



Partnerships in Faith Formation: An Interdependent Matrix of Ministries

JACOB SORENSON AND ROLAND MARTINSON

The Camp and Church Leadership Project (CCLP) was designed to investigate the impact that serving on a Christian summer camp staff has on faith formation and leadership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The findings made clear that serving on summer camp staff is one important element of a much larger interdependent ministry network. Through its investigation, the project gained insights into a multidimensional matrix of ministries influential in deepening faith and nurturing a call to ministry. Furthermore, focusing attention on particularly impactful ministries has potential to strengthen all the ministries in the matrix, thus facilitating the church's mission of forming disciples in the twenty-first century.

The multidimensional matrix includes Sunday school and confirmation; specialized ministries like youth conventions, camps, and campus ministry; and supportive faith practices in the home. The research findings indicate that these components are mutually dependent ministries, forming faith across the early life-stages and ministry experiences of church leaders. Participation in one or more of the ministries often leads to participation in others. The more ministry experiences a person has, the more likely it is that they will participate in others and the greater the impact will be.

The development of faith in youth and young adults directly influences their future vocation as Christians in the world. This article summarizes the impact of certain youth ministries and their role in forming faith among young Christians, with suggestions about how congregations and the church can carry out these ministries more effectively.

Among the ministry experiences examined, four were particularly influential in faith formation and call to ministry. These were Sunday school, summer camp, the triennial youth gathering, and campus ministry. It is notable that these ministries neatly span the formative years of early childhood through young adulthood. It is also notable that each of these ministries faces substantial challenges and critiques in our era of diminishing church involvement and faith decline.¹ The church is searching for new resources as it revitalizes its ministry. The findings of the CCLP indicate that a reexamination of the identified ministries and their relationship within the larger matrix of ministries can provide resourcing for church leaders revitalizing the church in the twenty-first century.

The CCLP focused on church insiders: rostered ministers who had chosen a career embedded in the structures of the church. Almost all these rostered ministers grew up in the church to some extent. Over their years of faith formation, their ministry experiences were cumulative and mutually reinforcing, building off one another in a complex matrix. The project utilized interviews and surveys to investigate those who, as youth and young adults, may have been engaged in camping and/or other ministries.

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The initial phase of the project in spring 2020 consisted of semi-structured interviews with twenty-four adults active in Lutheran churches in Wisconsin (half rostered and half non-rostered). All had previously served on summer staff at a Lutheran camp. One of the major findings was that summer camp staff experiences could not be isolated from other key life experiences. They served as part of an interconnected ecosystem of faith-based institutions and other life influencers.²

The subsequent survey phase expanded the research to all rostered ministers in the ELCA. It sought to assess the frequency of the ministry experiences identified as significant in the interviews, along with their perceived importance relative to faith formation and call to ministry. The survey included sixteen distinct ministry experiences from childhood through emerging adulthood, examined alongside religious worship attendance and perceived impact of faith influencers, both in and outside the home. The survey, distributed in both English and Spanish, garnered 3,041 responses, representing 18 percent of the entire ELCA roster. The response rate was evenly distributed throughout the ELCA, with respondents

¹ See, for example, Andrew Root, "The Youth Ministry Mission Trip as Global Tourism: Are We OK with This?" *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 4 (2008), 314–19; Rich Melheim, *Let's Kill Sunday School (Before It Kills the Church)* (Stillwater, MN: Faith Inkubators, 2016); and Jacob Sorenson and Roland Martinson, "Ministry at the Crossroads: Lutheran Campus Ministry's Power and Peril," *Word & World* 38, no. 4 (2018), 398–409.

² For more on the project findings, including the themes from the interview phase, see <https://sacredplaygrounds.com/cclp>.

from all sixty-five synods and similar response rates in all regions of the country. Response was higher among currently serving ministers than retired ministers.

The analysis was based primarily on retrospective accounts, with rostered ministers assessing their experiences from the perspective of years or even decades. There are limitations to this type of research, since perceptions of experiences are highly subjective and change over time. Moreover, church professionals are likely to interpret their childhood experiences through the lens of their current ministry practices.

However, the major strength of this approach is the opportunity for respondents to look back on a wide range of experiences and compare their relative influence on their life trajectory. This method demonstrated the interconnected nature of the ministries of the ELCA and further identified the four ministries particularly important in both the faith formation and call to ministry of rostered ministers.

Foremost among the four most influential ministries was Sunday school. Almost every ELCA rostered minister attended Sunday school or other Christian education as an elementary-aged child, with 94 percent attending monthly or more. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of these regular attendees indicated that childhood experiences in the congregation (particularly Sunday school and vacation Bible school, or VBS) were very or extremely important to their faith formation. Rostered ministers viewed these childhood experiences as much more important, on average, to faith formation than high school youth group attendance, confirmation training, church retreats, mission trips, and even summer camp attendance. Because of the ubiquity of Sunday school and the frequently perceived impacts, childhood experiences in the congregation were considered very or extremely important to faith formation among more ELCA ministers than any other experience in the survey.

Second in importance to faith formation was camping ministry. The most influential camp experience was serving on summer camp staff, an experience shared by a remarkable 40 percent of respondents. Over three-quarters (78 percent) of those who served on summer camp staff said it was very or extremely important to their faith formation, making it the second-most influential experience discovered in the survey.³ Camp attendance was a major factor in many respondents' stories (64 percent attended at least once) and correlated with numerous other ministry experiences, but it was not nearly as influential to responding ministry leaders as serving on summer staff.

The next-most-important experience was participation in campus ministry. Campus ministry included two distinct experiences: those who attended ELCA colleges (38 percent of respondents) and those who participated in Lutheran Campus Ministry (now known as Lu-Min) at a state or private college. Among those who attended non-ELCA schools, 67 percent of those active in Lu-Min said the experience was very or extremely important to their faith formation. This ranked it among the top five ministries in perceived impact on faith formation.

³ The experience rated most consistently as very or extremely important to both faith formation and call to ministry was Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM). However, only 2 percent of respondents shared this experience, dramatically decreasing its potential for influence.

The ELCA Gathering, a triennial convention for high school youth, is the final ministry experience that stood out in the survey. The evidence for its impact was the least compelling of the four (47 percent of those who attended said it was very or extremely important to their faith formation), but participation in this event had effects independent of the other ministry experiences. We measured these effects using a series of regression analyses, which isolate individual experiences relative to the others measured.

It was nearly impossible to isolate the influence of Sunday school because of its ubiquity among the respondents, but each of the other experiences (Gathering, camp, and campus ministry) could be statistically isolated as significant for call to ministry. The experiences that stood out were attending camp four or more times as a child/youth, serving on summer camp staff at least one summer, attending an ELCA college/university, attending campus ministry at least monthly, and attending the ELCA Gathering. If a respondent experienced any one of these, the median age they were rostered was twenty-nine. If a respondent did not experience any of these, the median age they were rostered was forty-one. This considerable age gap attests to the importance of these particular ministry experiences.

The oversized influence of these four ministries (Sunday school, camp, campus ministry, and the Gathering) reflects the importance of the matrix's interconnected ministries from early childhood through emerging adulthood. None of these was a stand-alone ministry, and they seldom provided a singular experience of faith formation. It was not possible to consider summer camp apart from Sunday school, for example, because 96 percent of respondents who attended camp as children attended Sunday school at least monthly (including 89 percent who attended weekly). Furthermore, 80 percent of those who attended the ELCA Gathering also attended camp. Those who attended Sunday school at least monthly were much more likely to be confirmed and participate in a church youth group. Those who participated in all three of these experiences were much more likely to attend the ELCA Gathering, attend summer camp, and become involved with campus ministry while in college. In turn, each of these correlated significantly with increased congregational involvement. Taking away one ministry seemed to impact the entire system, especially when it came to the big four ministries. The reverse is also true. For example, the Gathering fosters increased involvement across multiple ministries, including camp. Those who attended the Gathering were more than twice as likely to serve on summer camp staff than those who did not attend. This reveals the interconnected nature of the ministry network. Together, they comprise a complex matrix that remains strong when each element is valued and resourced.

The matrix has shown clear signs of weakness in recent years. This is clear in trends of national faith commitments showing a steady decline over the past few decades.⁴ The decline is also clear in data specific to the ELCA, particularly

⁴ Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," October 17, 2019, www.pewresearch.org.

with regard to Sunday school and campus ministry.⁵ Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the temporary closure of most summer camps in 2020 and the cancellation of the triennial Gathering, putting the future of both at risk. These disruptions in the church will be felt for a generation. Some see these declines as clear signs that what the church did in the past no longer works. From this perspective, attempts to revitalize existing ministries may seem backward-looking rather than innovative. The data from the CCLP offer a clear counter-argument to this perspective.

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A revitalization of the ministry matrix may begin with attention to the ministries that have proven most effective in forming faith and developing leaders in the church over the past six decades. This is not to stifle innovation or reject new ministry initiatives. On the contrary, all four of these ministry spaces have experienced innovative change and new models throughout their existence. Importantly, the survey did not differentiate program models. Ministries like Sunday school and camp have gone through multiple changes over their decades-long existence as specialized ministries. The Sunday school experience of a thirty-year-old survey respondent from North Carolina may bear little resemblance to the Sunday school experience of their ninety-year-old colleague from North Dakota. However, they both regard these childhood experiences in their home congregations as important to their faith formation and call to ministry. This is not to say that model and method do not matter. Rather, it is to say that the ministry space (congregation) and life stage (childhood) are the most crucial elements, whether it is labeled Sunday school or something else entirely. As ministries like Sunday school and camp changed over this sixty-year stretch, other innovative ministries came into vogue and declined, such as the church youth group, youth mission trips, and the specialized experience called Lutheran Youth Encounter. The survey included all three of these innovative ministries. They all demonstrated potential for impact, but none of them had the consistency or wide-ranging impact of the big four ministries. Renewed attention on Sunday school, summer camp, campus ministry, and the Gathering has great potential for far-reaching impacts across the entire church. Prioritizing these four ministries can actually enable the continuation of other ministries in the matrix, along with making space for innovative new ministries.

The ongoing influence of these identified ministries in faith formation, their correlation, and the significant contribution made by each ministry to participation

⁵ Data from the ELCA parochial reports show that, while ELCA membership declined 38 percent from 1990 to 2018, Sunday school attendance declined 69 percent during that same period (www.elca.org/research). For the recent struggles of campus ministry, see: Sorenson and Martinson, "Ministry at the Crossroads."

in another is interesting and has potential for strengthening and renewing faith formation across the church. However, aside from the project's focus (summer camp staff), the ministries were neither thoroughly investigated nor intentionally tested in this project. Thus, even though basic information was uncovered in this study about potentially effective ministry patterns and strategies, more research is needed and seems promising, especially in an era of secularism, religious transitions, and decline in faith formation and effective ministry. The specifics of Sunday school, including program models, are investigated in numerous places.⁶ There are also recent investigations available for further study of camp⁷ and campus ministry⁸ that detail how and why these ministry spaces are so effective. Deeper investigations of all four ministries are needed (particularly the Gathering), along with conversations among ministry partners to strengthen collaboration.

One can imagine several points of entry into such investigations. Many of the questions at these points of entry lend themselves to being worked separately and/or together. These inquiries may include further research, and they also may be the key topics among stakeholders that unveil new ways forward.

One might ask and investigate: What is it about these particular ministries (types, times, and places) that make each of them individually, and some or all of them together, especially impactful in faith formation? What needs to change or be maintained so their effectiveness might continue in these new times?

One might ask: What is it that leads from participation in one of these ministries to participation in others? Is it simply momentum, or is it deepening identification as a Christian, or ongoing connection to the faith community, or something else?

One might ask: Why does a greater number of these varied experiences have greater impact? Is it simply that the more exposure, the greater the impact? Or is it something about each ministry in the matrix that is timely and unique?

What about relationships that appear to be central to each of these ministry types, times, and places? How and why do these relationships matter in these contexts and activities?

One might ask: Were these ministries important in these rostered ministers' faith formation because they were drawn to specifically religious activities in their journey of becoming strongly affiliated with the church as religious leaders? In other words, would any church-based activity work, or is there something about specific ministries that matters?

From other studies we know that families are systems in which most people are embedded and formed,⁹ and indeed, the role of families was often referenced in

⁶ See, for example, Tanya Marie Eustace Campen, *Holy Work with Children: Making Meaning Together* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021).

⁷ Jacob Sorenson, *Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camp in Theological Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

⁸ Sorenson and Martinson, "Ministry at the Crossroads."

⁹ For some of the most recent and compelling research on the importance of family in faith formation, see Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

the findings. What place do families have in the matrix? Do they add a particular foundation to and encouragement in each of these activities and dynamics, as well as being another locus of ministry in and of themselves?

Then one might ask: Are there, in this matrix of faith formation, specific times and places in which particular activities occur within certain time frames and sequences that might provide the rudimentary shape and dynamics for partnership models of faith formation? If so, how might those partnerships be developed, scheduled, sustained, and enhanced?

We have a hunch that there might be real possibilities for identifying, strengthening, and even initiating these faith formation partnerships. This begins in each ministry sphere as leaders not only speak well of each other but also engage with their partners in ministry. This goes for congregations, camps, campus ministries, and collaborative church ministries, such as the ELCA Gathering. These ministries cannot remain siloed because they are most effective when they are interdependent. When they support and resource each other, they strengthen the entire matrix, creating space for deeper partnerships and new ministry initiatives.

There is much we might do with the discoveries of this project to strengthen faith formation with young people even before research delves more deeply into the findings.

In spite of Christianity's decades-long decline in the US, all the components of faith formation identified in the ministry matrix continue to exist in many churches. Thus, one path of revitalization of faith formation could very well be developmental—that is, refurbishing what is available, and more generatively weaving together already-existing ministry components and partnerships among families, congregations, and beyond.

Working with the components of the matrix and the potential partnerships, we might well refurbish each ministry, paying particular attention to the big four most influential ministries. Along the way of the refurbishing process, we might develop relationships, collaboration, and partnerships with leadership in other components in the matrix, especially families.

While the matrix and its components might develop in many different ways, each component developing its own faith formation capacities in context seems to be the most direct and productive approach. Given the project findings, the participating components and potential partners might include:

Congregational culture	vacation Bible school
Sunday school*	confirmation
church youth group	service/mission trips
ELCA Gathering*	camps*
campus ministry*	families

There are many approaches to engaging persons and processes that might well be utilized in each ministry's refurbishing, while simultaneously connecting with other institutions in the matrix for dialogue and collaboration.

Here is one approach:

It begins in the congregation, as leaders not only speak well of, but also engage with, their partners in ministry in families, at camps, in campus ministries, at churchwide and synod levels, and in other places. In turn, professionals in partnership ministries like camps and campus ministry can seek greater collaboration and partnership with congregational ministries. As particularly influential ministries, they are crucial entry points into church engagement, and vice versa. It may be a paradigm shift to understand that they are not simply dependent upon congregations to send their children. In this old model, as congregations decline, so will all the other ministries.

In contrast to this, the supporting ministries might see themselves as more than destinations for church kids: they become crucial points of entry for congregational engagement. Every camp minister should consider how they might get their campers and staff more engaged in congregational ministries. Every campus minister should consider how they might encourage their students to serve on summer camp staff or in a yearlong service organization, along with engagement in congregational ministry.

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On the congregational level, one might begin with a Guidance Team: a small group of stakeholders that includes at least one elder, a parent, a child, a young adult, and perhaps an outside guide or consultant. One task of the Guidance Team would be to continually take the pulse of congregational culture, especially existing relationships, worship, Sunday school, confirmation, youth ministries, and how well faith practices are generated in families and in the congregation. The Guidance Team should consider a liaison with a local camp, another with campus ministries, another with local schools and community organizations, another with the church council, and more as partnerships grow.

The refurbishing and development process overseen by the Guidance Team in the congregation might include some of the following activities with each of the partner organizations:

Guidance—recruiting, training; committed, innovative leadership development

Assessment—thorough and accurate investigation of nature of faith formation

Vision—developing a clear definition/description of faith and its exercise

Mission—deciding what it is to learn, live, and grow in faith across generations

Strategy—deciding on how to form faith in context at each stage across generations

Partnerships—building other ministry partners

Narrative—stories from participant experiences woven into a “whole story”

Evaluation—ongoing comprehensive assessment fed into ongoing refinement

Renewal—ongoing refinement led by Guidance Team/congregational leaders

Communication and collaborative planning with potential partners in the matrix might well continue throughout the development and refurbishing process.

The point of these activities is to prayerfully participate in God’s presence, seek God’s guidance, and with a laser focus effectively practice the activities of discipleship, which over time build faith across generations at life’s crucial stages. The key is partnership. None of these ministries operates on its own. They are mutually dependent. Working on behalf of your partnership ministries and speaking well of them can strengthen the entire matrix, including your own ministry. ⊕

JACOB SORENSON is the founder and director of Sacred Playgrounds, a ministry offering research and training to camps and congregations. He has a PhD from Luther Seminary, an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary, and more than twenty years of experience in camping ministry and congregational youth ministry. He is the author of Sacred Playgrounds (Cascade Books, 2021).

ROLAND MARTINSON is the emeritus dean and Carrie Olson Baalson Professor of Children, Youth, and Family and Pastoral Care at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. Among a number of other works, he is the author of Elders Rising: The Promise and Peril of Aging (Fortress Press, 2018), a Word & World book.