

Four Scenarios for the Future of Adult Faith Formation

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When the two critical uncertainties are connected in a 2x2 matrix, a set of four stories—or scenarios—are created to describe how the future of adult faith formation could evolve. The scenarios express a range of possible futures and explain why the “main story” of adult faith formation will be framed by the response to these two significant uncertainties. The scenarios are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive—rather they are designed to be both plausible and challenging, to engage the imagination while also raising new questions about what the future of adult faith formation might look and feel like.

The Future of Adult Formation Scenario Matrix

Response of faith communities to the increasing diversity in society

Embracing Diversity

Scenario 4

Faith communities embracing diversity
Adults uninterested in growing spiritually

Scenario 1

Faith communities embracing diversity
Adults interested in growing spiritually

Decreasing

Desire and interest of adults today in developing their spiritual life

Increasing

Scenario 3

Faith communities resisting diversity
Adults uninterested in growing spiritually

Scenario 2

Faith communities resisting diversity
Adults interested in growing spiritually

Resisting Diversity

No one can definitively map the future. We do not know which of the scenarios will rise in ascendancy over the next five years. *Will adults desire and interest in growing spiritually increase or decrease over the next five years? Will faith communities move toward embracing or resisting the increasing diversity in society and the adult population?*

Participants at the *Future of Adult Faith Formation Symposium* described the “world” of each scenario by describing what’s happening in the lives of young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults with special attention to their *desire and interest in growing spiritually* and what’s happening in the lives of the faith communities with special attention to how *faith communities are embracing or resisting the increasing diversity in society and the adult population*.

Scenario 1

The first scenario describes a world in which adults have a desire and interest in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are embracing the diversity in the adult population—including ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, and religiosity. In this world faith communities are developing approaches, strategies, and programming that respond to diversity and engage adults in growing spiritually.

Characteristics of Scenario 1

- This is a vibrant and inclusive faith community where everyone is welcomed and encouraged to belong, and where people experience hospitality, acceptance, and love.
- This is a faith community which honors and celebrates cultural diversity, and where cultural expression is abundant in all aspects of church life.
- This is a faith community that provides opportunities for learning, faith growth, and worship in languages of the people of the community.
- This is a faith community that address the life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of each season of adulthood—young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults.
- This is a faith community that offers a variety of content, methods, formats, and delivery systems to engage adults—in every season of adulthood—in growing spiritually, learning about the Bible and their religious tradition, serving the needs of others and working for justice, developing spiritual practices and disciplines, and much more. And all of this is customized around the interests, needs, and busy schedules and commitments of today’s adults.
- This is a faith community that utilizes online environments and digital tools to connect with and engage adults in spiritual and religious growth.
- This is a faith community that guides adults in identifying their gifts and strengths and utilizing them in ministry within the faith community and in mission to the world.
- This is a faith community that promotes adult discipleship and deepens adult’s relationship with Jesus through a variety of experiences and encounters, and that guides adults in living their faith in daily life.
- This is a faith community that incorporates adults fully into the intergenerational life of the community—developing relationships across generations, providing opportunities for mentoring younger generations, engaging them in shared learning, service, and worship experiences with the whole community.
- This is a faith community that is engaging adults in transforming the world—serving the needs of the poor and vulnerable, working for social justice, addressing racism and prejudice, and caring for creation.
- This is a faith community that helps adults manage and grow through the kinds of transitions, milestones, developmental tasks, and changes in personal meaning that mark the journey of adulthood; and that brings a faith perspective to the transitions adults are experiencing.
- This is a faith community that engages in missional outreach to adults who are spiritually open but not engaged in the faith community by expanding and extending the church’s presence through connection, relationship building, and engagement with adults where they live; and providing pathways for adults to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the Good News, and to live as disciples in a supportive community.

Scenario 2

The second scenario describes a world in which adults have a desire and interest in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are not embracing the diversity in the adult population (ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, religiosity, and more). In this world faith communities may recognize the desire and interest of adults in the spiritual life, but provide little or no adult faith formation for any adults or provide faith formation that is focused on a particular adult population, such as active adult members of the faith community or parents or older adults. There is little recognition of the diversity of the adult population or of the uniqueness of each season of adulthood— young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults.

Characteristics of Scenario 2

- This is a faith community that is not developing responsive approaches, strategies, and programming that address the diverse adult population and engage adults in growing spiritually.

- This is a faith community that may not have the staffing and/or resources to respond effectively to the diverse life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of adults.
- This is faith community that is finding it difficult to understand and accept the social, cultural, economic, and religious changes that have produced a more diverse population of adults.
- This is faith community whose adult members are (or have been) primarily from one cultural or economic group, but now finds itself struggling to adapt to changes in the lives of adults and in the adult population in their surrounding neighborhood/community.
- This is a faith community that sees their mission in faith formation to serve only the adult members who are active in their faith community.
- This is a faith community that is struggling to create an inclusive community where all adults are welcomed and encouraged to belong, and where people experience hospitality, acceptance, and love.
- This is a faith community with declining numbers of adults engaged in the life of the community, especially young adults, and an increasing number of adults who are participating occasionally in the life of the faith community.
- This is a faith community that is not engaged in missional outreach and relationship building with adults in their everyday lives.
- This is a faith community that is most often resistant to any type of change or transformation, preferring to rely on the “tried and true” ways, even if they are not working any longer.
- This is a world in which adults are finding opportunities for spiritual growth, service to others, Scripture enrichment, and more in venues outside the faith community—such as in online communities and resource centers, house churches, movements, social justice organizations and more.

Scenario 3

The third scenario describes a world in which adults are uninterested in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are not embracing the diversity in the adult population (ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, religiosity, and more). In this world adults experience little need for God and the spiritual life and are typically not affiliated with organized religion and not members of established churches. In light of this many of these faith communities have “given-up” on adult faith formation. They provide little or no adult faith formation for any adults, besides occasional opportunities directed to the active adult members of the faith community or parents with children in educational programming. There is little recognition of the diversity of the adult population or of the uniqueness of each season of adulthood—young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults.

Characteristics of Scenario 3

- This is a world in which adults lead busy lives filled with work, family, sports/leisure, and other activities, and find little need for faith or spirituality or involvement in a faith community.
- This is a world in which adults have a sense that they are self-sufficient and that there is no room in their life for faith or spirituality.
- This is a world in which adults have had negative experiences of church life—many feel rejected because of their lifestyle, others experience a lack of welcoming and hospitality, while still others feel churches are too legalistic or judgmental.
- This is faith community that does not understand and accept the social, cultural, economic, and religious changes that have produced a more diverse population of adults.
- This is a faith community that may not have the staffing and/or resources to respond effectively to the diverse life tasks, needs, interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of adults.
- This is a faith community with declining numbers of adults engaged in the life of the community, especially young adults, and an increasing number of adults who are participating occasionally in the life of the faith community.

- This is a faith community whose adult members are (or have been) primarily from one cultural or economic group, but now finds itself struggling to adapt to changes in the lives of adults and in the adult population in their surrounding neighborhood/community.
- This is a faith community that is not engaged in missional outreach and relationship building with adults in the wider community.
- This is a faith community that is most often resistant to any type of change or transformation, preferring to rely on the “tried and true” ways, even if they are not working any longer.

Scenario 4

The fourth scenario describes a world in which adults are uninterested in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are embracing the diversity in the adult population—including ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, and religiosity. In this world faith communities are working to develop approaches, strategies, and programming that address diversity and respond to lives of adults who are uninterested in faith and spirituality and uninvolved in the faith community.

Characteristics of Scenario 4

- This is a world in which adults lead busy lives filled with work, family, sports/leisure, and other activities, and find little need for faith or spirituality or involvement in a faith community.
- This is a world in which adults have a sense that they are self-sufficient and that there is no room in their life for faith or spirituality.
- This is a world in which adults have had negative experiences of church life—many feel rejected because of their lifestyle, others experience a lack of welcoming and hospitality, while still others feel churches are too legalistic or judgmental.
- This is a vibrant and inclusive faith community where everyone is welcomed and encouraged to belong, and where people experience hospitality, acceptance, and love.
- This is a faith community that engages in missional outreach to adults who are uninterested and unaffiliated by making connections in person and online, building relationships, and engaging with adults in hospitable environments for conversation.
- This is a faith community providing pathways for adults to consider or reconsider the Christian faith, to encounter Jesus and the Good News, and to live as disciples in a supportive community.
- This is a faith community that is equipping adults who are growing in their faith and active in the community to connect with adults who are uninterested and uninvolved.
- This is a faith community that is offering an array of life-centered programs and activities for each season of adulthood—young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, older adults—in a variety of venues.
- This is a faith community which honors and celebrates cultural diversity, and where cultural expression is abundant in all aspects of church life.
- This is a faith community that provides opportunities for learning, faith growth, and worship in the languages of the people of the community.
- This is a faith community that is engaging adults in the wider community in transforming the world—serving the needs of the poor and vulnerable, working for social justice, addressing racism and prejudice, and caring for creation.
- This is a faith community that helps adults manage and grow through the kinds of transitions, milestones, developmental tasks, and changes in personal meaning that mark the journey of adulthood; and that brings a faith perspective to the transitions adults are experiencing.
- This is a faith community which partners with other churches, synagogues, and mosques to learn how to live in a more diverse world and to serve the needs of all adults in the community.

The Future of Adult Formation Scenarios

Response of Faith Communities to the Increasing Diversity in Society

Embracing Diversity

Scenario 4

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Scenario 1

The first scenario describes a world in which adults have a desire and interest in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are embracing the diversity in the adult population—including ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, and religiosity. In this world faith communities are developing approaches, strategies, and programming that respond to diversity and engage adults in growing spiritually

Desire & Interest of Adults in Developing their Spiritual Life

Decreasing

Increasing

Scenario 3

The third scenario describes a world in which adults are uninterested in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are not embracing the diversity in the adult population (ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, religiosity, and more). In this world adults experience little need for God and the spiritual life and are typically not affiliated with organized religion and not members of established churches. In light of this many of these faith communities have “given-up” on adult faith formation. They provide little or no adult faith formation for any adults, besides occasional opportunities directed to the active adult members of the faith community or parents with children in educational programming. There is little recognition of the diversity of the adult population or of the uniqueness of each season of adulthood—young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults.

Scenario 2

The second scenario describes a world in which adults have a desire and interest in developing their spiritual life and faith communities are not embracing the diversity in the adult population (ethnic/cultural, sexual/gender, socio-economic, family styles, religiosity, and more). In this world faith communities may recognize the desire and interest of adults in the spiritual life, but provide little or no adult faith formation for any adults or provide faith formation that is focused on a particular adult population, such as active adult members of the faith community or parents or older adults. There is little recognition of the diversity of the adult population or of the uniqueness of each season of adulthood—young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults.

Resisting Diversity