

"What are you looking for?"

By [Diane Roth](#)

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In the past year or so, we have started using the term "faith formation" at my congregation. In the past, we talked about "Christian education," or we talked about "Sunday school" or "confirmation." Or maybe, "adult study." Words like that. But now we have abruptly begun to use the words "faith formation" fairly regularly, and it's a fair bet that many in our congregation don't know exactly what we are talking about or why we changed the words we use.

To be fair, it is possible to use the words "faith formation" and do everything the same way as you used to do it. You can say that now you have faith formation, but you still do Sunday school and confirmation and adult study in exactly the same way as before, except that you have a different catchphrase attached. I hope that's not the case with us, but it is something to think about and guard against.

But I really like the term "faith formation." It gives the impression (true, I think) that the process of forming our faith is eclectic: faith is formed in worship, through prayer, in service, while we are sitting down at a Bible study, at the dinner table, through informal conversations and acts of love done by us and to us. Faith is formed through times of doubt or struggle or failure as well. "Faith formation" also hints at the outcome of study and learning: not the simple intake of information, but who we are becoming as disciples of Jesus.

There's this great scene near the beginning of John's Gospel. John the Baptist is testifying about Jesus, telling people that he's the one they have been waiting for. He is the Lamb of God, the Chosen One, the Son of God.

Two of John's disciples just up and start following Jesus. I mean, literally. They start following Jesus down the street. Jesus turns around and asks them, "What are you looking for?"

It's such a great and ordinary question. It's the question that the assistant at the grocery store asks you, the clerk at the department store, the guy at the gas station if you come in and you are looking bewildered. "What are you looking for?" It sounds

like a marketing question. The church has been asking people this question, too. "What are you looking for?" And people are often giving the answers you would suspect: "I am looking for a contemporary worship service." "I am looking for a good youth program." "I am looking for fair-trade coffee at the fellowship hour." "I am looking for a good Bible study."

Here's the thing, though: when Jesus asks those two would-be disciples the question, they don't answer him. They don't answer the question. I think this is a moment of brilliance for the disciples (who are not known for often being brilliant, to tell the truth). They do not answer Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?"

To me, this simple silence is at the heart of the difference between faith formation and Christian education. Christian education is a menu of choices as we grow in our preferred direction of faith development. In that scenario Jesus asks you the question, "What are you looking for?" and you tell him, and he designs a curriculum to fit your needs.

But in faith formation, when Jesus asks us the question, "What are you looking for?" there is silence. There is silence, first of all, because we realize that we don't know what we're looking for, not exactly, except that it has something to do with light, and something to do with an ache in our heart. We check our pockets to see if there are keys, or a quarter, or something that will help us remember who we are. "What are you looking for?" he asks us, and the best answer is silence. And in the silence, we suddenly realize that it is we who should be asking him that question. "What are you looking for, Rabbi?"

In the silence, we put ourselves in his hands; we let him form us. We feel the weight of a piece of bread in our hands, and we see a small shaft of light near his feet.

And we realize that we are the people he is looking for, and that he means to form us, to make us into light and peace and bread.

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