

National Conference

Formation & Mission in a Digital World

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Online Resources

www.LifelongFaith.com

www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com

www.CuratingFaithFormation.com

www.ReimagineFaithFormation.com

www.FamiliesattheCenter.com

www.VibrantFaithatHome.org

Network Faith Formation

Faith formation can now be developed as a *network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources*—integrating a wide variety of engaging and interactive content and experiences in online and physical settings to engage *all* people today. We are moving away from the “one-size-fits-all” approach, which characterizes so much of faith formation today, towards a diversity of ways to grow in faith and a variety of faith formation opportunities that are designed around the needs and interests of people. People are at the center of a network approach. We can design faith formation so that *it adapts to individuals, groups, and families instead of expecting them to adapt to the programs (content, schedules, requirements) offered them by the congregation?*

A network approach is made possible by a web of environments that include churches, community organizations, libraries, museums, and schools/colleges; and by a web of digital resources, websites, and online communities. A network model of faith formation curates content and experiences from a wide variety of sources, presents that content on a digital platform, and guides parents and families in connecting content with needs and interests, creating personal/family pathways for faith growth.

There are three important programming practices which guide the development of a faith formation network.

1. Provide a *variety of content* (experiences, programs, activities, resources) to address the life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of *all* parents and families today.
2. Utilize a *variety of environments and methods* to engage *all* families, anytime and anywhere, in a variety of settings—*independent, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world.*
3. Become *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 faith formation at church, with peers, in the community, and at home using online and digital media.

Imagine designing a faith formation network for families with children (0-10 years old) with developmentally-appropriate children’s activities, whole family activities, and parent activities that implements these programming practices: variety of content, variety of approaches and methods,

and digitally-enabled and digitally-connected strategies. The family faith formation network would use strategies presented, tailored to families with young children and older children. It would incorporate the eight faith-forming processes—caring relationships, celebrating church year seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning, prayer and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshipping; and include parent formation and family life development.

Each content area of the network would have a variety of content—church and community programs and resources, digital media, links to online content at other websites, and more. Programming in each content area can be developed into *faith formation playlists*. This is similar to a music playlist where we curate and gather our favorite songs into our own “albums” for listening. A faith formation playlist curates content around a theme into an integrated learning plan that provides a variety of programming and a variety ways to learn.

The “Just for Parents” playlist offers a variety of ways for you to enhance and enrich your knowledge and skills for parenting children and teens. All of these programs, activities, and resources are developed around research-tested ways to help your children and teens grow in healthy and positive ways by 1) expressing care, 2) challenging them to growth, 3) providing them with support, 4) involving them in decision-making, and 5) expanding their possibilities for the future.

1. *Participate in the “First Wednesdays” Webinar Series—without leaving your home!*
2. *Use a variety of activities to build positive relationships at home.*
3. *Learn more about your children and teenager.*
4. *Participate in a Small Group Study with the best selling book *The Secrets of Happy Families* by Bruce Feiler*
5. *Watch the video: “Parenting for the Long Haul” and download the “9 Parenting Strategies” guide.*
6. *Strengthen family relationships with stories.*
7. *Discover parenting resources.*

Designing a Season of Faith Formation Programming

The most manageable way to program a faith formation network is to develop a three-season approach: January–April, May–August, and September–December. This means launching new programming three times a year and completing updating your website three times a year with the new programming as well as recurring programming.

All of the network content areas do not need to be introduced in the first season of programming. Over the course of a year (three seasons) network content areas and programming can be added so that the complete plan is finally implemented in the fourth season. Some of the programming will be consistent in every season, while other programming will be specific to a season. Programming from a completed season is archived online (on the website) so that it can be reused in another season or re-introduced a year later.

Here is a guide to developing one season of programming.

1. Identify the season: January 1–May 1 or May 1–September 1 or September 1–January 1.

2. Add continuing programs to the seasonal plan. Use the seasonal plan template to record the results: list the network content areas and then add the programs to the appropriate month.
3. Add intergenerational events and programs to the seasonal plan.
4. Add new programming to the seasonal plan. Try to provide new (or current) programs in *different learning environments* and/or one program in multiple learning environments: on your own (self-directed), with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the congregation, in the community, in the world. Try to implement a program idea with a *blended (digital) faith formation* strategy: gathered program with online content, gathered program and online content, online and gathered in one program, mostly online, and fully online.
5. Develop the final version of the seasonal plan. Select the program ideas for each network content area. Some content areas may have too many programs to launch in one season. Select the ones that will be included in this season and save the other program ideas for another season.
6. Schedule programming in each network content area. Some of the programming flows through multiple months in a season, such as a weekly Bible study group. Some programs are monthly, while other programs are seasonal—Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter—and therefore anchored in one or more months. Still other programming/resources are always available, such as an online course or a video program or Bible study resources.

One way to manage the variety of programming is to focus on one month of major programming in the network content areas. For example the “Learning the Tradition” content area might select one month to schedule its theology enrichment series with four presentations from guest experts and options for small group study and online study using the video recordings. The Bible area might focus its programming in different month, perhaps around a church year season, such as Lent. This approach reduces the overlap among major programming and helps people participate in multiple experiences.

7. Develop *faith formation playlists*. This is similar to a music playlist where we curate and gather our favorite songs into our own “albums” for listening. A faith formation playlist curates content around a theme into an integrated learning plan that provides a variety of programming and a variety ways to learn.
8. Develop specific plans for each program (when needed): date or month, programming environment(s), digital strategy(s), resources, leaders, and cost.

Seasonal Plan

Network Content Area	Programming & Dates			
	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4

Building the Digital Platform for Faith Formation

This digital platform provides the primary way to connect parents and families to the network's offerings and to connect parents and families with each other. A faith formation website provides the platform for publishing and delivering the experiences, content, programs, activities, and resources of the network. 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. And it is available to people anytime, anywhere, and any device (computer, tablet, smart phone).

Building a website is made much easier today by the availability of online website builders that provide predesigned website templates, drag-and-drop features to create webpages, and hosting for the website. Three popular website builders to explore are: *Weebly* (www.weebly.com), *Wix* (www.wix.com), and *Squarespace* (www.squarespace.com). All three have easy to use features and very reasonable subscription fees. For advanced users *WordPress* (<http://wordpress.org>) provides thousands of predesigned templates, lots of customization features, and ready-to-use apps. *WordPress* does require an understanding of web design and some programming ability. *Weebly*, *Wix*, and *Squarespace* have detailed tutorials for designing on their websites or on YouTube.

Here are several suggestions for web usability from Steve Krug's excellent and easy-to-use book *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*.

1. Don't make the user think—make web pages self-explanatory so the user hardly has any perceived effort to understand them, or example, clear choice of labels, clearly “clickable” items, simple search.
2. People generally don't read web pages closely; they scan, so design for scanning rather than reading.
3. Create a clear visual hierarchy and menu system (main menu, submenus).
4. Make it very clear how to navigate the site, with clear “signposts” on all pages.
5. Omit needless words.
6. The home page needs the greatest design care to convey site identity and mission.
7. Promote user goodwill by making the typical tasks easy to do, make it easy to recover from errors, and avoid anything likely to irritate users.

Design Suggestions

First, choose a domain name (URL) for the faith formation website. The congregation can either purchase a new domain name for the faith formation website from one of the companies that sell and register domain names or use a free domain name provided by the website builder, e.g., *Weebly* provides hosting and a free website URL with the *weebly.com* extension.

Second, select a website template that is mobile-responsive, which means that the website will automatically size-itself correctly on a computer, laptop, tablet, or phone. The template should do this automatically.

Third, create the primary navigation (main menus) for the website directly from the network content areas. Be sure to select a website template that allows enough room for all of the menu items to be seen. Today's website design favors horizontal menus (running across the webpage),

rather than vertical menus (running on the left side of the webpage). Select the template that provides enough room for the menus. There may be a need to consolidate several content areas to accommodate the website design template. This involves creating submenus (secondary navigation) under the main menu items. A well-designed site with clear and easy to understand navigation will increase engagement and the time people spend on the website.

Fourth, build each webpage to incorporate all of the programs, activities, and resources for a particular network content area for the seasonal plan. A well-designed site with quality content will increase engagement and create a positive experience for the user—all of which encourages continuous learning. Each webpage includes content that is uploaded to the website for people to use—audio podcasts, videos, articles, blog posts, interactive features—as well as descriptions and links to programs, activities, and resources that reside on other websites, such as online courses. Webpages can include stable content that is going to be available in every season and seasonal or calendar-specific content.

Each webpage is a *playlist* where people can learn online, download resources, and connect to activities and resources across the web. Here are two examples of faith formation website design—one for adults and one for parents: www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com, www.FamiliesattheCenter.com.

Fifth, design the website specifically for your target audiences and write the content for them in their language with titles and examples that connect to their lives; select images (photo or short video) that reflect their life situations. Engage the target audience and tell them what they need to know and do.

Be sure to pay careful attention to the titles and descriptions so that they capture people's interests. Develop descriptions that are positive in tone, indicate clearly the content or focus of an activity. Describe how your offerings respond to something within the lives of people. Highlight the relationship between the content and the particular spiritual or religious needs, interests, passions, concerns, or life issues of people. Describe the 2-3 benefits of participating or engaging in faith formation.

Programming Environments

Faith formation incorporates seven program 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 environment, as well as to offer the same program content in multiple learning environments—all of which provides people with more options to participate in faith formation and broadens the scope of faith formation offerings. The seven environments include:

Independent. Independent programming provides maximum flexibility to participate in faith formation, so they can decide when, how, where, and what they will experience. With the increasing number and variety of books and printed resources, audio podcasts, video presentations, video programs, online courses, and online resource centers, independent faith formation offers a 24/7 approach to faith growth and learning for busy people today. Congregations can serve as guide to helping them find the best format and content to address their needs, and then deliver that programming online through the faith formation website.

With a Mentor or Coach. Mentoring or coaching provides a one-to-one relationship that can be utilized in a variety of faith formation programming. Examples: a mentor/coach can work with parent/ who are having a child baptized and provide individualized faith formation around the life situations and religious-spiritual needs of the parents; most congregations have a group of willing mentors/coaches in the grandparent generation. Mentors can be developed for each person in the Christian initiation process or for those who want to explore Jesus and Christianity after leaving church earlier in life. Mentoring works older to younger, but also younger to older as in the case of young people mentoring older adults on the use of digital tools and media.

At Home. At home programming provides individuals, parents, and whole families with faith formation programs, activities, and resources designed for use at home or in daily life, and delivered in a variety of ways including a faith formation website or social media. With the abundance of high quality digital content congregations can provide programs and resources, such as online learning programs, resources for the church year seasons, Sunday worship resources, online communities and support groups, and links to online faith formation resources and resource centers.

In Small Groups. Small-group programming provides an excellent way to address a diversity of needs and life situations by organizing a variety of small groups with each one targeted to a particular need or topic. Small groups provide lots of flexibility in schedule and location. Groups can meet at times and places that best fit members' lives, such as group that meets for breakfast weekly at the local restaurant or for coffee at a local coffee shop. Small groups create an accepting environment in which new relationships can be formed. It is not always necessary for the congregation to sponsor small group programs. Congregational leaders can provide resources, support, and training for leaders, thereby enabling parents and families to organize their own small groups. Small group programming learning can take many different forms including:

- discipleship or faith sharing groups or study groups such as Bible study groups, theme or issue oriented study groups, Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing groups, book study groups
- practice-focused groups such as parenting skills and spiritual formation
- support groups for people at different life stages, e.g., for parents at different stages of family life: young children, older children, younger adolescents, older adolescents, and emerging adults
- support groups for kindred groups, such as caregiver groups, single parents, blended families, divorced parents, parents with children who suffer from serious illnesses, and more

In Large Groups. Large-group programming provides a way to address a faith theme, topic or issue that engages a wide diversity of people:

- multi-session programs, such as multi-week courses on theological themes, books of the Bible, parenting at particular stages of family life, life issues)
- multi-session programs, such as a parenting courses for each life stage: young children, older children, younger adolescents, older adolescents, and emerging adults
- family programming on faith themes, seasonal celebrations, social events, service days, and more that can be sponsored weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or seasonally
- one-session program, such as a monthly session on a theological topic or parent enrichment

- speaker series, such as a multi-evening or multi-week program focused around particular theological themes, Christian practices, current events, the season of the church year, life issues, family life issues, and more
- activities and discussion after Sunday worship for the community to explore and experience the Sunday readings in age groups or family/intergenerational groups
- parent parallel learning program for parents while their children are engaged in age-appropriate learning
- workshops, such as one day programs targeted to specific life issues—parenting, mid-life issues, aging, and more; for example workshops for parents or the whole family targeted to specific family life issues: communication, parenting skills, building a strong family, managing family time, developing technology rules, and more
- film festivals that explore important life and faith themes that can be followed with activities and discussions
- week or weekend at Christian camp
- retreat experiences in an evening, one-day, or weekend format at church or at a retreat center
- mission trip organized by the church: local, domestic, international – for age groups, for whole families, for intergenerational groups
- intergenerational programs for all ages in the congregation

The Congregation. Congregational programming focuses on the events already present in the life of the church: Sunday worship, the feasts and seasons of the church year, sacramental and ritual celebrations, works of justice and acts of service, prayer experiences, spiritual traditions, and events that originate within the life and history of a individual congregation. Faith formation can provide experiences for people to *prepare*—with the appropriate knowledge and practices—for participation in the central events of church life and the Christian faith and to *guide* their *participation* and *reflection* upon those events.

In the Community and World. Programming in the community and world provides a way for congregations to utilize existing programs and activities outside the church as part of a faith formation plan. This involves researching the resources and programs (programs, courses, clinics, workshops, presentations, and more) being offered by community organizations; schools, community colleges and universities; retreat centers and Christian camps; YMCAs; libraries; bookstores, and more. Many organizations—locally and nationally—have already created programs and activities that be adopted by the congregation. This is an important environment for developing initiatives for serving, working for justice, and caring for creation. Many organizations—locally, nationally, and globally—have already created programs that be adopted by the congregation.

Digital Enabled Strategies

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 faith formation at church, with peers, in the community, and at home using online and digital media.

Faith formation can now utilize digital technologies and digital media to engage parents and families with faith-forming content anytime, anyplace, and just-in-time—and extend and expand

faith formation from physical, face-to-face settings into their daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems. Online platforms for 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.

We now have access to new digital methods and media for reaching and engaging people—social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more), webinars and online learning, video conferencing, videos, audio podcasts, and much more. All of these methods and media expand the opportunities to engage *everyone* in faith formation. For example: How are we providing mobile content for a family to use at the dinner table, in the car, in the morning or at bedtime, or for a mom or dad to use while they wait for their children participating in sports, music, arts?

A faith formation website provides the platform for publishing and delivering faith formation experiences, content, programs, activities, and resources; and for engaging people in learning and faith formation. Increasingly churches will need to see themselves not as exclusive providers of 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.

Faith formation incorporates blended models of faith formation to connect physical settings and online settings. The new digital tools, digital media, and online platforms connect people’s participation in church life and events and in programs with their daily and home; and can reach people at home, at work, and in daily life with personalized and customized faith formation content and experiences. 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.

Faith formation utilizes five blended strategies (below) in designing new programming, re-designing 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.

Blended Faith Formation

Fully Online	Mostly Online	Online and Gathered	Gathered and Online Content	Gathered with Online Content
An online program with all learning done online and limited face-to-face, gathered learning settings	A mostly online program with opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings	Online learning focused on presenting the content of the program <i>combined with</i> face-to-face, gathered sessions using active learning methods to discuss, practice and apply the content.	A gathered event or program that provides online content and activities to extend and expand the learning from the gathered program	A gathered event or program that uses online content as part of the design of the event or program

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 with Online Content Beyond the Program. Connect the events of church life (Sunday worship, church year seasons) and programs at church with online content that extends and deepens the experience of individuals/families through resources for learning, prayer, ritual, action, and more.

Imagine extending 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.

Imagine providing 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. A Lent “home curriculum” could include activities for fasting, praying, and serving (almsgiving), reflections on the Sunday readings, daily Bible readings, Lent devotions and daily prayer, Lent study resources and videos, children’s activities, and much more. This example could be applied to all church year seasons.

Online and Gathered. Redesign programming by moving the content that people would experience in the gathered setting to an online platform using video, audio, and print resources. Now people will engage with the content online, at their own pace and time, in preparation for a gathered session. The gathered session can be redesigned, not to teach the content, but to interact and apply content already experienced—making gathered sessions much more experiential. A variety of interactive activities, discussion, project-based learning, and practice and demonstration activities can be used in the gathered session.

Imagine a baptism preparation process (or first communion or any milestone with a church celebration) in which the content of the program is now available online—in video and audio programs, articles and books, and more—and the gathered sessions focused on interaction, application, and theological reflection activities. A parent mentor/coach could be integrated into this process to assist parents and provide continuity.

Imagine redesigning children’s faith formation by moving the teaching content from the classes onto an online classroom (see Edmodo or Schoology) where parents and children could learn together at home and the gathered sessions at church could focus on interactive activities and demonstration with children sharing projects they created at home.

Mostly Online. Develop opportunities for people to learn online and provide opportunities for interaction in a gathered setting or web conference format.

Imagine offering online courses or video programs for self-study or small group study and gather people 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 all ages.

Imagine offering a monthly online parent education program using a webinar format delivered to parents at home that was organized in four-month semesters (Fall and Winter/Spring) with three webinars followed by a parent gathering at church

Fully Online. Offer online-only faith formation on a variety of topics and issues by using existing online courses, activities, print and e-books, audio podcasts, video programs, and content-rich websites.

Imagine offering a monthly seasonal activity for all families that is delivered online with a variety of media and family-based activities for Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer; and for monthly events such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Martin Luther King Jr. Remembrance, Earth Day, Mother's Day/Father's Day, and much more. Imagine an online prayer and spirituality center where families and people of all ages 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.

Imagine offering 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.