

Taking Faith Formation Online

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Practical Resources for Churches

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Why consider online faith formation?

This chart to the right shows internet use in the United States from 2000 to 2012 as a percentage of the population. I'm sure you're not surprised to see that the number of people using the internet has gone up steadily each year. In 2012 81% of the population were internet users and I would venture to guess that the number is even higher today.

According to a [report by eMarketer](#) in August of 2013, the average adult spends over 5 hours per day online, compared to 4 hours and 31 minutes watching television.

So if churches want to reach people where there are, then they should be looking at ways to do that online.

Internet users ^[1]		
Year ↕	% of population ↕	World rank ↕
2012	81.0%	28 of 211
2011	77.9%	30 of 214
2010	74.0%	31 of 209
2009	71.0%	26 of 210
2008	74.0%	18 of 210
2007	75.0%	14 of 209
2006	68.9%	17 of 206
2005	68.0%	15 of 206
2004	64.8%	14 of 204
2003	61.7%	12 of 202
2002	58.8%	13 of 207
2001	49.1%	12 of 207
2000	43.1%	12 of 206

Online spirituality

People are also going online for spiritual purposes in increasing numbers. Websites like [BeliefNet](#) and [Patheos](#) are growing rapidly in popularity. They have information on many topics related to spirituality and religion, opportunities to share with others, as well as devotional resources.

[Gratefulness.org](#) is a website for spiritual formation. On this website you can watch an inspirational video, walk a virtual labyrinth, and send uplifting e-cards. You can also light a virtual candle on the "Light a Candle" page of the website. There are directions to walk you through the process which includes time for reflection and the opportunity to enter a prayer concern. After you virtually click on the wick of a candle to light it, it stays on the website with other candles for 48 hours. You can also click on candles that others have lit to pray for their concerns as well.

It seems that the site is popular; over 18.5 million candles have been ignited by people in over 243 countries. The driving force behind the website is Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Roman Catholic monk. And for those of you who don't think older people can handle technology, Brother David is 88-years-old.



Who benefits from online faith formation?

Online faith formation is great for people with busy or irregular schedules who find it difficult to attend regular weekly meetings at a set time in a specific place. It's also great for those who are homebound due to illness or disabilities, as well as parents of young children who often need to be taking care of their children when studies and other events are offered. Online resources can also be used to connect with college students who are away from home.

Online faith formation is often enjoyed more than in person interaction by those who are quiet and shy. In a face to face setting there are usually more talkative people who may intimidate the quieter ones. Online everyone gets a chance to share their thoughts and opinions.

Some people think there is little relationship building when faith formation is done online. This is true in some cases, but there are many options which can be utilized to increase interaction and relationship building. Many of those who have shared online learning experiences together find that they continue the relationships with others on social media sites like Facebook even though they have never met in person and may live in different parts of the country – or even the world!

Taking faith formation online allows participants to participate where they are and when they're able instead of expecting them to be where the church is at a time decided on by the church.

[John Roberto](#) of Lifelong Faith Associates states:

We can now reimagine where, when, and how faith formation & learning take place. It is now possible to provide faith formation for everyone anytime, anywhere, 24 x 7 x 365. It is now possible to customize and personalize faith formation around the life tasks and issues, interests, religious and spiritual needs, and busy lives of people.

Online faith formation can be created to meet the needs of your congregation or other people you want to connect with. It can vary from a simple list of suggested websites for people to visit to offering interactive long-terms courses.



Considerations for online faith formation

In planning online faith formation, there are some things to consider and many of these are the same considerations in planning any study or program.

You'll need to identify your target audience. Will it be adults, children, youth, or an intergenerational audience?

What is the technical ability of your expected participants? This will probably vary greatly, but expect that some people will need assistance. You might want to offer a face to face initial meeting for these people; if possible participants can bring their laptops or other devices and you'll have some tech-savvy people available to assist them. Ask participants if they will be participating by using a computer or with a tablet or smartphone. If they're using mobile devices you'll have to make sure that the technology you use works with those platforms.

What's your expected outcome? Do you want participants to know more about the Bible, to be aware of spiritual practices, to learn how to live their faith in everyday life, etc.?

What material will you be using? Will you be creating your own material or using a purchased curriculum?

You'll want to consider finances when planning online faith formation, although the good news is that there are plenty of free resources out there. Often the basic version of a program is free but may contain advertising; upgraded versions are available for a fee.

You'll want to make sure your participants' privacy is protected and that you are obeying copyright laws. The best way to do this is to have a secure site where a password is required.

Remember that online faith formation doesn't have to be an all or nothing proposition. You can combine in-person meetings with online follow-up or even offer an online version of a regular Bible study; participants can choose to attend either in person, online, or both.

Now let's look at some delivery options. You'll need to decide if your online offering will use broadcast or interactive activities and whether it will be synchronous or asynchronous. Most online courses use a combination of all these options.

Broadcast or interactive

In considering what online faith formation resources you'll offer, you'll have to decide whether to use a broadcast or interactive format. A broadcast format is used when you are just providing information. This could include recordings (audio or video) of sermons, blogs, or videos you've created. Interactive formats would include questions for participants to answer, polls, discussion boards, screen sharing, and audio conferencing.

Synchronous or asynchronous

You'll have to determine if your online faith formation will be synchronous or asynchronous. There are advantages and disadvantages to each.

Synchronous means that everyone is online and communicating at the same time. This can be done in a chat room, through a conference call, on Facebook, on Skype, or using online meeting software. Synchronous interaction can enhance relationship building but can be difficult to coordinate with participants' varied schedules. It also can be confusing depending on the number of participants.

Asynchronous interaction is when people interact at various times. This allows flexibility and also gives people time to consider what they're writing. In a threaded discussion, Bob might post a response to a question that was asked in an online course on Tuesday afternoon and Oliver might respond to it on Thursday morning.

Broadcast

You'll select a broadcast format when you want to supply information that is the same for everyone. A simple broadcast method of faith formation could include written documents as well as audio and/or video broadcasts of sermons or other talks.

USTREAM You can live stream your Sunday services using a free service like Ustream; they can also be recorded for later viewing.

You Tube **vimeo** Sites like YouTube and Vimeo allow you to share videos or watch videos shared by others. [Chuck Knows Church](#) is a website where you can view two to three minute videos on objects, symbols, and terms used in church. The website suggests a number of ways these videos can be used -- during worship, before church meetings, or as a post on your church's Facebook pages are just a few of the suggestions.



You can also create a podcast, which is a digital audio file, which can be stored on a site like PodBean and then downloaded to someone's computer, smartphone, or any digital audio player.



Your church website can be a place for faith formation. You can include links to inspirational or educational websites or create your own discussion questions for families based on the lectionary readings or what the children are learning.



A blog can be created at no cost using websites like WordPress or Weebly or you can have a separate blog page on your church website. The pastor or a lay person can blog weekly on a particular topic or different topics each week.



Even Twitter, where you're limited to posts of 140 characters, can be used for faith formation. On Good Friday in 2009, Trinity Episcopal church in Lower Manhattan reenacted the hours leading up to Jesus' crucifixion with tweets from Jesus, Mary, Pilate, Joseph, and Peter. Be aware though, that anyone can use the hashtag you've selected to participate in the conversation.

The website of a church in my area, the [United Methodist Church of Patchogue](#), has a number of links on its home page. Visitors can access live streaming and recordings of church services as well as download a digital audio file of the previous week's sermon. If you click on the Prayer Request icon you can fill out an online form where your request will be added to the church's prayer list. There's also a link to a website for children provided by the United Methodist Church called "Kid's Corner."

The First Presbyterian Church of Dallas has a website for [Family Faith Formation](#). The site tells visitors that it is "an attempt to provide resources and links in a space where you can explore in your own time." The site includes information on family faith activities, parenting articles, suggestions on celebrating milestones in children's lives, and guidance and affirmation for parents.

Interactive

In the early days of the internet, static websites were the norm. We refer to today's internet as Web 2.0 as it's characterized by websites with interaction and collaboration. Interaction can include postings on message boards, live chats, collaborative projects, video and screen sharing, as well as online conference calls.

Interactive online faith formation can be done on many different platforms, from simple ones to more complex ones. Closed or secret groups can be created on Facebook. For

instance, you could form a closed or secret group for the youth of your church where they share their thoughts on a faith-based question each week. In a closed or secret group only those who are approved by the group's administrator can interact with the group. In a closed group anyone can find the group and see who's in it but only members can see posts. In a secret group only members can find the group and see posts.

If you want to offer an online study you can use a free forum site like [ProBoards](#) where you can hold online conversations in the form of posted messages. I created a [course based on the Gospel of Matthew](#). There are three separate discussion boards for the course, where messages can be posted. The first is a General Board where the course is explained and where a PDF document with the course guidelines is available. The second board is called Weekly Reading and includes the readings from Mark's Gospel for each week along with links to read the passages online. There are also links to online commentaries and YouTube videos based on the readings, as well as images of paintings related to the passages. The third board is called Discussion Boards and includes three questions for each of the eight sessions with opportunities for participants to also comment on each other's answers.

If you want to have live chats, use webcams, or share someone's computer screen with a group, you can use more sophisticated online meeting software such as [Zoom](#), which offers a free version.

Free open source software which is used by educational organizations includes Moodle and Blackboard, but these are complicated and probably not a good choice for churches.

You can also create a private or secret [Facebook Group](#) for your course which will let you post information and questions which people can respond to.

What to include

If you're going to offer an online course, you'll probably have to have some sort of in person session or sessions to help those in your congregation who aren't very tech savvy. I know one church that offers their online sessions as a live broadcast for an hour each week and then participants follow up on the materials at their own convenience the rest of the week. For the first live session participants are invited to bring their laptop to the church where there are several people there to help them.

You'll also want to have one or more people available to provide technical assistance throughout the course and give participants their contact information.

Try to create a course that has visual appeal. Color photos are good to include; graphics can be used but be careful of using ones that look outdated. Choosing to use either photos or graphics (not both) can make your course look more harmonious.

We live in a world rich with multimedia, so be sure to include it in your course. You can use video and music clips either by including them in the course itself or by providing links to the clips. Providing links is better in terms of copyright usage if you haven't created the videos and music yourself.

Make sure your course includes plenty of opportunities for participants to interact with the course leader as well as each other. Give people the opportunity to share information about themselves, their family, and their interests. Provide activities that build relationships. An online course can motivate participants to get involved in a service project or start a new ministry.

Offer opportunities for those who have more time or want to dig deeper into the subject matter by providing extra activities for those who want them.

Don't forget to have fun! You might want to celebrate the end of the course with dinner or an outing.

As with any study or course, be sure to ask for feedback from participants and then ask yourself what could be done better next time.

Ready to go online resources

There are also opportunities for online faith formation that you can plug into.



BeADisciple.com is a website that offers online Christian education. It's connected with the Institute for Discipleship of Southwestern College, a United Methodist institution, but the courses are for Christians of all denominations. There are a variety of courses available for varying fees including [Disciple Bible Study](#), courses on spiritual formation from the [Upper Room](#), and ministry training courses. Members of a congregation can take a course on their own or the church can become part of BeADisciple's [Congregational Partners](#) program. The church can then either offer one of the already created courses to their members or create their own course.



[ChurchNext](#) offers online courses in Scripture, liturgy, and important Christian topics taught by experts. Participants can join the ChurchNext community as an individual, form their own group, or build a school for their congregation.

Some denominations offer online courses although these are often for those seeking training or certification in a particular ministry area.



Opening Doors
to Discipleship

The Presbyterian Church USA, along with four other denominations, offers a program free to its members called [Opening Doors to Discipleship](#). It's a "series of four courses in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition to help teachers and leaders equip themselves to be faithful teachers and leaders." The courses are self-directed and the titles are: Teaching Skills, Bible Background, Presbyterian/Reformed Faith, and Discipleship.



United Methodist
communications

[United Methodist Communications](#) offers online courses on United Methodist basics, web ministry, and other topics. It also includes courses offers by some of the United Methodist regional conferences.



You might remember this poster from a number of years ago. Online faith formation, like anything new, is still in the early stages. You will probably find that some things you try will work and some things won't. That's to be expected so don't give up; just hang in there!

If you're a subscriber to PRC, we're there to help you in this process in any way we can. For information about subscribing, [click here](#). We'll work with you to create a customized program or set up a website, and we also have numerous [webinars](#) that have to do with social media and technology. Our recorded webinars are available through our website and include topics about churches using Facebook and other social media in their ministry.

Resources for online faith formation



Websites

- [Faith Formation Learning Exchange](#)
- [Lifelong Faith](#)

Church Faith Formation Websites

- [Beyond Our Windows](#)
- [Faith & Fun @ Home](#)
- [Holy Trinity Families](#)
- [Spirit Link](#)
- [St. Andrew's FISH](#)

Other Useful Websites

- [G-dcast](#) – Old Testament videos, apps, and interactive experiences
- [Living Compass](#) - Podcasts for families
- [Vibrant Faith at Home](#) – free seasonally-based faith formation activities for families

Articles

- [“Expanding the Reach of Faith Formation with Hybrid Networks”](#) by Kyle Matthew Oliver
- [Lifelong Faith Associates Summer 2013 Issue: A Lifelong Faith Formation Network Version 2.0](#)
- [“Moving Online: Faith Formation in a Digital Age”](#) by Julie Anne Lytle
- [“Shutting Down the Sunday School”](#) by Day Smith Pritchett
- [“Virtually Religious: Technology and Congregations”](#) by Scott Thuma

Books

- [Click 2 Save: The Digital Ministry Bible](#) by Elizabeth Drescher
- [Faith Formation 2020: Designing the Future of Faith Formation](#) by John Roberto

- [*Faith Formation 4.0: Introducing an Ecology of Faith in a Digital Age*](#) by Julie Anne Lytle
- [*The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Gospel in New Ways*](#) by Meredith Gould
- [*Social Media Guide for Ministry*](#) by Nils Smith

Recorded Free Webinars

- [*Enhance Your Digital Ministry: Strategy and Techniques for Integrating Social Media*](#) by Meredith Gould
- [*Facebook Ministry 101*](#) by David Czeisel
- [*Online plus in-Person Hybrid Learning in Congregational Faith Formation*](#) by Kyle Matthew Oliver
- [*Spiritual Resources Online*](#) by Kyle Matthew Oliver

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Revised January 2019