

CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Digital Formation

How feeds, platforms, AI, and online communities train attention before ministry enters the room

A free, research-grounded resource for ministry teams. Designed for a focused fifteen-minute staff, vestry, elder, board, ministry-team, or volunteer conversation.

03

What this names

The digital environments that help train attention, expectation, authority, identity, and belief before, between, and beyond formal ministry settings.

What to listen for

A question, claim, or spiritual experience that may already have been interpreted by a feed, search engine, online community, creator, or conversational AI system.

What this helps a team do

See the formation already happening, examine the ministry's own digital habits, and strengthen Christian practices that remain after the screen closes.

01 • THE FORMATION CHALLENGE

The person in front of you has already been in other formation rooms

A ministry leader hears a familiar sentence: "God told me," "I saw this everywhere," "The answer found me," or "Everyone in the comments agreed."

It can sound like one claim waiting to be corrected or confirmed. But the person may be bringing more than content into the conversation. They may also be bringing habits of attention, trust, urgency, identity, and interpretation that have been rehearsed for months or years.

A feed has learned what keeps them watching. A search engine has answered questions before they found language for asking another person. An online community has affirmed, challenged, or reframed what an experience means. A creator they have never met may feel familiar because that voice has appeared every day. Conversational AI may have supplied a complete answer at an hour when no one else was awake.

None of that makes the person gullible, faithless, or uniquely compromised. Ministry leaders live inside many of the same systems. Digital formation is not something happening to "those people" somewhere else. It is part of the environment in which all of us are learning what deserves attention and what feels true.

The ministry question is therefore larger than, "Was that video right?"

It is, "What has this environment been teaching us to notice, trust, expect, and become?"

THE MINISTRY QUESTION

What has this environment been teaching us to notice, trust, expect, and become?

Digital formation is not something happening to "those people" somewhere else. It is part of the environment in which all of us are learning what deserves attention and what feels true.

Digital formation is the ongoing shaping of attention, expectation, authority, identity, and belief through repeated participation in feeds, search, conversational AI, online communities, creator relationships, and platform reward systems.

The current research does not prove that a platform causes a particular belief or behavior. It shows us the answer environments and public conversations people can enter. The ministry applications in this brief are careful interpretations of those patterns.

02 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Online communities do more than answer questions

01 Athority Ministries® studied 281 stored Reddit threads across 53 distinct online communities in *The Authority Loop™* and *The Multi-Pathway Meaning-Making Model™*.

In those conversations, responses did more than pass along information. Ratifying responses affirmed an interpretation. Challenging responses contested it. Reframing responses offered another way to understand what the question or experience meant.

Ratifying responses appeared in 195 of the 281 conversations. Challenging responses appeared in 126, and reframing responses appeared in 124. These categories could overlap inside the same thread.

195

conversations included responses that affirmed an interpretation

126

conversations included responses that challenged an interpretation

124

conversations included responses that reframed an interpretation

The figures do not tell us that a response changed an individual's belief. They do show that the digital room participates in interpretation. A person may arrive at ministry carrying not only an experience, but also a community's accumulated language for deciding what that experience means.

The digital room participates in interpretation

A response can do more than supply information. It can help establish how an experience should be understood.

RATIFY

Affirm the meaning

The response reinforces the interpretation already offered.

CHALLENGE

Contest the meaning

The response questions the interpretation or claim.

REFRAME

Offer another meaning

The response changes the lens through which the experience is read.

A person may arrive carrying an experience and a community's accumulated language for deciding what that experience means.

02 CONTINUED • WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Availability and prominence can feel like authority before they have been tested

OBSERVATION 02

AI has made spiritual answers available with very little delay

Athority Ministries® used the same 2,789-question instrument across connected studies of spiritual, theological, and life questions.

In *The Anonymous Pastor™*, Google's AI Overview supplied an AI-written answer for 2,538 questions, or 91 percent. In *Everyone's Chaplain™*, the cleaned database contained 2,787 ChatGPT answers. ChatGPT returned a response for every analytic entry, although one was a mistaken safety-filter refusal rather than a real answer.

2,538

Google AI Overview answers across 2,789 questions

2,787

analytic ChatGPT answers in the cleaned database

Those studies measured the systems' answers, not their long-term effects on the people reading them. They do not prove that immediate answers caused anxiety, impatience, or a spiritual decision.

They do reveal a ministry environment in which almost any spiritual question can receive an organized response with very little waiting. The Church may enter the conversation after a person has already received many answers from systems that do not know the whole person.

OBSERVATION 03

What appears first is not always what the room mostly says

Digital order can feel like consensus. A prominent reply, a highly visible creator, or a repeated claim can seem to represent the room because it is the first thing we see.

In *The Anonymous Congregation™*, Athority Ministries® compared the top-sorted response with the majority stance in 546 Reddit posts. The top response matched the thread's majority position in 420 posts, or 76.9 percent. In the other 126 posts, about 23 percent, the first visible reply did not match what the thread mostly said.

420 of 546 top-sorted responses matched the thread's majority stance. In 126 posts, the first visible reply did not match what the thread mostly said.

That does not tell us which position was true. It tells us something more basic: prominence and agreement are not the same thing.

Ministry teams should not assume that the loudest, earliest, most liked, or most repeated voice has earned the authority it appears to hold.

Digital order can carry interpretive weight

Availability, order, familiarity, and visibility can shape what seems authoritative before the claim has been tested.

AVAILABLE

Answers with little delay

An organized response can arrive before a relationship or community enters the question.

FIRST

Appears earliest

Early arrival does not make a response true or representative.

VISIBLE

Receives attention

Likes, ranking, repetition, and prominence do not establish earned authority.

03 · THE THEOLOGICAL LENS

Formation that learns to test the loudest voice

THE CENTER

Volume, visibility, speed, and emotional intensity cannot authenticate themselves as divine.

1 KINGS 19:11-13 · ROMANS 12:2 · 1 THESSALONIANS 5:21

The God who was not in the spectacle

At Horeb, Elijah encounters a powerful wind, an earthquake, and a fire. Yet 1 Kings tells us that the Lord was not in those displays. Elijah has to attend differently to hear the low whisper that follows (1 Kings 19:11-13).

Force cannot authenticate itself

The passage does not teach that God never speaks through something dramatic. It refuses the assumption that force, intensity, or spectacle can authenticate themselves as divine.

Digital signals can resemble authority

That distinction matters in a digital environment. Volume can look like authority. Repetition can feel like confirmation. Emotional precision can feel like revelation. Visibility can feel like truth.

A renewed and testing mind

The Church forms another reflex. Paul calls believers not to be conformed to the surrounding pattern, but to be transformed through the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2). He also tells the community to test what it hears and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Christian formation therefore asks more than whether a claim contains a Bible verse or produces a strong feeling. It asks what kind of life the message forms, how it stands under Scripture, whether it can be tested in Christian community, and whether its authority remains accountable to Christ.

A life no platform can reproduce

Digital content can teach, encourage, and reach people. It cannot by itself reproduce the accountable, embodied, intergenerational life described in Acts 2:42-47.

The answer is not fear of technology. It is a Church that knows how to form attention, patience, memory, discernment, and shared life in the middle of it.

Christian discernment does not begin by treating technology as automatically evil or neutral. It begins by asking what kind of attention, authority, and shared life are being formed under Christ.

04 · WHAT MINISTRY TEAMS CAN MISREAD

Do not reduce formation to the content on the screen

MISREAD 01

"This is mainly a bad-content problem"

Content matters, but the wider environment also teaches. Repetition, order, availability, social response, and the relief of an immediate answer all shape what begins to feel normal. Removing one clip does not address the formation loop around it.

MISREAD 02

"The Church needs to become louder and faster"

A ministry can imitate the platform's urgency, spectacle, and certainty while believing it is competing with them. More Christian content is not automatically deeper Christian formation.

A feed can deliver a message. It cannot remain with a person after the feeling changes or the question becomes more complicated.

MISREAD 03

"This is a youth problem"

Young people deserve age-specific care, but adults and ministry leaders also live inside feeds, search results, group chats, online communities, and AI conversations. A faithful team examines its own habits before treating digital formation as a problem belonging to someone else.

05 · QUESTIONS FOR THE ROOM

Examine the formation loop, not only the message

QUESTION 01

Which digital voices, platform habits, and repeated messages are teaching people in our care what deserves attention, what feels trustworthy, and how quickly uncertainty should end?

QUESTION 02

Where might our ministry be mistaking the delivery of more content for the formation of people through Scripture, prayer, worship, service, patient discernment, and shared life?

QUESTION 03

What one embodied Christian practice could help people slow down, test what they hear, remember who God is, and remain connected after the screen closes?

06 · USE THIS IN FIFTEEN MINUTES

Use the brief without turning it into a training session

READ · 2 MIN

Read **The formation challenge** and the definition of digital formation aloud.

NOTICE · 3 MIN

Read the three research observations silently. Ask each person to mark the one they recognize most clearly in the ministry context.

MAP · 4 MIN

Choose one recurring digital moment and use **Map one digital formation loop** below. Do not attempt to solve every digital concern at once.

DISCUSS · 3 MIN

Choose one question for the room. Let each person answer briefly without requiring immediate agreement or resolution.

NAME · 2 MIN

Identify one embodied Christian practice or ministry environment the team will examine or strengthen.

PRAY · 1 MIN

Ask the Father for wisdom and patience, the mind and grace of Jesus Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the team serves people being formed in digital and embodied spaces.

07 · A PRACTICE TO CARRY FORWARD

Map one digital formation loop

Choose one recurring moment the team recognizes: an urgent spiritual search, a viral claim, an influencer controversy, an AI conversation, or a person's interpretation of a recommended video.

- What question, discomfort, desire, or pause begins the loop?
- What answer or experience arrives first?
- What does the environment reward with relief, visibility, affirmation, or certainty?
- Whose authority becomes easier to trust through repetition?
- What expectation about God, truth, identity, or community is being rehearsed?
- What embodied Christian practice could address the same formation need without copying the platform's incentives?
- Who can remain present after the immediate answer or emotional intensity has passed?

Choose one practice the team can strengthen before the next meeting.

Leave with one digital formation loop the team can name and one embodied practice it will examine or strengthen.

08 • TEAM COMMITMENT

Leave with one formation loop the team will examine

Choose one recurring digital moment. Record a next step that is concrete enough to revisit without trying to solve the entire digital environment in one meeting.

What begins the loop

Name the question, discomfort, desire, pause, or ministry moment that prompts the search.

What arrives first and what is rewarded

Name the answer or experience, then the relief, visibility, affirmation, or certainty the environment rewards.

What authority and expectation are being rehearsed

Name whose authority becomes easier to trust and what expectation about God, truth, identity, or community takes shape.

What embodied practice and presence can remain

Name one Christian practice that addresses the formation need and one person or community able to remain after the immediate answer passes.

One practice the team will strengthen before the next meeting

Owner and review date:

09 • CONTINUE EXPLORING

Stay with the formation challenge

01

READ 01

The Algorithm Is Discipling the Next Generation

02

READ 02

The Time Machine Problem

03

READ 03

Is It Spectacle or Scripture?

04

READ 04

Helping Our Youth Find Faith That Outlasts Influencers

RESEARCH NOTE

This brief draws on Athority Ministries® studies of 281 stored Reddit threads across 53 online communities, Google's AI Overview responses to a 2,789-question instrument, 2,787 analytic ChatGPT answers, and a top-reply comparison across 546 Reddit posts. These studies measured defined digital content and discourse. They did not measure the long-term effects of those environments on individual users. Claims about formation are identified as ministry and theological interpretation rather than measured causal findings.

PREPARED AND SHARED BY

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Read the web edition:

athority.org/formation-briefs-for-teams/digital-formation/

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CARRY THIS FORWARD

Form attention, patience, memory, discernment, and shared life in the middle of the digital environment.