

Taking Faith Formation Online

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Practical Resources for Churches

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Why consider online faith formation?

The number of people using the internet in the US is going up steadily each year; [in 2021 the number was 90%](#). On average, people in the US [spend over seven hours online](#) each day. So, if churches want to reach people where there are, then they should be looking at ways to do that online.

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; 22,463,952 candles have been lit from 194 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 95-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.

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-term 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; 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 using meeting software like Zoom, through a conference call, on Facebook, on Skype, etc. 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. You can live stream your Sunday services using a free service like Facebook Live; they can also be recorded for later viewing.



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 other people can blog weekly on a particular topic or different topics each week.



Even Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok 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.

Many churches now put links to live streaming and recordings of church services as well as audio files of sermons on their websites. You can also put a prayer request icon on your website where people can fill out an online form and their request will be added to the church's prayer list.

The First Presbyterian Church of Dallas has a website for [Family Faith Formation](#). The site tells visitors "These resources are an effort to provide resources and links in a space where you can explore on your time." The site includes seasonal family resources and at home devotions.

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 social media, video and screen sharing using meeting software, and online conference calls, as well as collaborative projects.

Interactive online faith formation can be done on many different platforms, from simple ones to more complex ones. Private groups can be created on Facebook. For instance, you could form a private group for the youth of your church where they share their thoughts on a faith-based question each week. In a private group, only members can see who's in the group and what they post.

If you want to offer an online study, you can use meeting software like Zoom or GoToMeeting where you can have live chats, use webcams, or share someone's computer screen with a group. Sessions can be broadcast live and recorded for viewing by those unable to attend the live session. There are some free online meeting software options but usually these have limitations in the number of people who can participate or the length of time for sessions.

Another possibility is a free forum site like [ProBoards](#) where you can hold online conversations in the form of posted messages. Forum sites are not as popular as they once were but are still used by some churches.

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.

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 about 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
CHRISTIAN ONLINE EDUCATION

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, and ministry training courses.

THE UPPER ROOM The [Upper Room](#) offers self-directed courses with a focus on spirituality.



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



**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](#). The courses focus on "best practices in education, our shared story in Reformed theology, and leadership in faith formation ministries."



**United Methodist
communications**

[United Methodist Communications](#) offers online courses on United Methodist basics, web ministry, and other topics.

If you're a subscriber to PRC, we're here to help you to set up your online learning 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 free [webinars](#) that you can attend live or you can [watch recorded webinars](#) that have to do with social media and technology.

Resources for online faith formation

Websites

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



Church Faith Formation Websites

- [St. Andrew's FISH](#)

Article

- ["Moving Online: Faith Formation in a Digital Age"](#) by Julie Anne Lytle

Books

- [Click2Save Reboot: The Digital Ministry Bible](#) by Keith Anderson and Elizabeth Drescher
- [Lifelong Faith: Formation for All Ages and Generations](#) by John Roberto
- [Faith Formation 4.0: Introducing an Ecology of Faith in a Digital Age](#) by Julie Anne Lytle
- [Social Media Guide for Ministry](#) by Nils Smith

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