

What is Faith Formation in a Missional Age? a conversation starter

By Terri Elton
Luther Seminary

Faith is a gift from God, a gift which informs, forms and transforms. Faith is a given and an unfolding mystery, a foundation and something to be nurtured, about salvation and life in this world, is personal and communal. As 1 Corinthians 13:13¹ reminds us, faith is a dynamic, multi-faceted reality which is not fully understood this side of heaven yet guides a Christian's life on earth.

Christians live in the world, a world where God's kingdom is unfolding, but not fully realized. In this now and not yet reality, God's people are offered an eternal relationship with the Creator and promised salvation, while remaining within a sinful world. God is present in this world and freely offers faith to all people. In this way, Christians are passive in faith. Yet faith is more than passive reception. Faith is stirs within as it also summons response. In this way, Christians are active in faith. Through faith God's people join God's work in the world as they participate in God's ongoing creative and redemptive mission. This work includes fostering faith or equipping "people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature." (Ephesians 4:12-13)

But what does this mean?

Several things can be said about the Christian faith. For our purposes, three key ideas will be lifted up.

1. **Christianity is an embodied faith**, a lived faith. Faith inhabits human beings who live in the world God created. 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, inviting people into a relationship with God and announcing the kingdom of God was near. Today the church, the body of Christ post-resurrection, is commanded to continue proclaiming and embodying God's love and promises, making God's people God's hands and feet. The church is the sign, foretaste and instrument of God's love in the world.
2. **Our life and identity as Christians is rooted in faith in God**. Faith summons people to see themselves as subjects of God's love; faith invites people into a two-way relationship with God; and faith informs the way Christian's live. Faith, at its core, is a relationship, born out of love and offered as a gift to all. This relationship gives Christians their identity as children of God and orients their life by placing it in God's hands, not the world's. Yet faith does more than inform Christian identity, it also forms and transforms life. Faith calls people to not only love themselves, but also to love and serve their neighbor. A life of faith draws people outside themselves and into the world. Hence, faith is a communal venture, as it is also personal. This

¹ "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I share know fully, even as I am fully know."

reality comforts as well as challenges. Faith matters for Christians as it's a given, providing identity, and a dynamic relationship, guiding and sending people into the world.

- 3. Christian's embodied faith exists in the midst of a broken world.** Pain and suffering are present realities, yet people of faith see beyond the present, informed by a different story. As God's people rest in their identity in God, not the promises of the world, they provide hope. As signs and instruments of God's love, God's people witness in a broken world as they proclaim the gospel and serve others. The church, as a living community, is called to translate the good news of God's love to every generation in every era. Being God's people in a broken world means telling God's story, again and again in new and different ways. Being the church requires connecting *current* experiences to the larger story of God's people across time and place. Being the church involves God's people gathered in Christian practices holding their identity in Christ. And being the church includes God's people scattered in the world, putting God's creative and redemptive love into action.

The World we Find Ourselves in

The church has always had a **call to the world** – to love one's neighbor and make disciples of all nations. Being a church sent into the world means cultivating Christian community along with engaging culture. This multi-faceted posture requires *both* knowing the Christian story and participating in Christian practices, *as well as* being in, for, with and against the world. The early church did this work primarily outside the host culture and the mainstream of religion or politics. But in the fourth century, when Constantine the Great was converted to Christianity, the Christian church began experiencing a shift, moving from being a sect (or minority) religion to being a state/national (or majority) religion. In the centuries that followed,² religious and political leaders often worked together, intertwining spiritual and civic matters. While there were benefits to this relationship, there were also many liabilities. One liability was blurring the lines between the work of government and religion. As the church operated from a majority position, it became accustom to engaging the world with certain "privileges." These "privileges" included support, resources and power. Within the Western church, this reality of Christianity being aligned with the host culture is referred to as Christendom. In Christendom, the church's call to the world relied heavily on institutional structure, organizational mechanisms and specialized leadership.

While the United States was founded on the separation of church and state it has operated in a *de facto* Christendom environment, with Christian ideals occupying a majority view. This reality resulted in the church being accustom to the host culture being ripe for fostering a Christian way of life, at least until the past 50 years. As the United States has continued welcoming 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. In this environment the Christian church has been forced to reexamine its relationship with the host culture. Accustom to working *with* the host culture, overlapping language, life patterns and values, the Christian church is now discovering it is no longer in the center,

² It is noted this story is not descriptive of all areas of the world. This story describes the orientation of Western Christianity.

aligned with the dominant power and supported by civil society. This shift, subtle in some areas and abrupt in others, has created an opportunity within the church to rediscovering its identity and mission practices.³ The call of the church to love God and one's neighbor plays out differently outside the center, without the resources of the host culture. Today society does not necessarily aspire to biblical values. Life patterns which reinforce a Christian lifestyle can no longer be assumed within school systems or the business world. And the language of faith, once understood in congregations and civil society, is now foreign to many. This is the missional era in which Christians live. Being a church sent into the world without the infrastructure of the host culture and with diminishing institutional support requires rethinking the church's posture toward the world, revisiting the role of faith communities and being open to learning new skills which help people discover a Christian way of life.⁴ So, **while the work of the church today is the same, the relationship with the host culture has changed, causing the church to reimagine its work.**

What is faith formation in a missional era?

In its history, the church has had to rediscover its sent nature and mission practices many times. Today is one such time. The activities associated with the sent character of the church, once charged to a specialized group of people, have reemerged as a call for all of God's people and this call is being lived out within an environment where the Christian faith is less prominent. Yet the deep questions humans have about life have not gone away. At work, in school and in neighborhoods people struggle to find meaning and identity in a broken world; pain and despair are wide spread and people long for hope and healing. Such moments not only highlight the missional reality in our midst, but also the opportunity for people of faith to witness to God's love. God's people are present in such moments every day. Yet how is faith informing and transforming these times? And, on a larger scale, how might Christians witness to God's love and promise in this missional era?

³ John Roberto, in *Faith Formation 2020*, identifies eight driving forces which are impacting the church and faith formation. These forces are: declining number of Christians and a growing number of people who identify with "no religious affiliation," increasing number people who identify as of "spiritual" but not "religious," decreasing number of people participating in Christian churches, increasing diversity and pluralism in the United States, increasing impact of individualism of Christian identity and community participation, changing marriage and family life patterns, declining socialization of family religiosity, and increasing impact of technology and digital media. For more, see *Faith Formation 2020*, Appendix, 26-39.

⁴ Anthony Robinson sums up the effects of Christendom with six shifts: "1. *Conversion* and *formation* declined because a person was Christian by virtue of citizenship, birth, and residence. This meant that the Christian faith was a social given rather than a choice or conscious commitment. 2. Christianity no longer found its primary embodiment in *congregations*, but in *territories* and *nations*. 3. *Mission* was not an inherent characteristic of every congregation that belonged to all its members; rather, mission was something done by specially designated 'missionaries' in territories or nations that were not Christian. 4. The *purpose* of a church was to provide religious services to a particular local population. 5. The ministry of the church increasingly was performed by and belonged to *religious professionals*, whose roles was in many ways comparable to that of civil servants or government officials. 6. *Society* (or culture) and *faith* (Christianity) overlapped to such an extent that being a good Christian and being a good citizen were equivalent, and each defined the other." Anthony Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: a third way for congregations*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008, 21. For more on this topic I commend this book and his ten conversations.

Today the work of translating the good news of God's love *is* located in the hands of all Christians. This is part of what it means to be church today. And this is an asset in a missional era. But what does it mean for the church to be the body of Christ not only when it is gathered, but also when it is scattered? As the church lives into its minority position, the practices which help Christians hold their unique Christian identity need to be revisited and refreshed, as do the skills and aptitudes needed to live a Christian life.

Faith formation in a missional age will be both similar and different to faith formation in other eras. Discovering what stays the same and what needs to be reinvented requires the whole body of Christ to return to the basics *and* engage in experiments; it will require risk and discernment. As the church lives into this time, two basics will be critical: *revisiting our view of faith* and *exploring what it means to be a gathered and sent people*.

1. Revisiting our view of Faith.

Faith is a gift, a relationship with God, which informs, forms and transforms. Faith is about salvation, or life after death, as it is also about life on earth. Hence, faith formation in a missional age begins by revisiting our view of faith. Faith, for Lutherans, is robust and dynamic and has at least four dimensions.⁵

- Faith as **a gift**. As has already been established, faith is a gift from God, a gift which saves and provides identity. Martin Luther wrestled with this issue, reminding himself and generations to come that Christians are justified by faith alone. There is nothing humans can do to earn this gift! Salvation is ours. This dimension of faith secures the future, while it also informs and forms the present. For Christians, faith creates a hybrid identity. In Lutheran terms this hybrid identity is known as being paradoxically saint and sinner. Christians humbly accept this gift of faith from God, while continuing to live as sinners. Receiving this gift names each human person child of God, and sets them on a journey of discovering a Christian way of life. Faith as a gift is simple and mysterious, unfolding over a lifetime.
- Faith **as compass**. Faith informs the Christian way of life. As faith is embodied, particular human experiences become the occasion for God's creative and redemptive love to be revealed in the world. In other words, faith is not just about salvation – or life after death, in heaven (eternal), but 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. God's Word and Christian communities come alongside individual Christians, as current situations are put into conversation with particular understandings of God. Faith as compass is an internal *and* external activity; it's at work implicitly, as well as explicitly.
- Faith **as witness**. The Christian faith is a relational affair, always and only within community, with a public dimension. And Christian witness is part of a larger story, drawing from the past and extending into the future, while rooted in the present

⁵⁵ For more on this see, Mark Edwards, Jr. "Characteristically Lutheran Leanings?," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol 41, No 1, Spring 2002.

moment. People of faith are the body of Christ in the world as they come together to be light in the darkness or share their faith one-on-one in the world. Christians witness to their relationship with God in many ways. This witness may include proclaiming God's Word, giving testimony to one's faith or putting faith into action through serving one's neighbor.

- **Faith as agent.** Empowered by the Holy Spirit, God's people are not only subjects of God's love, but agents as well. As faith informs, forms and transforms individuals and communities 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, turning their agency to the world. As people of faith, Christians are invited to join God in God's most precious mission – caring for the world. This mission is about fostering and sustaining life, as well as righting wrongs and reconciling brokenness.

2. Exploring what it means to be a gathered and sent people

Faith formation in a missional age also means exploring what it means to be a people gathered and sent. Living into and out of this *gathered and sent* rhythm is central for discovering a Christian way of life. 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 a missional age. This pattern, more than any program or educational endeavor, provides the "curriculum" for faith formation. As the church attends to helping people discover a Christian way of life, gathered and sent, it will be faced with rethinking its posture toward the world, reimagining the role of faith communities and discovering new skills and aptitudes.

- **Posture toward the world** – While people of faith have always lived with a hybrid identity, living in a missional age means embracing our call *to be and live* as strangers and aliens, similar to our Old Testament ancestors. Christians live in this world, but are not defined by it. Richard Bliese suggests the missional posture of Christianity is being *in, with, for and against* the world.⁶ This posture requires Christians to live in the midst of multiple cultures, fostering their own way of life as they also learn to navigate and speak into other ways of life. Minimally, Christians must learn what it means to live Christian, as they are present in and engaged with the host (or dominate) culture. In reality, most people live within multiple, complex cultures. A missional posture sees the world as God's, but also see its sin and injustice. Being people of faith witnessing to God's creative and redemptive love in the

⁶ For more on this, see Richard Bliese, "The Mission Matrix," *Word & World*, Vol. 26, Summer 2006, 237-249.

- world means accompanying, as well as condemning; fostering, as well as reconciling. Living out this call from a minority position requires courage, humility and improvisation. Use the language of faith as an example. “Walter Brueggemann argues that the cultural conditions of postmodernity require the church to function as a bilingual community, conversant in both the traditions of the church and the narratives of the dominant culture.”⁷ Translating the gospel across languages is more than finding the right words; good translation requires a broad understanding of many cultural dynamics. Cultural intelligence, therefore, is critical for Christians as they navigate the dominant culture, as well as various subcultures, inviting conversations among and between cultures.⁸ As faith is lived, embodied in humans and established as a way of life, doctrine and rituals take on flesh and become a public witness.
- **Reimagining the role of faith communities** – As Christianity recognizes its minority status, the importance of dynamic faith communities, which collectively embody a Christian way of life, is heightened. Christian communities, places where people can learn the language and practices of faith, are vital for Christian identity to be discovered and fostered. Kenda Creasy Dean notes that Christians have a peculiar God-Story to claim,⁹ and without vibrant communities faith this story does not become generative and bear witness in the world. Lesslie Newbigin says the congregation is a *hermeneutic of the gospel* – the place where everyday people live into and out of the radical promises of the gospel in a broken world.¹⁰ This public communal witness is critical for the on-going sustaining life of the church. Seeing and participating in living communities make the gospel promises possible. Vibrant communities of faith exercise their agency by being in, with, for and against the world. People, not programs, are central in these communities, for they are the best translators of the gospel. And congregations which invoke their missional imagination are best suited for bearing witness to God’s radical love.¹¹
 - **Discovering new skills and aptitudes** - As Christians live as aliens and strangers, navigating multiple cultures and translating the gospel in word and deed, they discover new skills and aptitudes are needed. Living Christian, when the host culture and the lived faith community are not aligned, is complicated and can be difficult. Once Christians discussed current issues within an environment where Christian values were shared. Now not only are Christian values not shared in much of society, but many do not even know, or care about, the

⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 112.

⁸ “Brueggemann maintains that taking part in both conversations is crucial for people of faith, and Christian formation must result in a bilingual consciousness.” Ibid., 113.

⁹ Ibid., part 2.

¹⁰ “I confess that I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.” Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989, 227. He goes on to name 6 characteristics of such communities: community of praise, community of truth, community concerned for its neighborhood, community that prepares and exercises the priesthood in the world, community of mutual responsibility, and community of hope. (227-233)

¹¹ For more see Dean, *Almost Christian*.

Christian story. Hence engaging in conversation about faith requires the ability for all Christians to be able to share the Christian story in the language of the people, as they also stand up for their beliefs. These circumstances require not only knowing the story, but also the ability to tell the story in one's own words. In the past, faith formation was primarily as an intellectual endeavor, providing education for the practices and relationships already in existence. Today faith formation includes creating and tending relationships, inviting and accompanying people in learning the Christian story and being able to share this story with others, especially those of other religions and religious traditions. Faith formation is teaching Christian faith traditions, but it also entails helping people explore other faith traditions. It is messy and mysterious, as it is wonderful and surprising.

Where do we go from here? And what does this mean for ministry with children, youth, young adults and their families?

Faith formation has not looked the same throughout the history of the Christian church. In the church's recent history within the United States, congregations have relied heavily on shared methods or models, i.e. Sunday School or confirmation. While these methods and models have morphed over time, responding to and adapting to cultural needs, this approach to faith formation is no longer sufficient. Radical shifts need to take place. Faith formation in a missional age will require much more contextualization and creativity. It may draw from the past, but the church must be willing to reimagine. As people of faith seek to discover God's activity in their midst and discern their place within it, risk and innovation will be critical. Such work will seek to extend old practices, as it also introduces new ones. Yes, some practices do transcend particular contextual experiences, but how they are embodied will vary. And, as in any time of major transition, there is a danger of too quickly transferring new discoveries into universal practices. This missional time needs experimenting, remembering, inviting and awakening. Drawing from the past, with an eye toward the future, faith formation in a missional age must be planted in the present circumstances. And current circumstances call for creativity and collaboration.

In the months and years ahead, congregational leaders attending to faith formation are invited into this holy and inventive time; a time to risk, experiment and learn. The church, at its best, will explore this work together, in various locations and with its best resources, and will share its learnings along the way.

As the ELCA seeks to faithfully attend to this question and this situation, the coming year has been dedicated to igniting a conversation. Will you join in the conversation? Will you be part of helping the church rediscover its identity and core work? Many leaders within the ELCA think this work is important and believe the future of the church depends on it. Not only that, but some of us believe the faith formation of children, youth, young adults and their families depend on it.¹² Trusting God is not only ahead of us, but also inviting us into a deeper conversation regarding faith formation for the sake of God's mission in the world, we move forward.

¹² If you are interested in the latest report on religious affiliation, especially among young adults, see the Pew Research Center Study, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, October 9, 2012. Available online at: www.pewforum.org accessed October 21, 2012.

As various networks within the ELCA explore faith formation in a missional age, a group has been formed to listen, collect and curate learnings. Over the next several months, various ministries are invited to discuss this paper, share your experiences and mine your learnings. As you do, several questions are of primary interest to this group. They are:

1. What **questions are most pressing** for your ministry as you attend to faith formation in this missional era? What **challenges** are you experiencing regarding faith formation? And what **opportunities or invitations** do these challenges present?
2. What **faith formation experiments** have your faith community found to be the most fruitful? and what key discoveries have emerged from this experiment? What are some **innovative ways** your ministries are practicing faith formation? And how is the network supporting innovation in this time?
3. What **skills and abilities** are helping people discover a Christian way of life in this missional age? What **resources** are needed to continue creating, expanding and learning from innovative opportunities for faith formation? And what might this mean for the church at-large?

As you have ideas around these questions, please share them via any of the communication channels listed below. Together, let us embrace our call as Christians, gathered and scattered, to bear witness to God's love in the world. And now may the God of abundant life empower and sustain us on this journey.