

The Changing World of Faith Formation & Church Life

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1. Significant Driving Forces Influencing Faith Formation 2020

- **Declining Number of Christians and Growing Number of People with No Religious Affiliation.** The U.S. population continues to show signs of becoming less religious: In 2008, 15-16% of Americans claimed no religious affiliation, nearly double the 1990 figure. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion. The number of American adults identified as Christians dropped 10% from 86% in 1990 to 76% in 2008. Similar to the general American public, Latinos have become less identified with Christianity—down from 91% in 1990 to 82% in 2008. No religious affiliation increased fourfold among Latinos from 900,000 or 6% in 1990 to nearly 4 million or 12% in 2008. It appears that the challenge to Christianity in the U.S. does not come from other religions but rather from a rejection of all forms of organized religion. This growing non-religious minority reduces the traditional societal role of congregations in family celebrations of life-cycle events. Forestalling of religious rites of passage, such as marriage and baptism, and the lowering expectations on religious funeral services, could have long lasting consequences for religious institutions.
- **Increasing Number of People Becoming More “Spiritual” and Less “Religious.”** A small but growing minority of the U.S. population describe themselves as spiritual but not religious (meaning not connected to organized religion): 9% of Americans were spiritual but not religious in 1998, rising to 14% in 2008; and 18% of 18-39 year olds say they are “spiritual but not religious,” compared to only 11% a decade ago. If what people mean when they say they are spiritual but not religious is that they are generally concerned with spiritual matters but are not interested in organized religion, then this trend indicates a growing minority of the population whose spiritual inclinations do not lead them to become involved in churches, synagogues, or mosques. In our increasingly pluralistic society, to be “spiritual” is more likely to represent an eclectic spirituality, drawing not only from the various streams of Christianity, but including elements of other religious traditions.
- **Declining Participation in Christian Churches.** By all measures of participation, the trends point toward declining participation in church life in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, including worship attendance, marriages and baptisms in the church, and children and youth participation in faith formation programming. Among young Hispanics, immigrants attend church services more regularly than do the native born (second and third generation). Combined with the trend toward fewer Christians and the growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated, it appears that succeeding generations of Christians are less likely to be exposed to formation in the Christian faith because worship attendance is down, and therefore participation in church life, education, and activities is down. This means less exposure to the Christian tradition and teachings, reduced opportunities to experience the Christian way of life, and far less reinforcement of the Christian faith in church settings. The effect of these trends can be found in research on emerging adults (20-30 year olds): only 15% embrace a strong religious faith and another 30% believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions; at least 40% have no connection to a religious tradition (see *Souls in Transition*).
- **Increasing Diversity and Pluralism in U.S. Society.** U.S. society reflects a growing diversity of ethnic cultures and nationalities and their traditions, customs, foods, and languages, and also a growing diversity of religious traditions from the East and the West. Pluralism creates both richness and tensions. We live next door to other nations; we’re engaged in conversation with people from all parts of the world, with customs and expectations vastly different from our own. We also live in a pluralistic society in which no single authority exercises supremacy and no single belief or ideology dominates. Christian culture is no longer at the center of American life; it has been replaced by a tapestry of religious and spiritual alternatives and

choices. The range of religious practice and belief in U.S. society today is enormous, and it is all around us. The increasing diversity and the pluralism of belief and practice undermines the plausibility and truth-claims of any single religious tradition. The diversity of religious choice and openness to everything religious results in people crisscrossing religious boundaries as they construct their own personal spiritualities. We have become a society of “spiritual tinkerers” (Robert Wuthnow), which makes developing and sustaining a Christian identity and religious commitments exceedingly difficult.

- **Increasing Influence of Individualism on Christian Identity and Community Life.** The influence of individualism means that religious identity is more autonomous and deliberate today and that religion is less anchored in a sense of belonging. There is a decline in connectedness; a weakening or severing of the *social* basis of religion in family, marriage, ethnicity, and community; a decline in the perceived necessity of communal or institutional structures as constituent of religious identity. Religious identity today is not only less bounded by doctrine or creed; it is also less nurtured and reinforced by community. Significant numbers of Americans see little necessary connection between being spiritual and being part of a historic tradition, or part of a disciplined community of faith. This is reinforced by the mass media’s not-so-subtle message that you don’t need a religious community to engage “God issues.” Nominal membership increasingly replaces active involvement, a development paralleling national civic trends. Religion is less perceived as an inherited phenomenon, or as a binding community of discipleship and obligation. Religious leaders and institutions, which traditionally provided the framework within which religious meaning was constructed, have become increasingly peripheral to the spirituality and “lived religion” of private personal enterprise.
- **Changing Patterns of Marriage and Family Life.** It appears that one of the reasons for the decline in church participation is that younger Americans are marrying later, having fewer children, and having them later—all of which means that far more younger Americans are single and childless than was true a generation ago and that the same younger Americans are not settling into religious congregations at the same rate as their parents did in the 1970s. Religious practice is especially influenced by marrying, settling down, having children and raising them. Since individuals who marry are more likely to attend religious services than are those who delay marriage, the postponement of marriage and childbearing has contributed to the decline in church attendance. Also, there has been a dramatic increase in religiously mixed marriages and partnerships: more than one-in-four (27%) American adults who are married or living with a partner are in religiously mixed relationships. If people from different Protestant denominational families are included, for example a marriage between a Methodist and a Lutheran, nearly four-in-ten (37%) marriages are religiously mixed.
- **Declining Family Religious Socialization.** Family religious socialization has always been the foundation for the development of faith and faith practices in children, and for participation in church life and worship. As Christian Smith observes, “teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously.” (Smith, 232) Significant indicators, such as religious identification as a Christian, worship attendance, marriages and baptisms in the church, and changing generational patterns, point to a decline in family religious socialization across all denominations, but especially among Catholic and Mainline traditions. Religious practice among the next generation of parents (young adults in their 20s and 30s) is especially influenced by marrying, settling down, having children and raising them. Since individuals who marry are more likely to attend religious services than are those who delay marriage, the postponement of marriage and childbearing has contributed to the decline in church attendance. Complicating this picture, is the fact that an ever growing percentage of Christians (at least 30%) are not getting married in a religious ceremony. The less contact that young adults have with the Christian tradition through participation in a local church, the less family religious socialization that is likely to take place when they marry and have children.

- Increasing Impact of Digital Media and Web Technologies.** Technology and digital media are transforming the ways we live. Globalization and pluralism are driven by this unprecedented technological change. People meet on Facebook and share their inspirations on YouTube all the while Twittering to an assortment of friends. Groups of people at opposite ends of a continent or around the globe don't need to leave their own contexts in order to meet in real time and in video, on Skype or some Webinar format. Social connectivity is being leveraged globally online. People's use of the internet's capabilities for communication—for creating, cultivating, and continuing social relationships—is undeniable. However, time spent online often takes time away from important face-to-face relationships. Virtually all of those 29 and younger in the U.S. today are online (as of 2010): 93% of teens (12-17) and young adults (18-29), 81% of adults 30-49 years old, 70% of adults 50-64 years old, and 38% of adults 65 and over. Increasingly people are accessing the internet on smart phones like the iPhone: sending or receiving text messages, taking a picture, playing a game, checking email, recording video, instant messaging, playing music, getting maps or directions, or recording and watching video. Media are among the most powerful forces in young people's lives today. Eight- to eighteen-year-olds spend more time with media than in any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping—an average of more than 7½ hours a day, seven days a week. The TV shows they watch, video games they play, songs they listen to, books they read, and websites they visit are an enormous part of their lives, offering a constant stream of messages about families, peers, relationships, gender roles, sex, violence, food, values, clothes, and an abundance of other topics too long to list. How will these new digital technologies transform our lives and our religious identities? What will be the impact of this technological revolution on faith formation and Christian congregations?

2. Two Critical Uncertainties for Faith Formation 2020

Relationship with Organized Religion & Christianity

Resistant ←-----→ **Receptive**

Will trends in U.S. culture lead people to become more receptive to organized religion, and in particular Christianity, over the next decade or will trends lead people to become more resistant to organized religion and Christianity?

Hunger for and Openness to God & the Spiritual Life

Decrease ←-----→ **Increase**

Will people's hunger for and openness to God and the spiritual life increase over the next decade or will people's hunger for and openness to God and the spiritual life decrease.

Relationship with Organized Religion and Christianity

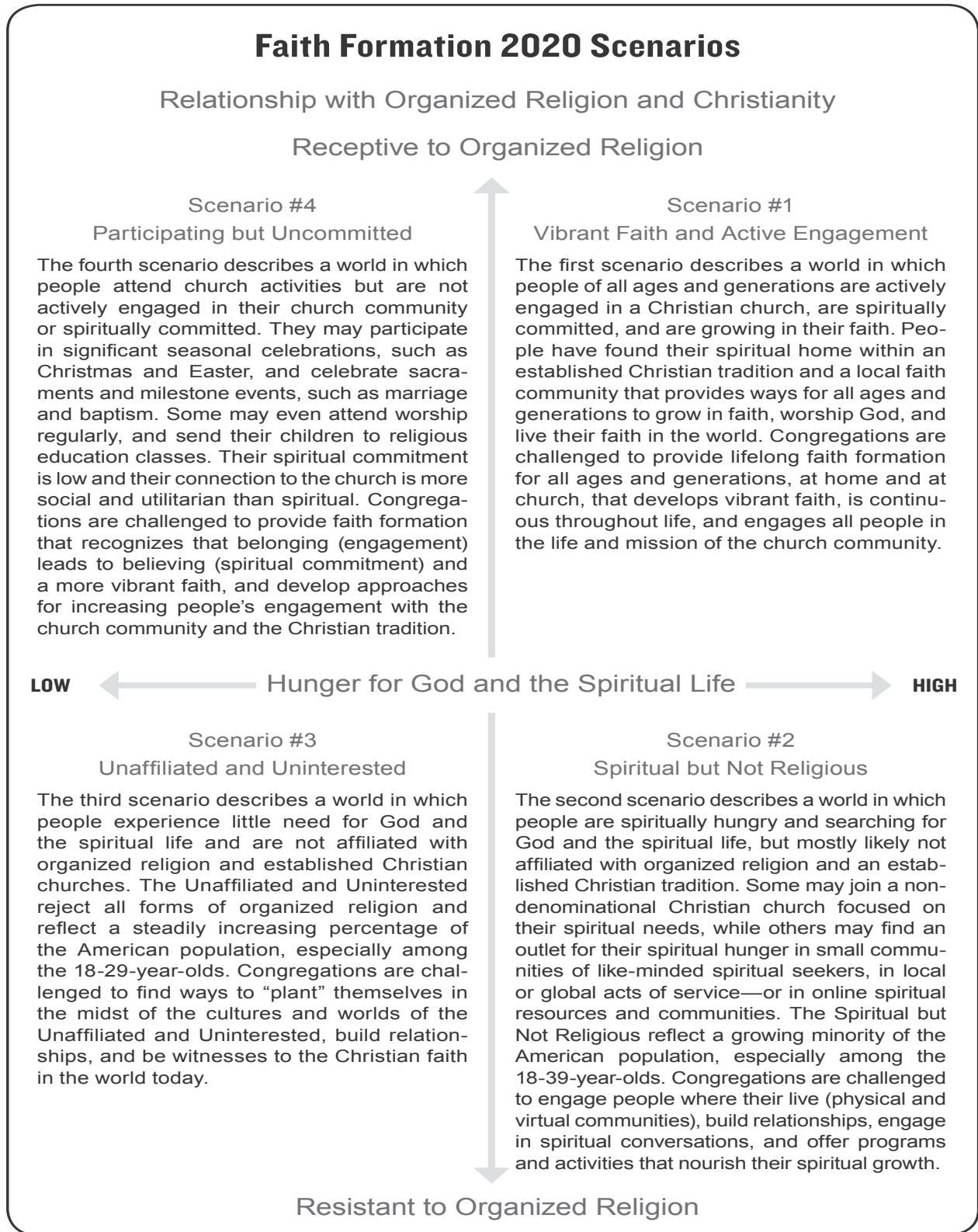
This uncertainty refers to the social and cultural trends regarding people's attitudes and responses to organized religion and, in particular Christianity, in the U.S. Will people be more or less receptive to Christianity and involved in churches in the next decade? Several of the eight significant forces describe the current trajectory of this uncertainty: declining number of Christians; growing number of people with no religious affiliation; increasing number of people becoming more "spiritual" and less "religious;" declining participation in Christian churches; increasing influence of individualism on Christian identity and community life; changing patterns of marriage and family life, especially delaying marriage and having children later; and declining family religious socialization. Will these trends continue and, if they do, what will be the impact on Christian churches and faith formation? How will churches respond to this uncertainty over the next decade?

Hunger for and Openness to God and the Spiritual Life

This uncertainty refers to the importance of God and the spiritual life in the lives of people today. Will people's hunger and openness increase or decrease over the next decade? Several of the eight significant forces describe the current trajectory of this uncertainty: declining numbers of Christians; increasing number of people becoming more "spiritual" and less "religious;" declining participation in Christian churches; increasing diversity and pluralism in U.S. society resulting in a tapestry of religious and spiritual alternatives and choices; increasing influence of individualism on Christian identity and community life resulting in "spiritual tinkering" and more

individualized spirituality; declining family religious socialization, and utilizing the digital media and technological tools to access a diversity of spiritual traditions and resources, and to participate in online communities of support and spiritual growth. Will these trends continue and, if they do, what will be the impact on Christian churches and faith formation? How will churches respond to this uncertainty over the next decade?

3. Envisioning the Future of Faith Formation



When the two critical uncertainties are connected in a 2x2 matrix, a set of four stories—or scenarios—are created to describe how the future of faith formation in 2020 could evolve. This matrix represents a map of today and a moving image of future reality. That is, each of the four quadrants of this map represents a dynamic story that is based on a different future outcome of the two critical uncertainties. *Which of the scenarios will rise in ascendancy over the next decade? Where are people in our churches and culture moving? What will be the response of Christian churches to the four scenarios?*

The scenarios express a range of possible futures facing congregational faith formation over the decade from 2010 to 2020. Each scenario story explains why the “main story” of faith formation in 2020 will be framed by the response of Christian churches to people’s relationship—their attitudes and responses—to organized religion (receptive or resistant) and to people’s hunger for and openness to God and the spiritual life (high or low). The scenarios that follow are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive—rather they are designed to be both plausible and challenging, to engage your imagination while also raising new questions about what the future of faith formation might look and feel like. *Imagine what faith formation could look and feel like in your congregation if your church is responding to the challenges and opportunities in each scenario. Imagine the life of your congregation in 2020 if faith formation addresses the spiritual and religious needs of all ages and generations in each scenario over the next 10 years.*

Scenario #1. Vibrant Faith and Active Engagement

The first scenario describes a world in which people of all ages and generations are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith. People have found their spiritual home within an established Christian tradition and a local faith community that provides ways for all ages and generations to grow in faith, worship God, and live their faith in the world. Congregations are challenged to provide lifelong faith formation for all ages and generations, at home and at church, that develops vibrant faith, is continuous throughout life, and engages all people in the life and mission of the church community.

In most congregations the overwhelming majority of resources, energy, and leadership are directed toward faith formation with people in Scenario #1, oftentimes with a decreasing number of people for a shorter period of the lifespan (e.g., grade school through high school years). The future of faith formation in Scenario #1 is being significantly impacted by a number of driving forces including: 1) the growing number of people who are leaving established Christian churches—people who claim no religious affiliation (about 15% of the population) and those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” (almost 20% of 18-39 year-olds); 2) declining participation in Christian worship, sacraments and rituals (baptism and marriage), and church life, in general, among those who consider themselves Christian; and 3) a serious decline in family religious socialization at home as few parents make passing on a faith tradition and faith practices central to family life.

Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #1

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Develop continuous faith formation for all ages and generations, especially for adults (twenties-nineties), that engages people—mind, body, heart, and spirit—in a diversity of ways to grow in faith for a lifetime.
- Strengthen family socialization by equipping parents and families to become centers of faith formation and practice.
- Become a “sticky” church—keeping all ages involved in faith formation through a diversity of programs, activities, and resources at home and church that address their life situations and religious and spiritual needs.
- Embrace the tremendous potential of digital media and web technologies to provide faith formation and engage people in lifelong faith growth 24x7x365.
- Empower people of vibrant faith with the knowledge, faith sharing skills, and confidence to share their faith with those who are not involved in a church community or spiritually committed.

Scenario #2. Spiritual, but Not Religious

The second scenario describes a world in which people are spiritually hungry and searching for God and the spiritual life, but most likely are not affiliated with organized religion and an established Christian tradition. Some may join a nondenominational Christian church focused on their spiritual needs, while others may find an outlet for their spiritual hunger in small communities of like-minded spiritual seekers, in local or global acts of service, or in online spiritual resources and communities. The Spiritual but Not Religious reflect a growing minority of the American population, especially among the eighteen- to thirty-nine-year-olds. Congregations are challenged to engage people where they live (physical and virtual communities), build relationships, engage in spiritual conversations, and offer programs and activities that nurture their spiritual growth.

Scenario #3. Unaffiliated and Uninterested

The third scenario describes a world in which people experience little need for God and the spiritual life and are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches. The Unaffiliated and Uninterested reject all forms of organized religion and reflect a steadily increasing percentage of the American population, especially among the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds. Congregations are challenged to find ways to “plant” themselves in the midst of the cultures and worlds of the Unaffiliated and Uninterested, build relationships, and be witnesses to the Christian faith in the world today.

If the statistics are accurate, the growing numbers of people reflected in Scenarios #2 and #3, especially people in their 20s and 30s, present the greatest challenge to congregations and to their faith formation efforts, now and into the future. The challenge presented by these two scenarios is expanding the congregation’s vision of faith formation to embrace the life worlds—and spiritual needs—of people in Scenario #2 and #3 who see little need for church, and the need for God and the spiritual life. Congregations need to develop strategies and approaches for moving faith formation from the church campus into the world.

Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #2

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Invest time and resources to develop specialized faith formation around the life situations and spiritual needs of the “Spiritual, but Not Religious” who are in their twenties and thirties.
- Provide faith formation programming for spiritual seekers that is conducted in “Third Place” settings outside of the church facilities (e.g., Lifetree Café).
- Develop faith formation around marriage and baptism to respond to the potential for (re)engagement in church life of the “Spiritual, but Not Religious?”
- Provide a guided process and program for spiritually hungry people to investigate the Christian faith and join in small communities with other seekers for spiritual growth and support (e.g., the Alpha course).

Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #3

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Establish a “Third Place” gathering site as a platform for reaching the “Unaffiliated and Uninterested” through a variety of spiritual and/or life-centered programs, conversations, and activities?
- Develop a “web-presence” that is inviting and attractive to the “Unaffiliated and Uninterested” so that they can investigate and experience the Christian faith online.
- Sponsor programs, such as service projects and mission trips, that are designed so that people from the wider community can participate, interact with church members, and come into contact with the Christian faith in action.

Scenario #4. Participating, but Uncommitted

The fourth scenario describes a world in which people attend church activities, but are not actively engaged in their church community or spiritually committed. They may participate in significant seasonal celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter, and celebrate sacraments and milestone events, such as marriage and baptism. Some may even attend worship regularly, and send their children to religious education classes. Their spiritual commitment is low and their connection to the church is more social and utilitarian than spiritual.

Congregations are challenged to provide faith formation that recognizes that belonging (engagement) leads to believing (spiritual commitment) and a more vibrant faith, and develop approaches for increasing people's engagement with the church community and the Christian tradition.

Scenario #4 reflects a growing number of people who, while receptive to an established church, do not have a faith commitment that would make their relationship with God and participation in a faith community a priority in their lives. Their occasional engagement in church life does not lead them toward spiritual commitment. Congregations often address the spiritual and religious needs of people in Scenario #4 through the lens of Scenario #1, which doesn't usually work effectively. Congregations need to begin in the life worlds of Scenario 4 and craft faith formation around their spiritual and religious needs, and their relationship with the faith community.

Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #4

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Begin faith formation with the birth and baptism of children in order to strengthen family socialization by equipping parents and families to become centers of faith formation and practice.
- Develop pathways for spiritual commitment and more active engagement by offering a formation process that helps people develop and deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ, explore the foundational teachings of the Christian faith, and live the fundamental Christian practices.
- Utilize digital media and web technologies to extend faith formation—resources, social networking, faith practices—into the daily lives of people who only participate occasionally?
- Focus on the occasions of participation, such as sacraments and milestones, to provide faith formation that involves the whole family, and invites them into more active engagement in the church community.

Apply the Four Scenarios to Your Church

Use the following questions to explore how each scenario applies in your church.

- Who are the people in your community in this scenario? How would you describe them?
- What are their religious and spiritual needs of people in this scenario? How would you describe one or two aspects of their religious and spiritual hopes or desires?
- How is your church addressing the spiritual and religious needs of people in this scenario through faith formation today?

Assess the Impact of the Four Scenarios on Your Church

Use the following questions to explore the impact of each scenario on your church.

- What are the *challenges* that this scenario presents for the future of faith formation in your church community?
- What are the *opportunities* that this scenario presents for the future of faith formation in your church community?
- What are the *implications* of not addressing the future of faith formation in this scenario?
- What are the *implications* of addressing the future of faith formation in this scenario?

Religiosity among Adolescents Today

From the National Study on Youth and Religion research studies we are discovering the diversity of religiosity and faith practices in adolescents and emerging adults (18-25 years old). In *A Faith of Their Own*, Lisa Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton examine three C's of religiosity in adolescence: the *content* of religious belief, the *conduct* of religious activity, and the *centrality* of religion to life. Understanding what a person believes, how a person practices his or her religion, and the extent to which religion is an important part of a person's identity provides a comprehensive sense of a person's religiosity. They propose a typology of five main profiles of adolescent religiosity:

Abiders	Adapters	Assenters	Avoiders	Atheists
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Abiders (20%). These are the adolescents with the highest levels of religiosity and practice. They believe in God, pray regularly, attend services, serve others, think about the meaning of life, and are most likely to say their religion is the only true faith.2. Adapters (20%). This group shows high levels of personal religiosity: they believe in a personal and involved God, engage in personal religious practice, think about the meaning of life, and serve others. Compared to the Abiders, they are more accepting of other people's faiths and attend religious services more sporadically. The Adapters are most likely of all the groups to help others in need.3. Assenters (31%). These adolescents say they believe in God and feel somewhat close to God, but they are minimally engaged with their faith and practice only occasionally. Religion is tangential to other aspects of their lives.4. Avoiders (24%). These adolescents believe in God but have low levels of religious practice. Their God is a distant, impersonal one and they often don't name a religious affiliation.5. Atheists (5%). These adolescents are the opposite of the Abiders. They don't believe in God and don't attend services.				

Pearce and Denton conclude that teenagers are interested in religion, but they often want to "do religion" apart from institutional structures. One of the more interesting findings was the degree to which teens felt that formal religious services were optional. There's a sense that religious services are helpful but not critical to faith, that engaging in a religious community is not that important. The authors say that religious congregations serious about attracting the younger generation may want to ask themselves: To what degree is communal worship an essential part of faith for this age group?

Commenting on the implications of the typology, Pearce and Denton write about the need to address the diversity of religiosity.

Religiosity is complex and multidimensional, so programs for youth (and likely adults as well) should be designed to address this. Youth could be better understood by knowing the profiles of religiosity into which they tend to fit. Programs could be designed around the types of profiles we identified. Youth who do not attend services or youth group meetings regularly should not be assumed to have reduced commitment to their beliefs. Nor should anyone assume that lower religious involvement necessarily equates to lower affective religiosity or salience. Alternatively youth who are regularly involved in religious activities should not be assumed to high levels of affective religiosity or feel particularly close to God." (Pearce and Denton 56)

Religiosity among Young Adults Today

In *Souls in Transition*, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell focus on the voices, experiences, beliefs, and stories that emerging adults expressed about religion and spiritual issues in their lives through the National Study on Youth and Religion research. From their interviews with emerging adults, they were able to develop a typology of the different types of emerging adult religiosity. They believe that most emerging adults in America today fall into one of six different types when it comes to religion and spirituality.

Committed Traditionalists	Selected Adherents	Spiritually Open	Religiously Indifferent	Religiously Disconnected	Irreligious
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1. **Type 1. Committed Traditionalists** (*No more than 15% of the emerging adults*). Committed Traditionalists embrace a strong religious faith, whose beliefs they can reasonably well articulate and which they actively practice. Personal commitment to faith is a significant part of their identities and moral reasoning, and they are at least somewhat regularly involved in some religious group. They also seem to focus more on inner piety and personal moral integrity than, say, social justice or political witness.
2. **Type 2. Selected Adherents** (*About 30% of all emerging adults*). Selected Adherents believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions but neglect and ignore others. Selective Adherents often have had fairly solid religious upbringings but as emerging adults are more discriminating than Committed Traditionalists about what they are willing to adopt of their religious tradition's beliefs and practices, some of which they think are "outdated." They often hold certain "different opinions" and desires from what their religion allows, so they pick and choose what they want to accept.
3. **Type 3. Spiritually Open** (*About 15% of emerging adults*). Spiritually Open emerging adults are not personally very committed to a religious faith but are nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters. They may be skeptical or critical toward certain forms of religion or spirituality but are definitely open to others. Typically, the Spiritually Open are nonreligious or former believers in some faith in which they were raised but may have since abandoned.
4. **Type 4. Religiously Indifferent** (*At least 25% of emerging adults*). Religiously Indifferent emerging adults neither care to practice religion nor oppose it. They are simply not invested in religion either way; it really doesn't count for that much. They may profess to be religious or least to appreciate religion. But the Indifferent are too distracted with and invested in other things in life and are sufficiently unconcerned with matters of faith to pay any real attention to religion. Indifferent emerging adults can come from any religious tradition or from a nonreligious background.
5. **Type 5. Religiously Disconnected** (*No more than 5%*). Religiously Disconnected emerging adults have little to no exposure or connection to religious people, ideas, or organizations. They are neither interested in nor opposed to religion. Faith simply has not been a part of their lives in any significant way, and it does not seem that it will become so in the near future, if ever. The family backgrounds of the Religiously Disconnected and the structure of their social relationships simply happen to isolate them from most things religious.
6. **Type 6. Irreligious** (*No more than 10%*). Irreligious emerging adults hold skeptical attitudes about and make critical arguments against religion generally, rejecting the idea of personal faith. They may concede that religion is functionally good for some people, but their general attitude is incredulous, derogatory, and antagonistic. Most were raised in nonreligious families or are ex-believers of some faith in which they were raised; emerging adults who identify as atheists or agnostics generally fall into this type. (Smith and Snell, 166-168)