



IMAGINE

FAITH FORMATION

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A New Faith Forming Ecology

For more than one hundred years in the United States, Christian churches had a highly integrated religious ecology comprised of multigenerational family faith practice and religious transmission at home; strong congregational community relationships and church life, especially participation in Sunday worship; weekly Sunday school for children and youth (and in many cases adults); and church groups (youth, men, women). Many Christian traditions relied heavily on the ethnic faith traditions of their people to transmit faith from generation to generation—at home and at church. And all of this was surrounded by an American culture that explicitly or implicitly supported the Christian value system and Christian practices.

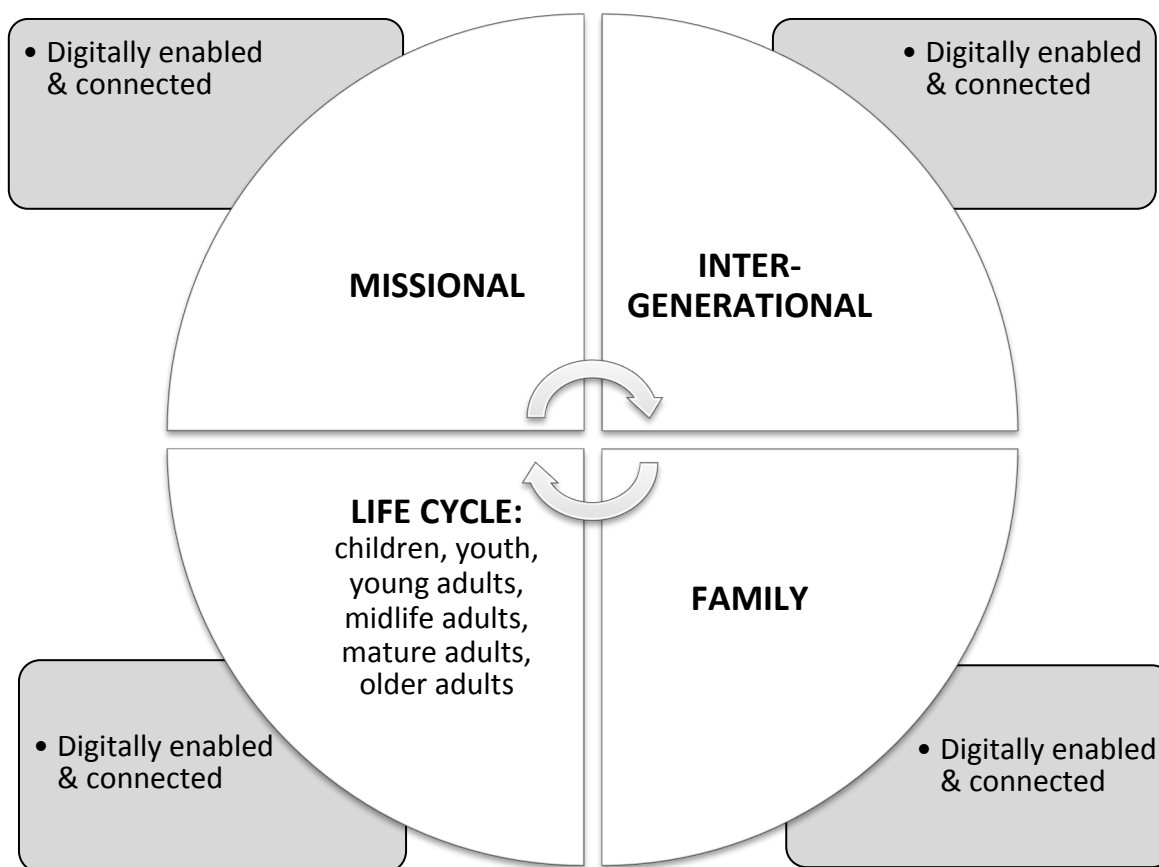
By the early 1960s this ecology began to decline due to the dramatic changes in families, and the wider society and culture. At the same time, congregations began developing new age-graded educational programming (with new developmentally-appropriate texts and resources) and expanding children’s ministries and youth ministries.

As the role of the church in faith formation took center stage, parents’ primary responsibility became bringing their children to Sunday worship and appropriate church activities, and supporting these efforts at home (“take home activities” to extend the learning). Parents were still involved occasionally in special programs around religious milestones such as baptism and first communion. The now dominant age-specific and church-based model of faith formation did not reflect a broader ecological view. While it raised the profile of children and youth in faith formation (but unfortunately not adults), it diminished the role of the family who were now “outsourcing” faith formation to churches, and the role of the intergenerational community where children and youth were not involved in intergenerational relationships and involvements—and even Sunday worship.

By the 2000s, another wave of dramatic change was sweeping across the U.S. and religious congregations: in marriage and family life, in religiosity and practice, in church participation, in ethnic and generational diversity, in technology and digital media, and much more. Congregations today are struggling to adapt to the changes occurring in their people and in the world. Many are trying to adjust or modify their age-specific model, but this model grew up in a world in the 20th century. We need a new faith forming ecology that reflects the needs of the 21st century.

A new faith forming ecology must be responsive to the challenges of the twenty-first century world and the religious and spiritual needs of people today. I believe the new ecology needs to incorporate five, essential, interconnected components so that people are nurtured, equipped and supported in faith and discipleship. Each of these components must be attended to, so that a whole ecology can be created.

1. **Intergenerational faith formation** and whole community faith experiences for all ages and generations provide guided participation in a community of practice with intergenerational learning, relationships, and mentoring
2. **Family faith formation** incorporates growing in faith and practice as a whole family, nurturing the faith of children and adolescents at home, equipping parents (and grandparents) as faith formers, and engaging the whole family in the life and ministries of the faith community
3. **Life cycle faith formation** provides developmentally-appropriate and generationally-appropriate experiences, programs, and activities across the ten decades of life
4. **Missional faith formation** for the unaffiliated and uninvolved expands and extends the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with people where they live, and 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
5. **Digitally enabled and connected faith formation** utilizes new digital technologies and media to reach and engage people in their daily lives anytime and anywhere, and expands faith formation through blended models combining online delivery of religious content and experiences with gathered events and programs.



Connecting Intergenerationally

Become more intentional about strengthening the intergenerational character of our congregations and faith formation experiences using these three core strategies. (For more see *Generations Together*.)

1. **Create** new intergenerational programs and experiences that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshipping.
2. **Utilize** the intergenerational events and experiences of church life (worship/lectionary, seasons of the year, service/mission actions, prayer, etc.) as the primary “content” and experiences for faith formation in intergenerational programs or age-group programs. Use a three-part process:
 1. *Prepare* people—intergenerationally or in age groups—with the knowledge and practices—for participating in a church event.
 2. *Experience/participate* in the intergenerational church event or experience.
 3. *Reflect* upon the meaning of the event and discover how to *live/practice* that learning in daily life (with online activities and resources. For example:
 - People learn about worship and how to worship in intergenerational settings or age groups; experience Sunday worship with the faith community and practice worshipping; and live the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives (with activities and resources delivered online).
 - People learn about the justice issues of our day and the biblical and church teachings on justice, service, and care for creation in intergenerational settings or age groups; 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.
3. **Connect** the generations through new activities and/or infuse intergenerational experiences and relationships into existing ministries and programs. For example:
 - Incorporate intergenerational dialogues into programming.
 - Develop mentoring relationships (prayer partners, spiritual direction, service involvements, confirmation mentors)
 - Link people of different generations who have insights and life experiences that may be helpful to other generations (midlife and older adults helping young adults and new parents with financial management and household management, or young people helping older adults navigate the digital and online world).
 - Involve the community in praying for a generation (on a mission trip or retreat weekend, celebrating a milestone, such as the birth of a child, marriage, graduation, retirement).
 - Organize social and recreational activities that build intergenerational relationships.
 - Sponsoring community-wide service projects that engage all ages
 - Include other generations in current age-group programs, such as mission trips, service projects, retreat experiences, vacation Bible school, etc.

Engaging Families

Develop a comprehensive plan for family faith formation utilizing one or more of these eight strategies that make families the center of faith formation. (For more see *Families at the Center of Faith Formation*)

1. *Discovering God in Everyday Life*: guiding families to reflect on God's presence in their daily life
2. *Forming Faith at Home through the Life Cycle*: equipping and resourcing families to practice their faith at home through prayer, devotions, reading the Bible, rituals, milestone celebrations, service, learning, and more (with activities and resources delivered online)
3. *Forming Faith through Milestones*: celebrating one-time milestones and annual milestones through experiences at home and in the congregation that activities of *naming, equipping, blessing, gifting, and reinforcing* (with activities and resources delivered online)
4. *Celebrating Seasonal Events through the Year*: celebrating church year seasons and calendar seasons at home, at church, and in the community (with activities and resources delivered online)
5. *Encountering God in the Bible through the Year*: reading and studying the Bible through Sunday worship and the lectionary, learning experiences, and at-home devotions and reading (with activities and resources delivered online)
6. *Connecting Families Intergenerationally*: developing intergenerational programs and experiences that engage families with other generations through learning, service, community life, etc.
7. *Developing a Strong Family Life*: cultivating a strong family life and strengthening developmental relationships through parent programs, whole family programs, family mentors, life cycle support groups, and online activities and resources.
8. *Empowering Parents and Grandparents*: developing parenting competencies and skills, promoting the faith growth of parents, and developing the faith forming skills of parents

Life Cycle Faith Formation

Develop age group and generational faith formation that addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of age groups and generations across the whole lifespan. In the 21st century a faith formation curriculum needs to be seen as *a lifelong journey of discipleship—a process of experiencing, learning, and practicing the Christian faith as we seek to follow Jesus and his Way in today's world.*

Faith formation is developed around eight primary faith forming processes that facilitate faith growth and incorporate essential knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. These eight process provide both a *framework* for a comprehensive curriculum with age groups across the life cycle.

1. **Caring Relationships.** Growing in faith and discipleship through caring relationships across generations and in a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love—in the congregation and family.
2. **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.
3. **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 .

4. **Learning the Christian Tradition and Applying It to Life.** Growing in faith and discipleship by learning the content of the tradition, reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one's faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world.
5. **Praying, Devotions, and Spiritual Formation.** Growing in faith and discipleship through personal and communal prayer, and being formed by the spiritual disciplines.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **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.

Missional Faith Formation

Design missional faith formation *expands and extends the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with people where they live—moving faith formation out into the community.* This involves developing targeted approaches and strategies designed around the particular needs and life situations of the unchurched and unaffiliated. These approaches and strategies need to be contextual—built around the congregation, community, and the needs of people. For example:

1. 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.
2. Open church events and programs to the whole community such as vacation Bible school.
3. Create a vibrant and inviting website and an active Facebook page to connect with people.
4. Connect with people's life issues and situations by offering career mentoring, job referrals, parenting courses, life skills courses, and more.
5. Connect with people during transitions and milestone moments such as marriage, birth of a baby, graduations, funerals, and more.
6. Develop high quality, relationship-building events designed to draw people from the wider community into relationships with people from your church such as social events, concerts, service projects, and children's programs.
7. 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.
8. Sponsor community-wide service days and service projects that are open to everyone.
9. Create digital initiatives that reach everyone such as conducting parenting webinars that are offered online.

Create *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 provides one example of a 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* cover the basics of Christianity in a multi-session course in a supportive small group environment. These types of programs and processes provide pathways for people to grow toward a life of discipleship and lifelong faith.

Digitally Enabled and Connected Faith Formation

Design faith formation that 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, peer experiences and programs, and daily/home life using online and digital media and/or reaching people at home and in daily life with online faith formation content and experiences that connect to church life and events.

Faith formation uses 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 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.

Blended Faith Formation

Online			Face-to-Face	
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

1. **Gathered Program with Online Content:** We can 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.

2. **Gathered Program and Online Content:** We can connect church programs or events with online content that extends and deepens the experience through learning, prayer, ritual, action, etc. Gathered events and programs such as Sunday worship, church year feasts and seasons intergenerational and family programs, classes, youth group meetings, mission trips, retreat experiences, and vacation Bible school would all benefit from extending the experience with digital content for learning, praying, celebrating, having faith conversations, acting/serving, and more.

Example: Provide a complete faith formation experience online connected to the life of the church, e.g., forty-day Lent “curriculum” that connects the Lent events at church with online content for experiencing and practicing Lent in daily and home life. For example:

Church Life Events

Ash Wednesday
Lent Sunday liturgies
Stations of the Cross
Lent prayer
Lent retreat
Lent service
Lent soup suppers

Daily and Home Life Activities

Fasting activities
Praying activities
Service/Almsgiving activities
Lectionary reflections
Lent study resources and videos
Lent devotions
Daily Bible readings

3. **Online and Gathered:** We can “flip the classroom or program” by creating a digital platform to provide the content that people would learn in the gathered setting in an online learning space using print, audio, video, and more. And then transform the gathered program using interactive activities, discussion, project-based learning, and practice and demonstration.

Example: “Flip the classroom or program” by creating a digital platform to provide the content that people would learn in the gathered setting in an online learning space using print, audio, video, and more. And then transform the gathered program using interactive activities, discussion, project-based learning, and practice and demonstration. One example is redesigning children’s faith formation so that children and their parents are learning online at home and doing activities together, and then refocusing “class time” to engage children in creating projects and activities that demonstrate their learning. Another example is designing a high school confirmation program that provides the content that used to be taught in the weekly sessions in an online platform for individual learning—watching videos, reading short materials, and writing a reflection journals; engages the young people in small groups during the month to discuss their online learning; and then meets monthly in a large group gathered session for discussion, interactive activities, and application of the content to living as a Christian today. During the year retreats, worship, and service projects offer additional gathered sessions.

4. **Mostly Online:** We can offer opportunities for individuals, families, and small groups to utilize the digital platform as their primary learning setting and provide opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings or in a web conference format.

Example: Offer six, one-hour parent webinar programs delivered to parents at home in four-month semesters: three webinars followed by a parent gathering at church; three more webinars and concluding with a parent gathering at church. Another example is developing an online

Bible study where groups can meet regularly in a physical setting or virtually through Skype or a Google+ Hangout for sharing their learning.

5. **Fully Online:** The rise of high quality and easily accessible online religious content—courses, activities, print and e-books, audio and video programs, and content-rich websites—has made designing online faith formation feasible.

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 publishers and organizations. Another example is providing 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, and more.

Lifelong Faith Resources

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Congregational Faith Formation Assessment

The Congregational Faith Formation Assessment tool provides a way for your congregation to examine how it is forming faith through congregational life, family faith formation, age-group faith formation, missional faith formation and leadership. Engage the whole team (and other leadership groups) in completing the assessment tool. Rate each item on a scale from poor practice (1) to excellent practice (4). Items that receive a rating of 4 (excellent) or 3 (good) indicate areas of strength. Items that receive a 2 (adequate) or 1 (poor) indicate areas for growth. Analyze the results and circle the items that are in need of attention and development (scores of 1 or 2) and items that your congregation wants to strengthen even if it received a score of 3 (good).

Part 1. The Congregation Creates a Faith Forming Culture

	Practice			
	1=poor	2	3	4=excellent
1. God's Living Presence: People experience God's living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service.	1	2	3	4
2. Discipleship: People learn who God is and come to know Jesus Christ personally; learn how to be Christian; and how to discover the meaning of the Bible for their lives.	1	2	3	4
3. Community: People experience a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love; characterized by hospitality, welcoming, love, and support.	1	2	3	4
4. Worship: People experience spiritually uplifting worship experiences that are enlightening, fulfilling, inspiring, interesting, easy to understand, and relevant in daily life.	1	2	3	4
5. Liturgical Seasons: People experience the Story of Faith through the celebration of the feasts and seasons of the church year.	1	2	3	4
6. Rituals and Milestones: People experience God's love through rituals, sacraments, and milestones that celebrate significant moments in one's life and faith journey.	1	2	3	4
7. Prayer: People experience the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and spiritual disciplines/practices.	1	2	3	4
8. Learning: People grow in faith understanding by learning the content of the Christian tradition, reflecting upon that content, integrating it their lives, and living its meaning in the world.	1	2	3	4
9. Moral Responsibility: People develop ethical/moral responsibility—learning about Christian perspectives on moral questions and how to apply their faith to decisions about what's right and wrong.	1	2	3	4
10. Service & Justice: People are engaged, locally and globally, in serving those in need, working for justice, and caring for God's creation.	1	2	3	4
11. Intergenerational Relationships: People develop intergenerational relationships and community where the Christian faith is shared, modeled, and lived.	1	2	3	4
12. Intergenerational Faith Experiences: People are engaged in intergenerational faith experiences and activities of worship, prayer, learning, and service as an integral aspect of congregational life.	1	2	3	4
13. Digital Ministry: People can grow in faith and discipleship through online faith forming content and social connections on the congregation's website(s) which provides content and experiences to extend participation in congregational life and ministries into daily life.	1	2	3	4

Part 2. The Congregation Equips Parents and Families

	Practice 1=poor 4=excellent			
14. Parental Faith: The congregation helps parents and grandparents grow in faith and discipleship, and practice a vital and informed Christian faith.	1	2	3	4
15. Parenting for Faith Growth: The congregation teaches parents and grandparents the knowledge and skills for forming faith at home: caring relationships, celebrating rituals and milestones, praying, serving, learning the Christian faith, and reading the Bible.	1	2	3	4
16. Parenting: The congregation equips parent and grandparents with the knowledge, skills, and confidence for parenting today, and how to develop a develop a close, warm, and affirming parenting style that promotes religious transmission at home.	1	2	3	4
17. Family Faith Experiences: The congregation provides whole family experiences that promote growth in faith and discipleship, and teach parents how to share faith and live faith practices at home.	1	2	3	4
18. Family Faith Practices: The congregation provides families with resources to nurture growth in Christian faith and practice at home: caring relationships, celebrating rituals and milestones, praying, serving, learning the Christian faith, and reading the Bible	1	2	3	4
19. Family Assets: The congregation strengthens family life by developing the assets that build strong families: nurturing family relationships, establishing family shared activities and traditions, maintaining family expectations and rules, adapting to daily challenges, and connecting to the community.	1	2	3	4
20. Digital Ministry with Families: The congregation connects with families at home through an online ministry (family website, social media) that provides social interaction and a variety of content (print, audio, video, websites) for family faith practices, parent faith formation, parenting, and family asset development.	1	2	3	4

Part 3. The Congregation Embraces Lifelong Faith Growth & Practice

	Practice 1=poor 4=excellent			
21. Lifelong: The congregation provides a continuity of ministry and faith formation across the whole lifecycle from children through older adults that promotes growth in Christian faith and discipleship in age-appropriate ways at each stage of life.	1	2	3	4
22. Programming: The congregation offers a variety of age-specific experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections for every stage of life 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.	1	2	3	4
23. Online: The congregation uses their own website(s), as an integral component of age-group ministry and faith formation, that extends gathered ministries/programs through online content (print, audio, video) and experiences, blends online and gathered activities in individual programs, and offers online-only programs, activities, and resources—all of which are available anytime, anywhere.	1	2	3	4
24. Children: The congregation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and religious/spiritual journeys of children through a variety of faith forming experiences and activities focused on developing caring relationships, celebrating the liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and apply it to life, praying, reading the Bible, serving /working for justice/caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community.	1	2	3	4

25. Youth: The congregation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and religious/spiritual journeys of youth through a variety of faith forming experiences and activities focused on developing caring relationships, celebrating the liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and apply it to life, praying, reading the Bible, serving /working for justice/caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community.	1 2 3 4
26. Young Adults: The congregation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and religious/spiritual journeys of young adults through a variety of faith forming experiences and activities focused on developing caring relationships, celebrating the liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and apply it to life, praying, reading the Bible, serving /working for justice/caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community.	1 2 3 4
27. Adults: The congregation addresses the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and religious/spiritual journeys of adults through a variety of faith forming experiences and activities focused on developing caring relationships, celebrating the liturgical seasons, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition and apply it to life, praying, reading the Bible, serving /working for justice/caring for creation, and worshipping God with the faith community.	1 2 3 4

Part 4. The Congregation Engages in Missional Outreach

	Practice 1=poor 4=excellent
28. Outreach: The congregation expands and extends the church’s presence through outreach, relationship building, and engagement with people who are not engaged in the faith community – the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated.	1 2 3 4
29. Outreach: The congregation offers faith formation targeted to the needs of the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated.	1 2 3 4
30. Pathways: The congregation provides pathways (programs, activities, experiences) 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 – guiding people as they move from discovery to exploration to commitment.	1 2 3 4

Part 5. The Congregation Has Faithful, Competent Leadership

	Practice 1=poor 4=excellent
31. Spiritual Influence: The pastor and ministry leaders know and model the transforming presence of God in their lives and ministries.	1 2 3 4
32. Interpersonal Competence: The pastor and ministry leaders build relationships and community in the congregation, as well as in their ministries and programs.	1 2 3 4
33. Competent Leadership: The pastor and ministry leaders demonstrate effective leadership by modeling the way—aligning values and actions, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process—being innovative and experimenting, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart of others—affirming and celebrating contributions.	1 2 3 4
34. Competent Ministry: The pastor and ministry leaders reflect superior theological, theoretical, and practical knowledge and skill for leadership in the congregation and their ministries.	1 2 3 4
35. Volunteer Leadership: The pastor and ministry leaders nurture the faith and theological knowledge of volunteer leaders, equip them with knowledge and skills for their ministry, and provide continuing support and mentoring	1 2 3 4