

An Agenda for the Future of Faith Formation

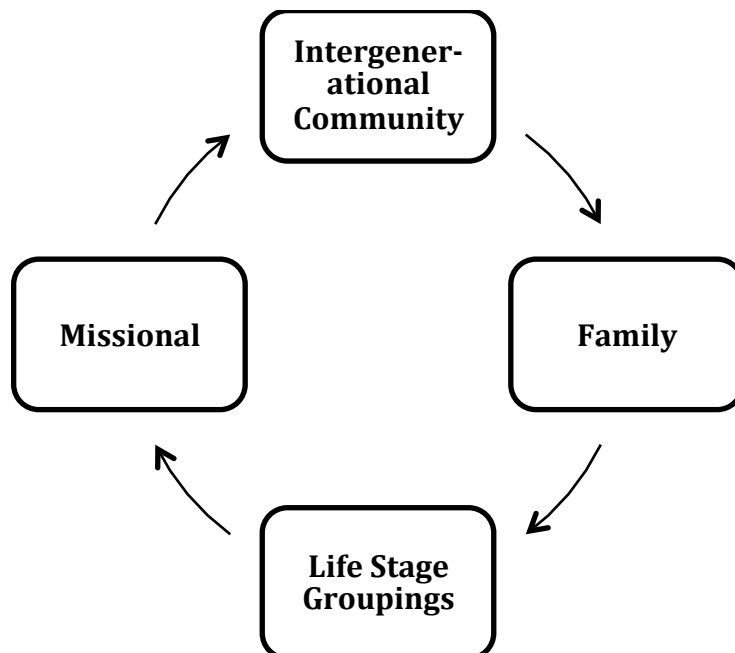
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We are on the doorstep of a new decade. So many of the trends and challenges we experience today were just emerging as this decade began: a ten-decade life span, the millennial generation starting families, baby boomers entering their “retirement” years, the younger generations leaving organized religion, multiple family structures and living arrangements, the diversity of ethnic cultures, the recognition of gender and sexual diversity, and more.

The arrival of a new decade is a good time to create an “agenda” for the future of faith formation. I am proposing seven areas for development on my agenda for the future. I believe these are important for the future of faith formation, and they are areas that I want to dedicate my time and energy. So here’s my agenda for action.

1. Developing a New Ecology of Christian Faith Formation

We know from research and practice that faith is formed in intergenerational faith communities, in families, in peer groups across the life cycle, and in missional settings where people are introduced to the Christian faith. We need to start thinking and acting ecologically in everything we do. For example, if we are creating a plan for children’s faith formation, we need to consider how we will engage children in faith community experiences with all generations (including worship), how we will equip parents to share faith at home and build families of faith practice, and how we will build relationships with and engage children and parents who are not involved in the faith community (e.g., baptized but not engaged). Once we have identified faith forming experiences in the broader ecology, we can identify the unique age-group experiences we need to provide children.



2. Focusing on Faith Maturing

We need to focus faith formation on the essential characteristics of lifelong growth in Christian faith and discipleship. These characteristics would incorporate knowing and believing, relating and belonging, practicing and living. With a lifelong vision of maturing faith we could address each characteristic in developmentally-appropriate ways at each stage of life. For example, if “*sustaining a personal relationship with Jesus Christ supported through regular prayer, faith sharing and Bible reading*” was one of these faith maturing characteristics, the task of faith formation would be to ask how we can accomplish this with children, youth, young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults. In this approach we would build our “curriculum” around the people and the faith maturing characteristics.

3. Personalizing Faith Formation

We need to tailor faith formation to the individual journeys of children, youth, young adults, adults, and families in order to address their increasing spiritual and religious diversity and life stage needs. One of the latest educational innovations is personalized learning, i.e., tailoring the educational environment—the what, when, how and where people learn—to address the individual needs and interests of each person. To personalize faith formation we need to create “faith growth pathways” that use the faith maturing characteristics and, with the help of a mentor or small group, guide people in discerning their faith growth needs. For example, if we took the characteristic “*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*” we could provide a tool that helps them discover their faith growth needs using a continuum from “exploring” to “getting started” to “making progress” to “going deeper” with short illustrations for each one. In this approach we would then develop a personalized faith growth plan—or what educators are now calling “playlists”—of content (print, audio, video, online) and direct experiences to address their needs.

4. Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational

We need to become intentional about strengthening the intergenerational character of our congregations and faith formation experiences. We can create a plan that (1) *utilizes* the intergenerational events and experiences of church life (community life events, worship and the lectionary, seasons of the year, service and mission projects, prayer and spiritual formation) as a primary “content” in faith formation by *preparing* people with the knowledge and practices for participating, by *engaging* people in the event, and by *reflecting* upon the meaning of the event and how to *live/practice* in daily life; (2) *infuses* intergenerational experiences and relationships into existing ministries and programs, such as age group programs; 3) *connects* the generations through 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. One area ripe with possibilities is to develop grandparent-grandchildren programming, such as a VBS, summer camp, service/mission projects, field trips, and more.

5. Empowering and Equipping Parents and the Family

We all know how important parents and the whole family are in the faith forming process. Today's families—of Gen Z children and teens, and Millennial and younger Gen X parents—present new challenges and opportunities. We will need to create new faith formation initiatives for the home, and learn from them what approaches and practices work best. There are proven strategies that can guide the development of comprehensive plan for family faith formation including: (1) *At Home*: discovering God in everyday life, forming faith practices, and celebrating milestones and rituals; (2) *In the Faith Community*: celebrating seasonal events, encountering God in the Bible, and connecting families intergenerationally (learning, service, community life); and (3) *With Parents*: developing a strong family life, and empowering parents and grandparents as faith formers. With the new digital tools and media we have the ability to reach today's parents and families anywhere and anytime with engaging and interactive faith forming content. (See *Families at the Center of Faith Formation* for the strategies.)

6. Designing Twenty-First Century Learning Experiences

We can dramatically improve our effectiveness in promoting faith growth and learning by using the new approaches and methods that are being designed by educators for twenty-first century learners of all ages—children, youth, and adults. We know today's younger generations learn best in environments that are interactive, participatory, experiential, visual, and multi-sensory. Among today's most promising educational innovations are *personalizing learning* (see #3), *blended learning* and *flipped learning*, *micro-learning*, and *immersive learning*. All of these new approaches and methods are enhanced by the use of digital technologies, methods, and media.

Blended Learning integrates learning in physical and online settings where a person has some control over time, place, path, and/or pace of the learning experience. One form of blended learning is *Flipped Learning* in which the content moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space (usually online), and the group space is transformed into an interactive learning environment for discussion and application. Congregations are already flipping confirmation preparation (learning online plus interactive group activities in gathered settings), extending gathered events with online content for continued learning, and providing online faith formation or live webinars for individuals or groups.

Micro-learning experiences are short-form—5, 10, 15 minute—learning experiences designed for anywhere, anytime learning that be combined into multi-part learning programs. Micro-learning experiences are one response to short attention spans and mobile learning. We can curate a series of micro-learning experiences (on a digital platform) to engage people in all types of faith formation content.

With the rise of anytime, anywhere faith formation content we need to ask what is the role of gathering people for faith formation. Today children (and their parents), youth, and adults can access online most of the content that we teach at church. One response to this new situation is to focus our gathered activities on creating *Immersive Learning*—faith-forming experiences that are interactive, participatory, experiential, visual, and multi-sensory. We have already been offering these types of

experiences—vacation Bible school, retreats, mission trips, and more. What if we expanded our immersive learning opportunities and focused our gathered settings on immersive faith formation in extended settings (half-day, full day, weekend, weeklong) offered throughout the year (but not weekly).

7. Embracing New Leadership Roles

We need to develop new leadership roles to match with the new approaches to faith formation in the twenty-first century. We are blending “traditional” roles like developing religious content, designing programming, managing programming, and teaching/facilitating programming with three new roles: *Architect*, *Curator*, and *Digital Designer*. We are becoming *learning architects* who design and/or identify environments which can become settings for faith formation, e.g., homes, workplaces, coffee shops, online communities, and more. We can design content and experiences to “deliver” to that setting. We are becoming *designers of digital platforms* (websites, social media) where people can connect with each other, access content, engage in learning activities, and more. These platforms provide 24x7 faith formation. While we may not personally possess these new digital skills, our congregations most likely have people who do. We are becoming *curators* of religious content and experiences. When there is an abundance of content, our role shifts from creator to curator. Curators are engaged in finding and identifying high quality content in all formats, matching it with the needs of people, providing the content on a digital platform (and often in gathered settings), and engaging people with the content.

So that’s my “to do list” where I want to focus my time and energy. Now it’s your turn. So what’s your agenda for the future of faith formation and how will you bring it to life?

About the Author

John Roberto’s life work has been in faith formation—first in youth ministry and now in lifelong faith formation with all ages and generations. He is on the leadership team of Vibrant Faith where he serves as the coordinator of training services and project coordinator of the “Certificate in Faith Formation for the 21st Century” – a two-year online ministry education program (www.VibrantFaith.org). His latest publications include *Families at the Center of Faith Formation* (editor and co-author, 2016), *Seasons of Adult Faith Formation* (editor and co-author, 2015), *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century* (2015), *Generations Together* (co-authored, 2014), and *Faith Formation 2020* (2010). He is the founder of LifelongFaith Associates (www.LifelongFaith.com). He can be reached at jroberto@lifelongfaith.com.

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