

Expanding the Reach of Faith Formation with Hybrid Networks

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Responding to a Problem

I serve as the “front line” in the consultation services of a small faith formation resource center at a large protestant seminary in the U.S. mid-Atlantic. Every day, I answer emails, phone calls, Facebook messages, and other inquiries about how to better design Christian education programs and other means of nurturing and growing the faith and discipleship of members of congregations large and small in the United States and beyond.

After a few months on the job, some patterns emerged in these requests for help. The one that really tugged at our institutional heartstrings illustrates how new patterns of American religiosity are changing (or should be changing) the tried-and-(no-longer)-true ministry models that churches have been using for decades. Here’s a sketch of how a typical caller describes things:

“I guess I’m calling to ask your help with a few different problems. We have a small Sunday school that is a lot of work to maintain. We have a hard time training and keeping teachers. In many cases, the only people willing to help are the parents of the few kids who show up, and even they are only here one or two Sundays per month. So it’s demoralizing for them and for us. Many of these families come to worship more regularly but say they can’t commit the time for an extended Sunday morning, to say nothing of coming back for youth group in the evening.

The same is true of our adults. Many of them tell us they’re really hungry to learn. They don’t necessarily know the Bible or the faith very well, and they feel inadequate about that but don’t know how to fix it. We ask them what kind of weekday morning fellowship or evening class would help, but they tell us they’re too busy to commit to that right now. So our Bible studies and small groups tend to consist of the same dozen or so people who come to everything. We’re not really reaching anyone outside these small clumps, even though our congregation is growing a bit. What do you think we should do?”

Sound familiar? It did to us, and these repeated calls strengthened our resolve to try to do something about it. But congregational leaders are reluctant to give up on programs that have worked in the past, especially when the replacements are far from certain. We recognized in this situation an opportunity to be led by the Spirit into new territory. We wanted to bring together faith formation practitioners to pilot a model in a diverse sampling of churches. And since we didn’t have all the answers ourselves, we knew we were going to have to learn along with the people we serve. Thus was born the Hybrid Faith Formation Network Initiative.

From Programs to Networks, From Weekly Meetings to Hybrid Groups

Once we knew where to look, we realized a huge part of the work had already been done for us. Anyone familiar with the [Faith Formation 2020](#) project or the [21st Century Faith Formation](#) training program has learned about faith formation networks and their potential to support faith learning in the [new social operating system](#). The idea here is to stop offering programs (“show up when and where we tell you and learn what we want you to learn”) and start nurturing networks (“get connected with others who want to learn and do so at your own pace and with the church’s blessing and support”). For an excellent summary of faith formation networks, check out the [Summer 2013 issue of the Lifelong Faith Journal](#), which is entirely dedicated to the subject.

The feedback we got from the folks we shared this idea with was that faith formation networks sounded very exciting, but making the transition to this new paradigm was intimidating. So with the help of several congregations who were intrigued by the idea, we proposed what we came to call a hybrid network, combining network theory with classic small group ministry ideas. The “hybrid” comes from “hybrid learning.” It’s the term used to describe classes that have both an online and in-person component in traditional educational settings.

The process of launching a hybrid network as we imagine it looks something like this:

1. identify an area of shared interest for learning and growth (e.g., prayer at home) and connect interested individuals or families via a contextually appropriate “hub” (social networking group, shared blog, or email listserv),
2. gather the group for monthly in-person meetings to build community and introduce important concepts and skills, and
3. in the intervening time, learn “alone together” by trying out leader-provided activities and discussing the experience online (and hopefully discussing other faith-learning joys and challenges along the way).

Step 1 acknowledges the new realities about how most Americans interact with each other (“offline” friendships extend into the online space) and empowers the group to learn according to their interests (a key point in adult learning theory).

Step 2 creates continuity between program- and network-based approaches to learning and preserves the insight that in-person fellowship can never be replaced by online connection (think *supplement* or *extend*, not *replace*).

Step 3 addresses the rampant busyness of learners’ lives by easing the travel and scheduling demands of the group and allows facilitators to provide faith activities to learners when they’re at home – which is where the most effective faith formation has always taken place anyway.

Networked Learners, Networked Leaders

Some of the power of this initiative was in the gathering of a cohort of faith formation practitioners all involved in planting these communities of learners. To our way of thinking, our center became the site of a process of parallel modeling and action research. At the same time that these parish facilitators were leading hybrid networks in their contexts, they were a part of a network with each other led by myself and Lisa Kimball, the director of our center. This parallel network was not, strictly speaking, a hybrid network (we met entirely online via Google Hangout, since several of our participants were many states away). But the way they connected with and learned from one another was similar to what participants in the congregational networks were experiencing. This allowed the leaders to walk a bit in their people's shoes.

We knew that experience would be helpful for coaching and training purposes. We took as our shared activity the reading of [The Social Media Gospel](#) by Meredith Gould and [Faith Formation 4.0](#) by Julie Lytle, two books with a lot to say about using technology for learning and communication in the church. We discussed the comparative merits of different network "hubs" in different contexts for different kinds of learning (fascinating example: a congregation in a community with many national intelligence workers refused to connect via Facebook). We curated potential resources for designing at-home faith activities for the congregational networks. And we shared our joys and frustrations with each other, taking advantage of the wisdom and experience of the group to identify best practices and potential pitfalls.

What surprised us was the power of the cohort to convince congregational leaders and even some of our participants that a hybrid network was a promising faith formation model to try in the first place. Several of our colleagues reported initial resistance from supervising clergy until they shared that this was an experiment that other congregations were involved in and that staff and faculty at a trusted denominational seminary were helping support it. Other congregations told us that they might consider a project like this once more data is available about its effectiveness. And one participant spoke particularly powerfully about what this network of colleagues meant to him and his ministry practice:

"As a rather extreme extrovert and a minimal participant in digital communities, I had an interesting experience yesterday. Fridays are my day off, but in many ways they are a day which I dread. Most Fridays I'm alone. I don't like days without personal meaningful contact. The idea, though, of having some reading to do as part of a group of people and of having comments/conversation to share seemed to positively affected my outlook for the day. This is something I'll be trying to pay attention to as we continue. This HFFNI will be my first serious online relationship."

We summarize some basic demographic information about this initiative in the table below, including a bit about what kind of network each facilitator brought together.

Hybrid Faith Formation Network Initiative Participant Information

Position	Gender	Lay or Ordained	Context	Network Convened
Minister for families (staff)	Female	Lay	Pastoral-sized suburban parish	Faith at home for families
Former leader of Christian education committee and current parish council officer (volunteer)	Male	Lay	Urban parish making transition from pastoral- to program-sized	Spiritual practices for participants in parish fellowship dinners program
Faith formation leader (staff)	Female	Lay	Mid-sized, Mid-Atlantic judicatory	Skills for digital faith formation for leaders in parishes
Assistant pastor (staff)	Male	Ordained	Corporate-sized suburban parish	Group Bible study for individuals; general online learning program for individuals
Minster for youth (staff)	Female	Lay	Program-sized suburban parish	Idea exchange for parish teachers; faith at home for Sunday school parents
Assistant pastor (staff)	Male	Ordained	Program-sized suburban parish	Faith at home for families
Minister for children and youth (staff)	Female	Lay	Corporate-sized suburban parish	Faith at home for families

Where To From Here (For Us and For You)?

Needless to say, our center is excited about and grateful for the early successes of this initiative and the way it is renewing faith formation efforts in these different contexts. Many of the hybrid networks have already launched, and our network of leaders have already requested that our group continue to meet informally for ongoing mutual support even after our formal time together has ended.

In future iterations of this initiative, we hope to use the face-to-face web conferencing time more for community building and less for negotiation of logistics. We found that smaller web conference conversations with interest-group clusters were particularly effective in creating a willingness for participants to be vulnerable and to learn more from each other than from us. (We should have known: that's the equivalent of splitting into table groups at an in-person meeting – an age-old technique in faith formation ministry.)

A continuing point of reflection for us relates to the hybrid learning from which our networks take their name. What is the difference between a hybrid course and a hybrid network? In both our network and the congregational ones, how do we negotiate and adjust expectations for participants and leaders. Flexibility, beyond that of a traditional online course in a traditional education setting or even a parish class, seems essential. But at what level of flexibility does

the network fail to be a community making progress on shared learning objectives? These are just a few of the questions we'll be asking each other in the coming months.

Just as we hope that the practitioners we've worked with will go on to plant new and different networks (and perhaps even split and multiply existing ones), we too remain open to discerning a variety of ways forward for the Hybrid Faith Formation Network Initiative. These will probably include new cohorts, informal articles and talks for practitioners interested in trying this approach, and more formal action research reporting (see the resource list below for a link to our recent report to the Religious Education Association). If any of this is interesting to you in your faith formation context, please don't hesitate to contact us at cmt@vts.edu.

Works Cited

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