

CHAPTER 2

REIMAGINING THE VISION

You may recall the famous opening sequence to *Star Trek Next Generation* voiced by Captain Picard, “Space. . . . The final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission, to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.”

This message captures perfectly the challenge for leaders in faith formation today. We need to embrace the continuing mission given to us by Jesus Christ: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

The goal of nurturing Christian faith in all ages and equipping people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world has guided Christian churches for 2,000 years. “Christian faith formation is a lifelong journey with Christ, in Christ, and to Christ. Lifelong Christian faith formation is lifelong growth in the knowledge, service and love of God as followers of Christ and is informed by scripture, tradition and reason” (*The Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation*).

OUR CONTINUING MISSION: MAKING DISCIPLES, FORMING FAITH

This robust, vital, and life-giving Christian faith is holistic: a way of the head, the heart, and the hands—informing, forming, and transforming people in Christian faith and identity.

32 Reimagining Faith Formation

- *A way of the head* (inform) demands a discipleship of faith seeking understanding and belief with personal conviction, sustained by study, reflecting, discerning and deciding, all toward spiritual wisdom for life. This requires that we educate people to know, understand, and embrace with personal conviction Christianity's core belief and values.
- *A way of the heart* (form) demands a discipleship of right relationships and right desires, community building, hospitality and inclusion, trust in God's love, and prayer and worship. This requires that we foster growth in people's identity through formation and the intentional socialization of Christian family and community.
- *A way of the hands* (transform) demands a discipleship of love, justice, peacemaking, simplicity, integrity, healing, and repentance. This requires that we foster in people an openness to a lifelong journey of conversion toward holiness and fullness of life for themselves and for the life of the world (see Groome, 111–119).

Congregations want Christian formation that *informs*, *forms*, and *transforms*; that immerses people into the practices and way of life of a tradition-bearing community where they can be transformed spiritually; and that engages all ages and generations in a lifelong process of growing, experiencing, celebrating, and living the Christian faith throughout life. While they may express this differently, Christian churches seek to help people:

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

Belonging—Behaving—Believing

How do we make disciples and form faith today? Most of us grew up with an approach that emphasized believing as the first step, then behavior, and finally belonging to a particular Christian tradition and community. Most of us are very familiar with this progression. Diana Butler Bass writes:

For the last few centuries, Western Christianity offered faith in a particular way. Catholics and Protestants taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belonging resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions. Churches turned this pattern into rituals of catechism, character formation, and Confirmation. At birth, Christian children were either baptized or dedicated, with sponsors and parents answering belief questions on their behalf, promising to teach them the faith. As children grew, Sunday schools and catechism classes taught Christian doctrine and the Bible, ensuring that each generation knew the intellectual content of the tradition. Eventually, children moved from Sunday school to “big church,” where they participated in grown-up church practices and learned how to pray, worship, sing, give alms, and act kindly. When a Christian child reached an age of intellectual and moral accountability—somewhere between seven and fifteen—the church would offer a rite of full membership in the form of Communion, Confirmation, or (in the case of Baptists) adult-believers baptism. Believe, behave, belong. It is almost second nature for Western people to read the religious script this way (201).

This approach has led people to believe that religious commitment begins when one assents to a body of organized doctrines—and that this assent to beliefs, precedes and takes priority over behaving and belonging.

This pattern is changing. We are returning to a much earlier approach, grounded in Jesus’ own ministry. “Long ago, before the last half millennium, Christians understood that faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two” (Bass, 203).

Jesus begins his ministry with *belonging* by calling together a community—a community of disciples who were asked to leave everything and form a new community.

Jesus began with the inner life, the heart. Indeed, when he said, “You will know the truth, and truth will make you free,” he was not speaking of a philosophical idea or set of doctrines. The truth is that the disposition of the heart was the ground of truth. Spiritual freedom results from a rightly directed heart, the self as it moves away from fear, hatred, isolation, and greed toward love. And, as Jesus also said, love is shaped through a relationship with God and neighbor, steeped in self-love and self-awareness. Faith, truth, freedom—all of it—is relational, not speculative (Bass, 205).

The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice—a community of living the Way of Jesus (*behaving*).

34 Reimagining Faith Formation

They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted, and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently (Bass, 207).

The beliefs that guide us as Christians are embedded in the community's life and the practices that give shape to that life and faith. Belonging and behaving lead to believing.

In the biblical pattern of faith, believing comes last. Indeed, this pattern repeats in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. From the calling of Abraham and Sarah through the great prophets and heroes of Israel to Jesus and the early church, those who walked with faith started by following, by becoming part of God's community, by enacting the practices of God's way, and finally by recognizing and proclaiming the glory of God (Bass, 209).

Relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief are forming a new vision of what it means to make disciples and form faith in the twenty-first century. This perspective is woven throughout the vision of faith formation proposed in this chapter.

Faith-forming Processes

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47).

We can discern at least *eight essential processes of forming faith*, informed by Scripture, theology, research, and contemporary reflection that promote faith growth and discipleship with age groups, families, and the whole faith community. The eight essential faith-forming processes—involving knowledge and practices of the Christian faith—facilitate faith growth *and* make a significant difference in the lives of children, youth, adults, and families. These eight faith-forming processes

are central to Christian lifelong faith formation. They provide a foundation to address the challenge of religious transmission from generation to generation, and promote lifelong growth in faith and discipleship. The eight processes include:

- **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.
- **Celebrating the liturgical seasons.** Growing in faith and discipleship by experiencing the feasts and seasons of the church year as they tell the story of faith through the year in an organic and natural sequence of faith learning.
- **Celebrating rituals and milestones.** Growing in faith and discipleship by celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones that provide a way to experience God’s love through significant moments in one’s life journey and faith journey.
- **Reading the Bible.** Growing in faith and discipleship by encountering God in the Bible, and by studying and interpreting the Bible—its message, its meaning, and its application to life today.
- **Learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life.** Growing in faith and discipleship by learning the content of the tradition, reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one’s faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world.
- **Praying, devotions, and spiritual formation.** Growing in faith and discipleship through personal and communal prayer, and being formed by the spiritual disciplines.
- **Serving and justice.** Growing in faith and discipleship by living the Christian mission in the world—engaging in service to those in need, care for God’s creation, and action and advocacy for justice.
- **Worshipping God.** Growing in faith and discipleship by worshipping God with the community of faith—praising God; giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world; bringing our human joys and dilemmas to God; experiencing God’s living presence through Scripture, preaching, and Eucharist; and being sent forth on mission.

Writing about the educational imagination in congregational life, Charles Foster supports a view of developing proficiency in these types of processes. He writes, “An education that forms the faith of children and youth builds up and equips congregations (and their religious traditions) to be the body of Christ in the world” (126). This involves engaging young people (and their families, and all adults) in the disciplines of developing proficiency in the ecclesial practices of worshipping God and serving neighbor; involving them in the practices and perspectives, sensibilities and habits associated with being the body of Christ in ministry in the world; and preparing them to participate in and celebrate Christ’s ministry as the focus of a congregation’s education (Foster, 126).

36 Reimagining Faith Formation

It's important to remember that these eight processes are interconnected. For example: caring relationships flow through every process; worship has elements of reading the Bible, celebrating the liturgical seasons, and learning; celebrating rituals and milestones incorporate learning, prayer, reading the Bible, and worship. Maria Harris reinforces this point in her discussion of the church's educational ministry: "When we say the words of justice and do the work of justice, our speaking and doing are credible only if outreach and service are associated with the more inner-directed works of teaching, learning, and prayer. At the same time, outreach and service combined with prayer and study ensure that the work of justice will be informed and careful, based on solid thought, serious scholarship, and intelligent probing. They can make us strong in the head as well as in the heart" (Harris, 45).

These eight faith-forming processes provide essential elements for a congregation's comprehensive, lifelong plan for faith formation with age groups, families, and the whole faith community; and for family faith formation at home.

Faith-forming Processes in Research and the Christian Tradition

We see these eight faith-forming processes in research studies that give evidence to their power in forming faith with all ages and in families. For example, the research findings in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* point to the power of the faith-forming processes within the congregation that develop maturity of faith in the lives of people.

- People experience God's living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service.
- People learn who God is and come to know Jesus personally—learn how to be a Christian, how to discover the meaning of the Bible for their lives, and how to pray.
- People experience spiritually uplifting worship experiences that are enlightening, fulfilling, inspiring, interesting, easy to understand, and relevant in daily life.
- People develop moral responsibility—learning about Christian perspectives on moral questions and how to apply their faith to decisions about what's right and wrong.
- People are engaged in serving those who are in need, locally and globally.
- People experience a friendly, welcoming, and warm community life that provides love, support, and friendship.

We see these processes reflected in the Christian tradition. In discussing how parents can fulfill their central duties, Marcia Bunge identifies eight best practices often mentioned in the Christian tradition as ways to strengthen a child's moral and spiritual development:

1. reading and discussing the Bible and interpretations with children
2. participating in community worship, family rituals, and traditions of worship and prayer
3. introducing children to good examples and mentors
4. participating in service projects with parents or other caring adults and teaching financial responsibility
5. singing together and exposing children to the spiritual gifts of music and the arts
6. appreciating the natural world and cultivating a reverence for creation
7. educating children and helping them discern their vocations
8. fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage (Bunge, 14–18)

We see these processes reflected in Maria Harris’s vision of the church’s educational ministry, embodied and lived in five classical forms.

Throughout history, reaching back to Acts 2:42–47, the church’s educational ministry has been embodied and lived in five classical forms: *didache*, *koinonia*, *kerygma*, *diakonia*, *leiturgia*. If we would educate *to* all of these forms, as well as *through* all of them, then attending only to any one of them, simply would not do. The fullness of the pastoral vocation demands that any ecclesial education must be one that educates to:

- *koinonia* (community and communion) by engaging in the forms of community and communion
- *leiturgia* (worship and prayer) by engaging in the forms of prayer and worship and spirituality
- *kerygma* (proclaiming the Word of God) by attention to and practicing and incarnating the *kerygma*, “Jesus is risen,” in the speech of our own lives, especially the speech of advocacy
- *diakonia* (service and outreach) by attending to our own service and reaching out to others, personally and communally, locally and globally
- *didache* (teaching and learning) by attention to the most appropriate forms of teaching and learning in our own communities

Should any of these be left out as full partners in the educational work of ministry; should any of these be downplayed; should any of these be exalted to the denigration of others, we will not be able to educate fully. All are needed (Harris 43–44).

38 Reimagining Faith Formation

We see these processes reflected in John Westerhoff’s vision of a *community of faith—enculturation paradigm* in which Christian education uses every aspect of the church’s life for education. “A viable paradigm or model for religious education needs to focus upon the radical nature of a Christian community where the tradition is faithfully transmitted through ritual and life, where persons as actors—thinking, feeling, willing, corporate selves—are nurtured and converted to radical faith, and where they are prepared and motivated for individual and corporate action in society on behalf of God’s coming community” (45). Westerhoff identifies three aspects of community life around which we need to develop educational programs: “the rituals of the people; the experiences persons have within the community, and the actions members of the community perform, individually and corporately, in the world” (45).

These eight faith-forming processes are central to Christian lifelong faith formation. They provide a foundation to address the challenge of religious transmission from generation to generation and promote lifelong growth in faith and discipleship. They provide essential elements for a congregation’s comprehensive, lifelong plan for faith formation with age groups, families, and the whole faith community; and for family faith formation at home.

These eight faith-forming processes are woven into each of the five elements of the new faith formation ecosystem proposed described in the next section.

Eight Faith-forming Processes



SEEK OUT, BOLDLY GO: FAITH FORMATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

We need to be willing to seek out new, innovative approaches for faith formation that engage everyone—all ages and generations in all of their diversity—and to be willing *to act boldly* to bring those innovations to life. Faith formation in the twenty-first century will need to create new models, approaches, resources, and tools to address the four big adaptive challenges described in Chapter 1. We will need an innovative spirit and a firm belief that we *can* provide lifelong faith formation for all ages and generations across a ten-decade life cycle; that we *can* address the changing patterns of America society (ethnic cultures, generations, families); that we *can* respond to the diverse religious beliefs and practices of people today; and that we *can* create new ways to promote religious transmission from generation to generation. We are called to be faithful to the continuing mission of faith formation while at the same time creating new ways to live that mission in the twenty-first century.

A New Faith Formation Ecosystem

Among the most important tasks for twenty-first century faith formation is to create a new faith formation ecosystem for the continuing mission of making disciples and forming faith across the whole life span. What is an ecosystem? “An ecosystem is a system formed by the interaction of a community of living organisms with each other and their environment” (Dictionary.com). It is any system or network of interconnecting and interacting parts. As an example of interconnecting and interacting parts, think about Apple’s “ecosystem” of hardware and software integration—how you can move seamlessly across Apple devices (computers, phones, tablets) using the same applications and accessing your content.

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

There is no way to go back to this older ecosystem. As we saw in Chapter 1, this ecosystem has eroded over the past several decades because of all the changes in the culture and society, the family, technology and communication, and more. The environment has changed, and the relationship between congregational faith

40 Reimagining Faith Formation

formation and its environment has changed. We need a new faith formation ecosystem that reflects this changed context.

The new faith formation ecosystem must be faithful to the continuing mission *and*, at the same, responsive to the challenges of the twenty-first century and the religious and spiritual needs of people today. This new ecosystem incorporates five, essential, interconnected components listed below and then explained in detail:

1. intergenerational faith formation in the congregation
2. age-group and generational faith formation in a variety of physical places and online spaces
3. family faith formation at home
4. missional faith formation to the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated
5. online and digitally enabled faith formation

The eight essential faith-forming processes (see page 38) are integrated into each of these components, providing both the processes for faith formation and the content—knowledge and practices of the Christian faith—of faith formation to facilitate growth in faith and discipleship in the lives of children, youth, adults, and families across the life cycle.

Intergenerational Faith Formation in the Congregation

Intergenerational faith formation and whole community faith experiences are at the *center* of the new faith formation ecosystem.

“Throughout Scripture there is a pervasive sense that all generations were typically present when faith communities gathered for worship, for celebration, for feasting, for praise, for encouragement, for reading of Scripture, in times of danger, and for support and service. . . . To experience authentic Christian community and reap the unique blessings of intergenerationality, the generations must be together regularly and often—infants to octogenarians” (Allen and Ross, 84).

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

Joyce Mercer, author and professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, asks the question this way: “What’s the best curriculum for forming children and youth in Christian faith?” She responds by focusing on the formative power of the whole Christian community.

We invite people into the way of life that embodies God’s love, justice, compassion, and reconciliation, by being, doing, and thinking about it together. The best curriculum for forming children, youth, and anyone else in Christian faith is guided participation in a community of practice where people are vibrantly, passionately risking themselves together in lives of faith in a world crying out for the love of Christ.

Guided participation in a community of practice puts a premium on both participation and practice. Watch children in play imitating the adults around them to see how even the youngest among us hunger to participate in the way of life they see enacted before them. That’s a good instinct to follow, because people—children or otherwise!—don’t become Christian by learning *about* what Christians do, say, or think (although at some point, particularly in adolescence and beyond, doing so can be an important part of deepening one’s faith identity). We become Christian, taking on the identity of one who is a disciple of Jesus, by acting the way Christians act, and by talking the way Christians talk. Over time through practice, even our hearts and minds are formed in this way of life.

Mercer makes the point that guided participation in practice isn’t just doing. It includes fully and actively practicing our faith in our everyday lives *and* making theological meaning out of the stuff of everyday life. In order to accomplish, we need places and ways to learn and inhabit faith stories.

Charles Foster writes, “A faith-forming education requires the interdependence of the generations” (128). This involves developing sustained patterns of intergenerational learning, relationships, and mentoring that develop young people’s identification with the faith community, give them memories of hope to enliven their future, and create their sense of responsibility for the well-being of the community and the earth” (Foster 128–130).

Foster continues, “The responsibility of mentoring the faith of children and youth belongs to the whole congregation in the full range of its ministries” (131). This involves highlighting the community as mentor/teacher in which no one, yet everyone, may move in and out of the interplay of teaching and learning, of forming and being formed. The clearest way of learning to be Christian is to participate with others in the practices of being Christian. Each member of a faith community may potentially mentor someone at the threshold of expertise in some shared community practice (Foster, 131–132).

42 Reimagining Faith Formation

The research in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* emphasizes the power of faith-forming congregational cultures where youth and parents come to know a living and active God through their relationships with God and the community. The young people in these congregations get to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Jesus. The power of faithful, multigenerational Christian relationships is at the heart of a congregational culture that develops and nurtures Christian faith in all ages and generations.

Most congregations are multigenerational by membership. Some are *intentionally* intergenerational. They make their intergenerational character a defining feature of their community life, ministries, and faith formation. These churches make it a priority to foster intergenerational relationships, faith sharing, and storytelling; to incorporate all generations in worship; to develop service projects that involve all ages; and to engage all generations in learning together. For these churches, being intergenerational is a way of life. It is an integral element of their culture. It is who they are!

Intergenerational faith formation and whole community faith experiences are at the *center* of the new faith formation ecosystem. Becoming intentionally intergenerational would:

- Form and deepen Christian identity and commitment as people develop relationships and actively participate in faith communities that teach, model, and live the Christian tradition and way of life.
- Provide a curriculum for the whole community—Sunday worship, the lectionary and church year seasons, learning, service, ritual and sacraments, prayer, and more—that is a shared experience in faith and belonging for everyone.
- Strengthen relationships, connections, and community across generations; enhance their sense of belonging in the faith community; and provide valuable adult role models for children and adolescents.
- Support families by surrounding them with a community of faith and engaging the whole family in a variety of faith-forming experiences together (caring relationships, celebrating, learning, praying, serving); and providing parents with opportunities to learn from Christians who are practicing their faith and raising faithful children.
- Strengthen the ability (confidence and competence) of parents and grandparents to promote religious socialization at home; be role models of faithful practice; and engage in faith practices at home and develop warm, affirming, and unconditionally supporting relationships between parents (and grandparents) and their children, teens, and young adults.

Charles Foster writes, “A faith-forming education relevant to the challenges of contemporary experience engages congregations in the preparation of their children, youth, and adults to participate in the events central to their identity as Christian communities” (135). A faith-forming education centered on events includes the practices of *anticipation* through stories from the past associated with the event, of *preparation* in which we develop knowledge and skill for participating in the event, of *rehearsal* of event, of *participation* in the event, and of *critical reflection* upon our participation in the event (Foster, 135–141).

Among the events central to the Christian community are the feasts and seasons of the church year, Sunday worship and the lectionary, sacramental and ritual celebrations, acts of justice and service, prayer experiences, spiritual traditions, and the events that originate within the life and history of a individual congregation. A faith-forming education that is centered in the events of the Christian community is intrinsically an intergenerational experience.

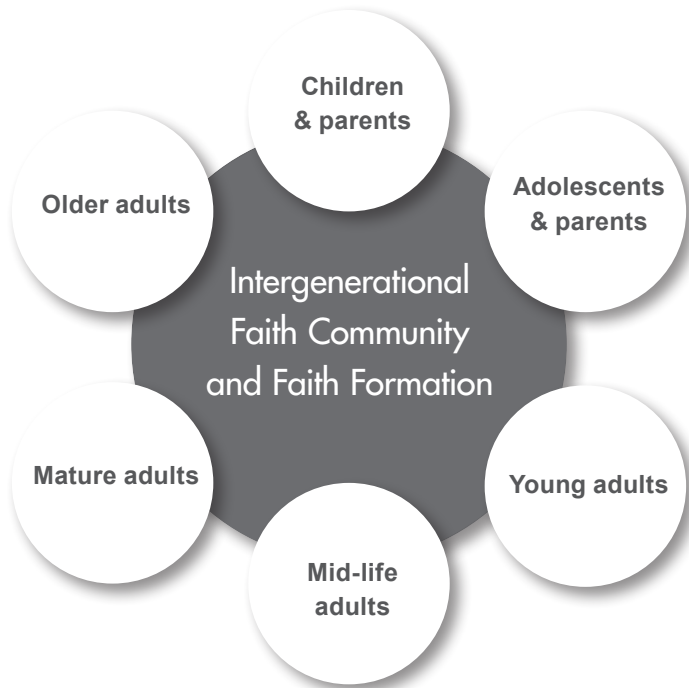
Intergenerational learning provides people of all generations the opportunity to *prepare*—with the appropriate knowledge and practices—for participation in the central events of church life and the Christian faith and to *guide* their participation and reflection upon those events. In a variety of formats—large group and small group—intergenerational learning provides a variety of activities to address all ages: developmentally-appropriate, experiential, multisensory, and interactive.

Age-group and Generational Faith Formation

Age-group and generational faith formation address the unique life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual journeys of age groups and generations across the whole lifespan. Intergenerational faith formation provides whole-community experiences and learning, focused on the central events of church life and the Christian faith, while age-group and generational faith formation addresses the unique needs of each stage of life. This provides a combination of intergenerational and peer-based learning and formation.

The eight faith-forming processes are a framework for an age-specific or generationally-specific curriculum. Instead of thinking of curriculum as content or themes, organized into sequential sessions and units by grade levels with textbooks, think of curriculum as the processes and practices that contribute to growth in faith and discipleship—a far more dynamic approach than a content-driven curriculum. Instead of thinking of classes and programs, think processes—how we guide people in living Christian lives today. The curriculum plan for each age group also includes “Life Issues” appropriate to that stage of life and “Discovering Faith” for initiatives to engage the “churchless” (spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated and uninterested).

Intergenerational Faith Formation and Age-group/Generational Faith Formation



Imagine an age-group curriculum designed around the eight faith-forming processes—each with developmentally-appropriate knowledge of the Bible and the Christian tradition, and experiential practice in the intergenerational faith community, at home, or as an age group. For example:

- People would learn about worship and how to worship; experience Sunday worship with the faith community and practice worshipping; and live the Sunday worship experience at home and in their daily lives.
- People would learn about the Bible and how to read it, interpret it, and apply it to their lives; experience the Bible at Sunday worship and at home; and develop their own practice of Bible study and reading.
- People would learn about Jesus and the Christian tradition—teachings, history, practices, what it means for life today, and how to live the Christian faith today; and experience the life of Jesus and the Christian tradition through participation in the events of church life, especially church year feasts and seasons.
- People would learn about prayer and spirituality and how to develop their spiritual lives through prayer and spiritual discipleship; experience the

prayer life of the faith community; and develop their own practice of prayer and the spiritual disciplines.

- People would learn about the justice issues of our day and the biblical and church teachings on justice, service, and care for creation; experience acts of justice and service with the faith community—locally and globally; and engage in the practices of serving those in need, caring for creation, and working for justice—as individuals, with their families, and with their church and other groups and organizations.

The age-specific curriculum engages people in the events of the intergenerational faith community—Sunday worship, the feasts and seasons of the church year, sacramental and ritual celebrations, works of justice and acts of service, prayer experiences, spiritual traditions, and events that originate within the life and history of a individual congregation—as integral to the curriculum.

Imagine a comprehensive, lifelong curriculum plan that is focused on the processes of growing in faith and discipleship that provides developmentally- and generationally-appropriate knowledge and practices; engages people intergenerationally in the life and events of the Christian community; and provides a focus for designing new programs and activities, as well as redesigning current programming, around faith-forming processes.

Family Faith Formation

The family is the single most important influence on religious transmission and faith practice—a truth demonstrated in research studies, the Christian tradition, and pastoral experience.

The reports from the National Study on Youth and Religion clearly show that the faith of parents and grandparents, their role modeling, and their teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious—are the key factors in developing highly religious children, youth, and emerging adults.

From the *Families and Faith* research (Vern Bengston, et al.) we learned that religious families are surprisingly successful at transmission (six out of ten parents have young adult children who report they have the same religious traditions as their parents) and that parental influence on religious beliefs and practices has not declined since the 1970s. We also learned that parental warmth is the key to successful transmission: a high-quality parent-child relationship leads to higher religiosity as demonstrated by the finding that parents who are felt by their children to be close, warm, and affirming are associated with higher religious transmission than are relationships perceived as cold, distant, or authoritarian. And we learned that grandparents will have an increasing influence on religious transmission, support, and socialization in the twenty-first century. Grandparents provide religious influence by replacing or substituting for parents' religious socialization—the

46 Reimagining Faith Formation

“skipped generation” effect, and by reinforcing or accentuating parents’ religious socialization.

Congregations need to equip families as centers of faith formation. Intergenerational faith formation and participation in church life can become a laboratory for immersing parents, grandparents, and the whole family in the Christian tradition, Christian practices, and Christian way of life. Participation in intergenerational experiences helps to develop the faith of parents and grandparents and increases their confidence and competence for engaging in faith practices at home. Intergenerational participation creates a shared experience—often missing from everyday life—of families learning together, sharing faith, praying together, serving, and celebrating rituals and traditions. Families learn the knowledge and skills for sharing faith, celebrating traditions, and practicing the Christian faith at home and in the world; and they receive encouragement for continued family faith practice at home. Congregations can then provide resources to help families share, celebrate, and practice their faith at home through the new digital technologies and media.

The family component of the twenty-first century faith formation ecosystem has three “curriculum” areas:

- nurturing family faith and developing the faith life of parents and grandparents
- strengthening family life by focusing on family asset-building
- developing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents (and grandparents) for parenting

A curriculum for family faith formation utilizes the eight faith-forming processes as a framework for organizing knowledge, experiences, practices, and resources to nurture family faith and develop the faith life of parents and grandparents. First, we can focus on the whole family and design the eight faith-forming processes—with activities, practices, and resources—so that they can be embedded into the daily life of families. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow makes this same point when he writes, “Effective religious socialization comes about through embedded practices; that is, through specific, deliberate religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community” (Wuthnow, xxxi–ii).

Wuthnow’s list of common family activities that surfaced repeatedly in the research include: 1) eating together, especially the power of Sunday meals and holidays; 2) praying: bedtime rituals and prayer, grace before meals, family Seder; 3) having family conversations; 4) displaying sacred objects and religious images, especially the Bible; 5) celebrating holidays; 6) providing moral instruction; 7) engaging in family devotions and reading the Bible.

Wuthnow found that spiritual practices were woven into the very fiber of people’s being; it was a total immersion. For these people, being religious was a way of

life. “The daily round of family activities must somehow be brought into the presence of God. Parents praying, families eating together, conversations focusing on what is proper and improper, and sacred artifacts are all important ways in which family space is sacralized. They come together, forming an almost imperceptible mirage of experience” (Wuthnow, 8).

We need to provide a variety activities and resources for each of the eight faith-forming processes delivered in different formats, but especially in digital formats, that can reach families where they live and where they go. We now have the ability to connect with families anytime, anyplace, and just-in-time by using digital content delivered to their mobile devices (phones and tablets). Because of the abundance of faith-forming digital content now available we can provide mobile content for a family to use at the dinner table, in the car, in the morning or at bedtime, or for a mom or dad to use while waiting for their children participating in sports, music, and arts (more about this later).

Second, we need to focus on parents. Parent faith formation helps parents and grandparents grow in faith and discipleship and practice a vital and informed Christian faith. This can happen through parents’ and grandparents’ participation in intergenerational faith formation at church and participation in church life. It can also happen through targeted programs of theological and biblical formation for parents and grandparents—at church or online—in a variety of learning formats to make it easy for them to access the educational opportunities.

Parenting for faith-growth training develops parents’ and grandparents’ faith-forming skills, teaches them how to parent for faith growth, and demonstrates how to be a role model for children and adolescents in the Christian faith. This skill building can be woven into each of the eight faith-forming processes so that parents develop skills and access content for developing caring relationships, celebrating the season of the church year at home, celebrating rituals and milestones, learning the Christian tradition, praying, reading the Bible, serving those in need, and worshipping as a family with the faith community.

A curriculum for family faith formation includes strengthening family life by focusing on the assets that build strong families. In *The American Families Asset Study*, The Search Institute identified key qualities, assets, which help all kinds of families become strong. The study found that strong families keep youth safe, help each other learn and pursue their deep interests, create opportunities to connect with others, teach youth to make good decisions, foster positive identity and values, nurture spiritual development, build social-emotional skills, and encourage healthy life habits.

The research study discovered twenty-one “Family Assets” that contribute to building a healthy and strong family life. When families have more of these research-based assets, the children, adolescents, and adults in the family do better in life. The Family Assets are organized into five categories:

48 Reimagining Faith Formation

1. *Nurturing relationships*: positive communication, affection, emotional openness, encouragement for pursuing talents and interests.
2. *Establishing routines*: family meals, shared activities, meaningful traditions (holidays, rituals, celebrations), dependability.
3. *Maintaining expectations*: openness about tough topics, fair rules, defined boundaries, clear expectations, contributions to family.
4. *Adapting to challenges*: management of daily commitments, adaptability problem-solving, democratic decision-making.
5. *Connecting to the community*: neighborhood cohesion, relationship with others in the community, participating in enriching activities, supportive resources in the community (*The American Family Asset Study*, Search Institute).

These assets can be utilized as the foundation for whole-family programs, parent programs, online resources and training, mentoring for parents, and much more—all directed toward building healthy and strong family life.

A curriculum for family faith formation includes developing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents (and grandparents) for parenting.

We know from the *Families and Faith* study that parents who demonstrate a close, warm, and affirming parenting style have higher religious transmission rates than cold, distant, or authoritarian parenting styles. In “What Makes a Good Parent?” Dr. Robert Epstein identifies the ten most effective child-rearing practices—all derived from published studies and ranked based on how well they predict a strong parent-child bond and children’s happiness, health, and success.

1. *Love and affection*. Parents support and accept the child, are physically affectionate, and spend quality one-on-one time together.
2. *Stress management*. Parents take steps to reduce stress for themselves and their child, practice relaxation techniques, and promote positive interpretations of events.
3. *Relationship skills*. Parents maintain a healthy relationship with their spouse, significant other or co-parent, and model effective relationship skills with other people.
4. *Autonomy and independence*. Parents treat their child with respect and encourage him or her to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.
5. *Education and learning*. Parents promote and model learning and provide educational opportunities for their child.
6. *Life skills*. Parents provide for their child, have a steady income, and plan for the future.

7. *Behavior management.* Parents make extensive use of positive reinforcement and punish only when other methods of managing behavior have failed.
8. *Health.* Parents model a healthy lifestyle and good habits, such as regular exercise and proper nutrition for their child.
9. *Religion.* Parents support spiritual or religious development and participate in spiritual or religious activities.
10. *Safety.* Parents take precautions to protect their child and maintain awareness of the child’s activities and friends

We can provide programs, resources, and support to help parents develop effective parenting and child-rearing practices that are conducive to building strong families and promoting faith transmission—offered in a variety of learning formats to make it easy for parents and grandparents to participate.

Intergenerational Faith Community and Family Faith Formation at Home



Missional Faith Formation

Missional faith formation focuses on the spiritual and religious needs of the “unchurched” and “de-churched,” those who are spiritual but not religious or unaffiliated and uninterested in religion.

Research and descriptions of the characteristics of these two groups (see Chapter 1) are now available. Among high school youth we have seen the rise of Avoiders and Atheists (*A Faith of Their Own*). Among the young adults in their 20s and 30s we have seen the distinct profiles of the Religiously Indifferent, Religiously Disconnected, and Irreligious (*Souls in Transition*); and the Wanderers and Rejecters (*Hemorrhaging Faith*). Linda Mercadante organized the spiritual but not religious into five types (from the least to the most spiritual): Dissenters, Casuals, Explorers, Seekers, and Immigrants. This research provides the basis for developing targeted approaches and strategies for connecting with and engaging the “unchurched” and “de-churched.”

Barna Research asked the unchurched to rate how much influence thirty different approaches had on their interest in attending a church. The three approaches that seemed to have the most positive effect were:

- developing relationships through an invitation from a trusted friend
- an appealing event—such as a concert or seminar—hosted at the church
- reputational appeal as reflected in ministries that serve the poor and providing mentoring and development for young people

Two additional ideas had moderate appeal:

- participating in a house church rather than conventional church ministry
- participating in a gathering of people from their same age group and general lifestyle (Barna and Kinnaman, 155–159)

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 de-churched. These approaches and strategies need to be contextual—built around the congregation, community, and the needs of people. Missional faith formation can reach the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated and uninterested by using adaptable strategies, such as the following:

- 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.
- Opening church events and programs to the whole community such as vacation Bible school.
 - Creating a vibrant and inviting website and an active Facebook page to connect with people.
 - Connecting with people's life issues and situations by offering career mentoring, job referrals, parenting courses, life skills courses, and more.
 - Connecting with people during transitions and milestone moments such as marriage, birth of a baby, graduations, funerals, and more.
 - Developing 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.
 - 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, theology study groups, service groups, prayer or spiritual disciplines groups, support groups, and study-action groups.
 - Sponsoring community-wide service days and service projects that are open to everyone.
 - Creating digital initiatives that reach everyone such as conducting parenting webinars that are offered online.

Missional faith formation provides pathways for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the good news, and to live as disciples in a supportive faith community. Congregations need to develop intentional and deliberate faith formation approaches that move people from discovery to exploration to commitment. Here are four examples that illustrate pathways for people to move from belonging to behaving to believing.

1. The *Catechumenate* of the early church, now restored for the contemporary church, provides a guided process moving from evangelization (inquiry) to catechesis (formation) to spiritual discernment (during Lent) to a ritual celebration of commitment (Baptism-Eucharist-Confirmation at the Easter Vigil) to post-baptismal faith formation (mystagogy). The formation component provides a holistic learning process: formation through 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. The journey from inquiry through formation to commitment

52 Reimagining Faith Formation

and a life of discipleship within a faith community is a process that can be applied to all types of situations and settings for people of all ages.

2. The *Alpha Course* covers the basics of Christianity, addressing questions like: Who is Jesus? and Why did he die? The Alpha course usually lasts ten weeks, with a day or weekend getaway in the middle. Each week, guests gather for about two hours. They share an informal meal, sing a few songs, listen to a talk on how Christianity approaches the question at hand, and then gather into small groups for discussion. The talks each week act as a springboard for small group discussions. Alpha is an open door to people outside the church. It's a way for those who are not believers or churchgoers to come and learn what Christianity is all about. It's informal and relaxed so people can drop their defenses and ask their questions. It's about exploration and discovery.
3. *Christian Life and Service Seminars* (C.L.A.S.S.) is offered by Saddleback Church to teach people what it looks like to follow Christ and give them tools they need for each step of the journey. Class 101 is an introduction to Saddleback Church, what the church believes, and how to become a member of the Saddleback family. In Class 201 people find out what it means to be more like Jesus, learn how to spend time with God through prayer and Bible study, discover the importance of tithing, and understand the value of community. In Class 301 people learn how God can use their spiritual gifts, heart (passions), abilities, personality, and experiences to help to others. Class 401 helps people discover their calling, learn how to share their story with others, write down their personal testimony, and see how to impact the world with Christ's love.
4. *Lifetree Café* offers people the opportunity to gather in warm and hospitable venues to explore life and faith. Simply put, it's a "conversation café"—a place and time for people to gather weekly to experience stories and talk about thought-provoking topics relating to life and faith. The hour-long Lifetree Café experiences feature stories of real people, guided conversation, biblical insights, time to build relationships with new and old friends, laughter, fun, and opportunities to serve. Lifetree brings people together to explore important and intriguing life issues, serve the community, and experience God through Jesus Christ.

Online and Digitally Enabled Faith Formation

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

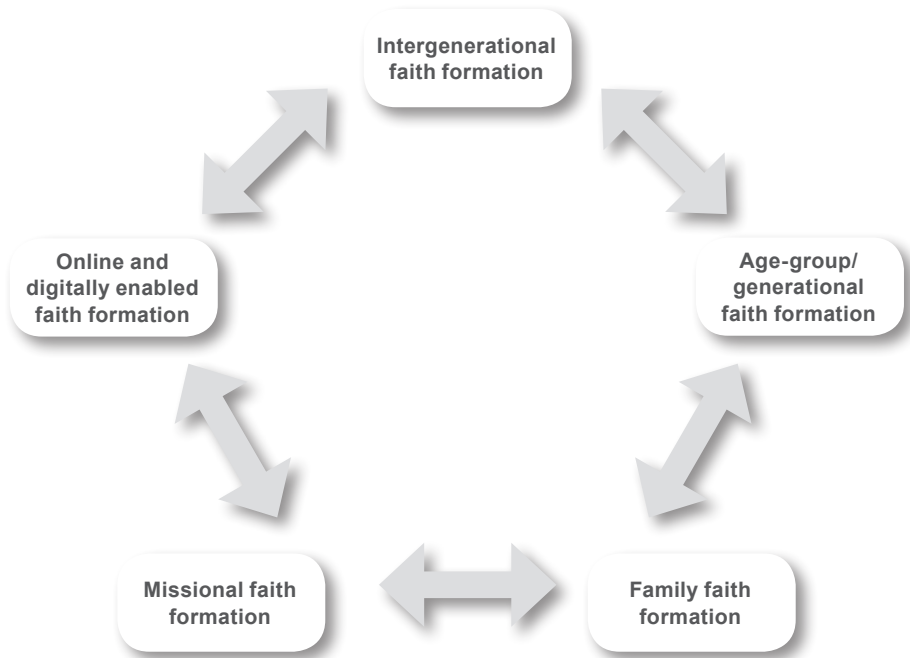
We have never had access to better technologies and resources for nurturing growth in Christian faith with all ages and equipping people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today. The new technologies and resources of the digital era provide tremendous opportunities for congregational faith formation to thrive in the twenty-first century. Just as an earlier era adopted the new technologies of the day—schooling and the printing press—to produce educational models using classrooms and teachers, catechisms and textbooks, the twenty-first century has digital technologies, tools, and media that can be utilized to create new models that will transform faith formation in a congregation.

We need to embrace **the abundance of new digital technologies and media for learning and faith formation** that is unprecedented in history—the Internet, Wi-Fi and broadband connectivity, interactive web platforms, mobile devices (phones, tablets, laptops), digital video websites (YouTube and more), social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more), online conferencing (Skype, Google+ Hangouts, and more), and digital tools for creating online classrooms, videos, games, etc.

We need to utilize **the abundance of high-quality digital religious content and experiences** found in websites, blogs, apps, e-books, video, and much more—created by individuals, publishers, congregations, religious organizations—and often free.

We need to create **new models of faith formation that utilize the digital technologies and digital media** to engage people with faith-forming content anytime, any place, just-in-time; and that can extend and expand faith formation in physical, face-to-face settings into people's daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems. We can develop blended models of faith formation that incorporate physical settings and online settings. These settings can be seen as a continuum: ranging from fully online programming to gathered programming in physical settings that use online resources. Blended faith formation usually combines online delivery of religious content and experiences with the best features of gathered face-to-face programs. Here is a view of the five models on a continuum (more about this in Chapter 3).

The New Faith Formation Ecosystem



A new model of faith formation and learning can bring to life interconnected components of the new faith formation ecosystem in a practical way for congregations. Chapter 3 introduces a network model of faith formation that seeks to do just this.

Works Cited

- Allen, Holly and Christine Ross. *Intergenerational Christian Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.
- Alpha USA. The Alpha Course (<http://guest.alphausa.org>; and http://www.alphausa.org/Groups/1000060778/For_my_Church.aspx)
- Barna, George, and David Kinnaman. *Churchless*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014. (also <https://www.barna.org/churchless#.VMdqTcZLzds>)
- Bass, Diana Butler. *Christianity after Religion*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012.
- Bengston, Vern with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris. *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Bunge, Marcia. "Biblical and Theological Perspectives and Best Practices for Faith Formation." *Understanding Children's Spirituality*. Edited by Kevin Lawson. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012.
- The Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation*. The Episcopal Church, July 2009. (www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/downloads/formationcharter_8.5x11_f.pdf.)

56 Reimagining Faith Formation

- Dollahite, David, and Loren Marks. "How Highly Religious Families Strive to Fulfill Sacred Purposes." *Sourcebook on Family Theories and Methods*. Edited by Bengston, V., D. Klein, A. Acock, K. Allen, and P. Dilworth-Anderson. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005.
- Epstein, Robert. "What Makes a Good Parent?: A Scientific Analysis Ranks the 10 Most Effective Child-Rearing Practices." *Scientific American Mind*, November/December 2010, (pages 46–51).
- Foster, Charles. *From Generation to Generation: The Adaptive Challenge of Mainline Protestant Education in Forming Faith*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012.
- Fuller, Buckminster. "Quotes." (http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/165737.Buckminster_Fuller)
- Groome, Thomas. *Will There Be Faith: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.
- Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me A People*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1988.
- Lifetree Café. (www.lifetreecafe.com.)
- Martinson, Roland, Wes Black, and John Roberto. *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. St. Paul: EYM Publications, 2010.
- Mercadante, Linda. *Belief with Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Mercer, Joyce Ann. "Cultivating a Community Practice." Patheos.com, August 13, 2013. (www.patheos.com/Topics/Passing-on-the-Faith/Community-Practice-Joyce-Ann-Mercer-08-14-2013.html.)
- Pearce, Lisa D., and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *A Faith of Their Own*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Pink, Daniel. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead, 2009.
- "Re-imagining Learning in the 21st Century." MacArthur Foundation, Digital Media and Learning Network, 2010.
- Saddleback Church. Class 101–401. (<http://saddleback.com/connect/ministry/class>)
- Smith, Christian with Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Syvertsen, Amy, K., Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, and Peter C. Scales. *The American Family Assets Study*. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2012. (<http://www.search-institute.org/research/family-strengths>)
- Westerhoff, John. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* New York: Morehouse, 2012.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *Growing Up Religious*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.