faith.
2. **Faith Practices at Home:** Provide parents with faith practices – rituals, milestones, prayers, Bible reading, family conversations, and more – geared to the age of their growing child and family; and connect parents to faith formation websites for additional resources, such as Vibrant Faith at Home (<http://vibrantfaithathome.org>) from Vibrant Faith Ministries.
3. **Parent Faith Formation:** Offer parents opportunities to grow in faith in physical settings such as workshops, presentations, retreats; and in online settings such as courses, videos, and print resources.
4. **Parenting Education:** Provide parent education programs and resources – knowledge, skills, practices – through church- or community-based programs, and through online parent education and resources using websites such as ParentFurther (www.parentfurther.com) from Search Institute.
5. **Support Groups:** Organize groups in the church, host community groups, or connect parents to existing support groups such as MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers, www.mops.org).
6. **Family Faith Formation Gatherings:** Conduct whole-family, faith formation gatherings three or four times per year around content appropriate for families with children, such as Church seasons (Advent-Christmas, Lent, Easter), Bible themes and stories, and faith practices.
7. **Parent Blog or Wiki:** Give parents the opportunity to connect, share, and ask for assistance through a blog or wiki that is included in the congregation’s online family resource center or a special page on Facebook or a group on Google+.

Example 2: A Faith Formation Network around Church Events and Programs

Congregations can develop a faith formation network to extend and deepen people’s experience of a church event or program, such as Sunday worship, children’s faith formation program, youth ministry, Vacation Bible School, youth mission trip, and so on. Using a simple template, like the one below, and a website, a congregation can extend Sunday worship all week long with activities and resources focused on the Sunday readings and sermon, or extend Vacation Bible School into the home throughout the VBS week or entire year with at-home activities structured around the themes of VBS, or extend a service or mission trip with continuing education and action projects. The possibilities are endless.

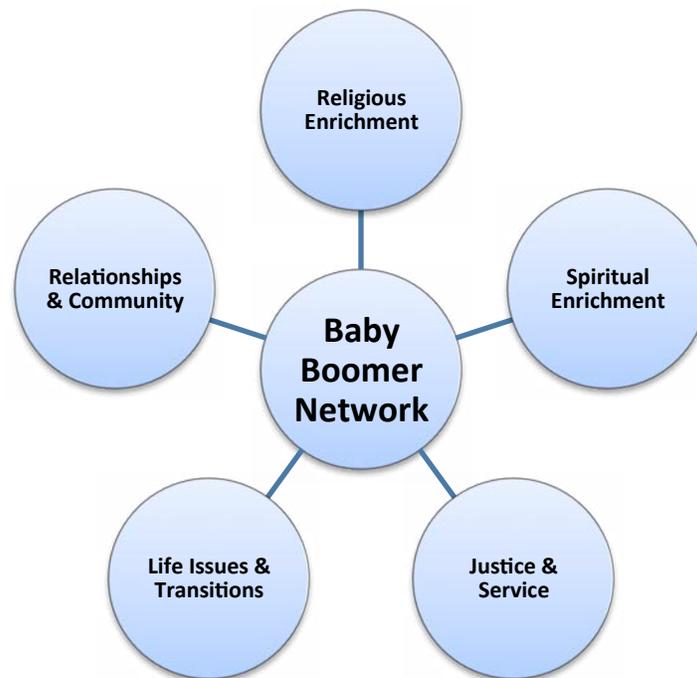


Example 3: An Adult Faith Formation Network

Now imagine developing an adult faith formation network around the life issues, transitions, and spiritual and religious needs of adults using the abundance of resources available to you, including online and digital resources, programs, and activities, and programs and activities sponsored by your parish, surrounding community, and local and national organizations. With the great diversity among the ages of adulthood (20s-90s), adult faith formation needs to target a particular life stage or generation, and then provide a wide variety of content, experiences, and faith formation formats for that life stage of generation. An adult faith formation network would engage adults in a wide diversity of programs, activities, and resources that incorporate a variety of ways to learn – on their own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the parish and in the community and world – delivered in physical gathered settings and virtual online settings.

The following example focuses on an adult faith formation network for Baby Boomers (50s-60s) and is designed around several significant life issues and spiritual/religious needs in the lives of Baby Boomer adults: 1) religious enrichment, 2) spiritual enrichment, 3) justice and service engagement, 4) life issues and transitions, and 5) intergenerational relationships and community (see *Baby Boomers and Beyond* by Amy Hanson for a good description of the hungers and needs of Baby Boomers). Imagine the

potential for reaching, engaging, and involving Baby Boomers in faith formation tailored to their interests, needs, and life styles.



1. Religious Enrichment

- Online theology courses for individual study using offerings at colleges/seminaries and on iTunes
- Small group theology courses or Bible study using an online course, digital resource, and/or video program as the primary resource delivered to wherever people want to gather
- Bible and Bible study apps for individual use
- Trip to the Holy Land organized by the experts at Road Scholar (www.road scholar.org)
- Book of the month club (or video of the month)
- Sunday Worship reflection activities: after-Mass reflection, Lectio Divina
- Discovering faith programs for those who are returning to the Christian faith

2. Spiritual Enrichment

- Retreat experiences including online retreats and programs at retreat centers
- Spiritual book of the month club (e.g., Richard Rohr's *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*)
- Spiritual practices course such as Mindy Caliguire's *Soul Care* books and videos (on YouTube), or online courses at SpiritualityandPractice.com
- Spiritual practices series with guest presenters
- Monastery trip
- Online daily prayer, devotions, and liturgy of the hours; daily Bible readings; *Praying with the Saints* app; liturgy of the hours app, and so much more

3. Justice and Service Engagement

- Mission and service opportunities, already organized by justice and service organizations, that provide a range of options for service: local mission projects for a day, short-term mission trips of 2-5 days, weeklong mission trips (US or international), global expedition trips of 10-14 days

that provide the opportunity to be immersed in a community and culture, and personalized small group mission trips, organized around the interests and time of the group

- Links to websites to learn about pressing social issues, explore Biblical and church teaching on justice, and find ways to act together through local and global projects and organizations.
- Connection to national service opportunities focused on engaging Baby Boomers
- Faith and action programs such as *Just Faith* and *Engaging Spirituality* from Just Faith Ministries
- Intergenerational service and mission trips that bring mature adults together with teens and young adults

4. Life Tasks and Transitions

- Adult milestones and life transitions (such as retirement, becoming a grandparent): celebrating rituals and blessings at home and parish; a blog for sharing stories and ideas, and online information about adult transitions
- Life tasks and issues (such as children getting married, grandparenting, retirement, finances in later life, caring for an aging parent, dealing with illness): online programs and resources that address adult life tasks and issues, such AARP.org; programs sponsored by churches or community organizations on adult life issues

5. Intergenerational Relationships and Community

- Opportunities for Baby Boomers and the younger generations to get to know each other: social events, service projects, or educational experiences
- Connecting different ages, such as Boomers helping young adults and new parents with money management and household management, or young people helping Boomers navigate the online world
- Intergenerational learning programs that involve all generations in learning, relationships building, faith sharing, prayer and celebrating.
- Mentoring relationships between youth and Baby Boomers, such as prayer partners, learning-to-pray spiritual direction, service involvement, and Confirmation mentors
- Intergenerational service programs

Imagine developing similar networks for every age group in your parish: children, adolescents, emerging adults, young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, older adults; and for families and households across the life cycle. An easy way to develop the online network is to use a website creator like *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).

Curators of Faith Formation

Fashioning faith formation networks around the people, ministries, and events of a congregation shifts the role of church leaders from *designing* programming and *attracting* people to participate (although programs will be a part of a network) to *curating* religious content, activities, and experiences for all ages. We are all familiar with curating and curation – museum curators collect art and artifacts and identify the most relevant or important to be displayed in an exhibit for the public. Museum curators are subject-matter experts that guide an organization’s overall art collection.

A Faith Formation Curator is someone who continually finds, groups, organizes, and shares the best and most relevant content on a specific subject to address the religious and spiritual needs of a specific group of people. Church leaders will still engage in a variety of roles: teaching, helping people reflect theologically on

their lives and faith experiences, and guiding them in living as Christian disciples today. As curators the primary task will be to research, aggregate, evaluate, and deliver religious content and experiences that others are creating (publishers, websites, seminaries and colleges, religious organizations, and so on) and connect people to this content via their online faith formation networks.

Conclusion

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete. ⁶ (Buckminster Fuller)

We live in a remarkable time for Christian faith formation. We are experiencing a *convergence* of new web and digital technologies that are transforming life and learning *and* the tremendous growth of religious content and experiences in digital form. And the vast majority of these new technologies and digital resources are *free*! We can expand faith formation to reach all ages and generations by wisely using these new free resources and the knowledge and skills of our faith communities.

We have a tremendous opportunity to create a new future for faith formation in the age of networks. We can create new models for children, adolescents, adults, and families that utilize the tremendous growth of religious content and experiences, and the explosion of new technologies that now give us ways to provide faith formation for all ages and generations, everywhere and anytime, 24x7x365. Twenty-first century faith formation will look and feel and operate as a network – a faith formation network. Imagine the new possibilities for bringing the Good News to all people, inviting people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ, engaging them in growing as a disciple for a lifetime, and equipping them to transform the world according to God’s vision. There’s never been a better time to be involved in faith formation!

Notes

- ¹ Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008)*, March 2009, Program on Public Values. (Hartford: Trinity College, 2009), www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf; and Pew Research Center, *Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.* April 27, 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1204/religion-changes-affiliations-survey>.
- ² IBID
- ³ Pew Research Center. *The Decline of Marriage and the Rise of New Families*. November 18, 2010. p. 40 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/11/18/the-decline-of-marriage-and-rise-of-new-families>.
- ⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds*. (January 2010), www.kff.org/entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm
- ⁵ Pew Internet and American Life. *The Rise of Network Information*. May 31, 2012. <http://pewinternet.org/Presentations/2012/May/The-Rise-of-Networked-Information.aspx>
- ⁶ Accessed at: http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/165737.Richard_Buckminster_Fuller

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