

Disconnected Formation— and What Is Becoming Clear



The previous reflection raised a disproportionate question under the guise of camp ministry that points to something deeper:

What formative capacities are we allowing to erode, and can they be rebuilt once they are lost?

This current reflection stays with that question, but looks more closely at what may lie beneath it:

Has the church's formative capacity changed—not in intention, but in structure?

*Formation is not disappearing.
It is still happening—though often
unrecognized and unconnected.*

*Formation is not passive.
It is practiced.*

Extending the conversation

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.
(Proverbs 27:17)

A web-based version of this booklet is available at
formativecapacity.org

The site includes:

- an HTML edition for continued reading
- downloadable PDFs suitable for local printing and sharing

Convergence

Across the Church, several pressures are becoming more visible:

- Membership is declining
- Clergy pipelines are thinning
- Historical assumptions are limiting future outcomes
- Leadership transitions are frequently more disruptive
- Congregations are bearing more responsibilities with fewer resources

None of these realities are new in isolation. What may be new is their convergence—decline is not only numerical, but formational.

It reflects a change in how people are being formed—and where.

Formation Once Happened Across a Wesleyan Ecosystem

Early Methodism did not grow primarily through institutional strategy. It grew through a formation ecosystem composed of interconnected environments:

- Class Meetings cultivated accountability and reflection.
- Camp Meetings created immersive, communal encounters.
- Circuit Riders connected communities and sustained continuity across distance.
- Local Congregations stabilized communities.

Together, these environments formed people over time through repetition, relationship, and shared practice.

They unintentionally created a **leadership formation pipeline** that was not concentrated, but **distributed and**, therefore, **resilient**.

Closing Reflection

Formation Environments enable Formative Encounters.

- Formative Encounters transform identity.
- Transformed identities renew communities.
- Renewed communities strengthen the ecosystem.

The Church does not lack Formation Environments.

What has eroded is

- the connective tissue that once allowed those environments to function as an ecosystem,
- structurally implemented Formative Encounters, and
- our recognition and intentional alignment of these environments.

When Formation Environments are reconnected, aligned, and stewarded, formation renews—and future capacity expands.

Rekindling Begins...



with Formative Encounters

What Disconnected?

Over time, these environments became less connected. Not through a single decision, and not intentionally, but through gradual shifts:

- ministries specialized
- programs consolidated
- leadership roles narrowed
- liability awareness increased
- commercial metrics expanded

This fragmentation was not only institutional—it was also cultural:

- moms started working
- children attended daycare
- young adults migrated to cities
- single parent households increased
- grandparents moved to nursing homes
- multi-generational households and communities dwindled

Formation did not disappear, but the pathways between Formation Environments weakened.

And when pathways weaken, alignment falters, continuity is quietly lost, and capacity declines.

If formation has become more distributed and less connected, then what, exactly, is carrying formation now?

The Program Assumption

Programs are visible, and easily scheduled, measured, tracked and categorized. Programs offer clear structure and defined outcomes. As we responded to cultural changes, and focused on efficiencies through commercial metrics, it was natural to focus on Programs.

Over time, however, something unintended begins to happen:
we tend to become what we measure.

When success is measured primarily through program offerings and attendance, systems begin to organize around calendar entries and attendance counts. What is counted becomes the focus: more programs, more events, and more attendance.

What quietly erodes is harder to measure:

- attention
- experience
- relationship
- identity
- responsibility
- mentorship

Across many studies and ministry contexts, a consistent pattern is emerging that younger adults are not primarily searching for more activity, nor more participatory programs. They are searching for meaning, community, and relationship. These are not programmatic desires—they are formative needs.

Programs and other short-term experiences can interrupt routine and create meaningful moments, but interruption alone is not the same as formation. Programs remain a valuable tool—but they are not the primary mechanism of formation.

Within the life of the church—*making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*—**Formation is our goal.**

Rekindling Questions

Where is formation currently happening across the church—and where is it not?

Which environments are shaping identity and leadership most deeply?

Where are these environments connected—and where are they operating in isolation?

What might change if these environments were more intentionally aligned over time?

If Formation Environments function as infrastructure, how do we structure and align them for Formative Encounters?

Leadership Implications

When Formation Environments are disconnected, leadership development becomes uneven.

When alignment is absent, the leadership pipeline does not disappear—it fragments.

- Some individuals experience deep formation. Others do not.
- Some leadership pathways emerge. Others never form.

Knowing that formation happens through environments, we recognize that leadership is not coordinating activities and programs.

Leadership is *stewarding* Formation Environments:

- identifying where formation is already occurring,
- reconnecting and aligning existing Formation Environments,
- designing and integrating intentional, Formative Encounters.

Across the church, formation is increasingly understood to emerge from participation within lived environments that align across time and context.

Through relationships, community, and mentorship, these environments shape identity, leadership, character, and future capacity.

From Participation to Identity

Formation Environments convert spectators into participants.

- Participation leads to responsibility.
- Responsibility leads to ownership.
- Ownership leads to identity formation.

Identity formation is the turning point.

When identity shifts, individuals begin to:

- Assume responsibility
- Internalize belief
- Imagine leadership roles
- Commit to community.

Across the denomination, **leadership formation** is increasingly being understood as something that **emerges from participation within lived environments** rather than from programs alone.

The Core Insight

Formation does not happen primarily through programs.

Formation develops through structured environments, and intentional encounters.

Formation Environments

Formation does not happen all at once.

It develops over time within environments that shape attention, relationships, and shared experience.

These environments are not always formally defined. Often, they are only recognized in hindsight.

They create the conditions where connection deepens, responsibility emerges, and identity begins to take shape.

In practice, Formation Environments often include patterns such as:

- Spaces where people spend extended time together
- Rhythms that create continuity and familiarity
- Shared practices that build trust and meaning
- Structured responsibilities for others
- Embodied mentorship

Within these environments, formation is not delivered—it is lived over time.

Time, in this sense, is not incidental—it is formative.

What these environments share is not structure alone, but a set of underlying dynamics.

The Opportunity

What is less visible is how these environments relate to one another.

Many operate:

- independently
- without continuity
- without shared pathways over time

Formation is occurring, but often in isolated moments rather than sustained patterns.

The question is not whether formation is happening.

The question is whether it is being:

- connected
- sustained
- intentionally aligned over time

When environments are disconnected, their long-term impact is negated.

When they are connected, the formation, identity, and leadership ecosystem emerges.

A Pattern Already Emerging

Across the life of the church, something is already beginning to take shape.

Formation is not disappearing.
In many places, it is expanding.

New environments are emerging:

- relational gatherings
- small group communities
- shared meals
- campus ministries
- immersive experiences

These environments often reflect the same underlying dynamics:

- belonging
- participation
- shared experience
- relational connection

What Actually Forms People

Formation is not produced by isolated moments.

It emerges within environments that consistently activate:

- focused attention
- emotional experience
- belonging and community
- reflection and meaning-making
- immersion in place (including nature)
- mentorship relationships
- spiritual practices

These are not abstract ideas. They are observable patterns.

- When these elements are present together, formation flourishes.
- When they are absent, formation weakens—even when information is delivered.

These dynamics are not theoretical—they are already visible in emerging environments across the life of the church—and documented in secular neuroscience.

These environments are not identical—but they share a common pattern.

Why This Matters Now

Modern culture is not neutral.
It is an always-on formation system.

Digital environments:

- Fragment attention
- Reduce depth
- Weaken belonging

If we are not intentionally designing Formation Environments, people will still be formed—just by default systems that do not produce identity, purpose, character, or leadership.

The scarcest resource in modern formation is not information—it is attention.

Formation Environments restore attention—and *restored attention makes identity formation possible.*

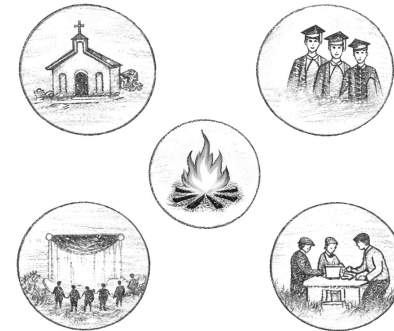
A Key Realization

- Programs introduce. → Environments sustain.
- Programs inform. → Environments transform.
- Programs gather persons. → Environments shape persons.

What Has Not Been Lost

Formation Environments still exist across the life of the church:

- Local Congregations
- Conference Ministries
- Immersion environments
- Community-based contexts
- Connectional structures



These environments continue to shape people—but often in isolation, without connection across the life of the Church.

For a connectional church, *our ministries are often experienced as siloed rather than interconnected.*