

Passing on the Faith in the 21st Century:

The effect of the current cultural shifts on faith formation in the former mainline Protestant Church

How We Got Here

By the turn of the 20th Century, the culture of the Protestant Church in America had the following supports in place for its religious education programs:

- **A Protestant ethos and atmosphere**

Typical American townspeople woke up each day “breathing Christianity.” American culture placed creches in the town square at Christmastime, most people could recite and/or recognize the meaning of biblical passages, the majority of them attended a church, for instance.

- **Little mobility in families**

Many attended the church they grew up in for much, if not all of their lives. Often grandparents lived in the same neighborhood or in the same town, which allowed for more faith-forming conversations and experiences.

- **Public schools that were “Protestant parochial schools”**

A school day included prayer, and Christmas carols and Christian songs were taught and sung, for example.

- **Community churches**

The church, generally located in the center of town, was the center of both religious and social life. Thus the lines between many church and secular relationship were blurred.

- **The Bible was read and prayers were prayed at home**

Research confirms that parents and grandparents have the most influence on the growth of one’s faith.

- **Faithful tithers**

A result of having experienced all of the above.

- **Blue Laws**

Allowed for essentially two choices for spending one’s time on a Sunday: attend church or stay at home. Societal pressures assisted in church attendance for those who may not otherwise have been drawn to it.

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Based on information from *Will Our Children Have Faith?* by John Westerhoff III

Today's Most Common Faith Formation Programs and Methods Do Not Meet the Needs of Today's Congregations

As stated by John Westerhoff above, the success of the Sunday School in the 19th & 20th Centuries, as well as its Confirmation, youth ministry, and adult education programs, was due to the supports that were in place within the secular culture. Much like what a lobster experiences when its water is being heated up in a lobster pot, we did not notice that the gradual shifts in our secular culture were influencing the effectiveness of how we went about nurturing the faith of our congregations. When we felt the water becoming unbearably hot as school sports practices began being held on Sunday mornings, we tried to fight back. And when that didn't work, we tried ways to entice our families with more "fun" activities, teacher-friendly (i.e. easy-to-prepare in "no time") Sunday School lessons, and some alternative scheduling.

As hindsight is 20-20, we now understand that these types of efforts do not meet the spiritual needs of our congregations in faithful ways. As we're discovering that the technical fixes we're applying to Sunday morning time conflicts are not working, we need to be looking at the more complex issues currently affecting congregations on a typical Sunday morning, such as:

- Many working parents prefer to spend focused time with their children on the weekend.
- What the Church offers does not meet many parents' criteria for what will look good on a college application.
- Many churches have not become adept at assimilating digital ministries that appeal to young people.
- Many believe that spirituality does not involve church attendance.

Our goals for nurturing the faith of our our children and youth (and adults) remain the same; however, the means for passing on the faith at church (and at home) must change.

Relationships: A Faithful Focus for 21st Century Faith Formation

There is one aspect in our congregational and secular lives that remains, which we can utilize in our efforts to faithfully nurture the faith of our congregations — relationships — particularly intergenerational relationships. And while this seems like a no-brainer, the intentional and authentic relationships that our secular and church cultures had in previous eras are not as strong in our congregations today.

After World War II, as the births of new babies was booming and churches began ushering children into their new Christian education wings and away from corporate worship, the potential for organic and authentic faith-forming relationships with a wide variety of adults was lost. This, of course, was not the only factor affecting intergenerational relationships, as noted above; however, the separation of children and youth from a wide variety of spiritual mentors reduced the progress of their growth into adult Christian disciples.

A Faith Formation Focus for Today's Congregations

The success and longevity of a church/faith community is grounded in solid relationships among the generations. There has been new research on the effectiveness of relationships in a variety of settings (Search Institute, Fuller Youth Institute, and many secular agencies). The research results

may assist a congregation in transforming its ways of nurturing faith and forming Christian disciples.

- ❖ “To grow up healthy, our youth need to be supported and known by at least five adults in addition to their parents or caregivers who are willing to invest time with them personally and spiritually.” [Eugene C. Reohlekpertain, “Building Assets, Strengthening Faith: An Intergenerational Survey for Congregations,” Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2003]
- ❖ Young people who experience strong developmental relationships are more likely to report a wide range of social-emotional strengths and other indicators of well-being and thriving, and young people with strong relationships are more resilient in the face of stress and trauma. [“Relationships First: Creating Connections That Help Young People Thrive, Search Institute” (<http://www.search-institute.org/blog/new-research-report>)]

“By the time our adolescents graduate from high school, they will have become so much a part of their entire church family that when they’re out on their own they will want to seek out a similar church family to enfold and nurture them (and vice versa) in adulthood.”

“This cannot happen if their youth group experience — even the strongest youth program — operates in isolation from the rest of the church/faith community. Because then, in adulthood, they will seek out the types of relationships they had with their peers rather than the types of relationships they could have formed with all of the ages in the entire congregation, and they will never find a church that ‘feels like’ the youth group they remember.”

Chap Clark, Fuller Youth Institute

A New Old Focus for Congregations

Congregations no longer have the intergenerational connections within their lives together that were prevalent in the previous century, thus we need to be intentional about fostering intergenerational relationships in order to pass on the faith to our children and youth in faithful ways. Our traditional congregational education/formation methods placed a focus on “educating” our young into the faith, and assumed that faith could be taught. The end result is that we’ve been confirming our young people right out the door, with the vast majority never returning. (Have you heard the joke, “How do you get bats out of the church belfry?” “Confirm them, and they’ll never come back.”)

But ask a young adult (or any adult) who is currently active in a congregation what the most formative church experience was that they had as a child and/or youth, and most all of them will share an experience that included a significant and authentic relationship with someone strong in their faith who was willing and able to nurture them in spiritual ways (grandparent, youth pastor, pastor, other relative, camp counselor). Faith cannot be taught. Growth in faith requires walking alongside others who are further along in their journey of faith as well as those who are just starting on the path.

So perhaps we should flip our focus. Rather than spending all of our efforts on programs and curriculum resources, let’s look at all of the places within congregational life that can be broadened to include all ages, growing into Christian discipleship together. Of course,

opportunities for each age group to gather and learn together need not be abandoned; however, the sole focus on separating age groups and intellectual learning should be reduced in order to allow opportunities for intergenerational relationships to be fostered, nurtured, and celebrated. Our children and youth have little exposure to relationships with a variety of adults in their secular lives. Perhaps it should be the Church, which already has multitudes of adults available, to nurture and mentor the next generations into mature faith and discipleship with intergenerational experiences.

In other words, it really doesn't matter what Sunday School curriculum you use, how many religious activities you are providing for the children, or whether you employ a Christian education staff person or not.

If the children in a congregation do not consistently connect with its adults and older youth, they most likely will not set foot in a church as an adult, and may not acquire enough of the spiritual resources they need to function as a healthy and whole adult. (Search Institute)

Many will ask, "But don't we need Sunday School to teach children the Bible?" and others will say, "Children can't understand what happens in worship." Dave Csinos, founder and president of Faith Forward, offers four Faith Formation Seeds to Water. These four seeds succinctly state that children (and youth) learn and grow in a wide variety of ways, and imply that worship should not be confined to just sitting still in a quiet room with a focus on words both written and spoken.

1. Everything we do as people of faith is formation.
2. Faith formation is a lifelong process.
3. Faith formation is experiential.
4. Faith formation is art. (i.e. always authentic with heart & feeling organically)

Another important fact to consider comes from the realm of brain science:

Ninety- to ninety-five percent of the subconscious choices we make as adults are based on what we experienced and learned between the ages of two and seven. These experiences and learnings were assimilated into our memories, unfiltered, meaning that we had little or no understanding of which were positive and healthy, and which could be negative influences. Of course after the age of seven, we are still taking in new knowledge and experiences; however, the subconscious impact will never be as great as that which we encountered between age two and seven. Which Christian practices, beliefs, and understandings do we hope our children will be drawn to as adults? Let's start engaging them in these activities and learnings in age-appropriate ways right now!

How a Congregation Can Be an "Education Program"

Maria Harris, the internationally acclaimed religious educator who taught at Andover Newton Theological School for many years, stated, "The church does not *have* an education program. The church IS an education program." Her definition of education is much broader than most congregations will initially understand. Yet by asking the following questions, the concept of education in terms of faith formation can be enhanced through the lens of intergenerational relationships.

- What elements of our congregational life are currently intergenerational?
- How are Christian faith and discipleship modeled for the children and youth in these areas?
- How are relationships formed in these areas?
- How can these areas be enhanced to be even more welcoming for children, youth, and families?
- What do you envision the benefits of these enhancements will be for all ages?
- What aspects of adult Christian discipleship can be introduced and nurtured in age-appropriate and mentored ways for children between the ages of two and seven? How will you continue to nurture these into adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood?
- Add your own questions to consider.

Some Guiding Suggestions

- If Sunday School, youth groups, and/or other educational programs are working for your congregation, just focus on making intergenerational relationships more intentional and authentic.
- If Sunday School, youth groups, and/or other educational programs are not working for your congregation, shift the main focus of those programs from educational to relational.
- LEARN MORE about the critical importance of relationships (<https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships>) and intergenerational ministry (<https://www.macucc.org/intergenerationalworshipministry>).
- TAKE BABY STEPS. Change is difficult for congregations. Be gentle not to shock your congregational system.
- EDUCATE your congregation about why you need to implement the specific change(s).
- CELEBRATE your successes! Remember that these will look different from your previous educational model successes.