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The  
Seasons  
of adult  
faith  
formation

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Lifelong Faith Associates

# Faith Formation for All the Seasons of Adulthood

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||||| It's time for every Christian church to commit itself to developing faith formation for every season of adulthood: young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults! We've discussed the importance of adult faith formation; we've produced official documents and vision statements; we've sponsored conferences and workshops; and we've even produced a variety of resources for adults. But to no avail. Adult faith formation remains stuck in neutral. It is the weakest ministry in most congregations—even though we are talking about everyone over eighteen years old!

Let's commit ourselves to developing faith formation for every adult—young adult, midlife adult, mature adult, older adult—in our congregation and in the wider community. It's possible today! We will need to learn new ways of thinking and acting. But adult formation for every adult is possible if we use twenty-first century practices, approaches, and resources.

We will need new insights—drawn from research, theory, and practice—to inform us and guide the development of adult faith formation through the seasons of adulthood. We will need new approaches and practices to engage all the seasons of

an adult's life in the lifelong journey of discipleship and faith growth—a process of experiencing, learning, and practicing the Christian faith as we seek to follow Jesus and his way in today's world. We will need a new model of faith formation that provides a platform to reach *every* adult in our faith communities and in the wider community.

This chapter presents a vision of what adult faith formation can look like in the twenty-first century. It presents a holistic vision of faith and faith-forming processes, eight practices or features to guide the development of twenty-first century faith formation, and a network model of faith formation that provides a way to reach all adults throughout the seasons of adulthood.

Our focus in this chapter, and the whole book, is to bring this twenty-first century vision, set of practices, and new faith formation model to life in a congregation that commits itself to reaching and engaging *every* adult throughout the seasons of adulthood.

## A Holistic Vision of Faith and Formation

Adult faith formation is guided by a holistic vision of the Christian faith as a way of the head, the heart, and the hands—informing, forming, and transforming adults in Christian faith and identity.

- *A way of the head* (inform) demands a discipleship of faith seeking understanding and belief with personal conviction, sustained by study, reflecting, discerning, and deciding, all toward spiritual wisdom for life. This requires that we educate people to know, understand, and embrace with personal conviction Christianity's core belief and values.
- *A way of the heart* (form) demands a discipleship of right relationships and right desires, community building, hospitality and inclusion, trust in God's love, and prayer and worship. This requires that we foster growth in people's identity through formation and the intentional socialization of Christian family and community.
- *A way of the hands* (transform) demands a discipleship of love, justice, peace-making, simplicity, integrity, healing, and repentance. This requires that we foster in people an openness to a lifelong journey of conversion toward holiness and fullness of life for themselves and for the life of the world (see Groome, 111–19).

This holistic vision is reflected in the documents of many Christian churches. *The Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation* (Episcopal Church) describes Christian faith formation as “a lifelong journey with Christ, in Christ, and to Christ. Lifelong Christian faith formation is lifelong growth in the knowledge, service and love of God as followers of Christ and is informed by Scripture, tradition and

reason.” *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* (Catholic Church) proposes three goals for adult faith formation: 1) inviting and enabling ongoing conversion to Jesus in holiness of life, 2) promoting and supporting active membership in the Christian community, and 3) calling and preparing adults to act as disciples in mission to the world. The United Church of Christ describes faith formation as “an engaged process of learning and practice integrated throughout all aspects of congregational life and daily life,” a definition that combines “head” and “heart” into a more holistic understanding and embodiment.

While they may express their goals for Christian adult faith formation in different ways, it seems that most Christian churches seek to help adults:

- grow deeper in their relationship with God throughout their adult lives
- live as disciples of Jesus Christ at home, in the workplace, in the community, and in the world
- make the Christian faith a way of life that gives their lives meaning and purpose and direction
- develop an understanding of the Bible and their particular faith tradition
- deepen their spiritual life and practices
- engage in service and mission to the world
- live with moral integrity guided by Christian values and ethics
- connect the Christian faith to life today
- participate in the life and ministries of their faith community

## Eight Faith-Forming Processes

We can discern at least *eight essential processes of forming faith*, informed by Scripture, theology, research, and contemporary reflection that bring the holistic vision of the Christian faith to life, and promote faith growth and discipleship in adulthood (and with all age groups, families, and generations). The eight essential faith-forming processes—involving knowledge and practices of the Christian faith—facilitate faith growth *and* make a significant difference in the lives of adults. These eight faith-forming processes are central to Christian lifelong faith formation. They provide a foundation and a framework for promoting growth in faith and discipleship. The eight processes include:

- *Caring relationships.* Growing in faith and discipleship through caring relationships across generations and with peers in a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love—in the congregation and family.
- *Celebrating the liturgical seasons.* Growing in faith and discipleship by experiencing the feasts and seasons of the church year as they tell the story of faith through the year in an organic and natural sequence of faith learning.
- *Celebrating rituals and milestones.* Growing in faith and discipleship by celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones that provide a way to experience

God's love through significant moments in one's life journey and faith journey.

- *Reading the Bible.* Growing in faith and discipleship by encountering God in the Bible and by studying and interpreting the Bible—its message, its meaning, and its application to life today.
- *Learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life.* Growing in faith and discipleship by learning the content of the tradition (Trinity, Jesus, church, beliefs, morality and ethics), reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one's faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world.
- *Praying, devotions, and spiritual formation.* Growing in faith and discipleship through personal and communal prayer, and being formed by the spiritual disciplines.
- *Serving and justice.* Growing in faith and discipleship by living the Christian mission in the world—engaging in service to those in need, care for God's creation, and action and advocacy for justice.
- *Worshipping God.* Growing in faith and discipleship by worshipping God with the community of faith—praising God; giving thanks for God's creative and redemptive work in the world; bringing our human joys and dilemmas to God; experiencing God's living presence through Scripture, preaching, and Eucharist; and being sent forth on mission.

## Features of Twenty-First Century Adult Faith Formation

From research studies, current thinking and practice in adult education and learning, and contemporary theory and practice in faith formation, we can identify eight features that provide the foundations upon which to build a twenty-first century approach to adult faith formation for all of the seasons of adulthood.

**1. Adult faith formation is *life-stage/generational*—addressing the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of people at each stage of adulthood; and *intergenerational*—engaging adults in the life and events of church life and the Christian faith through participation in the intergenerational faith experiences.**

Life-stage/generational adult faith formation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and faith/spiritual journeys of adults across the stages of adulthood—young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults. The eight faith-forming processes provide a framework for life-stage adult faith formation.

Rather than thinking about adult faith formation as religious content and programming, think of adult faith formation as the processes and practices that contribute to growth in faith and discipleship—a far more dynamic approach than a content-driven one. Instead of thinking of adult classes, small group studies, and large group programs, think about *processes*—how we guide adults in living Christian lives today.

A comprehensive and holistic approach to adult faith formation promotes discipleship and faith growth through the eight faith-forming processes with developmentally- and generationally-appropriate knowledge, experiences, and practices. The eight faith-forming processes provide a framework to guide the development of adult faith formation across the seasons of adulthood and a focus for designing new adult programs and activities, as well as redesigning current programming.

Faith-Forming Processes	Young Adults	Midlife Adults	Mature Adults	Older Adults
Caring relationships: intergenerational and peer relationships, supportive communities				
Celebrating the liturgical seasons: feasts and seasons of the church year				
Celebrating rituals and milestones: celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones at significant moments in one's life journey and faith journey				
Reading the Bible: studying and interpreting the Bible—its message, its meaning, and its application to life today				
Learning the Christian tradition: learning the content of the tradition (Trinity, Jesus, church, beliefs, morality, and ethics), reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one's faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world				
Praying, devotions, and spiritual formation: personal and communal prayer, being formed by the spiritual disciplines				
Serving and justice: living the Christian mission in the world—engaging in service to those in need, care for God's creation, and action and advocacy for justice				
Worshipping God with the faith community: experiencing God's living presence through Scripture, preaching, and Eucharist, and being sent forth on mission				

**Intergenerational faith formation** provides whole-community experiences and learning, focused on the central events of church life and the Christian faith. “Throughout Scripture there is a pervasive sense that all generations were typically present when faith communities gathered for worship, for celebration, for feasting, for praise, for encouragement, for reading of Scripture, in times of danger, and for support and service. . . . To experience authentic Christian community and reap the unique blessings of intergenerationality, the generations must be together regularly and often—infants to octogenarians” (Allen & Ross, 84).

Intergenerational faith formation and whole community faith experiences form and deepen Christian identity and commitment as adults develop relationships and actively participate in faith communities that teach, model, and live the Christian tradition and way of life; and strengthen relationships, connections, and community across generations and enhance adults sense of belonging in the faith community.

This is the recognition that congregations themselves teach. People learn by participating in the life of a community. Practices of faith are taught through the interrelationships of worship, learning, service, ritual, prayer, and more. Among the events central to the Christian community are the feasts and seasons of the church year, Sunday worship and the lectionary, sacramental and ritual celebrations, holidays and holydays, works of justice and acts of service, times of prayer, spiritual traditions, and events that originate within the life and history of a individual congregation. For example:

- *The feasts and seasons of the church year* provide a natural rhythm and calendar to the curriculum: Advent and Christmas seasons, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, Call of the Disciples, Ash Wednesday, Lenten season, Holy Week, Easter, Easter season, Pentecost, All Saints and All Souls, and remembrances of saints and holy people throughout the year.
- The *Revised Common and Catholic Lectionaries* provide a rich curriculum for the whole community with its three-year cycle of weekly readings from the Old Testament, psalms, epistles, and gospels built around the seasons of the church year. The *Narrative Lectionary* is a four-year cycle of readings from September through May each year following the sweep of the biblical story, from creation through the early Christian church.
- *Ritual, milestone, and sacramental celebrations* provide events rich in theological meaning and faith practice that celebrate the faith journey throughout life: baptism, confirmation, first Bible, first communion, graduation, marriage, funerals, and much more.
- *Acts of service and justice*—locally and globally—provide a focus on mission to the world and put in action biblical and church teachings on service, justice, and care for the earth.

Congregations can design adult faith formation that connects life-stage/generational programming for adults with their engagement in the intergenerational life and events of the faith community. For example:

- Adults would learn about worship and how to worship; experience Sunday worship with the faith community and practice worshipping; and live the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives.
- Adults would learn about the Bible and how to read it, interpret it, and apply it to their lives; experience the Bible at Sunday worship and at home; and develop their own practice of Bible study and reading.
- Adults would learn about Jesus and the Christian tradition—teachings, history, practices, what it means for life today, and how to live the Christian faith today; and experience the life of Jesus and the Christian tradition through participation in the events of church life, especially church year feasts and seasons.
- Adults would learn about prayer and spirituality and how to develop their spiritual lives through prayer and spiritual discipleship; experience the prayer life of the faith community; and develop their own practice of prayer and the spiritual disciplines.
- Adults would learn about the justice issues of our day and the biblical and church teachings on justice, service, and care for creation; experience acts of justice and service with the faith community—locally and globally; and engage in the practices of serving those in need, caring for creation, and working for justice—as individuals, with their peers, with their families, and with their church and other groups and organizations.



First, missional faith formation expands and extends the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with adults where they live—engaging with them around their life situation (needs, interests, concerns), their quest for meaning and purpose in life, their drive to make a difference in world and in lives of others, and more. This first type of missional activity provides a safe environment for people to explore life-centered and spiritual-centered activities. Missional faith formation can reach the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated and uninterested by using adaptable strategies, such as the following:

- Develop community settings for church ministries and faith formation by celebrating weekly worship in a community center, offering courses and workshops in a school or community center or coffee shop, and more.
- Create a vibrant and inviting website and an active Facebook page to connect with people.
- Connect with adults' life issues and situations by offering career mentoring, job referrals, parenting courses, life skills courses, and more.
- Connect with adults during transitions and milestone moments such as marriage, birth of a baby, graduations, funerals, retirements, and more.
- Develop high quality, relationship-building events designed to draw adults from the wider community into relationships with adults in the church such as social events, concerts, service projects, and more.
- Organize small groups on a variety of themes from life centered to faith centered that meet in a variety of locations (homes, coffee shops, community centers), for example: life situation groups (moms, dads), interest or activity groups, discipleship groups, spiritual sharing groups, Bible study groups, theology study groups, service groups, prayer or spiritual disciplines groups, support groups, and study-action groups.
- Sponsor community-wide service days and service projects—just for adults or make it multigenerational.

Second, missional faith formation provides pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the good news, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community. Missional faith formation guides people as they move from discovery to exploration to commitment. The catechumenal process (RCIA in the Catholic Church) offers one pathway with its ritual stages and formational content—participation in the life of the faith community, education in Scripture and the Christian tradition, apprenticeship in the Christian life, intimate connection with the liturgy and rituals of the church, moral formation, development of a life of prayer, and engagement in actions of justice and service. Programs like *The Alpha Course* and *Living the Questions* offer other pathways by covering the basics of Christianity through a multisession course in a supportive small group environment.

**3. Adult faith formation addresses the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of adults in four stages of adulthood—young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+).**

Adult faith formation is focused on the lives of adults—their unique life tasks, situations, needs, interests, and spiritual and faith journeys across the four distinct stages of adulthood: young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older 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 the content and programming and deliver it to adults. In the twenty-first century the diversity of the seasons of adulthood makes this approach ineffective. Adult faith formation is *person centered*, not content or program centered. *The content, experiences, programs, methods, and delivery systems are designed around the lives of the adults.*

Adult faith formation addresses the whole life of adults—social, ethnic/cultural, psychological, physical, spiritual, religious, and more. Consider the lives of adults through the lens of the following five categories. (Chapters 3 through 6 present profiles of each stage of adulthood through these five lenses.)

1. *Life stage.* What's happening in the lives and world of young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults today: developmental life tasks, family life, work life, leisure, relationships, sexuality, suffering and grief, social and political issues, community issues, and more?
2. *Generational.* What is the generational identity and the unique generational characteristics and needs of millennials (young adults), Generation X (midlife adults), baby boomers (mature adults), and builders (older adults)?
3. *Milestones and transitions.* What are the significant milestones and transitions in the lives of adults: marriages, births, graduations, geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, launching children and empty nests, retirement, unanticipated illness, divorce, loss of loved ones, and more?
4. *Ethnic/cultural life.* What are the unique lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of adults within the ethnic/cultural communities represented in the congregation and wider community? What are the unique faith traditions and practices of adults in these ethnic/cultural communities?

Faith-Forming Processes	Adult Life-Stage/ Generational Programming	Connection to Church Life and Events
Caring relationships: intergenerational and peer relationships, supportive communities		
Celebrating the liturgical seasons: feasts and seasons of the church year		
Celebrating rituals and milestones: celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones at significant moments in one's life journey and faith journey		
Reading the Bible: studying and interpreting the Bible—its message, its meaning, and its application to life today		
Learning the Christian tradition: learning the content of the tradition (Trinity, Jesus, church, beliefs, morality, and ethics), reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one's faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world		
Praying, devotions, and spiritual formation: personal and communal prayer; being formed by the spiritual disciplines		
Serving and justice: living the Christian mission in the world—engaging in service to those in need, care for God's creation, and action and advocacy for justice		
Worshipping God with the faith community: experiencing God's living presence through Scripture, preaching, and Eucharist; and being sent forth on mission		

**2. Adult faith formation is missional—expanding and extending the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with adults where they live; and providing pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the good news, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community.**

Missional faith formation focuses on the lives of adults who are spiritual but not religious or unaffiliated and uninterested in religion (adults who are “unchurched” and “de-churched”). We know from research about the growing number of unaffiliated (the “nones”) especially in the younger generations (millennials and Gen Xers) and the growing number of older adults (boomers) who are leaving established Christian churches after a lifetime of participation (the “dones”).

5. *Spiritual and religious journeys.* What are the significant spiritual and religious needs, interests, and concerns at each stage of adulthood? What are the unique characteristics and needs of adults across the spectrum of faith and practice—from adults who are growing in faith and actively engaged in the church community to adults who are spiritual but not religious and not involved in the church community to adults who are unaffiliated from established religion?

Adulthood is a time of change and transition, rather than continuity and sameness. Of particular importance to adult faith formation is the kind of transitions, developmental tasks, and changes in personal meaning that mark the journey of adulthood. Understanding the many ways adults change and grow alerts us to the dynamics of adult Christian growth. Diane Tickton Shuster notes how important times of transitions and change are in the lives of adults.

Adulthood is filled with transitions: geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, unanticipated illness, divorce, and the loss of loved ones. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to “finish unfinished business” or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive educational institutions as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help them regain “order and stability” in their lives (Schuster 2003b, 10).

Addressing the needs of people in transition provides important opportunities for adult faith formation by bringing a faith perspective to the transitions adults are experiencing. “Recognize that these transitions may prompt a hunger for learning and provide study opportunities that are responsive to immediate concerns. As adults begin to study, their new learning may lead them to new questioning and unanticipated changes in the views of self and world. Offer to sustain people through these times of upheaval by provide a steady presence in the lives” (Schuster 2003a, 37).

A challenge for congregations and adult religious educators is to be on the lookout for adults who are experiencing transition and change and offer to help them chart a course of learning that can help them find meaning in their lives. This means helping adults assess what they want and need, and showing them where to find programs, support, and resources for their continuing Christian growth.

4. 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 adults in four stages of adulthood—young adults (20s–30), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+).

To address the increasing diversity within the adult population, churches need to offer a greater variety of adult faith formation topics and activities. In the past churches have often chosen the “one size fits all” mentality for adult faith formation: How do we 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 activities. It is offering faith formation programming that is varied in content, expectations, depth, involvement, and timing. It is meeting individuals at the point of their spiritual and learning needs and offering personalized pathways of faith growth. By expanding the options for adult learning (offering “something for everyone”), churches can engage more adults in faith formation, even if some of the offerings involve only one person. The new reality of faith formation programming is that churches can offer activities that cater to niches— individuals and small groups with a particular spiritual or religious need, interest, passion, concern, or life issue. They no longer have to worry about reaching a “mass audience.”

*Adult faith formation provides a variety of experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections that are available anytime and anywhere, in physical places and online spaces.* Today, we can diversify faith formation offerings and tailor them to people’s needs and busy lives. This movement from “one sizes fits all” to a variety of faith formation offerings is made possible by the abundance of religious content—print, audio, video, online, and digital—and programming that is now available. And this is made possible by the creation of an online platform (website and social media platforms) that integrates, delivers, and communicates the content and programming with a variety of ways to learn and that is easily accessible and available, anytime and anywhere. Adult faith formation becomes personal, portable, and participatory—the key characteristics of the mobile technology revolution.

*Adult faith formation incorporates seven learning environments, 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.* The seven environments provide a way to offer a diversity of programs in different learning environments, as well as to offer the same program content in multiple learning environments—all of which provides adults with more options to participate in adult faith formation and broadens the scope of faith formation offerings. The seven environments include:

1. on your own/self-directed
2. with a mentor
3. at home
4. in small groups
5. in large groups
6. in the congregation
7. in the community and world

A variety of learning methods can be used with each of these seven learning environments. Creating this variety of learning environments is aided by the development of an online platform that integrates, delivers, and communicates the faith formation offerings.

*Adult faith formation incorporates formal and informal learning.* Informal learning describes a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from daily experience and the educational influences and resources in their environment, from family and neighbors, from work and play, from the marketplace, the library, the mass media, and the Internet. Informal learning can be intentional or not. There might be a teacher, but it's probably a colleague or friend. We might read an article or book, visit a website, listen to a podcast, or watch a video online. We might visit Home Depot or Lowe's for a clinic on home repair or gardening or stop by our local bookstore or library for a reading group or special program. We might go online to access any one of the thousands of "how to" videos on YouTube. We might watch one of the TV channels devoted to informal learning, such as cooking channels that teach people how to cook, try new recipes, etc., or home improvement shows that present examples and teach techniques.

Formal and informal learning can be *intentional*—when an individual aims to learn something and goes about achieving that objective or *unexpected*—when in the course of everyday activities an individual learns something that he or she had not intended or expected. Most faith formation programs are formal and intentional learning. We can expand *informal* and *intentional* faith formation when we make available a variety online activities, print resources, audio podcasts, videos, apps, and more that people can access on their own, anytime, anywhere.

The literature on the characteristics of adult learners provides rich insight to what matters to adults when they engage in learning activities. As adults strive to become independent, self-directing, and competent, they thrive in environments that help them to transform their perspective and feel empowered to effect change in their lives. *Adult learners are diverse and require learning programs that accommodate the full spectrum of learning needs, styles, and preferences.* This means that adult faith formation needs to:

- Utilize adults' experience and prior knowledge. Adults learn best from their own experiences. Adults bring relevant religious knowledge and life experiences to a learning program. They need the opportunity to build on their knowledge, as well as to learn from each other. Adults use their knowledge from years of experience as a filter for new information that can function as a catalyst or barrier to learning something new.
- Respect the variety of learning styles of adults with a diversity of learning experiences, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices. (See *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* by David Kolb.)
- Recognize the multiple intelligences of adults (linguistic, spatial, musical, logical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist) and use learning methods and offer programs, activities, and resources that address the variety of intelligences. (See the work of Howard Gardner.) While it may be difficult to incorporate all eight intelligences in a particular program or activity, offer programs, activities, and resources that emphasize different "intelligences"—one that is word-centered, another musical, another visual, and so forth.
- Incorporate activities that are realistic and that involve, stimulate thinking, and challenge adults.
- Incorporate real-life application of learning. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it. Providing ways for adults to practice what they are learning promotes the transfer of learning into to their daily lives.

**5. Adult faith formation recognizes that learning and growth is a process of active inquiry with initiative residing in the adult learner and that adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that adult learning activities will satisfy.**

A core principle of adult learning and faith formation is that *learning is a process of active inquiry with initiative residing in the adult learner*. Adults prefer to determine their *own* learning and faith formation experiences. The traditional model of schooling has conditioned adults to perceive the proper role of learners as being dependent on teachers to make decisions for them as to what should be learned, how it should be learned, when it should be learned, and if it has been learned. Today's adults are accustomed to searching out what they want to know, when they want and need to know it. People are becoming more and more self-directed in their learning,

and they have almost unlimited access to information through the Internet and the wide variety of print and media learning resources available in our society today.

As learning becomes a process of active inquiry, where the initiative resides within the person, intrinsic motivation becomes a key factor in determining whether or not people will engage in faith formation and open themselves to learning and faith growth. Drawing on decades of scientific research on human motivation, Daniel Pink in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* exposes the mismatch between what research shows and how we motivate people. While carrots and sticks (policies and requirements) worked somewhat successfully in the twentieth century, assembly-line model, that's precisely the wrong way to motivate people today. He describes three types of motivation: Motivation 1.0 presumed that humans were biological creatures, struggling for survival. Motivation 2.0 presumed that humans responded to reward and punishments in their environment. Motivation 3.0 presumes that humans have a third drive—to learn, to create, and to better the world. Motivation 3.0 has three essential elements.

- *Autonomy*: the desire to direct our own lives with autonomy over task (what they do), time (when they do it), team (who they do it with), and technique (how they do it).
- *Mastery*: the urge to get better and better at something that matters—to be engaged in deliberate practice to produce mastery.
- *Purpose*: the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves, to seek purpose—a cause greater and more enduring than ourselves.

Daniel Pink writes, “The secret to high performance and satisfaction—at work, at school, and at home—is the deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things, and to do better by ourselves and our world” (145).

Research studies on adult learning point to motivation as a key factor in determining whether or not adults will participate in an adult faith formation offering. *The key motivation in adult learning is that adults are motivated to learn and grow as they experience needs and interests that adult learning activities will satisfy.* The research tells us to be aware of a variety of adult motivations and design activities that utilize these motivational factors.

- Adults are motivated when facing life transitions. They seek learning and support to cope with changes in their lives that give rise to new developmental tasks, e.g., raising children, aging parents, financial matters, job changes, divorce, and so forth.
- Adults are motivated when there is a gap between their present level of understanding, skill, performance and/or growth and the desired level or goal that they set for themselves or their organization or community expects of them.



- Adults are motivated by appealing to personal and spiritual growth and/or personal benefits.
- Adults are motivated when they identify they have a need to learn.
- Adults are motivated when the benefits of a learning experience outweigh their resistance.
- Adults are motivated when programs are enjoyable and enriching.
- Adults are motivated when they have the opportunity to do something they could not do before.
- Adults are motivated by settings that have a natural, interactive, communal feel.
- Adults are motivated when programs are sensitive to their time constraints by keeping commitments short in terms of duration and offering choices of times for participation.

Studies of motivation show that adults bring diverse attitudes and expectations to their learning experiences. We can identify at least four different orientations for learning: a *goal-orientation* in which learning is seen as leading to a change in work or personal status, an *activity-orientation* in which participants' social interactions are especially valued, a *learning-orientation* in which a love of learning underlies the learner's engagement and participation, and a *spiritual-orientation* in which learners seek new meaning and perceive education as the starting point for thinking in new ways (Schuster & Grant).

**6. Adult faith formation provides the opportunity for personalized and customized learning and faith growth, giving adults an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Adults are guided by trusted mentors who find the right programs, activities, and resources to match with their learning and spiritual needs.**

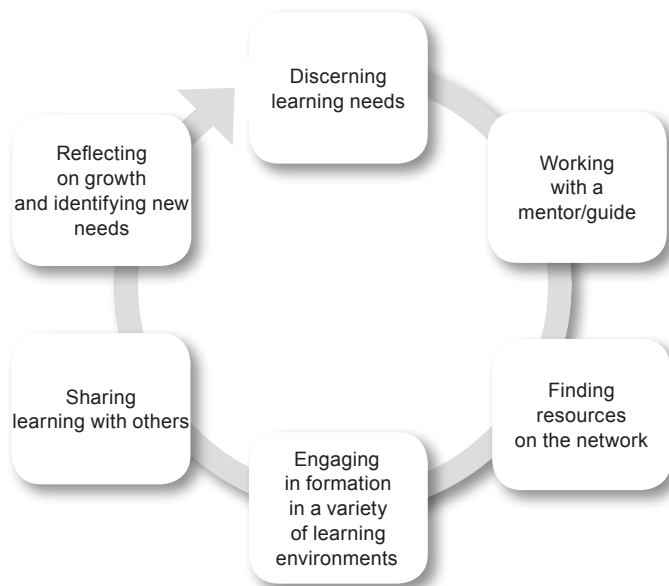
We know from learning sciences research that more effective learning will occur if each person receives a customized learning experience. People learn best when they are placed in a learning environment that is sensitive to their learning needs and flexible enough to adapt strategies and resources to individual needs. We can now meet people at the point of their spiritual, religious, and learning needs and offer personalized pathways for faith growth.

Adult faith formation, rich in a diversity of content and a variety of ways to learn, can guide people in creating their own personal learning pathways. Churches can develop processes for diagnosing adult religious and spiritual learning needs (online and in person) that help adults:

- discern their learning needs
- create a plan (with a mentor/guide) for faith growth and find faith formation resources, programs, and activities
- engage in faith formation experiences
- reflect on their learning with a mentor/guide or small group
- identify new needs for growth and learning

A “faith-growth learning plan” helps adults identify where they are on their spiritual journey, what they need for continuing their growth, who else might share that need, and the resources that could help them meet that need. Giving power to adults to shape their own learning does not mean abandoning them to their own devices. Congregations can provide mentors or guides to assist people in developing their growth plan, accessing the programs and resources that fit their plan, and evaluating their learning.

### The Flow of Personalized Learning



7. 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, adult peer experiences and programs, and daily/home life using online and digital media.

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

We have never had access to better technologies and resources for nurturing growth in Christian faith with all ages and equipping adults to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today. Today we can utilize the abundance of new digital technologies and media for adult learning and faith formation, and the abundance of high quality digital religious content and experiences, found in websites, blogs, apps, e-books, video, and much more.

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.

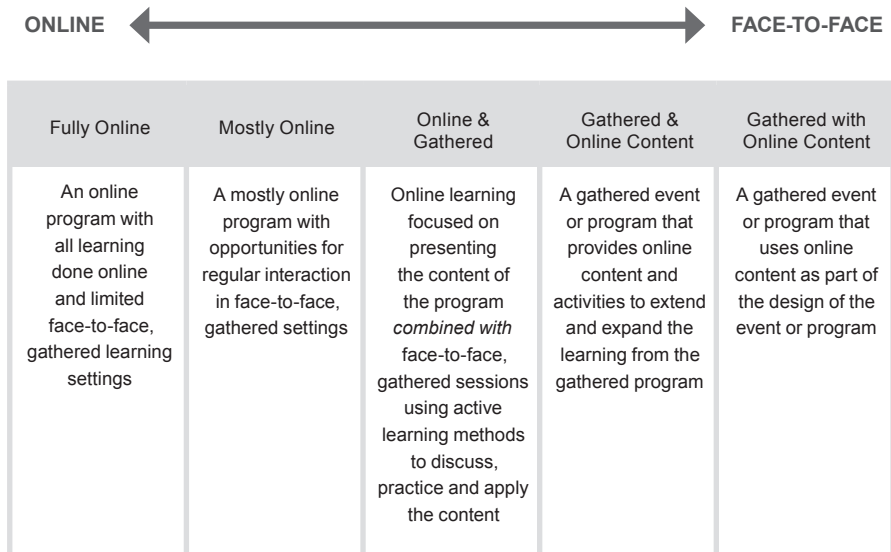
An adult faith formation website provides the platform for publishing and delivering adult faith formation experiences, content, programs, activities, and resources to engage people in learning and faith formation. Increasingly churches will need to see themselves not as exclusive providers of adult faith formation, but as platforms for bringing meaningful and engaging learning experiences to adults and for guiding them to such experiences elsewhere.

A website provides the platform for *seamless* learning across a variety of experiences, resources, locations, times, or settings. The website, together with social media, provides continuity between faith formation in the congregation, at home, in daily life, and online.

The technological and skill barriers for building a digital platform continue to decrease with the availability of drag and drop website builders like Weebly ([www.Weebly.com](http://www.Weebly.com)), Wix ([www.Wix.com](http://www.Wix.com)), and Squarespace ([www.squarespace.com](http://www.squarespace.com)). For more advanced website building there is WordPress ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)) with its thousands of templates and plug-ins.

Adult faith formation can use blended models of faith formation to connect physical settings and online settings. The new digital tools, digital media, and online platforms connect adult participation in church life with daily life *and* can reach adults at home, at work, and other places with personalized and customized faith formation content and experiences. Adult faith formation today can integrate online and face-to-face learning, blending them in a variety of ways from online programs with minimal interaction in physical settings to programs in physical settings that utilize online content or extend the program using online content.

### Blended Faith Formation Continuum



Imagine the possibilities for utilizing the five blended strategies in designing new programming, redesigning existing programming, surrounding events and programs with online content, and selecting a variety of digital programs, activities, and resources that can be used alone (fully online) or used in conjunction with face-to-face programs.

### **Gathered with Online Content**

Design a gathered program using online content from websites, videos from YouTube or other video sites, and blogs and other social media. With an abundance of high-quality digital content, this first option is the easiest way to bring the digital world into a gathered program.

### **Gathered and Online Content**

Connect the events of church life (Sunday worship, church year seasons) and adult programs at church with online content that extends and deepens the experience of the adults through resources for learning, prayer, ritual, action, and so forth. For example: extend Sunday worship through the week using a variety of digital content that deepens the understanding and practice of the Sunday readings, sermon, and church year season and provides prayer, devotions, rituals, a video of the sermon with a study guide, service/action ideas, conversation activities, and more. Or provide a forty-day Lent “curriculum” that connects the Lent events in church life with a variety of activities for experiencing and practicing Lent in daily and home life—delivered online through the congregation’s faith formation website.

### **Online and Gathered**

Use the digital platform to provide the content that adults would learn in the gathered setting using print, audio, video, and more. Then transform the gathered program using interactive activities, discussion, project-based learning, and practice and demonstration. Imagine a Bible study program where the videos and print content were online and people gathered for reflection, discussion, and application; or develop an online center for justice and service where adults learn about justice issues, explore biblical and Christian teaching on justice, and then gather to engage in actions to address the justice issue. Imagine a catechumenal process (RCIA) in which the content of the Christian faith is online—in video and audio programs, articles and books, and more—and the gathered sessions focused on interaction, application, theological reflection, and so forth.

### **Mostly Online**

Offer opportunities for adults to learn online and provide opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings, or in a web conference format. For example: offer online courses or video programs for adult self-study or small group study and gather the adults at the conclusion to share their insights with others who participated. Colleges, seminaries, and religious organizations provide an abundance of online courses, webinars, and video programs on variety of topics relevant to the lives of adults.

## Fully Online

Offer online-only faith formation by using existing courses, activities, print and e-books, audio and video programs, and content-rich websites. For example: offer adults a variety of online Bible and theology courses for individual study using online courses from colleges and seminaries, video programs on YouTube, online programs and webinars from religious organizations; or develop an online prayer and spirituality center where people can access daily prayer reflections and devotions, offer prayer intentions, pray for others, learn about spiritual practices, download prayer activities for the home, participate in an online retreat experience, and more.

### 8. Adult faith formation intentionally nurtures communities of learning and practice around the shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities.

Adult faith formation can connect adults to each other through communities of practice—groups of people who have a shared interest, passion, religious or spiritual need, life stage—who come together to learn with and from each other. William Synder describes communities of practice having three dimensions: “the domain (what it’s about); the topic (the issues that they are facing); and the community (the people who are involved).” Communities of practice use a variety of approaches to connect, such as face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, video conferencing, social networking, working on projects together. It is a mix of formal and informal methods. Some of them are online; some of them are face-to-face. Some of them happen weekly; some of them happen monthly or yearly.

With a diversity of programs and activities targeted to different needs and life stages, groups can form naturally as adults connect with others around shared interests, passions, needs, or life stage. Participation in these groups and their shared activities develop relationships, provide a supportive community, and promote learning and the application of that learning in practice. Congregations can encourage the natural development of communities of learning and practice around these shared activities. This is a different approach from the churches that adopt a small group model of church and then organize people into small groups. Oftentimes this approach can feel artificial and contrived. The formation of communities of practice can be self-organizing around activities that reflect their interests, passions, hungers, or needs.

A congregation is a community of practice. Practices like worship, liturgy, pastoral care, outreach, and social justice are important to the congregation’s vitality. Churches want people who are passionate about those practices to develop them so that they are thriving in the congregation. An example would be people in a congregation who are engaged in justice and service projects—in the church and

in the world—who could regularly connect, and even meet, to share their reflections and insights, communicate their insights to the whole congregation, and continue to support each other in their efforts. They can also invite new people to join their efforts. A community of practice around social justice could include not only church members, but also people in the wider community who have similar interests.

Imagine a group forming around a Bible study offering on the faith formation network. They may do this in a small group, but they are engaged in a larger community of practice in their congregation or in the world focused on reading and studying the book. People in the small group connect, face-to-face and/or online, to study the Bible together and to learn how to apply the Bible in their daily lives. They can connect with other groups, via social media, to share their experience of learning and practice. They can share their learning with the whole congregation, providing an opportunity for everyone to grow in their understanding of the Bible.

Most of the skills and expertise we learn, we learn from others in practice. We don't learn it in a course or book. It's helpful to have those, but the way we really learn is in practice with other practitioners. If you have a community of practice, someone can say, "I'm calling you about what I saw on your website or on Facebook. I heard that you tried this, and I'd love to talk to you about it." Communities of practice can connect people and diffuse learning and Christian practices across the congregation. Adult faith formation can cultivate and support communities of practices around particular topics or issues or Christian practices.

## A New Approach: A Network of Adult Faith Formation

We are witnessing transformations in the way we think about learning, reflecting the convergence of new technologies, digital media and tools, and network thinking. We are shifting from *education to learning*—digital media and technologies enable learning anywhere, anytime; from *consumption of information to participatory learning*—organized around learners' interests, enabling them to create as well as consume information; and from *institutions to networks*—where adults learn from a variety of sources in a variety of settings.

The central themes of the transformation in learning need to be central features in congregational faith formation: putting learners at the center of our thinking, enabling and trusting learners to co-creators of their learning experiences, connecting learning authentically to life concerns and real world issues, making room for new modes of learning and new methods of teaching, fostering collaboration in learning, and organizing structures around learners' needs.

So the central question for adult faith formation (and all learning and faith formation) is this: *What if learning adapted to each person instead of expecting each person to adapt to the programs offered them by institutions such as a congregation?* A network

approach provides both the resources and online platform to offer the diversity of faith formation that an adult can personalize and customize for his or her own learning needs.

Consider this: In an earlier era if you wanted to learn more about the Bible, you could take a Bible course at a fixed time—at a church, seminary, college, or other education provider, or read a book—perhaps recommended by your pastor and borrowed from your church’s library, or watch a video—on VHS of course! Your options would have been limited. In the twenty-first century if you want to learn more about the Bible, your options are greatly expanded. You could do any combination of the following:

- Take a course at church or college or seminary.
- Take a course online—at a scheduled time with a group or at your own time and pace.
- Read and view videos online at a Bible website, such as [www.EntertheBible.org](http://www.EntertheBible.org) from Luther Seminary.
- Join an online Bible study group at another church or on Facebook.
- Watch a video series on YouTube from a Scripture scholar, such as N.T. Wright, as you read his book or watch a video series produced by another congregation that is available for free on its website.
- Find a mentor in your community or online who will guide your self-directed Bible study.
- Listen to audio versions of your book(s) using your smartphone as you commute to work each day.
- Download a Bible study app, engage in daily Bible readings and reflections, and share your reflections with others who are studying the Bible using the app and social media.
- Create a blog to post your thoughts on what you are learning and invite others to offer their insights.
- Organize your own learning group by gathering a group of people who are interested in learning more about the Bible and using print, audio, video, and online resources to guide your small group.

In this example we see the shift to a network approach to learning. Adults now have the ability to construct their own networks of learning, utilizing a variety of new technologies and the abundance of high-quality print, audio, video, and online resources that are readily available to them. Learning networks not only provide access to a virtually endless array of learning opportunities, but can offer learners multiple points of entry that provide individualized pathways of learning and faith growth.

What if we reimagined adult faith formation as a *network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources*—in physical places and online spaces? An adult faith



formation network is a way to offer a wide variety of engaging and interactive content and experiences in online and physical settings. It offers faith formation content and experiences to respond to the diverse religious and spiritual needs of adults today—from the spiritually committed and engaged to the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated. It 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.

Imagine designing an adult faith formation network for mature adults in their fifties through the early seventies with content that provides developmentally- and generationally-appropriate faith knowledge and practices. The network could engage adults intergenerationally in the life and events of the Christian community and provide adult programs and activities in a variety of settings and media formats, organized around the eight faith-forming processes and three adult-specific content areas: adult life issues, discovering faith (outreach to the “churchless”), and grandparents. (See the diagram on the next page.) Depending on the size of the adult population in a church, there could be faith formation networks for each of the four stages of adulthood or one network for all adults with specialized content for different stages.

Programming can be designed and offered in three, four-month seasons: January–April, May–August, and September–December. Following is an example of one season (January–April) that provides a variety of experiences, programs, activities, and resources in physical places and online spaces, and is conducted in variety of settings—self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world. (For an illustration of an adult faith formation network and website go to: <http://holytrinityadults.weebly.com>. For more examples and resources go to: [www.21stCenturyFaithFormation.com](http://www.21stCenturyFaithFormation.com).)

## Faith Formation Network for Mature Adults



### Caring Relationships

- Friday Lent simple meals.
- Social gatherings for adults.
- Intergenerational experiences and programs in the church community.
- Career mentoring program between adults and young adults entering the workplace, addressing work issues, money management, career planning, living as a Christian in the workplace and world, and more.

### **Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons**

- A forty-day Lent “curriculum” that connects the Lent events in church life with a variety of activities for experiencing and practicing Lent in daily and home life—delivered online through the congregation’s faith formation website, including fasting activities, praying activities, service/almsgiving activities, lectionary reflections, Lent study resources and videos, Lent devotions, and daily Bible readings.

### **Celebrating Rituals and Milestones**

- Resources for celebrating adult milestones and life transitions, such as retirement, becoming a grandparent, at home with family and friends.

### **Learning the Christian Tradition and Applying It to Life**

- A theology book-of-the-month program with groups meeting at church, at home, in community settings, and online via web conferencing; and online content with discussion questions and links for further learning.
- January theology enrichment series: four presentations at church by guest experts on a theological theme; video recording of each presentation for online viewing and small group learning; and online resources for continuing learning.
- Online theology courses selected for individual study using offerings at colleges/seminaries and on iTunes University.
- An online theology video library of presentations on theological topics for individual or small group study.

### **Praying and Spiritual Formation**

- Lent spiritual practices course: a five-session spiritual practices course with sessions on prayer styles and traditions, fixed-hour prayer, contemplation and meditation, spiritual reading and praying with art and music, and Sabbath.
- An online Lent retreat experience delivered daily via e-mail.
- Online prayer center with links to print, audio, video, and digital resources for daily prayer, devotions, liturgy of the hours, and more.

### **Reading the Bible**

- A six-week Lent Bible study program organized in variety of settings with a print resource and online support materials and videos.
- Links to online resources for Bible study and a list of Bible apps for individual use.

### **Serving People in Need, Working for Justice, Caring for Creation**

- A variety of service/mission projects—just for adults or intergenerational—already offered by justice and service organizations, which provide a range of options for service, e.g., local one-day projects, short-term mission trips of two to five days, weeklong mission trips, and global expedition trips of ten to fourteen days.
- An online justice and service center where people can learn about justice issues and the biblical and church teachings on justice, service, and care for creation.

### **Worshipping God within the Faith Community**

- Online resources for extending Sunday worship into daily life and family life using a variety of digital content that deepens the understanding and practice of the Sunday readings and sermon, and provides prayer, devotions, rituals, a video of the sermon with a study guide, service/action ideas, conversation activities, and more.
- “Coffee and Conversation” groups after Sunday worship to reflect on the Sunday readings using *Lectio Divina*.

### **Mature Adult Life Issues**

- Programs and small groups organized around adult life tasks and issues, such as children getting married, retirement, finances in later life, caring for an aging parent, dealing with illness.
- Links to online programs and resources that address adult life tasks and issues, such [www.AARP.org](http://www.AARP.org).
- Connection to programs sponsored by churches or community organizations on adult life issues.

### **Just for Grandparents**

- Grandparent-grandchild programs, such as a mini-retreat program, trips, service projects, and more, organized by the church.
- Articles and materials to help grandparents understand their role in faith formation and raising their grandchildren.
- Faith-forming activities that grandparents can use with their grandchildren
- A list of recommended children’s Bibles, storybooks, and video programs that grandparents can use with grandchildren.

## Discovering Faith

- Sponsor a program, such as Alpha, for “churchless” adults who want to explore the Christian faith again or for the first time.
- Develop a weekly program, such as Lifetree Café, in a community setting for adults who want to connect with a community, discuss spiritual matters, and explore faith.
- Offer “reentry” experiences and mentors/guides for those who want to join the church community and need a gradual reintroduction to church life and the Christian faith.

The network approach is well suited to addressing the diversity in the lives of adults. It provides a way to offer a variety of experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections that are available anytime and anywhere, in physical places and online spaces, and conducted in variety of settings—self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world. And this diversity of offerings is made possible 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.

## Conclusion—Faith Formation for All the Seasons of Adulthood

We began with the questions: What could adult faith formation look like in the twenty-first century? What insights should inform us and guide the development of adult faith formation for the four stages of adulthood: young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults? How do we engage all the seasons of an adult’s life in the lifelong journey of discipleship and faith growth—a process of experiencing, learning, and practicing the Christian faith as we seek to follow Jesus and his way in today’s world? And how can we develop an approach that provides a platform for reaching *every* adult in our faith communities and in the wider community?

The answers to these questions can be found in the holistic vision of faith and faith-forming processes, in the eight features that can guide the development of twenty-first century faith formation, and in a network model of faith formation that provides a way to reach all adults throughout the seasons of adulthood.

Following are the key features that will guide the development of twenty-first century adult faith formation:

1. Adult Faith Formation is *life-stage/generational*—addressing the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of people at each stage of adulthood; and *intergenerational*—engaging adults in the life and events of church life and the Christian faith through participation in the intergenerational faith experiences.
2. Adult faith formation is *missional*—expanding and extending the church’s presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with adults where they live; and providing pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the good news, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community.
3. Adult faith formation addresses the *diverse* life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of adults in four stages of adulthood—young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+).
4. 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 adults in four stages of adulthood—young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+).
  - Adult faith formation provides a variety of experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections that are available anytime and anywhere, in physical places and online spaces.
  - Adult faith formation incorporates seven learning 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.
  - Adult faith formation incorporates formal and informal learning.
5. Adult faith formation recognizes that learning and growth is a *process of active inquiry* with initiative residing in the adult learner and that adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that adult learning activities will satisfy.
6. Adult faith formation provides the opportunity for *personalized and customized* learning and faith growth, giving adults an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Adults are guided by trusted mentors who find the right programs, activities, and resources to match with their learning and spiritual needs.

7. 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, adult peer experiences and programs, and daily/home life using online and digital media.
8. Adult faith formation intentionally nurtures *communities of learning and practice* around the shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities.

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