



## From Generation to Generation: A Case Study on Factors in the Family and Faith Community Impacting Faith Development

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**L**earning faith, developing faith, living faith, and sharing faith is multidimensional, multifaceted, and sometimes a mysterious process. How faith is handed down from one generation to the next is an inexact and sometimes elusive and unclear process. How does faith develop? How is the gift of faith passed on from one generation to another generation within the context of the family and of the faith community? What roles should the family and the faith community play in socializing children in the ways of faith?

This article describes a single site case study of a Catholic parish in the mid-western United States having a Catholic grade school as well as a family faith formation program for families with children who do not attend the parish school. The study empirically examined factors occurring in the family and faith community which are perceived to impact faith development. The focus was on parents' perceptions of factors affecting family faith formation. Also included in the study were the perceptions and observations of the parish staff and of young adults who had grown up in the parish.

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## Part 1. Introduction

### The Role of the Parish Community in Faith Formation

In past generations the parish community was the social, moral and spiritual center, the heart of faith life for Catholics in this country. The process of enculturation of faith (catechesis) was championed by the parish and began early through religious instruction occurring most often in the context of Catholic schools. Parishioners were also extensively involved in the local parish church community life which provided a strong dimension of religious formation for the family.

### The Role of Parents in Catholic Faith Formation

A sentiment which is echoed in virtually every catechetical document of the Catholic Church holds that “Parents are the primary educators in the faith” (General Directory for Catechesis #255). Today’s parents often are challenged to be effective at this, sometimes due to lack of their own depth of religious education and faith formation or lack of time or possibly a lack of a sense of commitment to the Catholic Church. The American family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is often highly scheduled and stretched by time commitments related to work and other activities. The time it takes to cultivate a religious tradition is often in competition with the many activities and pursuits children, teens, and families are engaged in. In past generations, the culture of faith was passed on through time spent in the milieu of the extended family. Today this opportunity for involving extended family as faith educators may be weakened because of physical distance, lack of time or lack of established shared traditions.

### The Growing Issues and Challenges of Catechetical Formation

The Catholic Church began to experience a significant challenge to faith formation as the number of students educated in Catholic schools declined. There was an increased need for catechetical ministry for children in Catholic parishes not attending Catholic schools. The Roman Catholic Confraternity for Christian Doctrine (CCD), a movement that dates back to the 1920’s, was established to meet this need. These CCD programs, as well as other traditional religious education programs targeted at educating children apart from the family in the present system of faith formation, depend heavily on volunteers, who most often are well meaning but uneducated in religious content and do not have background or training in education or effective teaching strategies (Strommen & Hardel, 2008). The significance of the issues resulting from the shifts in Catholic education and after-school models of religious education have had a profound effect on the issues of passing on the Catholic faith tradition

As the Church culture has changed, and some might say has weakened, the challenges of those responsible for faith formation in Catholic schools and parish catechetical ministry have increased (D’Antonio et al., 2007). Catechetical approaches, intended to provide supplemental religious formation, rely heavily on strong family involvement. With the changes in American culture in general, and the culture of Catholic parishes specifically, as well as the changes in the contemporary American family the present system of faith formation does not meet current catechetical needs.

These historical and faith cultural developments in the community challenge the catechetical process of passing on faith through religious education and faith formation. And if the other prevailing pathway affecting the transmission of faith generationally is the family, then the shifts of family structures have further challenged the

traditional conduit of the transmission of faith. Instead of supporting the larger religious culture of the Church and being the heart of the stabilizing religious force of formation, the context of family structure does not always reflect or reinforce formation in the Catholic faith.

## Need for Further Study of Faith Formation Development

The present generation of catechetical leaders in the Catholic Christian tradition is pondering these circumstances today in light of the present culture and its specific challenges. They are aware the family's involvement in the faith community has declined and the centrality of community life lived out in the local Catholic parish has weakened. This has affected the context for faith formation in both subtle and significant ways.

A problem exists in the lack of actual study or evaluation of the effects of more current approaches that call for a partnership of family and parish community in context of a lifelong faith learning paradigm. While many initiatives are proposed, launched, and even implemented, little study is done in Catholic catechetical ministry to determine if these approaches are cultivating the critical factors that are necessary to exist in the home and in the faith community to foster faith development.

## Part 2. The Research Study

### Purpose of the Study

This study identified parent and parish staff members' perceptions of factors affecting faith development. The overall research question posited by the study was: *What factors, occurring in the family and in the faith community, are perceived to impact faith development?* This is a unique study because it examined factors affecting faith formation of

school aged children largely from parents' perspectives. The goal of the study was to provide empirical data to parents, religious educators, and parish staffs regarding information generated on the factors that nurture the process of faith formation. It is hoped that this information will assist parents in understanding the importance of their role in their children's faith formation, inform religious educators designing effective education programs, and encourage parish leadership to provide the necessary resources to support faith formation programs.

### The Study Site

The site of this study was chosen because of its dedication to lifelong faith formation and commitment to the intentional dedication of family in faith formation through the school and parish family-based catechesis. This faith community was intentional in philosophy, staffing, and budget, fostering faith development in families and a perspective of lifelong faith development. As evidence the parish mission statement cited the commitment of the parish "to lifelong faith formation" and stated in its vision statement this church is a "learning community." The combination of a strong traditional school setting as a context for faith development and the family faith formation model's longevity of over fifteen years (a relatively long period for implementation of this model) offered a unique opportunity for research.

A key element of the parish faith formation program is its school-based program with approximately 200 students in grades K-8. The parish also supports a family-based faith formation program referred to as the "Family Program" primarily for children of parish members who do not attend the school though it is open to all families in the parish. Parents who elect to participate in the family program are considered as primary catechists and partners in the catechetical process and make a greater commitment of their time than is traditionally expected of parents in most

Catholic parishes. The parish provides these families with programs targeted to the developmental age of the children as well as intergenerational catechesis. Children and parents who participate in the family program gather as families and also disperse in age-specific settings to classrooms and halls filling every nook and cranny of the church building for their faith formation sessions following the Sunday 9:00 am Mass or Monday evening sessions.

## Description of Faith Formation Programs

The parish had a parish grade school. The school staff consisted of a principal, ten fulltime classroom teachers, and six support staff. The teachers taught religion in the classroom as an academic subject. The school had one class each of 5-year old Kindergarten through Grade 8. There were 130 families in the school having 220 students in the school at the time of the study. This is referred to as the “school program.”

The parish also provided a family faith formation program to approximately 330 families who had over 450 children and adolescents who participated in the “Family Program” at the time of the study. Children participated in the program from age 2, in childcare and, age 3 through grades 11, in age-specific religious education classes as well as intergenerational family faith formation sessions. Parents participated in adult faith formation sessions and in intergenerational activities with their own children. The faith formation department had six fulltime staff and five part-time staff members in 2010 through 2011, the year the research was conducted.

## Research Approach

The study approach was a mixed methods case study. The study incorporated a two-phase design in which quantitative data was collected through a survey and analyzed for

dominant themes. These analyses were followed by confirmatory focus groups and individual interviews conducted concurrently. The data from these two methods were analyzed separately. Finally, the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data were compared to achieve greater insight regarding the research question than could be obtained by either type of data alone.

## The Faith Development Survey

Quantitative data was collected using a survey which was developed based on existing research of factors identified which impact faith development. The process of developing the survey involved four revisions. Changes were made to improve the format of the survey, clarify the directions and improve the Likert scale used in the survey. The revisions were made and the fourth survey was piloted in a nearby parish in the same geographic area implementing a similar family faith formation program.

The final version of the survey consisted of three parts. In Section One, “Perceptions Regarding Personal Faith Development,” parents were asked to rate, using a 6 point Likert scale, 32 factors that they believe impacted their personal faith development. In Section Two, “Perceptions Regarding Family’s Faith Development,” parents rated 31 factors they believed were impacting the faith development of their family. Of the 31 factors, one factor was rated only by school parents and two factors were only rated by family program parents as was applicable to their circumstance. In Section Three, parents responded to 15 questions regarding demographic information such as the parent’s age and the ages of their children and information regarding their children’s attendance in Catholic school and faith formation programs.

## Participants in the Survey

The population that participated in the survey consisted of two groups of parents from the parish. The “school program” group consisted of parents having children attending the parish grade school. The “family program” group included parents participating in the family faith formation program. For analysis purposes, a third group, the “combined population” was created which included the aggregated responses from both groups. Statistical analyses established the reliability and validity of the survey instrument with the school program, family program and combined population groups.

The survey was given online to the parents of children who attended the school program. The school program parents completed 158 surveys for an 85% response rate. Parents who participated in the family program completed the survey in paper and pencil form. Every parent in attendance at one of the faith formation programs on the dates the survey was given participated in the survey for a total of 405 surveys completed. The combined population of school program and family program group members who participated in the survey totaled 563.

## Survey Data and Qualitative Data Collection

The data from the surveys was organized into three data sets to facilitate comparison of differences between responses from parents of the school program, those in the family program population and a combined set of both populations. The survey results from these three groups were analyzed by descriptive statistics to learn more about the perceptions of this population.

The qualitative portion of the mixed methods research design incorporated the use of focus groups and interviews. The focus groups and individual interviews were confirmatory in nature and provided an opportunity to follow up on analysis of the

survey data and sought insight into the meaning of the survey results. There were 6 focus groups (5 of parents and 1 of young adults) and 11 individual interviews with parish staff members conducted.

## Parent Focus Groups

In this study focus groups were used to elicit confirmatory research regarding data previously collected in the parent surveys. The source material for the confirmatory focus groups was inquiry regarding the factors identified initially in development of the survey and further developed from the statistical data analysis from the survey research.

The focus group members were willing participants chosen from a random stratified selection of parents from the same populations who participated in the faith development survey. Groups consisted of 6 to 8 parents. Guided by a moderator, group members were asked follow up questions based on the information regarding perceptions of faith development derived from the survey phase of the study. The focus groups provided anecdotal data about parents’ perceptions regarding faith development of themselves and their families.

The data derived from the focus groups was recorded, transcribed, coded, and reviewed through a constant comparative method. It was additionally reviewed and by an independent researcher with 95-96% inter-rater agreement.

## Staff Interviews

Interviews were a second technique used to gather qualitative data in this study. One-on-one, face to face interviews of about 30 to 40 minutes in length were conducted with 11 parish staff members who minister to the these families. The staff was asked to reflect on their perception of what the parents report as to the significance of the factors from the Faith Development Survey. The information

acquired from staff responses was used to see if the information they expressed was consistent with the results of the parent survey and focus groups. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The comments made by staff members were then coded for common themes based on the original constructs.

## Part 3. The Research Findings

The study examined factors perceived to impact both parents' personal faith development and that of their family. However, this article focuses on reporting and discussing only those responses to survey factors related to parents' perceptions of factors affecting the family's faith development which were originally identified in Section Two of the Faith Development Survey.

Statistical analyses of the findings of the factors studied identified no significant differences between the school program and family program parent groups. School parents and family program parents were far more similar than different in their ratings of what factors had the greatest impact on the faith of their families. Therefore, responses from the school and family program parents were combined to form the "Combined Parent Sample."

## Survey Findings on Faith Development

### Finding #1. Factors Perceived to Affect Family Faith Development

Table 1 presents the top ranked factors from the combined parent group as having impact on family faith formation. These factors, ranked by both groups as impacting faith development, were further investigated in the confirmatory focus groups and interviews.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Combined School and Family Program Parent's Perceptions of Factors Impacting their Family's Faith Development**

	<b>Factors Perceived to Impact Family's Faith Development</b>	<b>Rating (6=highest)</b>
<b>1</b>	Warm loving environment of our home	5.43
<b>2</b>	Adhering to our moral beliefs	5.41
<b>3</b>	The faith of the mother in family	5.18
<b>4</b>	Reliance on faith in crisis or traumatic events	5.15
<b>5</b>	Warm welcoming environment of our church	4.86
<b>6</b>	The faith of the father in family	4.84
<b>7</b>	Attending Mass regularly.	4.83
<b>8</b>	Praying together as a family	4.82
<b>9</b>	Participation in the Sacraments	4.81
<b>10</b>	Sacramental preparation sessions	4.77
<b>11</b>	Sense of belonging to a faith community	4.73
<b>12</b>	Church's teachings about beliefs and morals	4.71
<b>13</b>	Family discussions about faith	4.70
<b>14</b>	Service opportunities	4.48
<b>15</b>	The faith of a grandparent or extended family member	4.40
<b>16</b>	Social relationships and friendships at church	4.38
<b>17</b>	Personal prayer or meditation of family members	4.34
<b>18</b>	Local spiritual leaders	4.30
<b>19</b>	Participation of a teen in youth ministry	4.15
<b>20</b>	Social opportunities at church like festivals	4.01
<b>21</b>	The physical building of the church	3.95
<b>22</b>	Faith development opportunities like retreats	3.82
<b>23</b>	Sacramentals and symbols in home and church	3.72
<b>24</b>	Music and art at church	3.70
<b>25</b>	Reading Scripture or spiritual or religious material	3.50

26	Spiritual examples such as saints	3.43
27	Private practice of religious devotions	3.11
28	Being a member of a church choir or music ministry	3.03

The ranking of these factors impacting faith development, especially the highest rated factors, were further investigated in the confirmatory focus groups and interviews. The low ranked factor of Scripture was also further explored in the qualitative phase of the data due to the importance that Catholicism places on Scripture and the low ranking it consistently received across all of the parent groups in the quantitative data.

## Finding #2. Gender Differences on Perceptions of Impact of Factors Affecting Faith Formation

To explore the question of whether men and women differed in their perceptions of the factors that impacted their personal and family's faith development, descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were conducted on the school parent, family program parent and the combined parent samples. It was revealed that women and men ranked factors similarly. When they differed, women rated factors higher than men. There was one exception, men rated their own impact that is, faith of the father, on family faith development higher than women.

## Finding #3. Functions of Age of Children on Family Faith

Analysis was conducted to explore whether parents' perceptions of factors impacting their family's faith development was affected by the age(s) of their children. Results revealed that age(s) of children did, in fact, affect parents' perceptions of certain factors that impacted their faith development. Parents emphasized certain factors statistically, more or less, than

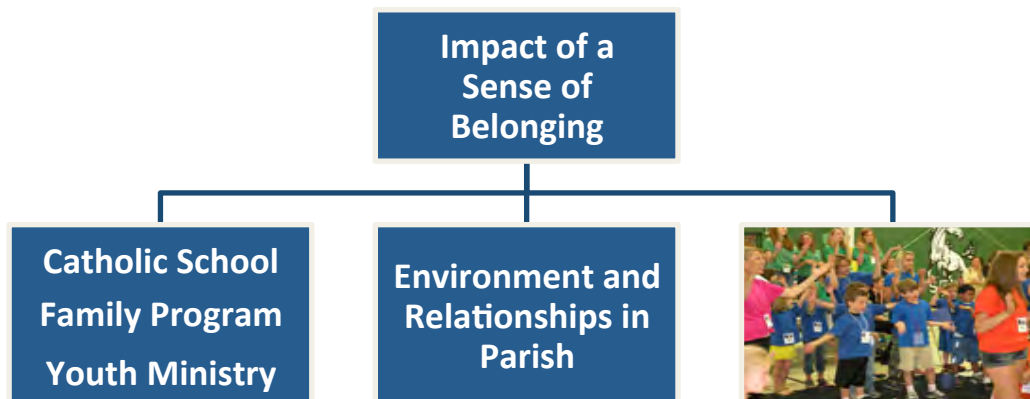
others depending on the ages of their children. Parents of younger children regarded the building of the church, personal prayer, praying together as a family, music and art at church, and intergenerational sessions of family program as more significant. Parents of older children rated the role of service and faith development opportunities such as retreats, as more significant.

Parents of mixed-aged children (having younger and older children), as might be expected, fell between those of with exclusively older or younger children. However, family program parents with older and younger children rated local spiritual leaders in church higher than parents with older children.

## Focus Group Findings on Faith Development

Certain findings from the survey data were brought to the confirmatory focus groups to gain more understanding and insight into the meaning of the results from the quantitative data. These discussions revealed more about the perspective of the parents as well as added insights from the young adult group. Responding to the research question, information from the focus group data was organized and five themes evolved, with several sub-themes in each area. The themes identified were related to the research question and offered more information into the inquiry about factors impacting faith development. The themes are identified in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The ages are indicated in quotations made by participants from the young adult focus group. Parent ages are not given.

**Figure 1: The Impact of a Sense of Belonging**



## Impact of Sense of Belonging

A dominant theme identified in the focus group data was a sense of belonging that came from the participants' being associated with a micro-community within the larger parish community. The micro-communities discussed were the sense of belonging that came from the school, the family program or the youth ministry community.

*We left the church that we were at because of that lack of connection. . . . feeling like you, that sense of belonging, going back to this place that I want to be at. . . . I think that's a huge part. (Joseph)*

*Don't you think Family Program has really attributed to that. . . ? I mean, I feel like for me and my kids, that really has been the huge factor, that in the summer they miss it, they talk about it. And I don't know if they would talk about missing CCD, or, you know, getting dropped off on a Tuesday night for that hour, I, I don't know. (Amy)*

*The Family Program. . . . where kids have to work with their parents, learn about certain things. . . . is really useful. It allows the kids to grow with their parents. . . . And I think that's really significant. The other part is of my picture. . . . is the Sunday School where the kids go to school but the parent doesn't get anything. To me, the Family Program, the parents also learn something I think is*

*very useful. . . . with all of the presentations, [the adult sessions of family program] I still learn something every time. To me, that is, it's good for both, for the kids and for the parents. (Kunta)*

*When we started Family Program, I fully admit. . . . when I found out that Family Program, meant that the whole family came, I was a little taken aback at first. I had gone to CCD, I had put my time in. . . . I had a little bit of a reservation. However, it's, been a wonderful experience and I wouldn't change it at all. And as a matter of fact, when August rolls around, we're like, "When's Family Program starting? We miss it." (Dan)*

*Comparing my public school upbringing, to my, children's Catholic school upbringing just brings me to tears. . . . It's just beautiful. They're so, so blessed to have that. . . . I need to pray, I need to thank God, I need to just sit back and think how great everything is. . . . And I don't think, that, if it was just me raising my kids at my public elementary school, that wouldn't be happening. (Mary Pat)*

*And I think it's kinda, like, at Breakfast Club [the name referred to the youth group of social and service opportunities] and all that it was kinda like, in a sneaky way, we didn't realize we were still practicing faith doing all those things, we thought we were*



*hanging out with friends. But looking back now, it really, I mean, we did all this stuff, and we were practicing our faith, and maybe didn't even realize it until now. (Emily, 26)*

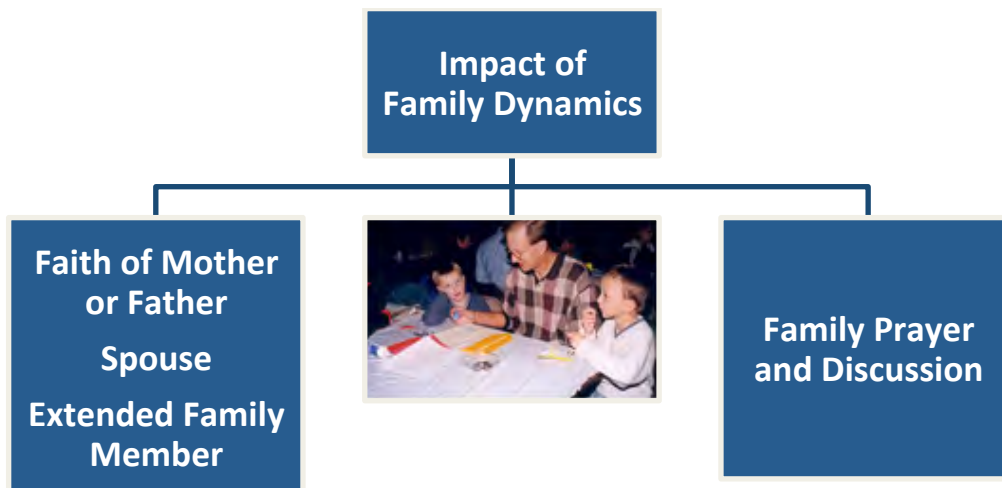
A sense of belonging also resulted from a combination of two related factors, the warm welcoming environment and the relationships that resulted from interaction with the larger parish community.

*My daughter said, "I love our church, Mom. It's so homey." I don't even know what it is,*

*but there's a sense of community, that she feels at home when she walks into this building. (Dawn)*

*I think, like, relationships at church. . . . you know, a strong church family or a strong parish it's, like, a good foundation to help you. . . . You kinda see how the leaders react in certain situations. And so I think that that helps you kind of look at how you should be reacting. (Betsy, 25)*

**Figure 2: The Impact of Family Dynamics**



### The Impact of Family Dynamics

The impact of family dynamics was a second dominant theme rising from the focus group discussions. Parents discussed their influence as parents, the extended family and the home environment on development of faith. Participants identified the family as a nurturing community of love and an originating source of the experience of faith. The family was also described in partnership with the impact the faith community had on their family's faith.

There was some discussion around the faith of the mother and the father and the impact of the faith of one spouse on another in the development of faith, the focus group discussions were more framed by the impact

parents, as an entity, had on faith development. The discussion explored not only the dynamic of relationships within the family on faith but also the dynamics of family activities impacting faith development such as family prayer and discussions of faith in the family. Parents expressed awareness that their example was a powerful factor in their children's faith formation. They also expressed in some cases that, a grandparent's or extended family member's faith had an impact on them personally or on their family.

*I think it is because our children learn about the warm and loving God through a warm and loving home. . . . My faith was deepened with each child but it was also that relationship of, wow, how much I love*

*this child is how much God loves me. And so I think, you know it is kind of related.*  
(Angie)

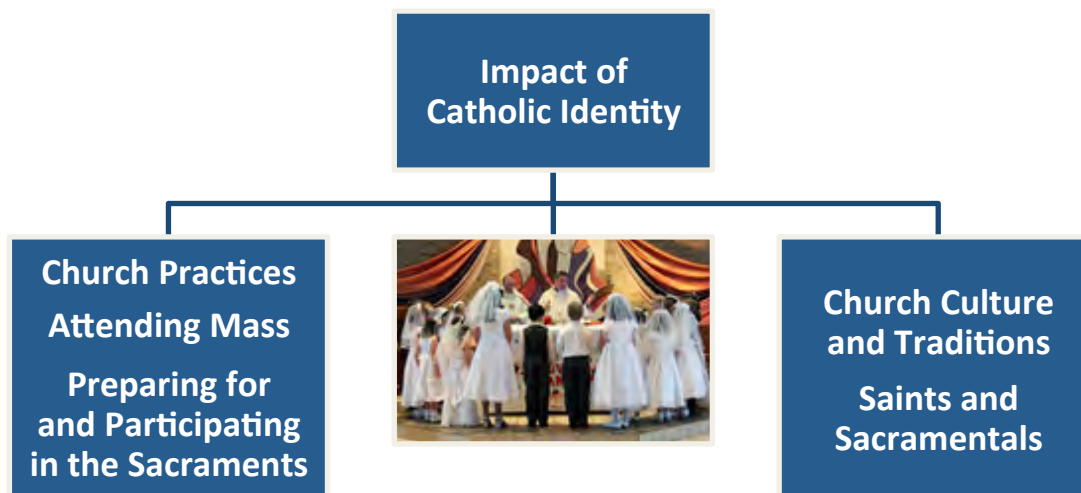
*My parents were my role models. . . . My mother is probably going to be a saint. She'll get up to the gates of heaven and Jesus will say, 'Millie!' My mother's a saint.* (Peggy)

*I think that the faith of a father or a mother, you've gotta walk the talk. And, I mean, if, if*

*you're faithful, I, I think they'll see that and they'll also follow. They may not know why to follow at first, but as they get older, they, they will realize, and say "Oh, I understand."*  
(Don)

*If you're not introduced to reading and writing, you're not going to know how to read and write. If you're not introduced to faith, you're not going to know what faith is.*  
(Joe)

**Figure 3: The Impact of Catholic Identity**



## Impact of Catholic Identity

Catholic identity was discussed as a dominant theme by the group participants. They focused mainly on areas of Catholic tradition that they held as significant in impacting their personal and their families' faith development. One dominant sub-theme identified as high in frequency and intensity, in the theme of Catholic identity, was how significantly regular "Mass attendance" was regarded in impacting faith. Apart from the themes of "belonging" and "family" the impact of no other single factor was given the same weight in significance as regular Mass attendance.

Related to this theme was general participation in all of the sacraments. This is consistent with Catholic teaching as the seven sacraments are the most sacred rituals in the Catholic Church. In the sacramental tradition,

the belief is held that through the Sacraments celebrated in the Church, a Catholic experiences God's presence in a significant, holy and real way. This understanding was reflected in some of the focus group discussions.

*I think we all agree, in the beginning attending Mass is the key, but it is so much more than that. . . . doing those things is what helps create you- your own relationship with Christ. . . . those things, like opportunities such as retreats and going to church, you see so much more about what the Catholic faith has to offer, that you can be involved in to enhance your relationship with God.* (Julie)

*If I had to reach out and grab one thing, it would be going to Sunday Mass because that has been such a big, strong part of my*

youth and, and the faith that I've passed on to my kids. (Mike)

*I think being involved in those things, Mass, prayer, participation in the Sacraments, fosters a sense of belonging. So the weekly Mass, attending Mass, to feel like your church home is another safe place. (a mom)*

*In the Catholic faith, tradition and ritual is so important. And so for me, number one, just attending Mass every single week, and not like an obligation. . . . to make it that this is what our family does together, you know? That is what helps our children build so when they get to be 20, and they get to decide for themselves whether they're going to go to church while they're at, in college, if they look back and say, well, is this what's familiar and comfortable. . . . that ritual, that tradition of going together as a family is really important as well, and for them to see that it's important to us. We don't go because we have to go, we go because we want to go. We want to all be together here and instill those traditions and values in our family. (Laura)*

*I don't know how to explain it. . . . it's just, when she [her daughter] said that she was excited to come, doesn't want to miss class,*

*the Wednesday night Confirmation preparation classes, she just absolutely loves it. (Lisa)*

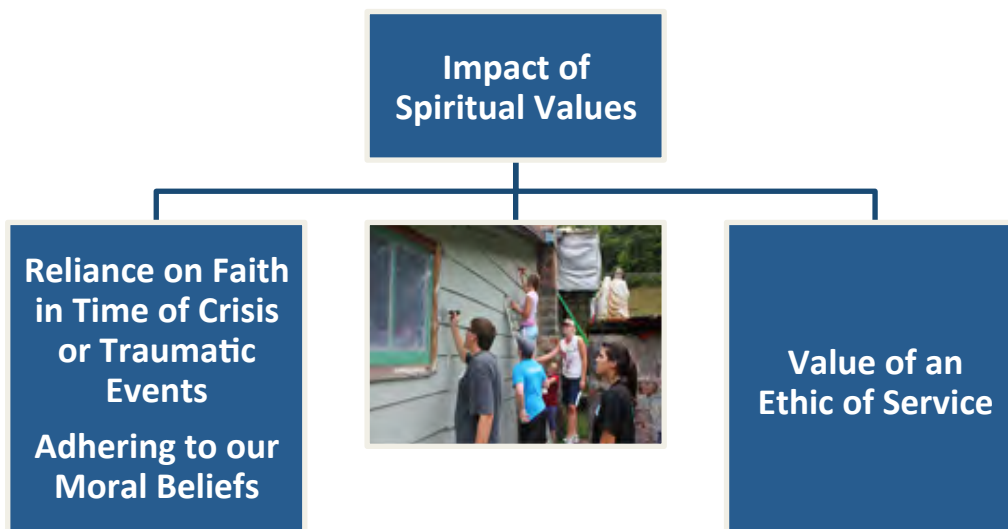
There were various other factors discussed relating to Catholic identity, yet, they were more marginal than central to the discussions. Two topics that seemed to be of interest to parents but they expressed being somewhat vague in their understanding of, were the teachings about saints and sacramentals. They hoped their children were experiencing them as part of the Catholic formation yet they were not totally clear about their place or meaning in the tradition.

*I'm wondering how. . . . our children learn kind of where some of our traditions come from. We've got the incense, and the oils, and those are all really cool Catholic things.*

*And I, I don't know how they got started, and, and, you know, how the tradition all came to be. (Amy)*

*I don't know much about saints, either. . . . but I would like to learn more about them, because they've – their life experience is amazing. And so I feel like I could learn so much from their hardships and how they encountered them. (Mary Pat)*

**Figure 4: The Impact of Spiritual Values**



## Impact of Spiritual Values

The quantitative data revealed the two highest rated factors impacting faith development as “reliance on faith in a traumatic crisis or event” and “adhering to our moral beliefs in important or difficult situations.” Inquiry about the meaning of this finding was followed up on in the focus groups and interviews.

The responses from the focus groups affirmed the value embraced in having faith to rely on, to sustain, and to strengthen them through life, especially in difficult times. The insight into the meaning this held for them was largely shared through storytelling about themselves or others and how faith had been important in certain life situations and circumstances. They did not have far-reaching explanations as to how or why this ability to rely on faith developed and they did not describe extensively how they cultivated this asset in their family values, but in the evaluation of the qualitative data this theme was clearly dominant in frequency of topic and high in their estimate of impact on faith.

Even people who don't think they have a faith, when they suffer a loss, want a faith.

*So I think that's one of the things, I mean, that, that's gotta be huge.” (Brenda)*

*You better have good faith developed before [laughs] or else you're kind of in trouble. . . . You better have worked on it [prayer and a relationship with God] all your life, or at least for a period of time, so when those things happen, you are prepared to deal with it. (a dad)*

*If you didn't have your faith, I don't think you'd go to God in a traumatic situation. You might go to other, not-so-good vehicles. (Peggy)*

*You need to practice it. (Sue)*

*I think not just the relationship with God, but the relationship that you've developed*

*with the other people in the community that share that relationship with God in their own way. And then in those times, you have those people to lift you up and support you, even if you, you know, because– there are gonna be times when you question and wonder, and if you've got someone backing you, that just helps keep you on the path for your own faith. (a dad)*

The second topic, of adhering to moral beliefs, was a second sub-theme of spiritual values. As parents raising children they perceived a clear and direct relationship between this factor of adhering to moral beliefs and cultivating faith in their families to establish a guide for their children in life. They viewed this as important and valuable in aiding them in raising their children.

*It's a classic, starting. . . . Well, what would Jesus do in that situation. . . .your kindness is part of your moral beliefs, right? (Brenda)*

*I would say that we have some people who took this [survey], then, have very strong Catholic moral beliefs and stand by them in a time of need, or decision-making. Which I think is fabulous. Looking at the big picture of our society. . . . when you consider our society, and how so many of our beliefs are not the norm of society. (Jen)*

*I think without that faith and that morality that you get here, it's hard to make the right choice, especially for kids. . . . the more they see it, the more they feel it in the faith community, the more they can live it, and when they're out in the real world. (Wendy)*

*We are their first teachers as their parents, and so we need to instill in our own family morals or values and priorities are what they're going to take with them as they grow into their own caring Christians and fully Catholic adults. (Laura)*

*I mentioned before adhering to the moral beliefs I think is a roadmap for our, our kids. I mean, if you, walk the talk [sic], and you show them how to act moral, you are not only a good example for them, but they understand how they need to behave, and really how they, they really should think and treat other people and how they should treat themselves. So I think it's a huge impact, I think, in our family. (Joel)*

Finally, the topic of service to others was initiated by the participants and evaluated as having a powerful impact on faith development for parents and their families. Service opportunities was not ranked high on the questionnaire but seemed to be a more significant factor in many interviews and focus groups. It was identified in the focus groups as a value lived in a Catholic Christian ethic. Repeatedly, parents and young adults praised the community for guiding and facilitating their participation in opportunities to serve as a way to live their faith.

*Service opportunities... Because I think it was through the mission trips here at St. Anthony's that as a youth, that really*

*opened my eyes to other cultures and other ways of life, that then in turn made me make my faith my own. It made me really internalize, what do I believe, and why do I believe that? Why, why are some people given the life that they're given, and why am I given this life? What, where does God fit into that? And I think that's what made me really question who I am and what I believe. (Sam, 23)*

*Service opportunities was always big in my family, and I notice that I do that a lot with my kids, and then family discussions about faith. . . . was something that we do to this day. (Kim)*

*I went to Catholic school my whole life, and the retreats that I went on in high school were more meaningful than almost anything. So I think, yeah, I think most of us have younger kids, so as our kids get older, I think, I, I know our family is really looking forward to them going on the mission trips. And we already do as much service as we are able at this point, but. . . . that's all tied in with family values, you know? (Laura)*

**Figure 5: The Impact of Obstacles and Impediments**



## The Impact of Obstacles and Impediments

The research question sought to learn more about what factors in the family and in the faith community impact faith development. While not stated explicitly, the study sought to learn more about factors that *positively* impacted faith development. However, in the first phase of the research a factor was identified and confirmed in the qualitative phase, to have unexpected results, that is the impact of Scripture on faith development. This was a significant finding because of the importance of Scripture within the Catholic tradition. Survey results revealed parents rated Scripture low in impact in regard to their personal as well as family's faith development. The low impact parents and young adults perceived Scripture had on their faith was confirmed in the focus groups. Thus, it was revealed as a barrier or impediment to faith development.

*My faith was learned by reciting. Tim's [husband] and my knowledge of the Bible is quite shallow because we never grew up reading the Bible. It just wasn't part of how we learned our faith. It was never stressed growing up. (Laura)*

*Reading your Bible and then talking about it. We don't certainly do that at home. . . . we get the little devotionals for the kids, and maybe a few nights we'll try that, but now it's been sitting on the shelf since First Communion. . . . so not that Scripture's not important, because that's obviously where everything is based off of. I don't know if that, as Catholics, you make it a daily practice. (Brenda)*

*I just wish we did have a Bible in our hand more as Catholics. I feel like we don't have, we have pieces of a Bible, kind of, in pamphlets or things, but to actually have a Bible and refer to it and have it readily*

*available, I find that's what I would like more. (Amy)*

*I think the Bible, to a lot of Catholics, is, intimidating. (Peggy)*

*For me it's just been a struggle for a long – long time. . . . never felt confident. . . . hard for me to comprehend. . . . Just my knowledge of the Bible, the stories, the teachings, are too. . . . hard for, for me to comprehend oftentimes. So when I looked at it, I felt, well, it would be hypocritical of me to rate this high, because I, you know, it's, it's something that I don't do regularly, and when I do, I struggle with it. I mean, I can read a passage over and over and over and over and it just, you know, so yeah, [I wish] Father Tony was there to help me. . . [laughs] ( Dan)*

*I could read it but. . . . I would never understand it unless somebody would explain it to me. Adam, 25)*

Additionally, an impediment or barrier to faith development, of a different nature but also revealed to have a powerful impact that conflicted with faith development, was the issue families faced in balancing schedules and determining priorities and the impact of limited availability of time due to extremely busy schedules. Parents described the stress and struggle they felt in regard to their time schedules and how the very crisis of time impacted the centrality of faith in their families. A high school parent summarized the dilemma many other parents expressed:

*There's just way too many competing factors... to try to participate and get the most out of all of the activities. . . . even with, with church, is just very, very difficult to be able to constantly prioritize. (a high school parent)*

*They [the factors] all stand out to me. . . . it's, it's hard to say one over the other. I don't want to discount any one of them. But*

*it's just I think the simple fact that we're so busy and caught up in so many other things, we don't have the time to really engage in these things. (Kevin)*

*And. . . all of these great things. . . in our lives, you get so busy, and it's balancing your. all your things with all these great opportunities. Because I'm sure the church says, well, we have this mission trip, and we provide all these service opportunities, and we have these classes and Bible studies. But where are you? So the church can only do so much. But then it, as a parent, it's balancing all their activities and all the other pulls that they have. I don't know, it's just a hard balance. . . . (Mary Pat)*

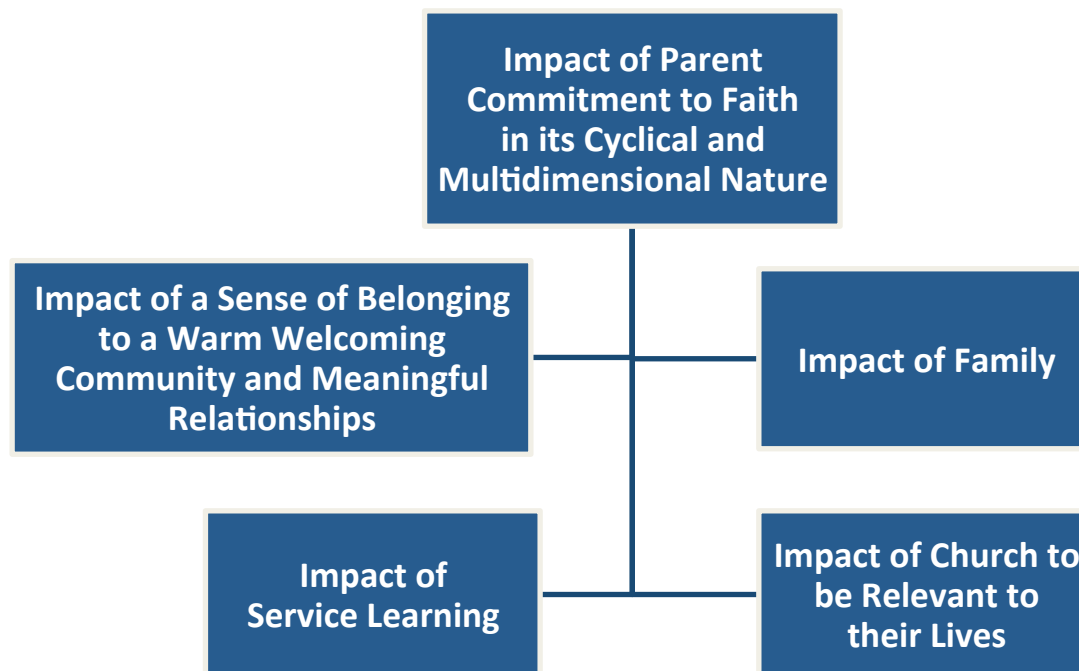
*One time he [Fr. Tony] did say something about how God is supposed to be first, God, then your, you know, he's like, it's a really hard thing to put God before everything else. (a mom)*

These two factors, in fact, did not cultivate faith but were depicted as barriers or impediments to faith development. They emerged from the discussions to be both high in the frequency and explicitly named as factors that impacted faith negatively.

## Summary of Findings on Faith Development from the Staff Interviews

The individual staff interviews echoed the themes of the parents and young adults in the focus groups discussions. Each of the staff members interviewed had a specific responsibility for ministry in the parish and each staff member reflected his or her particular lens and viewpoint. The individual interview discussions identified 5 findings as impactful from the staff viewpoint. They are identified in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Staff Interview Theme**



## Staff Interview Themes

The staff interviews were conducted with the purpose of triangulating the information gathered in the survey data and the focus groups. The staff members had a unique perspective in their roles ministering to the families in the parish. They were given a list of the factors the parents rated in Section Two of the survey and asked to identify the factors they perceived as impacting the families' faith development.

The dominant theme identified by staff members was the impact of a sense of belonging to a warm welcoming community and meaningful relationships they experienced in that community. As with the focus group findings, they perceived several related factors coalescing into this theme including: the affiliation with the micro community, the warm welcome they felt being initiated into the community, and the continual support they felt from relationships within the community. A staff member described her perception of how the sense of belonging and the relationships in community impacted the families she worked with:

*They get that huge sense of community, that this is another family, another of their families that they can relate to. We see that because of how the teens and young adults try to stay connected (Lea)*

The second dominant theme identified by the staff was the impact of family on faith development. A perspective was held by a majority of the staff that family environment and the family relationships were a dominant theme impacting faith development. The staff identified the home as the initial place where faith was cultivated and where experiences of faith in practices, discussions, and atmosphere of love occurred.

From the staff perspective, "on the balcony" and in their role as religious educators, they noted the hunger people felt for faith to have a meaningful role in their lives. The impact of

the ability of church to be relevant in their lives was a third dominant theme identified by staff members. The staff recognized the people they ministered to were not motivated to develop faith out of fear or obligation but that they had a real need to find support, help, inspiration and meaning in the midst of the hectic busy lives they and their families were leading.

The staff also validated the focus group findings of the impact of service learning. They perceived families felt the opportunities the church offered them to learn to serve others, a way to "live faith" was valuable to their faith development, and that the staff felt this had been highly impactful in the lives of the families. The staff noted the parish had been deliberate in offering numerous opportunities for service and cultivated a religious education paradigm where service learning was prominent and intentional in faith development.

Finally, the staff reinforced the impact of parent commitment to faith in its cyclical and multidimensional nature. Father Tony emphasized the overlap of the faith formation factors. He said, "They are impactful when they build on one another in a meaningful way."

## Culture, Climate and Practices

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The purpose of this study was to answer the question: What factors, occurring in the family and in the faith community, are perceived to impact faith development? In an effort to bring clarity to this study and to provide increased relevancy for religious educators, catechetical leaders, and parents, the factors investigated were grouped within three major constructs. The constructs of *practices*, *culture*, and *climate* allows analysis of the categories of factors that may be more pertinent for those responsible for catechetical leadership and for parents.



## Culture

The term culture in reference to the Catholic Church is more often associated with the diversity of cultures around the world that make up the worldwide Catholic Church. In this discussion the term is being used more as a tool of analysis. The researcher considered the meaning of culture used in educational or organizational disciplines. In this sense the definition of culture refers to: "This invisible, taken for granted flow of beliefs and assumptions that gives meaning to what people say and do... Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time." (Deal and Peterson, 7)

In a parish, within a faith formation program or a Catholic school, the term culture reflects the pervading context of shared values and beliefs held and demonstrated by the leaders and members. It is being used in this case to indicate the larger connecting values, beliefs, morals that have endured historically and theologically and are mitigated, negotiated and define a local faith community and the larger Church to which it is connected. For purposes of this discussion the term culture tends to refer to the deep and more stable factors of the way a group or a person within the group does things and the values he or she holds and believes. A defining characteristic that distinguishes between culture and climate in this discussion is that culture connects to the larger faith tradition in a significant and deep way and is not easily changed. It is the ineffable beliefs and values that knit the fiber of a group, a family or faith community together. It is, as Geertz says, "the web of significance in which we are all suspended."  
(3)

## Climate

Climate is being used here to signify formal and informal feelings from both leaders and members of a church community. Climate

refers to the attitudes and feelings that characterize the environment or context of a group. It may denote a positive environment that is friendly, inviting and supportive or it may refer to a negative environment that is unwelcoming, exclusive or unsafe.

Like the term culture, the term climate is being used as a tool to organize the factors being studied that impact faith. Because climate is about more transient perceptions it can be easier to assess and also to change. The term generally refers to the tenor of relationships, the feeling of safety, and the external environment. Climate is a more general term referring to the feel, tone or milieu of a community. It characterizes the collective personality and perceptions or overall atmosphere.

The term faith development or faith formation has been deliberately used in this study to connote the multidimensional process faith encompasses. It is holistic in nature and indicates faith can develop and grow or mature in a person and occurs over the entire lifespan and has many facets. One way that faith continues to develop, to be "lifelong" is by a person engaging in practices of faith. Practices in this discussion refer to actions such as religious ritual, prayer, and serving in the example Jesus. This study identified some practices of faith parents and young adults perceived highly impacting faith.

## Practices

The construct of practices was used to indicate actions, patterns of behavior and rituals in the Catholic Christian faith. Terrence Tilley, in his article "Communication in Handing on the Faith" said, "Faith can be understood as a set of practices even a complex virtue. Faith is not something we first believe and then practice. Rather we practice the faith and in doing so come to understand it. God's gracious initiation makes this possible." (156)

To explore ways the results of this study can inform families and parishes, the individual factors identified as affecting faith

development were grouped into these three constructs: culture, climate and practices. Table 2 shows the results of the quantitative data weighted by the findings in the qualitative data on the question of the impact of factors in ranking order and organized into the constructs of practices, climate and culture.

Considering faith development in light of these three constructs; culture, climate and practices allows leaders to analyze the culture and climate of their community and the practices they encourage. They can evaluate the environment of the parish, school or faith formation programs and create a positive climate and encourage impactful practices. The significance in the findings of the impact of a sense of belonging resulting from affiliation of a primary or micro-community,

the warm welcoming environment, and cultivation of relationships and friendships all relate to the climate that initially and continually connects people to a community of faith.

The practices of faith, especially the significance revealed of regular participation in the ritual worship of the Eucharistic Celebration of the Mass and to some extent all of the Sacraments, reflect the value of encouraging the repetitive practice of worship and prayer as conduits of strengthening faith and allowing faith to mature. As service learning opportunities develop and are offered as an integrated dimension of faith development, the climate becomes more positive and meaningful and the ethos of service is internalized.

**Table 2. Factors Impacting Families’ Faith Development Related to the Constructs of Climate, Practices and Culture**

(\*Factors in **bold** indicate highest impact on perceptions of faith)

<b>Connecting Climate</b>	<b>Practices of Faith</b>	<b>Religious Identity and Culture</b>
<b>The sense of belonging and being part of a faith community such as this parish</b>	<b>Attending Mass on a regular basis</b>	Reliance on faith in a traumatic crisis or event (such as loss)
<b>The warm welcoming environment in our church</b>	<b>Participating in the Sacraments</b>	<b>Adhering to our moral beliefs</b>
<b>The warm loving environment of your home</b>	<b>Service opportunities (such as meal programs, mission trips, church volunteering)</b>	<b>The faith of the mother in our family</b>
Social experiences /opportunities at church (Such as parish picnics, festivals, donut Sunday)	<b>Family discussions about faith</b>	<b>The Church’s teaching about beliefs and morals</b>
Our social relationships and friendships at church	Praying together as a family (such as meal prayer, bedtime prayer)	The faith of the father in our family
Local spiritual leaders of your church	Faith development opportunities (such as Bible camp, retreats, faith sharing groups)	The faith of grandparents or extended family member
The physical building of the church (physically being in the church building)	Sacramental preparation sessions (such as for Baptism, First Communion, Reconciliation)	Spiritual examples (such as the saints, Mary, the Pope)
The music or art at church (sacred music or sacred art)	Personal prayer or meditation of family members; family discussions about faith	

Sacramentals and symbols in the home or church (such as holy water, crucifix, ashes or palms)	Private practice of religious devotions (such as rosary, stations of the cross, vespers, adoration)	
	Reading and reflection on Scripture or spiritual or religious material	
	Participation of a teen in church youth group or church youth activities	
	Being a member of a church choir or participating in some kind of music ministry	
Child or teen's attendance in Catholic schools		
Adult sessions of Family Program		
Intergenerational family activity of Family Program		

At some point climate and practices mature into a culture of something deeper, more profound, more personal, and more internal. This study revealed the profound impact of internalizing a sense of belonging and acceptance that could mature into a peace and strength found in the faith community. Lea, a staff member, expressed so beautifully this dynamic, "I think our community is welcoming enough that all those people feel like they can come into it, and we're going to hold onto them."

Other staff members especially expressed the awareness of the appreciation of those who felt the community had become a kind of home and also experienced a sense of loss when they had to leave it.

*That the experience in the faith community leads a person to become a person of faith and the hope is that that faith eventually is internalized. Ultimately, "my Catholic faith" needs to be more than just that warm welcoming parish; that if they went elsewhere, that strong faith is always with them and they would not or could not dismiss it because the environment doesn't suit them. (Cindi)*

This may be why a certain person in a family, often a mother, carries this culture from generation to generation. Without that

link within the family the parish community must work harder to connect. When there is a nurturing presence within the home and within the faith community the experience of faith is reinforced and strengthened. This exemplifies the cyclical nature of faith development. This maturing of the faith process may also relate to the interesting data that when parents differed as a function of the age of their children, it always pertained to items that are either practices or climate. Is it that practices and factors related to climate change as children get older? And as a person moves through these developmentally, is it ultimately the cultural factors (reliance on faith in crisis, faith of father, faith of mother, and adhering to moral beliefs) that parents identify as especially salient?

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study was the high ranking of reliance on faith in difficult times, crisis or traumatic events, such as loss and the equally high ranking of adhering to moral beliefs. With the insight provided from the focus groups and staff interviews this seems to point to a key understanding of what motivated families to engage in a faith community and in practices of faith. It also appeared that parents lacked conscious awareness of these deep desires, hungers, longings and fears. Ronald Rohlheiser discussed this in his book, *The Holy Longing*. He describes, ". . . a desire that

lies at the center of our lives, the marrow of our bones, and in the deep recesses of the soul” (3). We seek peace, the opposite of this restlessness, longing and loneliness that lies at the heart of the human experience and the true force that drives us. St. Augustine said, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Rohlheiser says the essence of spirituality is what we do with this unrest which is at the core of our being (5).

What picture emerges out of this information and these insights revealed by this community? The model being offered names the cyclical, developmental and multidimensional nature of forming faith. It is cyclical and developmental in the sense that forming faith for most human beings is not a dramatic onetime event in life. The experience of faith can have moments of dramatic revelation, beauty and insight. These often occur in high and low life events such as birthing and losing a loved one. Faith usually matures, however, over time and through multiple lived experiences and in the practice of relying on faith and in the faith that blesses a person when our human resources fail us.

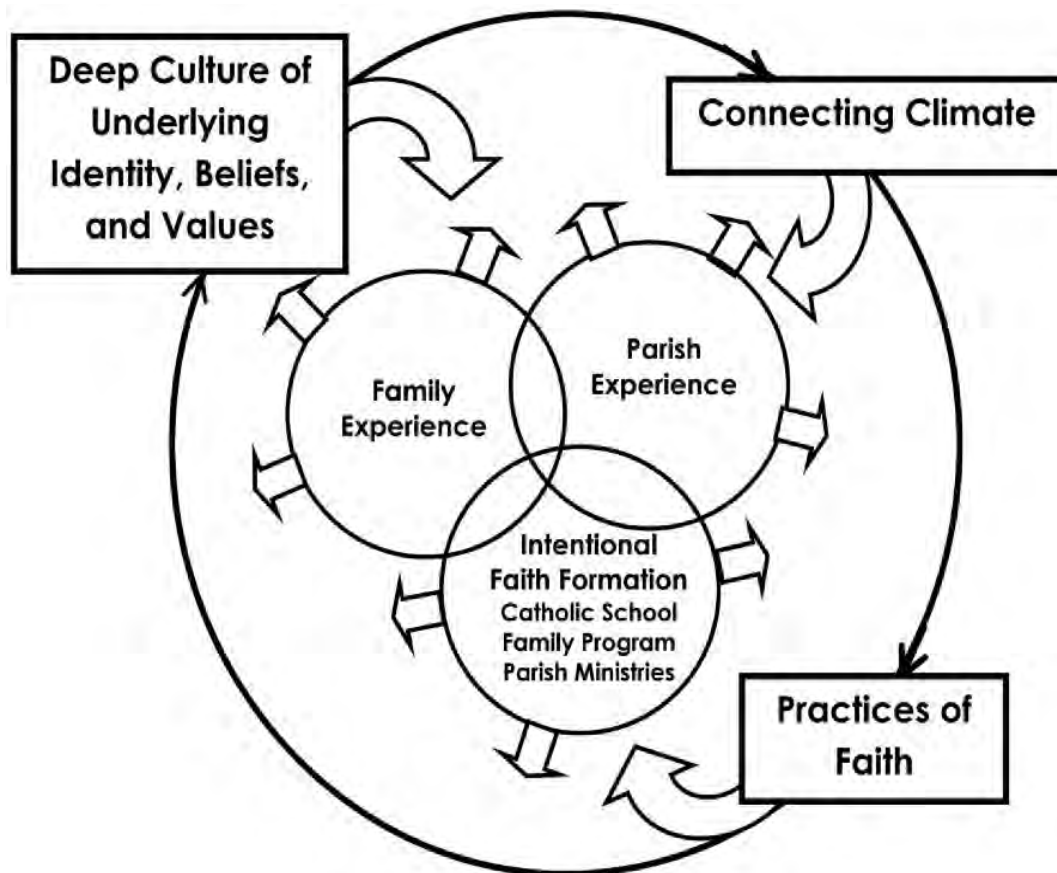
It is multidimensional in that we come to spiritual faith through our social, emotional, intellectual and physical beings. Faith development exclusively associated with an

intellectual pursuit can be sterile. Too often this over-emphasis on learning faith through textbooks has stunted growth in faith. This is not to demean theological inquiry or scholarship which is a solid aspect in the Catholic tradition. To honor the multiple dimensions of the nature of faith formation in parish communities, schools, and faith formation programs engage in multiple models such as prayer, worship, and service learning; multiple methodologies such as music, art, drama, discussion, reading, writing, listening, and sharing. These may to a greater extent, in frequency and intensity, more often lead to the soul experience of “metanoia,” “a profound transformation of mind and heart” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 48).

It is ironic to note that the Bible which could be hoped to root, nourish, and nurture faith is not perceived as helpful to the majority of participants in this study. This is a serious issue that catechetical leaders may wish to ponder. To express it simply, the research revealed a “lack of big picture” when parents even thought about Scripture. They described having no frame of reference, no context for an understanding of the meaning of Scripture. They did not understand what constituted a way to even begin to make sense of what the Bible was saying to them on their own.

**Figure 7: Faith Development Cycle**

*The following model emerging from the study and attempts to represent the cyclical, developmental, and multidimensional nature of faith development.*



## Part 4. Implications of the Research

### Leadership

There are implications from this study for leaders interested in engaging families in faith formation. While the more multidimensional models of faith formation requires more creativity, energy, open-mindedness and perhaps financial commitment in staff and resources, this study evidences their potential effectiveness.

The study revealed that when a faith community invests in all families of the parish, the Catholic school families and the faith formation families in a similar way the outlay

is rewarded in involved, more committed families and catechesis that is more effective for all. Parents become lifelong learners when the door is opened by the love they have for their children and the faith community leaders insist on a partnership with them. This is a paradigm shift for generations of religious education leaders who have only explored the schoolhouse model where parents are not present. It is an adjustment for parents who have been lulled into a model of parental non-participation. Parents need the faith community to give their children the most meaningful opportunity to develop faith and faith communities need parents to be involved to be effective in catechetical ministry. Both the home and the faith community have to work diligently and consistently to be

successful in passing on the faith in a post-modern culture.

## Learning Research

The advances in education, especially the developments in new understandings of brain compatible learning and the multiple dimensions of intelligences, as well as the research into multiple intelligences, need to be incorporated into faith formation programs and religious education in Catholic schools. Active learning that engages the whole person needs to be integrated into formal faith formation programs. This requires catechetical leaders to be given opportunities to learn from educational research and encouraged to lead others into a broader understanding of ministry that is charged with passing on the faith to the next generation.

It has been said “Christianity is always one generation away from extinction.” That may be true. Faith must be learned and accepted anew by each generation. That most often occurs through a reinforcing cyclical process of practices of faith. Faith that is immature is vulnerable. Faith maturity is expressed by mature Christians who love and support each other and by their service to the lost, lonely and vulnerable to heal the world.

## Service

If there was one shining star in this study it was service learning. Service learning was valued and perceived as effective, and it enhanced all other aspects of faith development. This was especially evidenced in feedback from parents of adolescents and young adults. While parents and leaders may struggle with adolescent immature, rebellious or irresponsible behaviors, service is a language young people speak fluently and understand with their heart. Serving together is bonding within a family or community. It is acting and living the message and mission of Jesus in the world. Parishes, schools, and faith formation programs that can integrate service and

cultivate an ethic of service within the community and encourage it and offer opportunities to families increase their effectiveness, integrity and relevancy to those to whom they minister.

Engaging families in service opportunities may be the most powerful strategy and methodology for families to have a real dialogue about care for others and the need we all have for God’s protection. There is something about standing or helping someone more vulnerable than you that evokes a deeper understanding of our responsibility to others and the potential for God’s presence to be real in our lives. Congregations who understand the busy schedules that challenge families and create short achievable opportunities as well as extended more intensive experiences such as mission trips appear to be more effective in this mission.

This study indicated an enormous value in integrating service learning into the faith formation program. It was considered not an isolated project but a methodology. It was considered valuable and enhanced all other aspects of faith development. Serving together as a family resulted in increased bonding as a family as well as deepening ties to the community. Cultivating an ethic of service as an intentional dimension of faith formation increases the effectiveness, integrity and relevancy of faith to a person. It is a door into understanding what is intrinsic to living as a Christian.

## Welcoming Environment

While most leaders are aware of the importance of hospitality and welcome, its significance may not be fully appreciated. Over and over participants reported that it is the door by which they do or don’t enter. If drawn in by a welcoming, non-judgmental, and warm presence, a person enters the possibility of relationship. This initial welcome, followed by relevant conversation and dialogue, activates the relationship. There is little relating to a faith that is impersonal and whose initial

greeting is doctrinal. Many people are open and, in fact, often eager to learn creedal beliefs, traditions, tenants of a faith tradition, but this is a later step in the process. Without the welcoming environment and personal experience not much gets initiated for many people on a faith journey.

This suggestion is not to dismiss the importance of “knowing” the faith but of what creates the hospitable heart to open one’s mind to the “knowing”. It advises the faith formation leader and community about the importance of connecting emotionally and keeping the message grounded and understandable. It suggests the importance about what are leading strategies of parishes, congregations and schools.

The significance is not just an initial issue but an ongoing one. In the present age of rich personal communication and social networks individuals highly value the “being known” factor. In the fast pace of family life and perhaps lack of available extended family relationships many respond to the genuine effort to care about them and their children. They are open to the message if this important factor of climate is attended to. This cannot be dismissed as soft, a waste of time or superfluous. It is achieved through personal presence, electronic communication and easy access to relevant and meaningful resources.

## Families

Parents who engage in adult formation in intergenerational settings are more likely to become lifelong learners. The door is opened by the love they have for their children. Catechetical leaders must insist on a partnership with families. Both the home and the faith community have to work diligently and consistently to be successful in passing on the Catholic faith in a post-modern culture. Catholic school educators and parish staffs who work collaboratively act in exemplifying Christian love and simply have a greater likelihood of being effective. Invest in all families, and the results are more involvement,

more committed families, more effective catechesis

In the Catholic Bishops’ document on family, *Follow the Way of Love*, it states, “Wherever a family exist and love still moves through its members, grace is present. Nothing, not even divorce or death, can place limits on God’s gracious love.” There is a power in grace that flows through families that is at work most especially in the process of faith development. It does not depend on whether this is a highly functioning family or a wounded family, or as most are, somewhere in between. Faith formation leaders serve a valuable function in the message we have for parents to amplify this voice of God that flows through families. The leaders who has regard for this grace knows that the leadership of the congregation is in partnership with the family, and asks herself what are the ways I can encourage and enrich this movement of the Spirit? How can I help give it language and structure to intensify the meaning of what God already is at work doing within the family? Practical applications of this will focus on speaking to the capacity of family members to reveal God in their actions, language, worship and service.

## Intergenerational Learning

Active learning engages the whole person and should be integrated into formal catechetical programs. Strategies that incorporate brain compatible learning and multiple dimensions of intelligence need to be incorporated into faith formation programs. We learn or retain 10% of what we read, 50% of what we discuss, 75% of what we practice. Jesus used multiple methodologies. So should we!

Harness a parent’s love as a force in accomplishing catechetical learning and faith development. Intergenerational opportunities and programs, such as described in this study, that are relevant to family life are effective. Programs that are adequately staffed and funded potentially change families and faith communities.

## Faith and Life Today

We need to speak to the relevant concerns and challenges people face and why faith matters. The concepts of fear and obligation are not the language that is motivating to either parents or catechetical leaders. For parents as well as for religious educators these are perceived as shallow and missing the point of the awesome possibilities of a relationship with God. At the same time in a world where every national disaster, political uprising, and tragic human story is available with the click of a remote control or app on a phone, individuals are well aware that bad things happen to good people and that safety is not a guarantee. Life is complex and their deepest desire is to protect and care for their family members. They long for their children, as well as themselves, to have a north star to guide their moral decisions. It is a complex world that can be puzzling, frightening and challenging to negotiate.

Explicitly or implicitly parents long to situate their family in the care and protection of a God they know and trust. They do not always know how to form that bond or how to communicate this in language to their children. Framing this desire for parents is to be a conduit of faith for them. Speaking about this longing may resonate with parents. Practical applications include engaging parents in topics that might raise conscious awareness of these real concerns. Encourage faith that is cultivated through regular practices of prayer, worship and family discussion.

## Conclusions

This study originated out of interest in the mystery of faith and sought to learn more about the process of how faith develops. It focused on two communities: the home community and the faith community. This study sought to learn more about factors that nurture the faith process, much the way an educator would seek to learn more about

factors that nurture intelligence. Seeking to understand what impacts faith and how to nurture it is perhaps even a more challenging mission because of the complexity of what faith is.

Nurturing faith is a multifaceted complex process. It encompasses learning a tradition, participating in prayer and worship, developing a moral life, and allowing Scripture to guide, inspire and change our hearts. To nurture faith is to be dedicated to learn to trust God, to serve others, to help the poor and vulnerable, to forgive and accept forgiveness, to love others without judgment, to cherish peace, to have concern for justice and to value life. It involves opening ourselves as human beings to receive and give love. "And we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love" (Blake, 1789).

The study was able to isolate some factors that may impact faith to guide those who have interest in this topic. It revealed some insight into what might warrant awareness in planning, in making choices, in advocating and in determining a focus of priorities for parents and catechetical leaders. This study would suggest the value of paying attention to factors of *climate*. Do people feel a warm welcome? Do they feel there is a small group with whom they connect? Do people feel a sense of belonging? Do they know and feel the connection between the local community of faith and the larger community of faith? Do people experience friendships and meaningful relationships where they can be their authentic selves?

This study would suggest the value and power of encouraging *practices of faith* to root faith, to strengthen faith and to enter more deeply into the mystery of faith. For Catholics, participation in the Sacraments especially, the celebration of Eucharistic liturgy holds deep meaning and value and nurtures faith. This study reveals that learning to share our experiences of God through discussion, expressed through our own human stories, profoundly impacts faith.

This study suggests that the practice of serving others in need is a cultivated practice



that furthers God's Kingdom of peace, justice and love. Serving others makes faith come alive, connects us to each other, authenticates our Christian values, and is a language very meaningful, especially to young persons. Encouraging an ethic of service strengthens the faith of individuals, families and communities.

Finally, this study would suggest an invitation to know the deep longing in the heart is really a holy longing. A longing, a desire, a hunger is wired into our humanity. It is the Eros, the force, that calls us to live in a more creative, life-giving way and what holds us in the dark nights of our lives. This Eros, this force, when nurtured, drives us to love and serve, directs our moral decisions and sustains us in the dark times of trauma, difficulty and loss.

Reliance on faith and faith as a moral north star are the result of a **culture of faith** that is nurtured. It is most powerful when it is nurtured in a family and in a community of faithful others. This study revealed the struggle of abundance. Parents often expressed the abundance in their lives but often found choosing difficult. Jesus said he longed for us to have *life* in abundance (John 10:10). To develop a culture of faith, within a community, a family and an individual human heart is to cultivate the ability to choose what is life-giving and nurture the soul that energizes us and holds us together.

It is evident that there is more unknown about the factors that impact faith development than is known. This poem is a concluding thought that alludes to the fragility and resiliency of faith as it is passed from one generation to the next and why the process is a worthy pursuit and holds eternal meaning.

## The Way It Is

*There is a thread you follow.  
It goes among the things that change.  
But it does not change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.*

*While you hold on to it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die;  
And you suffer and grow old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.  
(Stafford)*

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