

Forming and Transforming

Study Resources on Faith Formation for Whole Congregations

Excerpts from *Foundations, Findings, and Futures: Christian Faith Formation and Education in the United Church of Christ (2012)*

Things Have Changed...

Deep cultural, religious/ecclesial, and pedagogical shifts have taken place in the U.S. over the last several decades that have specifically affected Christian faith formation and education in the church. Overall, the shift from modernism to postmodernism is the single most influential movement that has taken place over the last several decades and affects all aspects of church and society. Brian McLaren contended that the “old modern paradigm, with its absolute scientific laws, consumerist individualism, and rational certainty, [is] giving way to a new postmodern paradigm of pluralism, relativism, globalism, and uncertainty.”¹

In a similar manner, theologian Phyllis Tickle has argued that about every 500 years the church undergoes a significant change. She also says that we are presently experiencing one of these periods of change and are living in a time in which Christianity is moving from the inherited church of modernism to the emerging church of postmodernism.²

What do these changes look like specifically? Below are some major examples.

Technological Changes. Technology has deeply impacted the way in which relationships are formed and navigated in our culture and has many implications for the church and how we carry out the work of faith formation. The broad use of social networking sites and a constant sense of being in communication with increasingly diverse peoples and ideas are just a few specific phenomena within this major shift. Whether for worship, service, learning, or community building, the opportunities that technology creates are transforming the very foundation of what is considered “church.”

Familial Changes. There are several shifts with regard to the notion and activity of the family in both church and society. *First, “Families have become less stable, more mobile and more influenced by culture than by institution.”*³ Families can no longer be identified (and could never actually be identified) as strictly heterosexual and two-parent, and they cannot be assumed to have children. The notion of family includes singles, non-childbearing couples, grandparents, single parents, adoptive families, step-families, and a number of other configurations. In addition, with an increasingly globalized and economically unstable world, families make geographical relocations more frequently now than at any other time in recent history.

Second, families are smaller and more domestically isolated. A 1957 study found that “80% of those surveyed believed that people who preferred being unmarried were ‘sick,’ ‘immoral,’ or ‘neurotic.’ At a time when more than 70% of adults were married, it's not surprising that people would express a preference for wedded life.” Today, things are different. According to a recent study, “Americans are now within mere percentage points of being a majority single nation: Only 51% of adults today are married, according to census data. And 28% of all households now consist of just one person—the highest level in U.S. history.”³

Third, competing demands on families' time has caused them to consider church as just one of many options for development and growth. As one seminary professor articulated, “The number of narratives and sources of those narratives have exploded due to TV, internet, etc. Christian stories become one of thousands that people draw on to make meaning and therefore shape how the Christian stories function in people's lives.” Many people are just as happy to spend Sunday mornings at home relaxing or engaging in family time in other settings, as church increasingly becomes just “one more thing to do.”

Fourth, the role of women within the family unit has changed drastically in the last 50 years. Families used to be able to survive and thrive with one income, and this enabled many women to stay at home and to also focus on the religious education of children and youth in the local church. Today, most women work, possess careers, and handle multiple household and professional responsibilities. This shift has also impacted the ministry of Christian education in the church with increased professionalization and visibility of this ministry, but also with the loss of a generation of women who invested in church formation as un-paid Sunday School teachers.

Fifth, as Christian education/Sunday School became a defining feature of spiritual formation in the church, faith formation in the home diminished. As public education was further systematized within the U.S., basic learning came to be understood a good that could be obtained in order to further one's intellectual development. Similarly, Sunday School was viewed in this manner, except that it was a good to be obtained in order to further one's spiritual and moral development. Today, much of the work of educators and faith formation leaders entails equipping parents and grandparents with tools and skills to reintegrate faith back into daily life.

Generational Changes. As a result of the shifting role of institutional religion in American life, there are profound generational changes that have impacted faith formation in the church as a whole. In addition, with new generations come different ways of doing and being in the world that, in many ways, are not congruent with traditional structures and pedagogies familiar to church life.

For example, it is less likely that younger generations will identify with a particular religious tradition, even though they may have been raised within a specific tradition. This trend is not likely to change with age or having children.⁴ Generally, younger generations may be seeking to transform hierarchical, intellectual, specialized structures and programs into collaborative, experiential, organic, and fluid models of faithful living. However, when met with resistance, younger people are moving away from those structures to create their own forms of community that are different in scope and purpose than those of their parents and grandparents.

Public Discourse Changes. Both the frequency and ways that Christianity is discussed in the public sphere have shifted over the last several decades. For example, "church speak" is no longer understood by a majority of people in the U.S. With increasing religious and ethnic/racial diversities in this country, the once common language shared by Christians is not understood (and is often misunderstood) within a changed context. A denominational church leader commented, "Because of the real diversification of the U.S. population, and the influx of people from around the world, all of that has had its impact on our understanding of Christian faith and has expanded our view to have much more engagement in an interfaith way."

In addition, an increasingly secular population has shifted the public discourse, particularly as younger generations continue to become religiously unaffiliated. The use of "spirituality" in juxtaposition to "religion" is a common phenomenon present today. As one seminary professor articulated:

"Spirituality" has become a normative word in the broader culture, sometimes having nothing to do with a relationship with God. Some understand it very narcissistically, focusing only on their spirituality and what helps them. But there are many others who understand spirituality being strongly rooting in small non-church communities (i.e. friends who meet and share regularly over coffee). These are both the un-churched and those who are members of churches, but find their spiritual needs being met outside of congregational life.

Economic/Financial Changes. The final major shift that has occurred in the last several decades concerns a loss of financial stability and prosperity for U.S. mainline denominations. In part, because of the overall decline in membership numbers, and the economic hardships that existing members have faced in recent years, local churches, regional, and national settings of

these denominations have experienced losses in terms of funding, staff, programming, and resources. As many expressed in the course of interviews for this study, Christian education and faith formation is often one of the main casualties when financial losses are experienced. Specifically, decreased income affects:

- Paid church staff positions in faith formation/Christian education
- Regional support staff for faith formation ministries
- Available resources for congregations and regions
- Programs and resources in national denominational settings
- Morale and church vitality
- Creativity (both positively and negatively)

Fewer resources offer both a challenge and an opportunity to envision new ways of engaging in the work of faith formation. Without a reliance on funding to build programs and resources that may or may not have their intended effect, opportunities to practice more authentic, creative, contextually-based faith formation and networking are possible at this moment in the life of the church.

Questions for Reflection

- Which of these changes is having the greatest impact on your congregation at this time? What specific challenges are you facing as a result?
- Name the ways that your church utilizes web-based technologies. What has been the impact of those technologies on people's opportunities for faith formation?
- What is your definition of a family? How does your church define (implicitly or explicitly) what makes a family? Are all types of families valued equally, or are some types of families (young families with children, two-parent families) valued more than others?
- Think of the people in your family who are from a different generation than yourself. Do they attend church regularly? If so, ask them why they attend church. If they are not regular attenders, ask them why not. (Maybe you already know the answers to these questions based on previous conversations.) How do their responses correspond with or negate the research on generational trends?
- Do you describe yourself as spiritual, religious, both, or other? What do those words mean to you? Ask others in your congregation about how they would describe themselves.
- Who is "responsible" for faith formation in your church? Is it your pastor? A paid church staff? Volunteers? The whole congregation? Is this model of responsibility congruent with your church's mission and vision? Is this model based on your current economic situation?

References

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3. Klinenberg, E., "Solo nation: American consumers stay single," *Fortune*. February 6, 2012, <http://finance.fortune.cnn.com/2012/01/25/eric-klinenberg-going-solo/>.
4. "Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

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