



Shaping a New Vision of Faith Formation for Maturing Adults: Sixteen Fundamental Tasks

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For years, we've heard predictions that "the elders are coming." Now they are here. And these maturing adults are here to stay in ever advancing numbers that are fueled by downward shifts in worldwide fertility rates and dramatically increased longevity.

Today's maturing adults are different from those who came before. Sociologist Dean Hoge of the Catholic University of America, says they are more motivated by a desire for personal purpose; also, they tend to be more participatory, more interested in being actively involved with issues that "matter."

Yet maturing adults are perhaps the least understood of any group within churches today. They are also the group that receives the least amount of focus on faith formation. There are many reasons for this: a general fear of aging; an historical preoccupation with the educational and sacramental needs of our youth; the relatively small numbers of maturing adults in the overall composition of many congregations (although in others, maturing adults

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may make up the majority of the community; a lack of faith formation curricular materials for maturing adults; and the perception that maturing adults don't need further faith formation. All of these reasons have conspired to create a generally anemic approach to faith formation in the maturing years.

But the situation is changing. Today, we better understand the prejudice of ageism. Churches see the need for faith formation efforts at every phase and stage of life and are willing to make room for these efforts in budgets. Additionally, we are beginning to see curricular materials and resources targeted to the needs of maturing adults. All of this points to the need for a new vision of faith formation for maturing adults.

Developing this new vision requires a fundamental change, one that includes a transformation in the way spiritually maturing adults understand their role as children of God, and a grounded shift in how we, as leaders, "do" ongoing faith formation. We can and must become more intentional in our work with the maturing adults. We can and must become more proactive, more assertive, and more focused on incorporating faith formation for maturing adults into our plans and programs.

This article outlines sixteen fundamental tasks, overarching units of faith-work, which serve as the scaffolding for comprehensive faith formation programs for maturing adults. These tasks not only guide church leaders in constructing fundamental and functional faith formation ministries, they also act as spiritual development handholds for maturing adults as they work toward a greater realization of God's presence in their lives. These sixteen tasks help illustrate a sense of

purpose for maturing adults in the Christian community, and give leaders the necessary vocabulary to conceptualize and converse about maturing adult faith formation in entirely new ways.

Ongoing faith formation for maturing adults must be intentional, purposeful, organized, and developmental. Too often, faith formation efforts for this age group seem to lack direction, structure, and an integrative framework. In many churches, lifelong faith formation is little more than a hit-or-miss proposition that satisfies no one: not congregational leadership, not the faith formation coordinator, and certainly not maturing adults themselves. No one feels good about the "program"—if indeed it can be called a program! Yet this is no one's fault, since up until now there has been little guidance available for articulating a clear curriculum structure for maturing adults.

Recently, I had a personal experience that illustrated the need for new guidance in what constitutes faith formation for maturing adults. While giving a seminar at what could only be considered an otherwise forward-looking church, I mentioned, somewhat astonished, that some churches actually included bus trips to the local casino as an accepted event in their ministry to senior adults. Imagine my surprise when I returned from lunch that day to find a flyer on my lectern, from that very community, announcing a bus trip to the local casino! Please understand: there is nothing wrong with trips to casino, and other social activities for maturing adults. But we must be clear that these activities are socialization, and not faith formation.

Faith Formation Builds on Nature

Each stage and phase of life is ordained by God and therefore has a purpose. Each and every season of our lives offers a cornucopia of opportunities for growth on all levels: body, mind, and spirit. We grow in never-ending spirals of change, as the progression of our lives ebbs and flows, with the Spirit nudging and guiding us always. There is no one phase of life that is more important than another: each has its place; each is equally essential.

Like our lives, ongoing faith formation throughout life supports a spirituality that is constantly growing, ever changing. Ongoing faith formation brings us closer to God, closer to our true selves, our holy selves, the Christ within us. It is best practiced as a sequence of faith formation experiences, some intentional and some quite unexpected, that generate deeper and deeper insights about our true nature and relationship with God. These experiences flow quite naturally from our God-ordained developmental path, the sequence of life stages and transitions that make up our total life experience.

Ongoing faith formation is most effective when it's directly linked to our maturation process. The developmental tasks of life provide us with the framework and essential opportunities for living our lives with a purposeful, intentional, and integrative response to the grace that God continually showers on us.

The best ongoing faith formation is built on life experience. As such, a comprehensive program needs to include all groups and subgroups that make up the larger population of maturing adults in the church. This includes, but is not confined to:

the pre-retired or “Boomers,” the already retired or “Builders,” and the physically diminishing or “Elders.”

This ministry also needs to focus on those who work with maturing adults, whether they are part of the staff or volunteers. As such, we need to construct or adopt an ongoing education program that parallels and extends the ministry of faith formation for our maturing members, especially those elders who are homebound.

When faith formation for maturing adults becomes fully operative, all church members naturally come to see themselves as sharing their own personal faith journey with the whole community. Interacting with maturing adults is a special calling; this only becomes apparent when a congregation has adopted an intentional adult faith formation process.

Perhaps the biggest reason why maturing adult faith formation has not yet become a “true” comprehensive ministry is because there hasn’t been credible investigation into the spiritual needs of maturing adults. We haven’t yet awakened to the need for what Jane Regan of Boston College calls “an adult church.” In the absence of a clear understanding of the developmental stages in later life, precious few curricular materials exist that are specifically targeted for maturing adults—the Boomers, Builders, and Elders. Consequently, many churches have yet to grow beyond what I call “buses, bingo, and brownies,” a tongue-in-cheek description for an anemic approach to ministry for maturing adults.

Slowly this lack of material is now being addressed. There does appear to be an emerging body of knowledge that combines the best from adult development research,

the behavioral sciences, and church documents, tradition, and theology to form what one writer calls “spiritual gerontology.” This emerging body of work can serve as the underpinnings of a curriculum for faith formation that is personal, practical, and relevant for the ongoing needs of maturing adults.

A Framework for the Ongoing Faith Formation Needs of Maturing Adults

If faith builds on nature, then stimulating a deepened spiritual awareness in maturing adults can best be served by looking at the specific issues of life and love that concern them most. These issues are taken from their everyday lives, the ordinary and extraordinary “stuff” that weaves together the fabric of their hearts and minds. Here we find evidence of the work of the Spirit, and the most potential for spiritual awakening.

Faith formation for maturing adults is best constructed around a solid understanding of each facet of modern life. From this perspective, grounded in the faith and tradition of our Church, we can best grab the attention of maturing adults by helping them make the connections between their life experiences and the transcendent power of God.

Here are sixteen tasks, essential competencies for spiritual development taken from everyday life, that together form a framework of fundamentals for a faith formation curriculum for maturing adults.

1. Develop basic faith formation competencies with a strong spiritual base.

All maturing adults need to have some basic information, such as common misconceptions about aging, the fundamental emotional needs of elder adults, common reactions to loss, lifestyle adjustments that come with aging, ways to build relationships that are both nurturing and spiritually, and so on. This information helps form the foundation for the process of “holy aging.” The following story illustrates this goal. Three bricklayers, who were working on a church, were asked what they were doing. The first said, “I’m laying bricks.” The second responded, “I’m building a church.” The third replied, “I’m helping to build heaven on earth.” Maturing adults need a new vision of aging that is faith-based, and not simply secular.

2. Define a new personal paradigm for aging that is built on a spiritual framework.

Too often, maturing adults see the aging process simply as the secular world sees it, as something that happens only to our bodies. Yet the entire maturation process is an extension of the lifelong developmental process, which is ordained by God and therefore, is good. Again, I want to emphasize that aging is a spiritual process every bit as much as it is a physical and mental process. In order to understand and personally “own” this expanded view of aging, maturing adults must be given the tools to help them deal positively and constructively with all the issues that aging brings.

3. See retirement as a holy journey of peace and purpose.

Maturing adults can often define a spiritual path through the transition we call retirement. They need to know that retirement isn't an end, but a new beginning.

Retirement has a unique spirituality, one that can enhance growth at both a spiritual and personal level. It offers a new balance to life that can invigorate, rather than diminish. We have the responsibility of clearly articulating a challenge to maturing adults: that this time of life offers a unique opportunity to use their specific gifts and talents in service to their families and friends, their churches, and their communities, as well as for their own advancing faith formation. Maturing adults need the skills and competencies that enable them to live their retirement "on purpose."

4. Build spiritual companionship skills into the intergenerational patterns of the Christian community.

Maturing adults can enhance their ongoing faith formation by learning and practicing relationship skills that go beyond the normal patterns of social interaction. By forming relationships with diverse groups, across lines of age and other categories, maturing adults can become more aware of the movement of the Spirit in their own lives and in the lives of others. For example, helping maturing adults form mentoring relationships with younger members of the congregation can be a source of positive growth for all involved.

5. Develop ways to see illness through a lens of faith.

Over eighty-six percent of persons over sixty years of age have at least one chronic ailment. Maturing adults can grow to see their illness

as a normal part of growing older, and as an opportunity to embrace God's love more dearly. Sometimes, personal impairment can come more from the way people *see* their illness than from the sickness itself. Why do some maturing adults live a full and rich life in spite of their sickness, while other seems to make a lifestyle out of being sick? Illness doesn't need to be debilitating, certainly not from a spiritual perspective.

6. Understand wellness as a spiritually holistic concept.

Wellness is more than the absence of disease; it's a state of being where one is functioning in an optimal manner, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Maturing adults need a personal wellness program, a framework that gives them specific guidance on how to achieve wellness *regardless of the condition of their objective health.*

7. Learn the essentials of giving care in a way that encourages spiritually growth.

Many of your maturing adults will be called to caregivers. As such, they should know and practice the competencies of caregiving that have proven effective. Caregiving is so much more than performing tasks; it's an engagement of the heart as well as the mind, an illumination of the spirit as well as an activity of the soul. Caregivers need to know that their role is a ministry, an opportunity for spiritual growth. Without this dimension, caregivers risk becoming overwhelmed, falling prey to motivational failures and burnout.

8. Understand the connection between spiritual growth and good mental health.

About twenty percent of maturing adults eventually struggle with

what have been termed "chronic problem" or "difficult" personalities. The five most common of these personalities are: depressed, anxious, dependent, delusional, and angry.

These five personalities can cause many problems for the person, as well as for their families, friends, and fellow church members. It is imperative that those who work with maturing adults have a firm grasp on how to identify tendencies toward these problem personalities, while at the same time learning how they can best serve and give care to these struggling, yet sometimes exasperating, individuals.

9. Link the experiences of the middle years with God's grace.

The middle years, generally thought of as between ages forty-five to sixty-five, are filled with potential turmoil. Yet this very turmoil can be the soil for faith growth. Maturing adults in the middle years are "charged" with setting down the foundation of the second half of their life, a process that includes confronting their own mortality. What came before our middle years was a prelude, preparation for a fantastic journey of interior growth and psycho-spiritual alignment that uses the rest of life to advance our spiritual authenticity and quest for God.

10. Connect the experiences of the maturing years with God's grace.

The maturing years, those beyond the middle years, offer a time of graced and gracious growth. As the body slowly diminishes and shows the signs of physical "dis-integration," the heart and soul have the potential to more fully integrate. It's been said that with age, one's body slows down while one's spiritual pace quickens. The road to spiritual development in the

maturing stage is not an easy one; walking it requires continual guidance and enlightenment. This is where your ongoing faith formation program can rise to the occasion.

11. See all relationships as opportunities for expressing the love of Jesus Christ.

Jesus commanded us to love God and one another. This is the central message of Christianity, a message that challenges us daily throughout life, no less so in our maturing years. Yet how can we love best? What guidelines can we follow in our everyday lives that help us to love better? Maturing adults need, and perhaps even crave, the warmth and connection of relationships regardless of whether they are married or single, living at home or in a care setting. Faith formation for maturing adults can raise-up all relationships, regardless of how difficult they can sometimes be, as reflections of God's love in action. Maturing adults need to hear the message of love accented again and again so they can reflect the light of Christ in their everyday lives.

12. Stimulate a new openness to the ongoing work of the Spirit.

Change stimulates growth, and its pace quickens as we advance in age. Our maturing years ask that we enter into a continuous progression of change, unparalleled to what we may have experienced in previous years. The more we can embrace change as a beneficial force in our lives, the better we can reap the harvest of our years lived in the Spirit.

13. Rise to the role of spiritual mentor-coach.

Younger persons in the faith community need the spiritual wisdom of maturing adults. At the same time, maturing adults need the

encouragement and skills to carry out the role of mentor-coach. The role of the mentor-coach is to couple with younger people who can benefit from the spiritual life experience of the maturing adult. The mentor-coach models the work of Jesus Christ, and shares her or his life in Christ with the rest of the faith community.

14. Recognize the innate power in one's own spiritual story.

One of the most profound faith formation tasks of the elder years is to realize that Christ has been present in and guiding one's life all along. This awareness ushers in a renewal of faith that can emancipate maturing adults from spiritual shadows and compulsions that constrict communion with Christ. Instead, a new innocence and simplicity emerges that lubricates any tired or worn spiritual mechanisms and coaxes them into finer operation. Such profound discernment comes only from a deep consideration and contemplation of soul, the result of which leads to new abundance of life.

15. Enter into a renewed practice of prayer.

Prayer reminds us who we are; it reiterates our essential core, illuminates our inner reality, and activates our true self. In our advancing maturity we discover new urges to find more intimate communion with the divine, and a desire for deeper connection with Jesus. Prayer, our continuous connection with God available 24/7, brings us ever further into the mystery of life, while providing the means for a more peaceful and secure existence.

16. Recognize the essential wonder of our advancing walk with God.

Paradoxically, as we mature we become more different from and yet more alike every other person. As our walk with God progresses, we more clearly come to recognize our inner light, more tenderly appreciate our essential inner attractiveness, and more confidently validate our innate distinctiveness. These three characteristics—light, beauty, and uniqueness—constitute the core elements of our divine ordination.

Focusing This Work

Essentially, maturing adults are asking for two things from the Christian community:

- ♦ **Personal relevancy:** They want to make a difference and tackle some of the social injustices in our culture
- ♦ **Interior growth in faith:** They want guidance and direction so they can activate their contemplative nature; they desire clear connection between their world experience and the higher call to God.

We need to listen to this new call by re-defining the ministry and mission to maturing adults. There must be more two-way communication between church leadership and maturing adults, with an emphasis on the potential for empowerment, and a deeper discovery of our spiritual nature through the process of ongoing faith formation. We can see this emerging group of maturing adults as a source of new vitality, people who can tap into their essential faith, loosen inhibiting constraints, and raise the standard of expectation for both active involvement and interior contemplation.

Such lofty goals take a commitment to action from all levels of the church. We need to:

- ♦ Educate ourselves about the value of aging, its purpose and its promise, so we can clearly understand the needs, wants, and desires of maturing adults at all stages of development.
- ♦ Make room in church budgets for addressing the needs of this group.
- ♦ Build a comprehensive curriculum that connects the everyday concerns of all maturing adults—Boomers, Builders, and Elders—to their ongoing spiritual journey. This requires a new scope and sequence of content relevant to their faith formation needs.
- ♦ Construct and expertly manage ministerial structures in each church that can focus the vast energy and talent of our maturing members on the myriad needs of our culture.

Let's embrace the challenge to develop a new model of faith formation for maturing adults. We can chart a new course and a set a new direction, well beyond the old model, dominated by socialization, that is so common in "senior groups" today. We can incorporate the ideas of psychosocial development into the practices of adult faith formation. We can capture and incorporate a new vibrancy, a new vitality, and a new vision into what a maturing life in the Spirit can and should be today.

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