Growing up in a Christian home and within a community of believers, my earliest memories are marked by a keen awareness of God’s love for me. At age six I responded to Christ’s call to follow him. Did I fully realize the demands of the journey on which I was embarking? Surely not. I firmly believe, however, that God readily and lovingly accepts our first steps on the pilgrim journey, no matter what our age or stage in life.

With all of my six-year-old understanding, I placed my life into God’s care and keeping. It was later that I came to a more complete realization that God’s desire is not just to “stamp us saved,” but to grow us up into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

**Christian Formation Defined**

Christian formation concerns that process of growth toward wholeness in Christ. It is our continuing journey of being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ, experiencing and expressing love for God and others.

The word *formation* is derived from the Greek word *morphe*, suggesting that the inner being of a person is radically altered in this process. Paul used this word in his letter to the Galatian church: “until Christ is *formed* in you.” Paul agonized, he said, as a woman in labor, until Christ’s character and goodness was evident. A derivative of this word, *morphoo*, was a term used to describe the formation and growth of an embryo in a mother’s body. So here we get a sense that we are truly in a gestation process.

Learning to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, however, is a life-long process. We never “graduate” from the school of Christian living. The result of this life-long process is real, radical change, as expressed in both our individual and our community life.

**It’s a Cooperative Venture**

Christian formation relies decisively on God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. While we can choose to work with or against the Spirit, we cannot accomplish growth into Christ’s likeness through our own efforts alone. To get a better picture of this concept, I like to consider a sailing analogy. Marjorie
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Thompson, in her book Soul Feast, compares the relationship between our will and the Spirit’s transforming work to the interaction between sailor and sailboat. Though the sailor cannot control the wind, he/she can set the sails and position the tiller to maximize the effectiveness of the wind. Likewise, Christian formation requires our conscious choice and a responsive awareness of the Spirit’s presence in our lives. Through intentionally chosen spiritual disciplines or practices, we ‘set our sails’ to maximize the effect of the wind of the Spirit in our lives.

Information or knowledge alone will not result in the radical change that we are seeking. The goal of Christian formation is whole-person learning, which focuses on the heart as well as the head. Though cognitive knowledge is essential, it is only a part of the whole process. Our knowing must lead to new attitudes and new actions that are increasingly consistent with the character of Jesus Christ.

Loving God and Loving Others is Our Goal

As we increasingly reflect the character of Christ, we learn to live more fully in the kingdom of Christ. In Christ’s kingdom, it is normal to experience God’s love and to express that love back to God and others. In Christ’s kingdom, it is normal and natural to live a life of obedience to his teachings.

Dallas Willard, in The Divine Conspiracy, points out that in Christ’s kingdom obedient living is really abundant living. Obedience, though sometimes understood to be a rigid legalism, is more rightly understood in terms of the abundant life that leads to blessing others through witness and service. Christian formation leads us to an understanding of Christ’s unique call on our lives, an increasing ability to express ourselves freely, and a generosity in using our God-given gifts for the sake of Christ’s kingdom.

Certain Elements are Essential for Growth

As we’ve looked at Scripture as well as the historical context of our denomination, we believe that there are four elements or means of growth into Christ’s likeness. Practices, or disciplines, within each of these four areas need to be engaged by people of all ages. We’ve used the word GROW as an acronym to make these four areas easy to remember.

- God’s Word…shaping our actions and our lives
- Relationships…nurturing our growth in community
- Obedient living…using God’s gifts in witness and service
- Worship…interacting with and experiencing God

You can learn more about each of these areas on our website at http://www.covchurch.org/adults/grow/
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Some Shifts Need to Happen in a Congregation’s Approach

Creating an environment in which transformation can take place requires an intentional approach. Churches seeking to develop an effective formation focus make three distinctive shifts.

1) They emphasize personal and community transformation over program, understanding that, though programs are a necessary dimension of congregational life, they are a means toward the end and not the end itself. Christian formation is about turning believers into disciples of Jesus Christ, so that we are formed in Christ, both personally and as a community.

2) They emphasize a holistic head, heart and hand approach to formation. Information or knowledge alone will not support the kind of radical transformation we are seeking. Christian formation includes the goal of increasing our knowledge of Scripture, for example, but it is not limited to that. It is about whole-person learning. It is about knowing, being, and doing.

3) They emphasize an integrated faith, understanding that Christian formation is not about accomplishing a series of tasks, nor does it happen only in the church building. It happens everywhere...at home, at school, at work, and throughout our lives. Growing together toward wholeness in Christ requires that we be “border crossers” when it comes to generational, class, gender, home/church, work/church, clergy/lay, and racial, cultural and ethnic boundaries.

Some Shifts Need to Happen in a Congregation’s Approach

The spiritual journey continues throughout our lives. We are continually...

- Becoming aware of God
- Committing to Christ, and
- Maturing through the work of the Holy Spirit

This growth experience is more like a spiral than a straight path. As followers of Christ, who lean into the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, we are continually becoming more aware of God’s character and God’s truths, and need to choose whether we will commit to those new realities or truths. The journey is often neither linear nor steady in its pace.

Christian formation is a lifelong process. The main thing, from the Bible’s perspective, is that we are continually growing into Christ’s likeness...as an individual, as well as a church. “The only evidence of life is growth.” It is definitely not an instantaneous thing. It’s a continuing journey we’re on.

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

Philippians 1:9-11