

# Strategies for Adult Faith Formation

(From Chapter Eight in *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*)

## Caring Relationships

*Growing in faith and discipleship through caring relationships across generations and with peers in a life-giving spiritual community of faith, hope, and love—in the congregation and family.*

Cultivating caring relationships among adults (peers) and between adults and other generations (intergenerational) is an essential component of all adult programming. This includes an atmosphere of welcome, hospitality, and relationship-building in all adult programming. Caring relationships are developed in a variety of environments and program—through a variety of small group programs and support groups, through mentoring relationships (older to younger, and younger to older), through intergenerational experiences in the church community, through storytelling and caring conversations among peers and inter-generationally, through spiritual companionship and spiritual direction, through social events (dinners, festivals, activities), and much more.

*Support groups* are an important element of adult faith formation—connecting faith and life, and integrating life issues and concerns with pastoral care and faith formation. Support groups can address the various circumstances and/or challenges people experience in their lives and offer the encouragement and assistance of others who are facing or who have faced similar situations and difficulties. Support groups can be developed or encouraged around a variety of adult life roles, issues, interests, and transitions, such as parents, caregivers, divorce and remarriage, unemployment, careers, and much more.

## Celebrating Milestones and Transitions

*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.*

Milestones are significant moments in life's journey that provide the opportunity for adults to experience God's love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Milestones faith formation has five elements:

1. *Naming* the sacred and ordinary events that take place in daily life—beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage, and creating rituals and traditions that shape our identities and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
2. *Equipping* brings people together for learning, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides information. Opportunities are provided here to model faith practices for daily life and home life.
3. *Blessing* the individual and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home, says that it is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred. Offer a prayer to bless the lives of those involved in the milestone moment: a prayer during worship for those participating in the milestone moment and a prayer at a small group or with family at home.

4. *Gifting* offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life.
5. *Reinforcing* the milestone with a follow-up gathering of those involved in the milestone moment to help it gain deeper roots in the life of faith of those who participated.

Adulthood is filled with milestones and transitions. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to “finish unfinished business” or develop new dimensions of their lives. Addressing the needs of people in transition provides important opportunities for adult faith formation by bringing a faith perspective to the transitions adults are experiencing. Adults are motivated when facing life transitions. They seek learning and support to cope with changes in their lives that give rise to new developmental tasks. Consider the following milestone and transitions in adulthood and the potential for developing adult faith formation around these events:

- graduating from college or technical school
- returning from military deployment
- getting married
- birth of a child/adoption of a child
- raising children
- owning a first home
- starting a new job/job changes
- anniversary of marriage
- financial matters
- divorce
- serious illness
- becoming a grandparent
- becoming an empty nest household
- retirement
- caring for an aging parent
- death of a spouse or family member

## Learning the Christian Tradition and Reading the Bible

*Growing in faith and discipleship by learning the content of the tradition (Trinity, Jesus, church, beliefs, morality and ethics), reflecting upon that content, integrating it into one's faith life, applying it to life today, and living its meaning in the world. . . 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.*

Adult programming focused on learning the Christian tradition and reading the Bible is developed around the principles of effective adult learning and can be offered in online and physical settings and in the seven learning environments. Adult programming facilitates a deeper sense of intimacy with Jesus, fosters a deeper understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith, and explores how the Bible and the Christian tradition provides wisdom for living a meaningful life today.

Adult programming can focus on a wide range of topics and themes relevant to adults at each stage of adulthood:

- *Life Issues*: strengths and gifts development, finances and financial security, physical health and exercise, personal interests, marital relationship, family relationships, wellness, aging

- *Milestones and Life Transitions*: marriage, birth/baptism of a children, jobs and careers, changing living situations, midlife crisis, illness, divorce, empty-nest household, becoming a grandparent, retirement, successful aging, becoming a caregiver
- *Faith Enrichment*: Bible study, Christian teachings, morality and ethics, Christian practices, theological exploration, sharing faith with children and grandchildren
- *Spiritual Enrichment*: spiritual life tasks at each stage of adulthood, prayer practices, spiritual disciplines, retreat experiences, aging as a spiritual process

## Praying and Spiritual Formation

*Growing in faith and discipleship through personal and communal prayer, and being formed by the spiritual disciplines.*

Adult programming can engage adults in learning about and practicing historic Christian spiritual disciplines and in developing a “rule of life” that allows for regular space for the practice of the spiritual disciplines. Adult programming can offer spiritual formation for adults that includes education in the spiritual disciplines and practices, retreat experiences, spiritual guides who serve as mentors on the spiritual journey, and resources on the spiritual disciplines and practices.

Churches can develop the spiritual life of all adults through the intentional teaching of spiritual practices and disciplines in age-appropriate ways by focusing on essential spiritual practices such as Lectio Divina, Scripture reflection, spiritual reading, contemplation, fixed-hour prayer, the examen, solitude and silence, Sabbath, praying with art and music, discernment, fasting, and prayer styles and traditions. Adult programming can utilize a variety of models to teach spiritual practices and disciplines, such as individualized growth plans, online spiritual formation centers and resources, one-on-one spiritual direction or mentoring, small group spiritual formation, retreats, and large group programs (courses, workshops).

Spiritual formation programming can be targeted to specific stages of life, such as programs, activities, and resources that encourage adults to explore a midlife crisis as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Programs and resources can help midlife adults reflect deeply on the path their lives have taken up to this point and about the goals they set earlier in life—career goals, community participation goals, intimacy goals, family goals, personal goals, and faith goals. These goals can be clarified and evaluated at midlife. How have they been met? Are they still unmet? Are they goals worth keeping? Are there new goals that need to be established?

Another example is “spirituality for the second half of life”—providing formation in spiritual disciplines and practices for the second half of life through educational programs, retreat experiences, spiritual guides who serve as mentors on the spiritual journey, and resources on the spiritual disciplines and practices.

## Serving, Working for Justice, Caring for Creation

*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, including community organizing for justice.*

Adult programming can offer service and justice projects that are *developmental* in scope with projects geared to different levels of involvement and challenge:

- local mission projects lasting anywhere from a few hours to one day in length

- short-term mission trips lasting anywhere from two to five days and requiring an overnight stay on location
- weeklong mission trips within the United States as well as to foreign countries, designed for those who are ready to take the next big step in service
- global expedition trips of ten to fourteen days that provide the opportunity to be immersed for a longer period in the targeted community and culture
- personalized small group mission trips, organized around the interests and time of the group

Adult service and justice programming incorporate social analysis and theological reflection with action projects to guide people in developing a deeper understanding of the causes of injustice and the teachings of Scripture and the Christian tradition. The process includes: 1) connect to a social issue (*experience*)—how people are personally affected by an issue or how the issue affects others, 2) explore the social issue (*social analysis*) to understand the causes and underlying factors that promote or sustain the issue; 3) reflect upon the teachings of Scripture and the Christian tradition (*theological reflection*) to develop a faith perspective on the social issue and how people of faith can address the issue; and 4) develop ways to address the issue (*action*) by working for social change and serving those in need as individuals, groups, communities, and/or organizations. The process can begin with a service involvement, leading to social analysis and theological reflection *or* it can begin with people’s experience of a social issue, leading to analysis of the issue, connecting the issue to the faith tradition, and developing action projects of direct service to those in need, and social change and advocacy. (For more information on the process see *Social Analysis—Linking Faith and Justice* by Joseph Holland and Peter Henriot.)

## Worshipping and Celebrating the Liturgical Seasons

*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. . . 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.*

Authentic and meaningful worship enhances faith growth, and purposeful faith formation draws one into deeper and more profound worship. As the faith community journeys through the year, the events of church life provide an organic and natural sequence of faith learning for the whole community. Truly effective faith formation is anchored in the events of church life, the majority of which are marked and celebrated in the context of worship. How the community prays reveals how the community learns, and vice versa. Adult faith formation makes worship and the seasons of the liturgical year central to programming, especially designing learning experiences that connect to Sunday worship and the content of the liturgical year feasts and seasons (see Guide 8 below).

## Intergenerational Programming in Adult Faith Formation

Intergenerational programming engages adults in the life and events of church life and the Christian faith through participation in the intergenerational faith experiences. Adults 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* provide a natural rhythm and calendar to the curriculum: Advent and Christmas seasons, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, Call of the Disciples, Ash Wednesday, Lenten season, Holy Week, Easter, Easter season, Pentecost, All Saints and All Souls, and remembrances of saints and holy people throughout the year.
- *Sunday worship and the lectionary* provide a rich curriculum for the whole community with its cycle of weekly Scripture readings.
- *Ritual, milestone, and sacramental celebrations* provide events rich in theological meaning and faith practice that celebrate the faith journey throughout life.
- *Acts of service and justice*—locally and globally—provide a focus on mission to the world and put in action biblical and church teachings on service, justice, and care for the earth.
- *Prayer and spiritual traditions* provide times for reflection, praying as a community, and living the practices of the spiritual life through the community's life together.
- *Congregational events* that originate within the life and history of an individual congregation can create community.

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

**Second**, adult faith formation can connect adult-specific programming with engagement in the intergenerational life and events of the faith community. For example:

- Adults 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.
- Adults 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.
- Adults would learn about Jesus and the Christian tradition—teachings, history, practices, what it means for life today, and how to live the Christian faith; and experience the life of Jesus and the Christian tradition through participation in the events of church life, especially church year feasts and seasons.
- Adults 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.
- Adults 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 peers, with their families, and with their church and other groups and organizations.

**Third**, adult faith formation can enhance intergenerational relationships and ministry in the community by:

- Incorporating intergenerational dialogues into programming—providing opportunities for children and youth to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of older adults through presentations, performances, and discussions. And then reversing the process

and providing opportunities for the older adults to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of children or teens through presentations, performances, and discussions.

- Developing mentoring relationships between adults and children/youth, such as prayer partners, learning-to-pray spiritual direction, service involvements, and confirmation mentors.
- Linking people of different generations (older-to-younger or younger-to-older) in the church who have insights and life experiences that may be helpful to the other, such as 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.
- Involving the community in praying for each generation, for example when people leave on a mission trip or retreat weekend or when people celebrate a milestone, such as the birth of a child, a marriage, a graduation, and a retirement.
- Organizing social and recreational activities that build intergenerational relationships, such as an intergenerational Olympics, a Friday night simple meal during Lent, or a summer film festival (maybe outdoors on a large screen).
- Offering mission trips for adults and young people.
- Conducting a church-wide or community-wide intergenerational fundraising project to support the efforts of groups who work directly with the poor.
- Developing intergenerational justice teams to advocate for just policies and priorities that protect human life, promote human dignity, preserve God’s creation, and build peace.
- Sponsoring community-wide service projects that engage all ages.

**Fourth**, it is important to involve parents, grandparents, and the whole family in the intergenerational faith community where their participation in church life can become a “laboratory” for immersing them 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.

## Family Programming in Adult Faith Formation

At each stage of adulthood there are significant family life issues and transitions that can be the focus of adult faith formation programming. Congregations can assist parents and grandparents in nurturing faith family life, developing their faith life, strengthening family strengths and assets, and developing skills for parenting. Congregations can develop targeted faith formation strategies for single-person families (and to non-kindred adults living together as a family). This is an important need for older adults whose spouse or partner has died and is not a single-person family.

**First**, congregations 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. Provide a variety of 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. Congregations can connect with families

anytime, anyplace, and just-in-time by using digital content delivered to their mobile devices (phones and tablets). Ask: How are we providing 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 they wait for their children participating in sports, music, arts? This is possible today because of the abundance of faith forming digital content available.

**Second**, congregations can focus on parents and grandparents. *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.

**Third**, congregations can strengthen family life by focusing on the assets that build strong families. In *The American Families Asset Study*, the Search Institute identified twenty-one key qualities, assets, which help all kinds of families become strong. When families have more of these research-based assets, the children, adolescents, and adults in the family do better in life. The Family Assets include:

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

**Fourth**, congregation can assist parents and grandparents develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence for parenting. Parents and grandparents 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.

## Missional Initiatives in Adult Faith Formation

Adult faith formation is *missional*—expanding and extending the church's presence through outreach, connection, relationship building, and engagement with adults where they live and providing 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

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 on the potential for returning to church were: 1) developing relationships (an invitation from a trusted friend), 2) an appealing event—such as a concert or seminar—hosted at the church, and 3) 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, and participating in a gathering of people from their same age group and general lifestyle (Barna and Kinnaman, 155–9).

**First**, missional faith formation involves developing targeted approaches and strategies designed around the particular needs and life situations of the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated. Congregations can reach the spiritual but not religious and the unaffiliated and uninterested by using adaptable strategies, such as the following:

- Develop community settings for church ministries and faith formation by celebrating weekly worship in a community center, offering courses and workshops in a school or community center or coffee shop, and more.
- Create a vibrant and inviting website and an active Facebook page (and other social media) to connect with people.
- Connect with people's life issues and situations by offering career mentoring, job referrals, parenting courses, life skills courses, and more.
- Connect with people during transitions and milestone moments such as marriage, birth of a baby, graduations, funerals, and more.
- Develop high quality, relationship-building events designed to draw people from the wider community into relationships with people from your church such as social events, concerts, service projects, and children's programs.
- Organize small groups on a variety of themes from life-centered to faith-centered that meet in a variety of locations (homes, coffee shops, community centers), for example: life situation groups (moms, dads), interest or activity groups, discipleship groups, spiritual sharing groups, Bible study groups, theology study groups, service groups, prayer or spiritual disciplines groups, support groups, and study-action groups.
- Sponsor 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.



- Create digital initiatives that reach everyone such as conducting parenting webinars that are offered online.

Make contact with those not engaged in the church community by establishing third-place settings in the community that offer hospitality, build relationships, host spiritual conversations, provide programs and activities, and nourish the spiritual life of people. A third place is the ideal setting for groups to gather, each with its own focus. Some groups emphasize studying the Bible and deepening knowledge of the faith; others emphasize expressive and artistic activities (making music, creating art or writing poetry); others are organized around a lifestyle or common interest. Some are on a contemplative path (gathering for evening prayers or spiritual exercises), while others are on an active path (working at soup kitchens, tutoring kids, building houses). Program offerings can include spiritual formation programs, life-centered clinics and workshops (for example, marriage enrichment, parenting, divorce and separation, bereavement, life and career planning, financial planning, recovery programs, dealing with depression), and an “Introduction to the Christian Faith Course” (see next paragraph).

**Second**, congregations can provide 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. One example of this process is an “Introduction to the Christian faith” program—an opportunity for people to investigate the claims of the Christian faith in an informal, no pressure, nonjudgmental, and friendly environment. The emphasis is upon exploration and discovery in a relaxed and informal setting and does not assume any background knowledge or belief in Christianity. It can be offered in a variety of settings, formats, and times. (Programs like *The Alpha Course* and *Living the Questions* are examples of this.)

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 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.

**Third**, congregations can offer an apprenticeship in discipleship for adults who want to grow in relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian way of life. An “apprenticeship process” is designed to help adults grow as disciples by helping them understand who God is, what it means to be a Christian, and what it means to live in the Christian community. An apprenticeship often incorporates one-on-one mentoring, small group sharing, personal study, prayer, and retreat experiences.

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