

# Envisioning the Future of Faith Formation in Your Congregation

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Imagine faith formation today in a church community. A variety of high-quality faith formation programs for grade-school children, youth, and adults are offered throughout the year. The children's program consists of weekly classes and occasional special activities and events. The youth program is a mix of confirmation classes, youth meetings, service projects, and special events and trips. Adult programs include courses on a variety of topics, seasonal presentations like a Lenten series, and small group Bible study. Family programs are offered several times a year to connect families with the celebration of the church year seasons. In the summer, children and their parents participate in a Vacation Bible School program, while young people are engaged in service projects and mission trips locally and across the country. Milestones and sacraments provide opportunities for faith formation at baptism, first communion, receiving the first Bible, and confirmation. For people interested in becoming Christian, there is a yearlong process of faith formation to prepare them for baptism and joining the church.

It is a huge undertaking for the church and their faith formation leaders to provide this level of faith formation programming. But is it enough? Even though the community is very positive and supportive of faith formation and the great work that is being done, there is a feeling among the leaders that something is missing. They are working harder and providing more programming but not achieving the impact they desire. They wonder why teens leave the church after confirmation. Why are parents bringing their children to classes but not to worship on Sunday? Why do some families get involved only when they are celebrating a milestone or sacrament? Why don't more adults participate in the adult faith formation programs? Where are all the people in their twenties and thirties? Why do parents have their child baptized and then never return to church again? How can we reach the new ethnic groups that are moving into our community? How can we reach those who have left the church?

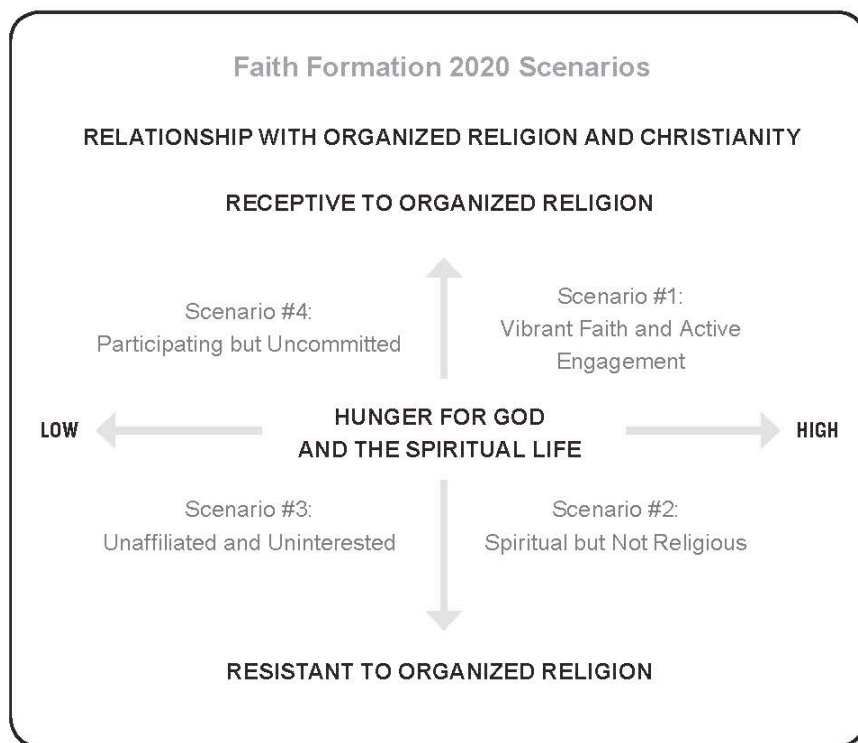
The pastor, staff, and faith formation leaders see the changes occurring in their church, in their community, and in the world, and wonder what the future holds for them. If present trends continue what impact will they have on the future of the church? What will happen if the church doesn't respond to the challenges, if faith formation is not aligned well with the life situations and the spiritual needs of people today and in the future? The pastor, staff, and faith formation leaders feel that the pressing demands of the present preclude the possibility of imagining the future of faith formation in their church. Yet they must envision the future and design new initiatives to provide vibrant faith formation for all ages and generations if they are to thrive as a church community.

Does this sound familiar? *Faith Formation 2020* is designed to help leaders envision and design 21<sup>st</sup> century faith formation in their congregations. While no one can definitively map the future of Christian faith formation, there are tools that congregations can use to interpret their current reality and envision the future. Scenario planning is one of those tools and, through the *Faith Formation 2020 Initiative*, we have developed four scenarios that leaders can use to discuss, interpret, envision, and design the future of faith formation in their congregations.

- 1) **Scenario #1 – Vibrant Faith and Active Engagement:** The first scenario describes a world in which people of all ages and generations are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith.

- 2) **Scenario #2 - Spiritual but Not Religious:** The second scenario describes a world in which people are spiritually hungry and searching for God and the spiritual life, but most likely not affiliated with organized religion and an established Christian tradition.
- 3) **Scenario #3 - Unaffiliated and Uninterested:** The third scenario describes a world in which people experience little need for God and the spiritual life, and are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches.
- 4) **Scenario #4. Participating but Uncommitted:** The fourth scenario describes a world in which people attend worship and church activities occasionally, but are not actively engaged in their church community or spiritually committed.

The four scenarios express a range of possible futures facing faith formation. They can be visualized in a 2x2 matrix: the vertical line represents people’s receptivity toward organized religion and established churches; the horizontal line represents peoples hunger for and openness to God and the spiritual life. Scenarios 1 and 4 share an openness to participating in an established church, while Scenarios 2 and 3 are more resistant to organized religion. Scenarios 1 and 2 share a higher degree of spiritual openness and commitment, while Scenarios 3 and 4 are less open and spiritually committed. The four scenarios are designed as an interpretive tool to help you assess your responsiveness to the spiritual and religious needs of people today and as a planning tool to help you design initiatives for the future of faith formation in your congregation.



### Scenario #1. Vibrant Faith and Active Engagement

The first scenario describes a world in which people of all ages and generations are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith. People have found their spiritual home within an established Christian tradition and a local faith community that provides ways for all ages and generations to grow in faith, worship God, and live their faith in the world. Congregations are challenged to provide lifelong faith formation for all ages and generations, at home

and at church, that develops vibrant faith, is continuous throughout life, and engages all people in the life and mission of the church community.

In most congregations the overwhelming majority of resources, energy, and leadership are directed toward faith formation with people in Scenario #1, oftentimes with a decreasing number of people for a shorter period of the lifespan (e.g., grade school through high school years). The future of faith formation in Scenario #1 is being significantly impacted by a number of driving forces including: 1) the growing number of people who are leaving established Christian churches – people who claim no religious affiliation (about 15% of the population) and those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” (almost 20% of 18-39 year-olds); 2) declining participation in Christian worship, sacraments and rituals (baptism and marriage), and church life, in general, among those who consider themselves Christian; and 3) a serious decline in family religious socialization at home as few parents make passing on a faith tradition and faith practices central to family life.

### **Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #1**

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Develop continuous faith formation for all ages and generations, especially for adults (twenties-nineties), that engages people – mind, body, heart, and spirit – in a diversity of ways to grow in faith for a lifetime.
- Strengthen family socialization by equipping parents and families to become centers of faith formation and practice.
- Become a “sticky” church – keeping all ages involved in faith formation through a diversity of programs, activities, and resources at home and church that address their life situations and religious and spiritual needs.
- Embrace the tremendous potential of digital media and web technologies to provide faith formation and engage people in lifelong faith growth 24x7x365.
- Empower people of vibrant faith with the knowledge, faith sharing skills, and confidence to share their faith with those who are not involved in a church community or spiritually committed.

### **Scenario #2. Spiritual, but Not Religious**

The second scenario describes a world in which people are spiritually hungry and searching for God and the spiritual life, but most likely are not affiliated with organized religion and an established Christian tradition. Some may join a nondenominational Christian church focused on their spiritual needs, while others may find an outlet for their spiritual hunger in small communities of like-minded spiritual seekers, in local or global acts of service, or in online spiritual resources and communities. The Spiritual but Not Religious reflect a growing minority of the American population, especially among the eighteen- to thirty-nine-year-olds. Congregations are challenged to engage people where they live (physical and virtual communities), build relationships, engage in spiritual conversations, and offer programs and activities that nurture their spiritual growth.

### **Scenario #3. Unaffiliated and Uninterested**

The third scenario describes a world in which people experience little need for God and the spiritual life and are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches. The Unaffiliated and Uninterested reject all forms of organized religion and reflect a steadily increasing percentage of the American population, especially among the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds. Congregations are challenged to find ways to “plant” themselves in the midst of the cultures and worlds of the Unaffiliated and Uninterested, build relationships, and be witnesses to the Christian faith in the world today.

If the statistics are accurate, the growing numbers of people reflected in Scenarios #2 and #3, especially people in their 20s and 30s, present the greatest challenge to congregations and to their faith formation efforts, now and into the future. The challenge presented by these two scenarios is expanding the congregation's vision of faith formation to embrace the life worlds – and spiritual needs – of people in Scenario #2 and #3 who see little need for church, and the need for God and the spiritual life. Congregations need to develop strategies and approaches for moving faith formation from the church campus into the world.

### **Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #2**

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Invest time and resources to develop specialized faith formation around the life situations and spiritual needs of the “Spiritual, but Not Religious” who are in their twenties and thirties.
- Provide faith formation programming for spiritual seekers that is conducted in “Third Place” settings outside of the church facilities (e.g., Lifetree Café).
- Develop faith formation around marriage and baptism to respond to the potential for (re)engagement in church life of the “Spiritual, but Not Religious?”
- Provide a guided process and program for spiritually hungry people to investigate the Christian faith and join in small communities with other seekers for spiritual growth and support (e.g., the Alpha course).

### **Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #3**

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Establish a “Third Place” gathering site as a platform for reaching the “Unaffiliated and Uninterested” through a variety of spiritual and/or life-centered programs, conversations, and activities?
- Develop a “web-presence” that is inviting and attractive to the “Unaffiliated and Uninterested” so that they can investigate and experience the Christian faith online.
- Sponsor programs, such as service projects and mission trips, that are designed so that people from the wider community can participate, interact with church members, and come into contact with the Christian faith in action.

### **Scenario #4. Participating, but Uncommitted**

The fourth scenario describes a world in which people attend church activities, but are not actively engaged in their church community or spiritually committed. They may participate in significant seasonal celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter, and celebrate sacraments and milestone events, such as marriage and baptism. Some may even attend worship regularly, and send their children to religious education classes. Their spiritual commitment is low and their connection to the church is more social and utilitarian than spiritual. Congregations are challenged to provide faith formation that recognizes that belonging (engagement) leads to believing (spiritual commitment) and a more vibrant faith, and develop approaches for increasing people's engagement with the church community and the Christian tradition.

Scenario #4 reflects a growing number of people who, while receptive to an established church, do not have a faith commitment that would make their relationship with God and participation in a faith community a priority in their lives. Their occasional engagement in church life does not lead them toward spiritual commitment. Congregations often address the spiritual and religious needs of people in Scenario #4 through the lens of Scenario #1, which doesn't usually work effectively. Congregations need to begin in the life worlds of Scenario 4 and craft faith formation around their spiritual and religious needs, and their relationship with the faith community.

## Strategies for Faith Formation in Scenario #4

Here are few examples of strategies for envisioning the possibilities for the future:

- Begin faith formation with the birth and baptism of children in order to strengthen family socialization by equipping parents and families to become centers of faith formation and practice.
- Develop pathways for spiritual commitment and more active engagement by offering a formation process that helps people develop and deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ, explore the foundational teachings of the Christian faith, and live the fundamental Christian practices.
- Utilize digital media and web technologies to extend faith formation – resources, social networking, faith practices – into the daily lives of people who only participate occasionally?
- Focus on the occasions of participation, such as sacraments and milestones, to provide faith formation that involves the whole family, and invites them into more active engagement in the church community.

### Apply the Four Scenarios to Your Church

Use the following questions to explore how each scenario applies in your church.

- Who are the people in your community in this scenario? How would you describe them?
- What are their religious and spiritual needs of people in this scenario? How would you describe one or two aspects of their religious and spiritual hopes or desires?
- How is your church addressing the spiritual and religious needs of people in this scenario through faith formation today?

### Assess the Impact of the Four Scenarios on Your Church

Use the following questions to explore the impact of each scenario on your church.

- What are the *challenges* that this scenario presents for the future of faith formation in your church community?
- What are the *opportunities* that this scenario presents for the future of faith formation in your church community?
- What are the *implications* of not addressing the future of faith formation in this scenario?
- What are the *implications* of addressing the future of faith formation in this scenario?

*Imagine what faith formation could look and feel like in your congregation if you are responding to the challenges and opportunities in each scenario. Imagine the life of your congregation in 2020 if faith formation addresses the spiritual and religious needs of all ages and generations in each scenario.*