

Case Study: Online Cohort (2022)

The Formation Project

At A Glance

- 20 participants total, put into four small groups with five people per group, and with one facilitator for each group.
- Ran for one year from November 2021 – November 2022.
- All online via Zoom, no travel involved. Offered at free of cost.
- The first Formation Year conducted with the Formation Manual published as resource.

Why We Made It

In Summer 2021, the Formation Project Stewardship Team launched a second round of the cohort-based Formation Year experience. Since the Pilot Year concluded in October 2019, a small stewardship team had been tending to the spirit of the project in small ways, and felt ready to launch another Formation Year. This coincided with the editing and finalizing of the Formation Project Manual, and was a perfect chance to open up the project to new participants.

In July 2021, alums from the Pilot Year as well as new, interested participants who had found out about Formation Project through word-of-mouth or through finding it via an online search, came together for an afternoon gathering. From that gathering, themes and desires from the potential participants became clear:

- The desire and need for more structure and accountability in their spiritual journeys.
- The desire to be in a container with no set religious creed or dogma, a container that can hold the multiplicity and plurality of our spiritual identities.
- The desire for integration of our lives; to have a space that can catch our whole of life (from family, to friends, to spirit, to sports, etc) with meaning and depth.
- The need to weave our call to spiritual formation and call to social justice into one; to not separate them out, but to appreciate and uplift the ways that they are calling us to be whole and to show up for this moment of national/global reckoning we are all a part of.
- The importance of people of color-centered spiritual formation groups, to decenter whiteness in spiritual spaces in order to embrace the wholeness of folks of color in their spiritual journeys.
- The movement toward intergenerational formation groups as more folks on the older end of life express interest in deepening in this container.

What It Was

In September, the first version of our Formation Project Manual (now called [the Formation Companion](#)) was launched. In the same month, we invited all interested participants to respond to a “Commitment to Discernment” google form in order to indicate interest for beginning the journey. For the first time, participants were able to use this comprehensive guide for their experience.

The Formation Year began in October 2021 with 31 participants. Over the next three months, we held monthly zoom calls to launch discernment and to cross each bridge of discernment. By the end of discernment, 20 participants said “yes” to the nine months of Formation Small Groups, which launched in January 2022.

Who Joined

The participants were from all over the world, and varied in age, background, and identity. What brought them together was the desire to deepen. Many expressed a spiritual longing that required greater structure and accompaniment to attend to, and said yes to buoy their own individual journeys.

Practices included things like: Morning Pages, Sabbath, hiking, wonder, embodied movement and dance, daily reading and *lectio divina*, sitting with gratitude and grief, rooting with trees, and more. During the year, many found that the spiritual life was as much about *simplifying* one’s practices, as much as it can be about *adding or finding more* practices to explore.

The participants tended to transcend any one religious label or affiliation, yet drew wisdom from their own traditions and each other’s. The cohorts also included several people who were in moments of transition: midlife discernment, becoming a parent, losing a loved one, shifting vocations, and more. The Formation Year was a structure to hold the transformation people either longed for, or found themselves in the middle of.

The four small group facilitators were Djalòki Dessables, Tammy Monroe, Lawrence Barriner II, and Teju Ravilochan ([bios here](#)). Each came from a background of spiritual leadership and/or soulful facilitation, and offered themselves very generously to their small groups and the project at-large. Each received a small stipend for their contribution to the project.

The Structure

The structure of the Formation Year was largely the same as the [Pilot Year](#):

- We began with three months of discernment, followed by nine months of formation, culminating in a commitment (at participants' discretion) to continue living into this new way of being once the pilot ended.
- During the nine-months of formation, participants were in a facilitated small group that met online weekly for 90 minutes, with weekly spiritual reports.
- Other core components were elder accompaniment, a healing inventory and action plan, intensive engagement with spiritual practices of one's choosing, and the creation of personal commitments for a new way of being.

There were some differences from the Pilot Year:

- Responding to a desire for more regular and ritualized large group time, we hosted Zoom Gatherings for all to get together. This meant *monthly* during Discernment Period (Months 1-3) and *quarterly* during the Formation Period (Months 4-12). The Formation Period quarterly calls were focused on marking the inner life, outer life, and life beyond. We concluded with a full group Commitment Ceremony in Nov. 2022.
- We did not host monthly wisdom sessions via zoom, and did not keep up the online wisdom wells, both due to the significant staff time it took, and the little utilization both saw from participants in the pilot year.
- There was greater variance between the small group experiences, with some facilitators being more lax with the structure, and some being more strict. This did not seem to be "good" or "bad" but just introduced varied experiences group-to-group. In general, the lesson was that facilitation matters, and dependable facilitation is needed to trust the container. Developing a support structure for facilitators to talk with one another, share ideas and strategies, was also important.

While the Formation Year concluded, two of the four groups still continue to meet regularly (now monthly or seasonally, instead of weekly). The relationships and trust established in the small groups continue to have ripple effects in the journeys of participants.

Additionally, several facilitators and participants from the 2022 Formation Year continued on to support the Formation Project on the Stewardship Team for future developments and iterations of the work.

[Read testimonials here.](#)

Acknowledgements

The 2021-2022 Stewardship Team included:

- Djalòki Dessables (Formation Coordinator, Facilitator)
- Katie Gordon (Stewardship Coordinator, Discernment Coordinator, and Manual Support)
- lawrence barriner ii (Formation Coordinator, Facilitator)
- Nasya Miller (Discernment Coordinator, Manual Support)
- Raisa Tolchinsky (Lead Manual Support)

The Team was supported financially by the Crestwood Foundation, and supported generally by Angie Thurston, one of the designers of the Formation Project Pilot Year. Many other alums of the Pilot Year offered support or advice throughout the year as well.

This case study was written by Katie Gordon.