WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

Networks of Lifelong Learning – Part Two
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(Eighth and final article in a series on developing a lifelong learning paradigm)

> The seventh and eighth articles in this series explore how churches can become centers of lifelong faith formation through a network approach to learning. This article concludes the series. For all of the articles go to the Lifelong Faith website: https://www.lifelongfaith.com/articles.html.

In "Networks of Lifelong Learning—Part One" we explored the concept of a network approach to learning and faith formation as a way to move away from the one-size-fits-all approach of so much of today's faith formation toward a more multi-faceted approach built around the lives of people at every stage of life.

We now have the ability to design faith formation networks to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of families and individuals at each stage of life: childhood (0–10), adolescents (11–19), young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid 50s–mid 70s), and older adults (75+). At every stage of life, we can offer people a wide variety of faith-forming experiences in intergenerational, family, and life stage settings; a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources; and a variety of formats: on your own, mentored, small groups, and large groups—all designed around goals for maturing in faith..

A network approach is designed around the vision and goals of lifelong maturing in Christian faith.

A church's goals for lifelong maturing in faith can be thought of as a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+). Lifelong goals provide a seamless process of fostering faith

growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. Each goal needs to incorporate knowing and understanding more fully the Christian faith (informing), developing and deepening people's relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community (forming), and equipping people to live the Christian faith in every aspect of their lives (transforming). I am proposing ten goals to guide faith formation:

1. To develop and sustain a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and make the Christian faith a way of life.
3. To read and study the Bible and apply its message and meaning to living as a Christian today.
4. To learn the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular faith tradition and integrate its meaning into one's life.
5. To worship God with the community at Sunday worship, in ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year.
6. To pray, together and alone, and seek spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines.
7. To live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and apply Christian moral values to decision-making.
8. To live the Christian mission in the world by serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally.
9. To be actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community.
10. To practice faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world.

A network approach is person- or learner-centered, placing the individual or family at the center of faith formation.

Making this shift from program to person highlights the need for sensitivity to the individual differences among people. People differ in many ways: prior knowledge, ability, learning styles and strategies, interest, and motivation, as well in linguistic, ethnic, and social background. People also differ in their spiritual and religious practices and commitments: the Engaged who demonstrate a vibrant faith and relationship with God and are actively engaged in the faith community, the Occasionals who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith and practice is less central to their lives, the Spirituals who are living spiritual lives but not involved in a church community, and the Unaffiliated who are not affiliated with a church or religious tradition and may have little need for God or religion.

A network approach embraces learning and faith growth as a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing within the individual.

Motivation for learning is intrinsic to the person and is driven by a need for autonomy (self-directedness), mastery, and purpose and meaning. The traditional model of schooling conditioned people to perceive the proper role of learners as being dependent on teachers to

make decisions for them as to what should be learned, how it should be learned, when it should be learned, and if it has been learned. Today people are accustomed to searching out what they want to know, when they want and need to know it. People are becoming more and more self-directed in their learning, and they have almost unlimited access to information through the internet and the wide variety of print and media learning resources available.

A network approach provides the faith-forming experiences to personalize learning and faith formation around the lives of people.

Personalization means tailoring faith-forming experiences around each person's spiritual and religious strengths, needs, and interests. It enables faith formation to be individualized and differentiated. Personalization gives people choice in what, how, when, and where they learn; and equips them to make decisions about the direction of their learning and faith growth, which gives people more ownership over their learning and faith growth. Personalizing faith formation gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Personalization allows the time, resources, and support needed to master knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. A personalized approach provides more time to achieve mastery for those who need it, while allowing those who want to move ahead or dive more deeply into a topic to do so when they are ready. (See the previous articles in this series on personalizing faith formation.)

A network approach provides a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of people of all ages.

A network approach provides a variety of methods for learning, ways to learn, and styles of learning.

A network addresses the whole person and how people learn best by offering programs, activities, and resources that incorporate different ways to learn (multiple intelligences: word-centered, verbal- linguistic, logical, musical, visual, intrapersonal, interpersonal, naturalist, and bodily-kinesthetic); and different styles of learning (hands-on experiences, reflective observation, exploration and analysis, and active experimentation).

A network approach incorporates a variety of formats for learning—on your own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the church community, and in the community and world—delivered in physical gathered settings and online settings.

A network approach provides a way to offer a diversity of programs in different formats and to offer one program or experience in multiple formats, expanding the scope of faith formation offerings and providing people with more options to participate

A network approach is built on a digital platform for faith formation.

People are connected to the content (programs, activities, resources) and to each other. There's continuity for people across different learning experiences, and it's available anytime, anywhere. The digital platform provides for seamless learning across a variety of experiences, resources, locations, times, or settings; and fosters a strong connection between faith formation at church, at home, in daily life, and online.

A network approach nurtures communities of learning and practice around shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities.

People can connect with each other through these shared activities, programs, or experiences. With a diversity of programs and activities targeted to different needs and life stages, groups will form naturally as people connect with others who share their interests, life issues, or religious and spiritual needs. Participation in these groups and their shared activities develop relationships, provide a supportive community, promote learning, and encourage the application of learning in practice.

Examples

Westwood Lutheran Church has been using a network approach to their youth programming. Check out Westwood U at https://www.westwood.church/westwoodu.

I am building a demonstration network to illustrate the key features of a network approach. Check out an adult network on the Bible: http://seasonsofadultfaith.weebly.com/bible.html.

Conclusion

Over the course of these eight articles, I have tried to demonstrate how churches can become centers of lifelong learning for every season of life from young children through older adults. I believe that a lifelong approach provides a way to engage people in learning and practicing faith at every stage of life through a variety of faith forming experiences. A church as a center of lifelong learning is a church that is ready to reach and engage people of all ages and generations in transformative experiences of learning and growing in faith. And that is our mission!