

What is Faith Formation in a Missional Age?

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Section 1 – Introduction (10/20 minutes)

This curriculum is designed with flexibility and options, allowing you, the facilitator/teacher, to adapt it to fit your particular setting.

One main point of flexibility is the length of time allotted for this session. The session ranges from 60-90 minutes. Two times are listed for each section to give facilitators an idea of the anticipated flow based on these two parameters.

Another point of flexibility is how it will be taught/facilitated. There are various activities throughout the session. Use as many or as few as you'd like. The curriculum is laid out almost as a script, with accompanying PowerPoint should you choose to use it. Use as much, or as little, as you like, and there is no need to over it all. If you are interested in going deeper, either in preparation or for further learning, resources are available in the footnotes which accompany the material.

Activities are woven into the curriculum, and are intended to make the curriculum interactive. They are set apart in boxes. Use them as you see fit.

Welcome to the second year of the ELCA's *Practicing Discipleship Leadership Initiative*, an initiative for equipping leaders working with congregational youth ministry. Last year this initiative focused on the theme – *Youth Ministry at a Crossroads*. The aim was to help congregational leaders step back and look at the current state of ministry with youth and rediscover some basics of youth ministry. (Sessions included: *Lutheran Theology: God at work in the world, Lutheran Theology: How Lutherans read the Bible, Your Role as a Leader, Strategic Planning, Leading a Small Group, Faith Conversations, Planning for the Unexpected, and Compassionate Justice and Service Learning*.) If you missed any or all of those sessions, recorded webinars and accompanying curriculum is available at www.practicediscipleship.org. We encourage you to draw on these resources.

This year the theme again invites participants to take a step back, yet this time looking forward and asking a critical question – *What is Faith Formation in a Missional Age?* As many know, the religious landscape in the United States is changing and these changes provide the opportunity for the church to revisit its primary call and reimagine future ministry practices in light of the current realities. This curriculum begins by naming the current societal realities and then offers some theological, theoretical, and practical ideas for engaging faith formation in this new situation. This overview session sets the stage and gives an overview of the theme. The following 6 sessions will address *speaking the faith, theories of culture, the ministry of accompaniment, learning cultural intelligence, translating the language of faith, and understanding the public nature of faith*. The **overall goal** of this year's leadership initiative is not to prescribe a particular program or curriculum. Rather it is to **ignite a conversation** within the church around its two-fold calling of discipleship and loving one's neighbor. And it is **our hope** that

such a conversation might lead the church to **recommit** itself to helping people **discover a Christian way of life in a pluralistic society**, as it also **reimagines its ongoing ministry practices**.

Open in Prayer

Opening Activity – Who am I? - four symbols

Knowing who we are and what's central to our lives is critical, especially in times of transition and change. Naming and claiming these central elements is fruitful for our lives. In fact, in other eras people put symbols on their shields to publically state who they were. If you were to create your own shield today, naming what's central to your life, what four symbols would illustrate your identity?

Take a few minutes and write or draw four symbols. After a few minutes, get into groups of three and share your symbols. Then reflect on these questions:

- How did these elements come to be important in your life?
- Have these ever elements been challenged? How and what was it like?
- How might these elements be similar and different to others in your family?

My identity – Heritage, Christian, Active, Family (feel free to replace this section with your own elements and story)

If I was doing this exercise my four symbols would be related to: my heritage, being Christian, being physically active and my family. These four elements have formed and shaped me. Much of my identity emerged within community. For example, as a child much of my identity was given to me by my family. Yet as I grew, my "family" identity was both tested and refined, until over time it became my own. At various points in my life my identity has been comforting and grounding, while at other times it has been challenged and needed to be examined. Knowing who we are and what we are about is critical today, as so many forces are trying to speak into our lives. And, no matter what our identity is, explicitly or implicitly, our identity influences and shapes our way of life.

Our session today is about **identity**, and in particular our identity as Christians. At the heart of this session lies a core question - *what does it means to be and live Christian*, especially in our religiously pluralistic world.

We are going to address this question from **three different angles**:

1. By looking at the community of faith, *the church*, in the world today.
2. By looking at *faith*, and what forming faith entails.
3. By looking at what it means to *form faith in the midst of today's world*.

Section 2 - Why is this a missional age? Current realities (10/15 minutes)

This section is important, but only serves as a backdrop for the next two sections. Therefore, the length to which you engage it will depend on your context. For some, this will be a review, for others it's new information. Minimally, draw on this first paragraph, then just down to the three summary points.

It's true the world is changing, and these changes include the religious landscape in the United States. Once known as a Christian nation, today the United States is a religious melting pot, and its make-up is changing. For example, 2012 marks the first time in American history where the number of people who identify as Protestants has dropped below 50% of the population. In addition, today most states (45 of 52) have between 30-55% of their population who claim to be Christian.¹ Fifty years ago, congregations nurtured faith within a society which supported Christian values and a Christian rhythm of life. Today, people of faith cannot count on society to share their faith commitments, Christian or otherwise. This fact means Christianity is no longer a majority religion in the United States; nor is any other religion. This reality has challenged many congregations and church leaders. These circumstances are not the world many Christians were raised in, and it was not the situation many church leaders were trained to lead. It's no wonder the church is puzzled by our current reality.

Yet the church is still called to cultivate faith in everyday life. And the Christian church still believes living communities of faith are the best ways for doing this. So what are our **cultural realities**? Let's begin by taking a deeper look at today's religious landscape.

This section is a review of last year's overview session. Facilitators can leave it in or skip over it based on their read of the group.

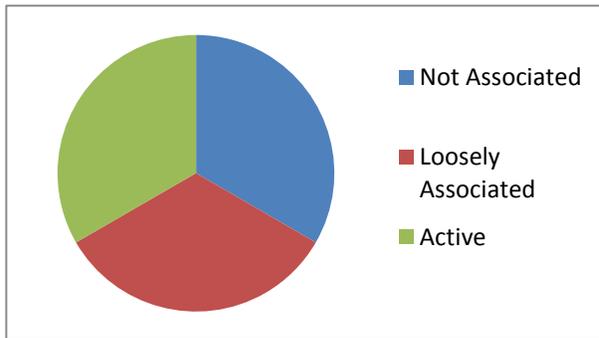
If you want to skip over it, jump ahead to current reports and research.

Last year, in our overview session, **we reported about the faith and spirituality of young people** based on two national studies. In a nutshell, here's a summary of some key findings.

(For more, you are encouraged to review the session *Youth Ministry at a Crossroads* on practicingdiscipleship.org.)

¹ Richard Sterns, "Goodbye, Christian America; Hello, True Christianity," Huffington Post Religion 11/6/2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-stearns/goodbye-christian-america-hello-true-christianity_b_2082649.html (Reporting on the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life)

Of the 13-18 year olds surveyed in the National Study of Youth and Religion:



1/3 were *not associated* with a faith community
1/3 were *loosely associated* to a faith community
1/3 were *actively involved* in a faith community

That's both good news and bad news. But there's more...

- **8%** of those surveyed reported they *didn't believe in God*. That means 92% believed in God. So yes, this means more people believe in God than are associated with faith communities.
- Yet, only **8%** of those surveyed reported that *faith was an active part of their life*. That means of the 92% who believe in God, 84% of those who believe in God didn't claim it made a difference in their daily life.

That's also both good news and bad news. One thing this research highlights is being connected to or participating in a faith community *does not* equal having a faith that matters in daily life. And in fact, according to researcher Christian Smith, in most cases faith operated like the wallpaper in young people's lives, it didn't really matter to their daily life.

Research from the **Exemplary Youth Ministry Study** reports that *congregations do matter*. In fact, congregations with an alive, vibrant faith have a higher probability of cultivating a mature Christian faith within youth. In other words, young people are impacted by congregations which foster discipleship, not only within youth, but across all generations. There is hope! Yet, as we will see, research reports *congregations are not as vital as they use to be*. So, more good news and bad news.

Current reports and research lift up **three big themes** about the religious landscape today. Let's explore these themes by looking through three lenses: *denominations, religious affiliation and congregational life*.

1. Theme #1 - Across the board, major religious groups are experiencing decline – denominational lens

March 2009 in the USA Today reads, "Almost all denominations losing ground, survey finds; Faith is shifting, drifting or vanishing outright."²

This probably isn't new news to most "church-going" people. Look around your sanctuary any given Sunday and you might have experienced this decline first-hand. Yet while people in congregations

² Cathy Lynn Grossman, *USA Today*, March 9, 2009 (from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Research report).

see it every week, most don't understand the breadth and depth of situation. So today, hear this: **all major religious groups are experiencing decline.** Name it. Acknowledge it. It's not JUST your congregation, our denomination, or our "brand" of faith. And the numbers back it up!

Yes, a few major religious groups have experienced some *growth* (more than 135,000).

Assemblies of God	14.9%	+382,889 people	+378 congregations
Church of Latter Day Saints	45.5%	+1,920,556 people	+2,086 congregations
Muslim estimate	66.7%	+1,040,788 people	+897 congregations
Seventh-Day Adventist	29.5%	+271,950 people	+1,158 congregations

But most have experienced *decline*. Highlights include:

ELCA	18.2%	-893,932 people	-893 congregations
United Church of Christ	24.4%	-414,622 people	-638 congregations
Presbyterian (USA)	22%	-689,586 people	-619 congregations
Episcopal Church	15.7%	-362,849 people	-520 congregations
American Baptist Church	11.7%	-206,890 people	-312 congregations
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	9.9%	-250,141 people	-37 congregations
Roman Catholic Church	5%	-3,107,155 people	-1,202 parishes
United Methodists	4.7%	-489,976 people	-2,398 congregations

2. Theme #2 - Overall the "churched population" within the United States has declined - Religious Affiliation lens.

As you can see from the above numbers, **not only are denominations feeling the decline, so is society as a whole.** In the past 10 years, the United States has become a less "churched population." This isn't just about church attendance, rather it is about people reporting they are less affiliated to or aligning with religious bodies.

In 2000, 50.2% of the total population reported a religious affiliation.

In 2010, 48.8% of the total population reported a religious affiliation.³

Yes, *the United States is becoming a less religious country.* (Note: this reality is about religion in general, not just Christianity.)

What is the biggest factor? Some people are affiliating with non-Christian religious groups, but the biggest factor impacting the change in religious landscape is the growing of **the "nones"** or unaffiliated.⁴ This group, the "nones" has more than doubled since 1990. Today, "The number of

³ The **population** of the United States was 308,745,538 in 2010, up from 281,421,839 in 2000. The adherent totals of the **religious groups** listed in 2010 (150,596,792) included **48.8%** of the total population. And the adherent totals of the religious groups listed in 2000 (141,371,963) included **50.2%** of the total population. www.thearda.com (the association of religious data archives)

⁴ **What is a "none"?** Since the 1960s a **new term** has surfaced in the sociology of religious. The term "nones" refers to the persons in religious surveys who have "no religion, no particular religion, no religious preference, or the like." The term "religiously unaffiliated" is also used to refer to Americans who say on surveys that they are atheists, agnostics or have no particular religion.

Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. Today, **one-fifth of the U.S. public are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.** And, for adults under 30, it's one-third!⁵

Who are the 'nones'? Just like in the National Study of Youth and Religion, not being connected to a faith community did not mean people did not believe in God. **Being a "none" or one with no religious affiliation does not mean lack of belief.** "On the contrary, most of the "nones" say they believe in God, and describe themselves as religious, spiritual or both."⁶ And while many "nones" believe in God, they are not interested in "church" (or organized religion) as many of us know it. "With few exceptions, though, the unaffiliated say they are *not* looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics." Hence, **it's time for congregations (or the organized church) to rethink what it means to journey with people currently participating in congregations, as well as those who believe in God yet are not connecting themselves to congregations.** As Time magazine reports, "For traditional religious institutions, the challenge is how to adapt to this trend rather than fight it."

3. **Theme #3 – Congregations are less healthy – Congregational lens**

Not only are the number of people interested in connecting to organized religion declining, **congregations are reporting to be less healthy.** David Roozen, in *A Decade of Change in America Congregations 2000-2010*,⁷ reports that "Despite bursts of innovation and pockets of vitality, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a slow, overall erosion of the strength of America's congregations."

⁵ "In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%)." Pew, Oct 9, 2012

⁶ "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation. Pew Research Report, released October 9, 2012. Other highlights include: The Pew survey "finds that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious" (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor." To view the full report, see <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

⁷ See <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org> for more information.

Some of Roozen discoveries:

The past decade brought:	continued increase in innovative, adaptive worship
	surprisingly rapid adoption of electronic technologies
	dramatic increase in racial/ethnic congregations, many for immigrant groups
	general increase in the breadth of both member-oriented and mission-oriented programs
The decade also saw:	A steep drop in financial health ⁸
	Continuing high levels of conflict ⁹
	Aging memberships
Hence, the net, overall result:	Fewer persons in the pews
	Decreasing spiritual vitality ¹⁰

Congregations are stressed and feeling societal changes. Is it time to address this reality?

So what does this research tell us about our current reality?

This is the key part of this section, these three points.

If you (or others) need more, or want to add an activity, see Appendix A for some additional perspective on the church and its changing role within history.

1. First off, **it's not your fault**. If your congregation is experiencing decline, more loose affiliation or a lessening of spiritual vitality, you are not alone. The changes your congregation's experiencing exists within a larger ecology of changes taking place across the whole religious landscape.
2. Second, **changing worship style or switching curriculum or adding social media is not enough**. The changes taking place religiously in the United States today are bigger than any technical change can fix. These trends recognize something larger is taking place.
3. Third, **it's time for the church to recognize and name the current situation**. The winds of change are upon us and will continue. Our small efforts cannot stop them. This moment in history calls for naming reality, claiming our mission and rethinking what it means to be church from a non-majority position.

⁸ In 2000, 31% of congregations were financially healthy. This number has decreased (24% in 2005, 19% in 2008) to 14% in 2010. <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/decade-change> accessed December 14, 2012.

⁹ Two of three congregations experienced conflict in at least one of four key areas (worship, finances, leadership, ministry priorities) in the past five years. In a third the conflict was serious enough members left, members withheld financial support, or a leader left. And this conflict has taken a toll on spiritual vitality, decline in attendance and financial health. Ibid.

¹⁰ In 2005, 42.8% of congregations were spiritual vital. In 2010, it was only 28.4%.Ibid.

Section 3 - What is faith and faith formation? (15/25 minutes)

All this talk about the changing context can be overwhelming. Yet faith and faith formation shouldn't be so complicated, right? Next, let's turn to understanding what faith is, and consequently, what faith formation entails.

Here are some accompanying Bible verses to draw in and/or have people explore.

Hebrews 11:1

Ephesians 2:8-10

Galatians 3:9-14, 23-29

1 Corinthians 2:5-13

James 2:18, 21-24

Colossians 1:3-6

What do we know about faith?

1. Faith is a gift from God, and gives Christians their identity.

Given by God, faith is the foundational for a Christian way of life. And faith informs and shapes who we are as Christians. Just like our family name gives a particular identity, so to God's claim on us gives us an identity as children of God. This is a reality, a given. Yet faith, and being Christian, is dynamic. Just like our personal identity, our Christian identity is nurtured and fostered over time as people of faith explore what it means to live Christian. Faith forms us, informs our way of life, and transforms us into children of God.

2. Christian faith is not an abstract idea; it is an embodied faith, a

faith which takes on flesh as people live *in God's world*. This reality is most evident in the incarnation – in God coming to earth in the person of Jesus. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God's love and promises broke into the world *in the flesh*. Jesus' life centered on sharing God's love by inviting people into a relationship with God and announcing the kingdom of God was near. Christians bring to life God's mission as they live in the world, the world where God's kingdom is unfolding but not

fully realized. This means Christians live confident of God's promised future, while they are also aware of pain and brokenness in the present. Faith allows Christians to have an eye toward heaven, as they also have an eye toward the world.

- 3. Faith is passive, yet active.** God freely offers faith to all people, and in this way, Christians are passive in faith. There is nothing humans do to receive faith, it is a free gift. Yet faith is more than passive reception. Faith also summons a response, which overtime becomes a lifestyle. In this way, Christians are active in faith. Hence, not only does faith form Christians, it also informs and transforms how they act and see themselves. Through faith God's people join God's work in the world as they actively participate in God's ongoing creative and redemptive mission of love.
- 4. A life of faith is like jazz.** A life of faith emerges as core beliefs meet improvisation within a particular rhythm. People of faith are always living as God's people within the particular realities of their lived experience in a broken, sinful world. These realities are put into conversation with God's promise of love, seeking to discover what it means to live "Christian" in their distinct time and place.

Activity – Life of Faith as Jazz

If a life of faith is like jazz, where core commitments make up the base in the improvisation of our life, what are these core commitments?

- Take two minutes by yourself to reflect on what you think it is to BE Christian. Write down 3-4 core commitments.
- After two minutes, find a partner and share your core commitments. Together write up four or five things you think are core to a Christian way of live. Write each core principle on a post-it note and place it on the wall.
- Read through all the post-its.

End by looking at what the group has recognized as being critical to being Christian.

As people of faith embody a Christian identity in the world, both individually and communally, **the church's role is to help people come to know and understand what it means to be Christian, and live Christian in** one's daily life. Being a Christian is not layered on top of other things, it is the identity given at baptism. The church lives into and out of this identity. But like our personal identities, in the midst of various pressures, our identity as a Christian will be tested. Being a Christian is a communal affair, so Christians accompany each other as they seek to embody faith in the world with the particular challenges and opportunities each generation faces.

Optional Activity - go back to the four items of your personal identity and share with a partner what in your life was significant in forming/cultivating your identity. How is that similar to forming faith?

As Christians embody faith in the world they are called to help each other discover what it means to be Christian, but they also are called into the world to love their neighbor. Therefore, the church has a two-fold calling. Discipleship, the word most often used to talk about cultivating our identity as Christian people, is personal and communal and includes knowing the Christian story and engaging in Christian practices. Loving the neighbor, the second aspect of the church's call, is about moving the church into the world. This work includes witnessing to God's love, but it means also serving and working for justice. Christians have no other place to BE Christian then in the world, but the world is a challenging place. Therefore, Christians are in, for, with and against the world as they participate in God's unfolding mission. Hence, the church works at **cultivating discipleship community as well as engaging culture**. Both aspects of work, help people discover a Christian way of life in the world, and are part of the formation process.

Section 4 – Putting it all together - Faith Formation in a Missional Age (20/30 minutes)

So what is it to live a Christian way of life within a religiously diverse culture? How are ministry leaders to cultivate communities of disciples loving and serving the world from a non-majority position? What does it mean to equip all people to be sent into the world as witnesses to God’s love? These are just some of the critical questions for congregations today. As we end our session, let’s put our understanding of faith into conversation with current realities. What if we describe the Christian life as “faith with a mission,” and this **faith with a mission** had *four core commitments* and engaged *two movements*? Attending to these commitments and movements allows God’s people to “do jazz” in a religiously pluralistic society, as well as offer congregations a framework for thinking about the formation of faith in this missional age.

4a. Discovering “faith with a mission” is grounded in four core commitments:

Faith is a communal venture, as it also is a personal journey. Faith is about salvation, or life after death, but faith is also about life on earth. A Lutherans understanding of faith is robust and dynamic, and four commitments within two movements can help us discover this dynamism and foster a Christian way of life.

Review each of the four images, drawing on the table discussion questions as time allows.

Remember *the four images* which represent *your identity*? Remember what we discussed about what it meant to BE Christian? What if four images could help us understand our identity as people of faith, and helped us claim our identity as Christians?

As has already been stated, **a Christian’s life and identity is rooted in faith in God**. Faith is a gift, a gift which invites people into a dynamic, two-way relationship with God. Faith claims humans as children of God, summons them to see themselves as subjects of God’s love and orients their life by placing it in God’s hands, not the world’s. Faith calls people not only to love themselves, but also to love and serve their neighbor, and this draws people outside

themselves and into the world.



Gift of Love – As has already been established, faith is a gift from God, a gift which both saves and provides identity. This gift is a gift of love, and love is always connected with a relationship. Love is central in faith, and love cannot be earned. Martin Luther wrestled with this aspect of faith, reminding himself and future generations that Christians are justified by faith alone. There is nothing humans can do to earn this gift! Salvation is ours, and faith secures that future.

Yet knowing one’s future changes the present. Christians, knowing their future is with God, have the opportunity to live differently in the world today. Being Christian, with faith as one’s identity, creates a hybrid reality. In Lutheran terms this hybrid reality results in a hybrid identity - being both saint and sinner. Christians humbly accept this gift of faith from God, while continuing to struggle

with their sinful nature. Receiving this gift renames each person child of God, and begins a journey of discovering a Christian way of life. Faith as a gift is simple and mysterious, in the future and in the present, unfolding over a lifetime.

Table discussion –

How has the gift of faith informed your life?
What does being in a relationship with God mean to you?
How has God’s love for you impacted how you love others?



Compass for daily living – Faith also informs a Christian’s way of life. In this way, faith is a compass. If faith as a gift implicitly impacts one’s life, faith as a compass is its explicit expression. Because faith is embodied, faith finds expression in human actions and circumstances. Faith is not just about salvation – or life after death in heaven (eternal), but faith is also about every day matters – or life on earth (temporal). Because faith is a relationship, not a set a rules,

people of faith are constantly discerning what a Christian would say or do in any given situation. Faith as compass guides such discernment, both personally and communally. This means faith as compass is an internal *and* external activity. It means God’s Word and Christian communities come alongside communities and individuals, as current situations are put into conversation with our particular understandings of God.

Table discussion –

How has faith as a relationship with God not a set of rules informed your life?
How has the community of faith helped you discern a Christian way of life?
What does it mean to foster faith as a compass in the lives of young people?



Witness to God’s Story – Faith is also being a witness, a person testifying to God’s story and God’s love in the world. Faith has a public dimension. Being Christian means bearing witness to God’s larger story, a story which draws from the past and extends into the future, as it also speaks to the present moment. The church, as the body of Christ post-resurrection, is a witness ,to love is an unloving world, to forgive in a culture of getting even, to a communal view of life in an individualistic society. In this way, Christians are a light in the darkness. Through prayer, worship and telling God’s story, Christians witness to God’s love in the midst of a broken world. And Christians witness to God’s love as they share their faith, their story of encountering God’s love. Being a witness to God’s love happens as God’s people live into and out of their relationship with God and come to know God’s story, again and again.

Table discussion –

How have others witnessed God’s love to you in your life?
How have you experienced congregations witness to God’s love?
Why is it important to foster faith as witness? How might that happen in the lives of young people and their families?



Agent of God's love – Faith transforms the subjects of God's love into agents of God's love. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, faith informs and transforms individuals and communities as it evokes agency. Faith calls forth active engagement with the world, the world which God created. This world seeks rich, abundant life within its broken, sinful reality. God loves the world and people of faith in a relationship with God cannot help but get caught up in this love. Gifted with particular passions and located in particular places, people of faith turn their agency to the world. As the embodiment of God's love in the world, people of faith become participants in God's most precious mission – loving the world. And this mission is about creating and sustaining life. As the church is in, with, for and against the world, God's people foster life in their efforts to create community, as they seek to reconcile brokenness.

Table discussion -

How has faith empowered you to be an agent of God's love in the world?
How have you helped others discover their gifts and passion so they might participate in God's mission?
What difference does it make for people to discover their agency and direct it toward God's mission in the world? How might the church help young people with this?

4b. Discovering "Faith with a mission" includes two movements:

Fostering faith in the world today means exploring what it means to be God's people both gathered together and sent into the world. Living *gathered and sent* rhythm is central for discovering faith with a mission. Gathered God's people come to know God's story, engage in Christian practices, live in relationship with other people of faith, and discover their identity as children of God. Yet God's people live most of their lives scattered in the world. And in the world God's people encounter others, with diverse stories, values and beliefs; in the world God's people see and experience injustice and pain, as they also have opportunities to nurture life and exercise agency. Attending to the rhythm of gathering and scattering is central for the church as it reimagines faith formation in this time.

Gathering – Any time two or three gather in God's name, God promises to be present and we, God's people remember and discover our identity. These times are formal and informal, planned and unplanned. They include particular practices place us within the larger Christian community, as they also recognize the uniqueness of our time and place. Times of gathering include times of being, others are times of doing. In gathering we learn God's story, as we also discover our own.

Table discussion -

How has the gathered community of faith helped you discover your identity as a child of God?
How have they embodied the faith for you at a critical time in your life?
What practices have been most impactful for you living your faith in your everyday life?
What practice or practices were most helpful in you learning the Christian story?

Scattering – Times apart, or away from Christian community, are often challenging, making it easy to forget our Christian identity. On our own the brokenness of the world can be overwhelming, pain too great, and solutions too simplistic. Yet our Christian identity shapes not only our times together, but also as God’s people are scattered in the world. Living “Christian” in the world means being God’s love in the world. It can be as simple as listening to others’ stories, as we share our own, or it can mean accompanying and serving others. God’s love is expressed in two ways. One way is creative, and is about fostering and sustaining life. Another way is redemptive, and is about reconciling, healing and offering hope in a broken world.

Table discussion -

What are some ways you have been part of God’s creative love in the world?
What are some ways you have been part of God’s redemptive love in the world?
What is most challenging for you as you seek to discover a Christian way of life scattered in the world? How could a community of faith help you with this?

Think of how much time people of faith spend together, and think about how much time people of faith spend scattered apart in the world. The church has placed most of its energy on tending to gathering times. Yet such a small percentage of one’s week or month is spent gathered with other people of faith. When Christianity was a majority religion, congregations fostered faith with the help of society. Within this environment, there was little need for helping people discover a Christian way of life in their everyday world. Yet, in a religiously pluralistic society, new attention needs to be given to helping people live “Christian” scattered in the world.

Table discussion -

What stands out for you in the pattern of gathering and scattering? What’s similar and different from the current practices of your congregation?
How would this pattern help you, personally, discover a Christian way of life? What might it entail?
How might this pattern be a “curriculum” for helping young people discover a Christian way of life? How would this change your current practices?

Closing

Yes, the world is changing, and these changes offer the church the opportunity to reimagine its ongoing work of cultivating a faith that matters in everyday life. Today, the United States is a melting pot of various religions, with Christianity becoming less of a majority. Within this new place in society, congregations continue their ongoing work of faith formation. Living in a missional age provides the opportunity to remind Christians of their identity and help them discover what it means to live a Christian way of life in this time and place. Christians are both passive and active in this process, as faith forms, informs, and transforms their lives. Gathered and scattered, God’s people create a rhythm of life which allows God’s love to be embodied in the world. People of God, the Christian faith is a “faith with a mission” and congregations are prime locations for cultivating such a faith. The coming sessions are designed to help congregational leaders lean into this reality. There is hope, and our hope rests in placing our lives and our future in God’s hands.

Close in Prayer

APPENDIX A

Our Context

The church in any time in history faces opportunities and challenges. Cultivating Christian community and a Christian identity always does so in the midst of contextual realities. For example, think about what it must of have been like being Christian community in the midst of World War 2 Germany and the Nazi regime or in modern day China and its particular religious and government realities. Or what about the liberation movement of South America, especially thinking about offering a faithful response to being church for a people oppressed. So what about our United States context?

Around your tables, talk about United States history, noting both significant contextual realities and what impact they've had on what it means to be church. Write each of a post-it. After 5-7 minutes, create a large timeline on the wall - posting contextual realities on the top of the timeline and impacts on the church under the timeline.

Birth of US -----1900-----Today

As time allows, discuss what you see from this visual timeline. What changes have taken place in the church? Why did these changes take place? What would have happened if the church had not changed? Where there times the church didn't respond to the culture? What happened as a result? What insights did you gain from this exercise?

As this exercise illuminates, the **church's relationship with the culture** has changed over time. And the church has changed throughout history, not just within the United States. Back in the first century, the church worked primarily outside the host culture, religiously or politically. In the fourth century, when Constantine the Great converted to Christianity, the Christian church began moving from being or minority religion to being a state/national or majority religion. Since the fourth century, most European countries experienced religious and political leaders working together. This reality intertwined spiritual and civic matters, and over time, this relationship brought the church into the center of society. Yet this relationship also blurred the church's mission. With the church located in the center of society it became accustom to engaging the world with certain resources, support, and power. From this posture, the church's call to the world relied heavily on the church's institutional structure, organizational mechanisms and specialized leadership.

While the United States was founded on the principles of separation of church and state, much of its existence has included a foundation of Christian ideals held by the majority of the population. This has meant the dominate host culture voluntarily partnered with the Christian culture and congregations in fostering a Christian way of life. Together, society and the church, helped people navigate the challenges of the world by fostering particular practices which reinforce a rhythm of life based on Christian values and commitments. This situation provided a holding environment for Christians, with most people not having to be overtly active in nurturing a Christian lifestyle. For examples, this meant religious holidays were days off from school and Sundays were "Sabbath" times, not only from school, but also for many businesses.

In the past 50 years, however, this reality has changed. As the United States has continued to welcome diverse groups of people, it has had the opportunity to exercise its commitments to religious freedom. As a result, the United States has experienced a growing religious pluralism and shifts in shared cultural commitments. Today, the Christian church is discovering it is no longer in the center, aligned with the dominant power and supported by civil society. Subtle in some areas and abrupt in others, this shift has created an opportunity for the church to rediscovering its identity and mission practices. Accustom to working *with* the greater society with overlapping language, life patterns and values, the Christian church has been forced to reexamine its relationship with the greater culture.

The church's call to love God and neighbor is different without society partnerships and shared ideals. Life patterns which reinforce a Christian lifestyle can no longer be assumed within school systems or the business world. Communities do not necessarily aspire to biblical values. And the language of faith is not a primary language. So today, while the work of the church is the same, its relationship with culture has changed. This reality provides the opportunity for people of faith to rediscover their Christian identity and for the church to reimagine its work, as the work of translating the good news of God's love is located in the hands of all Christians.



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