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A New Faith Forming Ecosystem

For more than one hundred years in the United States, Christian churches had a highly integrated religious ecosystem 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 ecosystem 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.

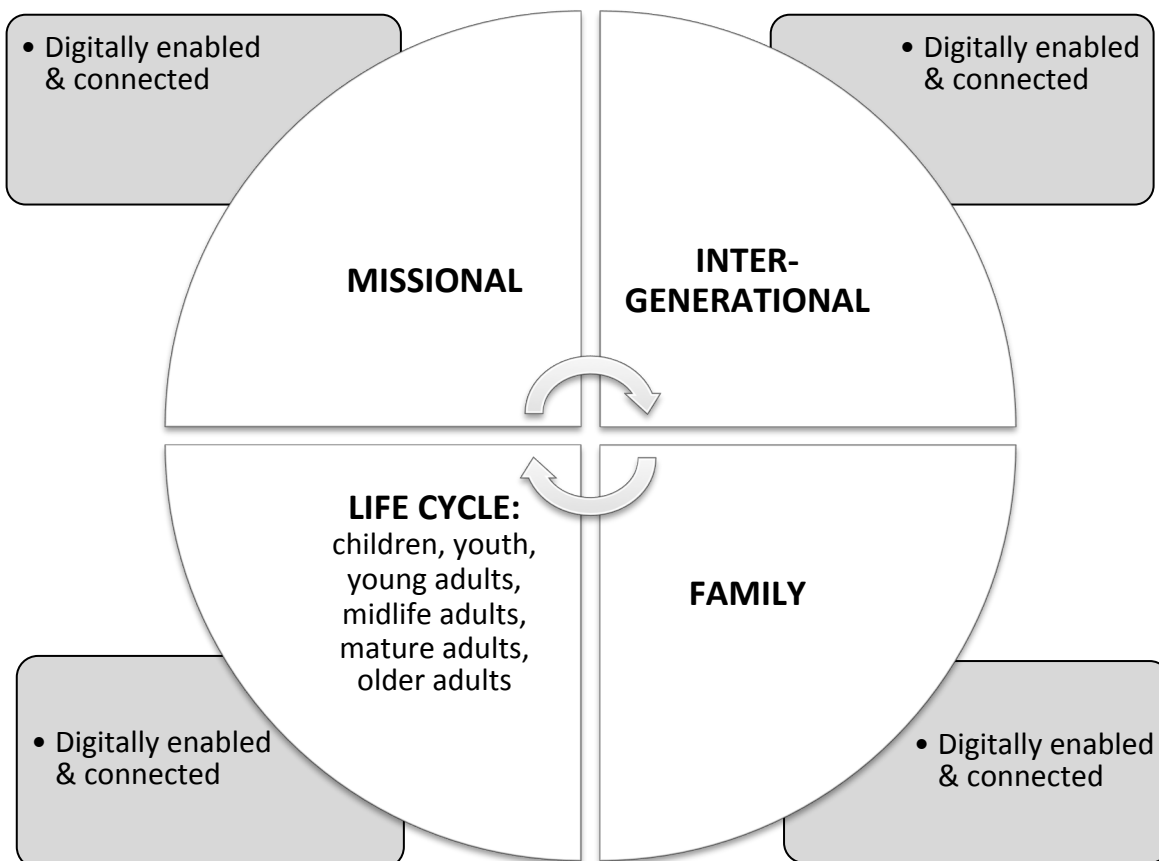
As the role of the church in faith formation took center stage, parents’ primary responsibility became bringing their children to Sunday worship and appropriate church activities, and supporting these efforts at home (“take home activities” to extend the learning). Parents were still involved occasionally 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 formation ecosystem that reflects the needs of the 21st century.

A new faith formation ecosystem 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 ecosystem 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 that provide guided participation in a community of practice with intergenerational learning, relationships, and mentoring
2. **Lifelong faith formation** in developmentally-appropriate and generationally-appropriate experiences, programs, and activities across the ten decades of life
3. **Family faith formation** that 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
4. **Missional faith formation** for the unaffiliated and the spiritual but not religious that 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. **Online and digital faith formation** that connects the components of the ecosystem, utilizes new technologies and digital 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.



Principles & Practices

☑ Focus on Maturing in Faith

Viewed from the perspective of the young person at 19 years old, we can identify at least thirteen characteristics of maturing committed Christian youth. These characteristics are drawn from research of faith maturing in young people and from the wisdom of the Christian leaders engaged in faith formation with children and adolescents. Although still very much in the process of maturing in faith, the young person at 19 is already:

1. Sustaining a personal relationship with Jesus Christ supported through regular prayer, faith sharing and Bible reading.
2. Making the Christian faith a way of life by integrating their beliefs into the conversation, decisions, and actions of daily life.
3. Possessing a vital faith and being aware of God present and active in their own life, the lives of others, and the life of the world.
4. Seeking spiritual growth by actively pursuing questions of faith, learning what it means to believe in God, and what it's like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.
5. Living a life of service by caring for others, reaching out those in need, and addressing injustice in the world.
6. Sharing the Good News through words and actions, through Christian stewardship and working for peace, justice and human dignity.
7. Participating fully, consciously, actively and regularly in the ritual and worship life of the faith community.
8. Articulating the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith and demonstrating a commitment to learning and growing in this faith.
9. Exercising moral responsibility by applying Christian ethics, virtues, principles, values, and social teaching to moral decision-making, life situations, and in interactions with the larger culture.
10. Practicing faith in Jesus Christ, privately and publicly, through participation in the congregation's worship, ministries, and leadership.
11. Discerning and using their gifts to actively belong to and participate in the life and mission of the Christian community.
12. Exploring God's call to vocation through prayer, reflection, and discernment.
13. Possessing a positive spirit with loving and hopeful attitudes toward others and life, convinced that they can make the world a better place.

These thirteen characteristics are foundational. They are developmentally-appropriate—realistic expectations for faith maturing in the first two decades of life. They provide the beginnings of lifelong process of growth in Christian faith and discipleship. They provide a perspective to view faith maturing in the first two decades of life *and* a guide to building developmentally-appropriate faith formation from childhood through adolescence that has direction and purpose.

But these characteristics are not the final word. These characteristics need to be contextualized within specific Christian churches and their traditions, within the specific ethnic-cultural traditions and identifies of faith communities, and within the unique socio-cultural needs of faith communities.

These thirteen characteristics are descriptive, not prescriptive. They serve as a guide for congregations to develop faith formation with children and adolescents. They provide a way to direct energy and attention to specific goals or outcomes. And they provide a way to develop a seamless process of fostering faith growth from 0-19 years old.

Develop a Comprehensive Approach

Faith formation is developed around the eight primary faith forming processes that facilitate faith growth and incorporate essential knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. These eight essential processes of forming faith – informed by Scripture, theology, research, and contemporary reflection – promote faith growth and discipleship with age groups, families, and the whole faith community. These eight process provide both a *framework* for a comprehensive curriculum with age groups, generations, and families; and the *content*—knowledge and practices—of the Christian faith.

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.

Use Multiple Environments for Faith Formation

Faith formation incorporates seven learning environments, in online spaces and physical places, to provide a variety of ways for people to learn and grow in faith that respects their preferred styles of learning, their life situations, and their time constraints. The seven environments provide a way to offer a diversity of programs in different learning 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:

1. Independent (on your own/self-directed)
2. Mentoring
3. At home
4. Small groups
5. Large groups
6. Church-wide
7. Community and world

☑ Personalize and Customize Faith Formation

Faith formation recognizes that learning is a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing within the individual. Faith formation recognizes that the motivation for learning is intrinsic to the person and is driven by a need for autonomy (self-directedness), mastery, and purpose and meaning.

Faith formation provides the opportunity for personalized and customized learning and faith growth, giving people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. People are guided by trusted guides who find the right programs, activities, and resources to match with their learning needs.

☑ Use Digitally Enabled and Connected 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 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 can now utilize digital technologies and digital media to engage people with faith-forming content anytime, anyplace, just-in-time—and extend and expand faith formation from physical, face-to-face settings into people’s daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems. Online platforms for adult faith formation (websites) integrate the content (programs, activities, resources), connect people to the content and to each other, provide continuity for people across different learning experiences, and make everything available anytime, anywhere, 24x7x365.

<p>Fully Online An online program with all learning done online and limited face-to-face, gathered learning settings</p>	<p>Mostly Online A mostly online program with opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings</p>	<p>Online and Gathered 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.</p>	<p>Gathered and Online Content A gathered event or program that provides online content and activities to extend and expand the learning from the gathered program</p>	<p>Gathered with Online Content A gathered event or program that uses online content as part of the design of the event or program</p>
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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.
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.

Networked

Faith formation is designed as a network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources—in physical places and online spaces—that offers people “playlists” of engaging and interactive content and experiences tailored to their needs and interests—all offered on a digital platform that makes it easy for adults to find and follow pathways for growth in faith.

- A network provides a *variety* of content, methods, formats, and delivery systems to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of people across the life span.
- A network approach offers a variety of settings for experiencing the content—self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world.
- A network approach integrates online and face-to-face learning, blending learning 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.
- A network approach utilizes an online platform to integrate, deliver, and communicate the content and programming so that people can learn and connect 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).

Curated

Faith formation is increasingly *curated*. In order to expand faith formation offerings, leaders will need to become skilled at *curating* content, experiences, programs, activities, and resources from a variety of sources—especially online and digital media—and becoming matchmakers by matching content with adult needs. We are moving from an emphasis on developing religious content, designing and managing programming, and teaching/facilitating learning to designing faith forming environments, designing digital platforms for faith forming content, and curating religious content and experiences.

Developing a Faith Formation Plan

Integrate the Eight Faith Formation Processes

- Caring relationships
- Celebrating the liturgical seasons
- Celebrating rituals and milestones
- Learning the Christian story and vision
- Praying and spiritual formation
- Reading and studying the Bible
- Serving and working justice
- Worshipping God with the faith community

Use Multiple Environments

- Independent/Individualized
- Mentored
- Family / At Home
- Small Group
- Large Group
- Whole Church Community
- Community and World

Design with Digital Strategies

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

Connect Intergenerationally

To become becoming more intentionally intergenerational in your lifelong faith formation plan utilize one or more of these strategies:

- 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.
- Make the intergenerational events and experiences of church life (worship/lectionary, seasons of the year, service/mission actions, prayer, etc.) the primary “content” and experiences for faith formation in intergenerational programs or age-group programs. Use a three
 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.
- ☑ 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.

Engage Families

To engage families in your lifelong faith formation plan utilize one or more of these eight strategies that make families the center of faith formation and provide the building blocks for developing a comprehensive plan for family faith formation.

(See Chapter 6 in *Families at the Center of Faith Formation*)

- ☑ *Discovering God in Everyday Life*: guiding families to reflect on God's presence in their daily life
- ☑ *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)
- ☑ *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)
- ☑ *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)
- ☑ *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)
- ☑ *Connecting Families Intergenerationally*: developing intergenerational programs and experiences that

engage families with other generations through learning, service, community life, etc.

- ☑ *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.
- ☑ *Empowering Parents and Grandparents*: developing parenting competencies and skills, promoting the faith growth of parents, and developing the faith forming skills of parents

Develop Missional Outreach

The first element involves expanding and extending the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with people where they live—engaging with people around their life situation (needs, interests, concerns), their quest for meaning and purpose in life, their drive to make a difference in world and in lives of others, and more. Developing 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.

- ☑ Creating a vibrant and inviting website and social media to connect with people.
- ☑ Connecting with people's life issues and situations through programs, services, mentoring, etc.
- ☑ Connecting with people during transitions/milestone moments: marriage, births, funerals, etc.
- ☑ Developing high quality, relationship-building events designed to draw people from the wider community and congregation into relationships: social events, concerts, movies, service, etc.
- ☑ Organizing 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, service groups, prayer or spiritual disciplines groups, support groups, and study-action groups.
- ☑ Sponsoring community-wide service days, service projects, and mission trips that are open to everyone so that people from the wider community can participate, interact with church members, and come into contact with the Christian faith in action.
- ☑ Creating digital initiatives that reach everyone such as conducting parenting webinars that are offered online.

The second element provides pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the Good News, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community. Missional faith formation guides people as they move from discovery to exploration to commitment. Programs like *The Alpha Course* covers the basics of Christianity in a multi-session course in a supportive small group environment.

Worksheet

Use the this worksheet as a guide for creating your plan. You may want to use a large sheet of newsprint/easel paper to record your responses. This will allow you to see the whole picture of faith formation in your congregation.

Intergenerational Faith Forming Experiences

Intergenerational faith forming events and experiences (relationships, community life, worship, learning, service, prayer, etc.) that will be included in your plan.

Family Faith Formation

Family faith forming experiences, events, programs, and activities at church and for the home that will be included in your plan; parent education and formation programs and activities that will be included in your plan.

Life Cycle Faith Formation

Developmentally-appropriate experiences, programs, and activities for children, adolescents, and adults that will be included in your plan. Programs or activities can address one or more of the eight faith forming processes, be offered in one or more environments, and employ one or more of the digital strategies.

Content

Developmental Need or Interest	Program or Activity	Family Connection	Intergenerational Connection

Programming

Eight Faith Forming Processes	Multiple Environments	Digital Strategies
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Caring relationships <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Celebrating the liturgical seasons <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Celebrating rituals and milestones <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Learning the Christian story and vision <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Praying and spiritual formation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reading and studying the Bible <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Serving and working for justice <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Worshipping God with the faith community	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Independent/Individualized <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mentored <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Family / At Home <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small Group <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Large Group <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Whole Church Community <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community and World	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gathered using Online Content <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gathered with Online Content <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Online and Gathered Content <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mostly Online Content <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fully Online Content

Missional Faith Formation

Developing outreach and relationship with the uninvolved and unaffiliated, and developing pathways for discipleship and engagement in the faith community.