

# **Congregational spirituality: Faith formation in and through the congregation**

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## **Abstract**

Each congregation has its own spirituality. Within the Reformed tradition, it is usually linked to faith formation. The purpose of this contribution is to address the following research question: How does faith formation take place in and through congregations? In answer to this question, attention will be paid to the following: Firstly, the function and purpose of faith formation will be looked at. Secondly, we will focus on some of the challenges that faith formation faces. Thirdly, the embodiment of faith formation is discussed. Fourthly, the connection between faith formation and desires is examined and finally the focus is on faith formation in and through congregations.

## **Keywords**

*Spirituality; Reformed tradition; faith formation; secularization; desires*

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic came like a tsunami. One consequence of the pandemic on us as people of faith is that we have all become detached from our congregations in one way or another. Detached in the sense of a forced distance due to the Covid measures. So much so that at level 4 we were not allowed to go to church at all. A second consequence of the pandemic is that we have all been traumatized to a greater or lesser extent by this Covid virus. There are very few of us who do not have friends or family members who either had Covid themselves or died from it.

Along with missing the physical closeness of fellow believers, and the trauma of family and friends who passed away, something else also

happened to us. As a result of the distance and trauma, we started looking at our own congregations again with different and new eyes. I even caught myself asking myself more than once: What exactly am I missing? What I missed and in a certain sense still miss, I figured out for myself over some time, can be related to three factors. Three factors that I believe we will have to look at in more depth and which are also directly related to the formation of our faith.

The first thing I miss is the role of worship in a specific liturgical space, the physical participation in the sacraments and all the events related to the building up and nourishing of our lived faith. In other words, everything that has to do with the formation of our faith through our participation in worship. The second factor that I experience as a lack, is the fact that the participation in worship is done by people, by a community of living, flesh, and blood believers. I miss my fellow believers' physical closeness; touch, being together, socializing, conversations. In other words, the important role of *koinonia*. I realized anew that I am someone with a desire for community, I live and breathe from my interaction with people. The third thing I miss is that our congregations may be in deeper trouble than we realize, and therefore I miss deeper reflection on what is causing this trouble. Troubles that also stands in the way of faith formation. The pandemic has deepened and accelerated these three factors. I would like to start with the third one, but before I start with it, it might be worth thinking quickly about the function and purpose of faith formation.

## **Function and purpose of faith formation**

In Brueggemann's book *The Creative Word*, he examines sources that help him explain how the Jewish community managed to maintain their identity over the centuries (2015:1). He wonders how the children of Abraham and Sarah managed to survive repeated experiences of war, exile, and persecution. He concludes that the continued viability of the Jewish community can be traced to their persistent commitment to education and teaching. According to him, we find an early description of this dedication in the sermon delivered by Moses when the Israelites were preparing to cross the Jordan River to the long-awaited promised land. The key elements

of this sermon are found in Deuteronomy 6:3 and not only helped the Israelites, but also apply to our situation.

This sermon of Moses helps us to get clarity about what we understand as the function and purpose of faith formation and education. The instructions that Moses gives in Deuteronomy 6 onwards suggest a way of thinking about faith formation that can help us to this day. In short, it means that families and congregations, through processes of faith formation and education, are deliberately looking for the transmission of knowledge, values, skills, and feelings that they judge to be at the heart of the ongoing vitality of their identity and character. The transmission of knowledge and values does not happen by chance, it requires a deliberate decision about what needs to be learned and how, where and when it needs to happen. Systematic patterns of teaching and learning must be established for increasingly complex ways of knowing, doing and being. The latter is again embedded in a web of institutions (schools and congregations) that maintain and strengthen these patterns from one generation to the next.

Brueggemann (2015:1) goes further and identifies two functions of faith formation and education. In the first, faith formation is concerned with the maintenance of the identity, character, practices, and traditions of a community over a period of time by those who identify with it. Through education and faith formation, a community sets a course for their future based on the sources of their heritage. This means that the future of a community's identity depends on the extent to which successive generations can identify with the traditions, values, and practices they receive from their ancestors.

There is also a second function of faith formation and education. If a congregation and its members want to remain relevant to the challenges of continuous change and new circumstances, this process needs enough freedom and innovation to survive and make an impact on the challenges. This means that the maintenance of a congregation's identity, practices and character is only sustainable if there is renewal through the revival of faith of the members in each succeeding generation. The result is that faith in congregations can only be renewed if transformation also takes place.

These two functions of faith formation and education work in tandem, one cannot do without the other. When the focus is only on maintenance, it

is easy to get stuck in traditionalism and become rigid. When the focus is only on the freedom and renewal, the tradition loses its anchoring, and the boat of faith becomes free floating on the ocean which means that the winds of change can force the boat completely off course. It is precisely to these winds of change and the ocean on which the boat finds itself that we are going to pay attention to next.

### **Faith formation in dangerous waters**

According to Root (2017:131), many of the programs for faith formation and education work with the starting point that it is about religious participation in certain doctrines about the faith. In other words, an attempt is made to help the young people to participate with their consent in these teachings about faith and the institutions that propagate it (churches and denominations). However, what many educators overlook is what ultimately uproots faith itself and that is the loss of the acceptability (plausibility) of transcendence and the suspicion that our world consists only of the material. In a secular world where the self is buffered and the world is disenchanted, God is always on the verge of being reduced to a psychologically created and imaginative friend. God becomes just another concept that can be chosen individually for individual reasons. When God simply becomes a concept, it also means that there can be no claim on my life, because a concept cannot make any demands on me. In the process, faith formation becomes a struggle to win a place for the God concept and to get young people to be part of the congregation. Along with this, it is becoming more difficult for our young people to believe in transcendence and the thought that God is an active force in the world has become unbelievable. In short, it is about our social imagination that no longer has room for transcendence or divine action.

Root (2017:133–140) further explains, based on the work of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, that there are three ways in which “secular” can be understood, which help us to better navigate the waters in which we find ourselves. The first relates to the separation between the sacred and the secular. In “secular 1” as he refers to it, the transcendent was not merely a reality in people’s imagination, but it existed in the world beyond. Therefore, a cathedral was something of the sacred or transcendent that

broke into the secular world and people experienced it as holy. Some objects like sacraments, or buildings carried one into the transcendent and others did not. The area in which people could experience the transcendent was a great open door that dwarfed you by its enormity because people imagined that things in the world were magical and moreover porous.

The second aspect has to do with religious versus a-religious spaces. In “secular 2” the secular versus the transcendent is radically reformulated. In “secular 2” the distinction between these spaces disappears as the human mind touches the confirming power of reality. The independent reality of the transcendent and the eternal became increasingly implausible. In “secular 1” the sacred and the secular were different levels of reality with porous borders and an expansive reach. People were always on the lookout for where and when the sacred could penetrate the secular and no part of life was protected from the possibility that the sacred could displace the secular. In “secular 2” the sacred and the secular are no longer fluid and in many respects they can no longer mix. The result is that secular and sacred are no longer different planes where the eternal and the temporal collide, but separate terrains locked in institutions and ideologies and located almost exclusively in our social and cultural worlds. Because both the secular and the sacred were bound to these sites and represented two different realities, they found themselves in a struggle for territory. The battle is no longer between the two levels of the eternal and temporal, but for cultural and social space.

One of the reasons why faith formation is so difficult in “secular 2” is because we fail to see how our imaginations became entangled in the gears of “secular 2”. In “secular 2” faith is about affiliation (in belief and participation) to the cultural and social institutions of religion. In other words, faith is about the preservation of religious space and the sociologists become much more powerful than theologians because they, as it were, keep track of the institutional spaces by using instruments to point to the shifts in the religious market share. Faith through the lens of “secular 2” is the voluntary affiliation with religious institutions and is choosing to place oneself within the cultural space of institutional religion. In this way, faith is bound to a closed material space as there is a choice against the secular a-religious. Divine activity is therefore much more difficult to encounter because the transcendent must attempt to penetrate the buffered force field

of the self and change the will of the individual. Transcendence therefore only becomes possible within these religious spaces.

The third way in which the secular can be understood is related to the denial of the transcendent. “Secular 1” and “secular 2” create, as it were, the condition for “secular 3”. Where “secular 1” sees transcendence as another level of existence and “secular 2” surrenders transcendence to the spatial division between religious and non-religious, “secular 3” finally finds transcendence as a divine activity unbelievable. It is this new understanding of transcendence that Taylor describes as the “immanent frame” and articulates it as follows: “the immanent frame is a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence” (Smith 2014:141). With “secular 3”, the pendulum has thus swung to the other side, where the natural and the material dominate. “Secular 3” therefore looks with suspicion at any definition of human experience that consists of anything other than the immanent. Faith also no longer needs to be defined as it is stripped of transcendence and has little to do with mystery, transformation, or an ontological encounter. The result is that “secular 3” has already driven some of us into a dark corner where transcendence and Divine action become an impossibility. Taylor’s perspectives give us both a window into the challenges we face and why many of our programs for faith formation do not always succeed. When we see “secular 3” as the construction of an imminent framework, it helps us to understand why a deeper theological construction is needed since the credibility of Divine action itself is questioned.

## **Embodiment of faith formation**

When we think about faith formation and embodiment, there is no better starting point than to join Augustine’s famous statement that God made us for Godself and that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God (Confessions, Book IV, Chapter 8). Augustine begins here with a conviction about what we as humans were created for and he emphasizes that we were made by and for the Creator who is known in Jesus Christ. In other words, to be fully human we need to “find” ourselves in relation to the One who

made us and for whom we were created. In other words, the gospel is the way in which we learn to be human as Irenaeus puts it so beautifully: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.20.7). This also means that the image of being human is also dynamic. To be human is to be for something, directed and oriented towards something and to be on the move in the pursuit of that something. In short, it means to be directed towards some telos (goal).

A second theme that Augustine makes us aware of is that he regards the heart as the central “organ” for theological orientation since according to him the heart is the seat of our desires. He considers the heart, in Greek *kardia*, to be the fulcrum for our most fundamental desires and is our unconscious orientation to the world. For Augustine, faith formation is therefore not only about an intellectual quest, but it is more of a curiosity or a kind of hunger (cf. Ps 42:1–2). If we consider it this way then the centre of gravity for human beings is not located in the intellect, but in the heart. And then more specifically in the desires of the heart.

There is also a third insight that we learn from Augustine: because we were made to love the One who made us and loves us, we will find “rest” when our love (and desires) is properly ordered with the eye on our goal, “We love because God first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). But Augustine also makes us aware of the alternative: since our hearts are made to find their purpose in God, we will experience anxiety and restlessness for as long as we try to find substitutes for God. To be human is to have a heart, we cannot not love. Therefore, the question is whether you love something to the extreme and the next question is: what is it that you love to the extreme. In other words, we are what we love.

## **Faith formation and being on the way with our desires**

To be human means not only to love, but also to be on the way with all kinds of aspirations and desires (Smith 2016:22). We are on an unconscious journey to a destination we dream of. We live with our eyes focused on the future to reach a place we long for. The ancient Greek philosophers described it as our telos, our purpose, or the end. However, the interesting thing is that the telos we pursue is not primarily something we think about

or believe or know. Our telos is what we would like to have, what we long for and want to possess at all costs. In other words, it is rather a vision or image of the good life than it is simply an ideal about which we have certain ideas. It consists of images that we carry around of what a “flourishing life” entails and where we think true happiness can be found. These desires for a good and prosperous life orient our whole life. In this desire for the good life, the heart plays a central role and functions as a compass and internal control centre. Our heart shows us the direction of what we desire and drives us in that direction. There is therefore a resonance between the telos towards which we are heading and the desires and longings that drive us in that direction. The latter brings us to the important role that habits play in our lives. In the previous section we found that the gravity of our identity is located in the heart and our heart has loves that consist of longings and desires. If we look at the New Testament, it is interesting to see how Paul writes about it in Colossians 3:12–14. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Paul here uses the idea of clothing to describe the Christian life. To put on Christ is to clothe ourselves with compassion, patience, sincerity, and humility and above all these, love. Love is, as it were, the belt that tightly binds all the other pieces of clothing together. So what we are dealing with here is what is known to us as virtues and by virtues we understand good moral habits. So virtues are good character traits that are woven into who you are so that you can be the type of person who tends to be compassionate, forgiving, and so on. Virtues therefore differ from moral laws which are external determinations of the good. Furthermore, it is interesting that someone like Thomas Aquinas points out to us that there is an inversely proportional relationship between virtues and laws: the more virtuous someone is, the more the person has the inner inclination to do the good that comes from within, the less such a person needs the external power of the law to do good. So the opposite is also equally true.



## **Faith formation in and through the life of congregations**

With a good idea of the embodiment of faith formation and the role of desires in our faith formation, we then look at how these processes are now taking place in the congregation. In other words, as congregations we embody certain practices. Another way to describe it is to refer to it as the curriculum of faith-forming practices for a congregation. Before we pay attention to the curriculum as such, it is important to keep a few points of departure in mind in connection with the preceding paragraphs. The first has to do with the fact that people are constantly learning and that much of this learning and faith formation does not take place in classrooms, workshops, retreats, and conferences. We also learn by watching TV, listening to the radio, reading and simply by observing what is going on around us. We learn through everyday conversations and we often learn from people who would not identify or describe themselves as teachers.

Secondly, it is the case that an important part of our teaching and thus faith formation does take place through structured forms of teaching and which are then also guided and presented by teachers, catechists and teachers who have received training for this task. These formal teaching opportunities usually have three characteristics:

- First, it is intentional and deliberate. When congregations as communities of faith help the believers to prepare for certain ministries, they also aim that the people will learn in a certain way what skills are expected of them, will be familiar with certain customs, will be able to distinguish certain meanings and will make certain values their own.
- Second, it must be systematic. Certain aspects of a curriculum precede other parts and build on the previous ones. For this purpose, it is necessary that a curriculum must be systematically thought through if believers are expected to make sense of their experiences, relationships and specifically their encounter with stories and the vision of the Christian faith.
- Thirdly, it is the case that intentional and systematic learning and formation of faith practices is only effective if it is sustainable over a certain period of time. If believers in a congregation want to expand the memory of the church's story and vision in the future, it is

important that certain learning processes must be repeated until it is so well known that one does not have to think about it. The result is that this memory about these events is embedded in such a way that it shapes people's thoughts and perceptions. If this memory or recollection still wants to be relevant, it must be nourished over a sustainable period that must be long enough to be integrated into its understanding and interpretation in new contexts and circumstances.

## **On the way to a curriculum**

Referring to the works of Foster (2012), Osmer (2005), Mouton (2021), Nell (2021) and others, a possible curriculum for the formation of faith practices and teaching in a congregation could consist of the following elements. All these elements are “eventful” in character. By “eventful” we mean that these events have the potential to transform encounters with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with the mystery of God into opportunities for transformation. Therefore, it can also be described as eventful teaching, learning and faith formation.

### **1. The liturgical calendar**

Over the past thirty years, one could probably describe the use of the liturgical calendar as one of the most important developments in the formation of religious practices in the Dutch Reformed Church. When I was a child, I didn't know much about Ash Wednesday, Advent, the great Holy Week and so on. Over time, it became clear to us what an important role the liturgical seasons play in providing us with a structure for the rehearsal of the primary story of the Christian community. The rhythmic repetition over time renews our awareness of those stories in a time where we are literally bombarded by competing stories from the market and politics. The liturgical calendar helps us to remember who we are in an era of flux and change. The liturgical year orders the way we live together in relation to the flow of events that remind us of our relationship with the Christ events. Finally, it also deepens our relationship with each other when we participate in the liturgical events that remind us of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

## 2. Catechetical instruction

Teaching our children and young people through a formal curriculum remains an extremely important opportunity for faith formation. Over the past thirty years, we have seen the pendulum swing back and forth between curricula with a more cognitive starting point and others that were more experientially oriented. The choice will of course vary from congregation to congregation, but the important thing is to understand its eventful character for the faith formation of children and young people. For this purpose, renewed theological reflection on faith formation is needed, especially in light of the pandemic. In this regard, there is a need for an organic, flexible, and relevant curriculum for faith formation where learners and pupils go on a journey together and in an authentic way effort must be made with the insecurities and doubts of young people instead trying to provide fixed answers and certainties. Furthermore, it is important to understand that faith formation is intergenerational and does not only have to do with the children and young people.

## 3. Paradigmatic events

Paradigmatic events usually establish some pattern in our lives. The patterns for Christian life and community have their origins in significant events deeply rooted in ancient traditions, rituals, sacred writings, and stories. These events provide a fixed structure that gives order and purpose to our lives. We think here, for example, of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism as part of the covenant events in the Old and New Testaments and the Lord's Supper as part of the commemoration of Jesus' death and resurrection. Both of these sacraments usually take place monthly and quarterly in the Reformed tradition and are important opportunities for the formation of faith practices.

The meaning of these paradigmatic stories is influenced by the specific history of a faith community. The unfolding of the meaning of these paradigmatic events over time helps with the sustainability and renewal of congregations' lifestyles and theology. This meaning is often reflected in the metaphors that congregations use to identify themselves, such as "streams of living water", "branches on the vine", "radiating for Christ".

#### **4. Seasonal events**

Seasonal events are related to the rhythmic pattern of a congregation. The ritual process that gives structure to these events carries congregations through the liturgical seasons of Advent, through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, through the ordinary time up to and including the Sunday of glorification. These seasonal events establish a structure for the interplay of a congregation's identification with paradigmatic events in their faith history and the response of the congregation to local circumstances and relationships. Often these events also provide the clearest and most consistent structure for the education, teaching and faith formation of a congregation. They provide a regular arrangement for the congregation's life through weekly worship, study, mission, and fellowship. However, what is important to remember is that seasonal events have very little power and influence in people's faith formation if they are not familiar with the texts and ritual activities that sustain them.

#### **5. Occasional events**

Occasional events intensify the congregation's identity, help shed light on common meanings and often energize the congregation's life. These events include activities such as marriages, funerals, baptisms, wedding anniversaries, outreach events, bazaars, dedication of the church building and so on. We see the power of these events in the increased attention and focused energy of a congregation when, for example, a young couple has a baby baptized in front of the congregation or the bride and the groom pledge their allegiance to each other. In the ebb and flow of events that occur from time to time, the congregation's identity and mission is renewed and it intensifies our faith in the Triune God.

#### **6. Unexpected events**

Unexpected events often invade the life of a congregation. These events interrupt the rhythm, patterns, structures, and relationships that give coherence and order to the way congregations function. These unexpected elements can bring joy and sorrow, blessing and suffering to a congregation. They can come in different forms and probably the most recent and well-known unexpected event that has hit all congregations in the world is the Covid-19 pandemic. At the stage of this writing, the pandemic has

been with us exactly two years since the announcement of the first so-called “lockdown”. This unexpected event cut through the programs of congregations and affected people of all ages, ethnicities, countries, and genders.

The pandemic challenged our congregations’ experiences and interpretation of the Scriptures and our personal stories on a deep level. In an equally unexpected way, the pandemic can also provide the impetus for new ways of understanding the Scriptures and our personal and communal stories. In this case, faith formation takes place from the congregation’s response to the tragedy. This creates the opportunity for the development of new meanings from what we did not expect. We have already noticed that the faith formation that takes place here is more spontaneous and has an informal structure. This often happens in response to an immediate need and may not last longer than a few seconds of a phone call or a pastoral visit. The response may also be more comprehensive and a planned action that requires a large amount of time and energy in the life of a congregation. In whatever form it takes place, the character of the faith-forming response to the unexpected is shaped by the event (pandemic) itself.

### **Three movements on the way to faith formation**

The teaching and education of a congregation around the various events discussed in the previous section requires three moments to provide it with the necessary structure and momentum:

- Faith formation needs preparation to empower participation. The aim is to move from ignorance, incompetence and naivety to familiarity and the ability to participate with freedom and fullness in the congregation’s worship and mission. Sufficient preparation for participation in the congregation’s life therefore requires familiarity with the stories, texts, roles, and activities that are associated with a specific event and in which people can participate without feeling excluded or out of place. It requires enough practice that participants themselves can experience something of the power of the event that others have experienced in the past. This requires a thorough investigation of the texts, symbols and actions that are identified

with the events and to discover in the experience of the events new meanings and perspectives for their lives and for changing circumstances.

- Faith formation requires involvement and commitment to the events. Events transform lives only when people participate in them with full commitment and allow their imaginations to experience and appreciate new possibilities, relationships, expectations, and practices. That is why the repeated participation in such events is so important for capturing emerging possibilities.
- Faith formation completes the full circle when mutual critical reflection takes place on the meanings people find through their participation in these events. This phase of faith formation is very important if the meanings of the events are to be useful beyond the boundaries of the event. Mutual critical reflection requires that we share our experiences of the events with each other. This means we must tell our story as part of the larger story of which the events form a part. This requires us to assess the meanings from our own faith traditions, biblical testimony and the experience of people who come from other traditions and give other meanings to the events. Mutual critical reflection becomes transformative when we begin to live out our commitment through the meanings we have discovered, which is usually the moment we begin to embody the events personally.

## **Conclusion**

I began this contribution by reflecting on the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on my life of faith and by referring to the three things that I missed the most during the pandemic, namely: the role of worship, the community of living, flesh and blood believers and deeper reflection on what we are doing when we talk about faith formation. We looked at the function and purpose of faith formation and stopped at the dangerous waters in which faith formation finds itself. Furthermore, we investigated the embodiment of faith formation, after which we also looked at how our desires impact on faith formation. However, the core of my argument was about faith formation in and through the life of congregations and I also

paid attention to a possible curriculum, among other things. Finally, we looked at three movements on the way to faith formation. My confidence is that this article can serve as impetus for further discussions about how our faith can be formed, nourished, and maintained.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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