WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

Creating Innovation in Faith Formation
John Roberto

What is innovation? The Cambridge Dictionary defines innovation as *"a new idea or method, or the use of new ideas and methods; the development of new products, designs, or ideas."* The Oxford Dictionary describes it this way, *"to make changes in something established, especially by introducing new methods, ideas, or products."* IDEO, an international design firm, describes innovation as *"the ability to generate and execute on new ideas. These ideas can be incremental, evolutionary, or revolutionary."*

During this pandemic we are witnessing amazing innovations. First among them is the use of Messenger RNA (mRNA) by Pfizer/GenenTech and Moderna to create and safely bring to market a vaccine for COVID-19—in under nine months! We are seeing businesses, nonprofit organizations, governments, and religious congregations engage in substantial innovations to respond to the challenges of the pandemic.

Two Buckets of Innovation

It's helpful to sort innovations into two buckers. Some innovations *enhance* current offerings and/or operations; while other innovations *create* new initiatives that generate growth or reach new audiences (see Anthony, Duncan, and Siren). We can see both of these types of innovation during the pandemic in church life and faith formation. In the first category (*enhancing*), we see congregations *enhancing* existing offerings or *improving* the way they deliver faith formation. For example, we see churches offering one program in multiple formats (physical gathering, online, hybrid, and homeschooling) to accommodate the needs and safety concerns of people. We see churches utilizing digital technologies they never imagined using to deliver existing faith formation, such as live streaming and video conferencing.

In the second bucket (*creating*), churches are *creating* entirely new approaches to faith formation that respond to the challenges of the pandemic and the changing life situations of people. For example, we see churches creating family-centered faith formation at home or in

family clusters, online faith formation with digital learning platforms and video gatherings, and playlists of faith forming experiences that provide the programming content for families and age groups.

What are the innovations that your church developed and launched in response to the pandemic?

Use the two innovation buckets – **Enhance** and **Create** – to analyze the innovations your church and faith formation have initiated since the start of the pandemic.

Identify the initiatives (approaches, programs, activities, delivery systems, etc.) that your church launched during the pandemic and sort them into the appropriate Innovation Bucket.

Enhance   **Create**
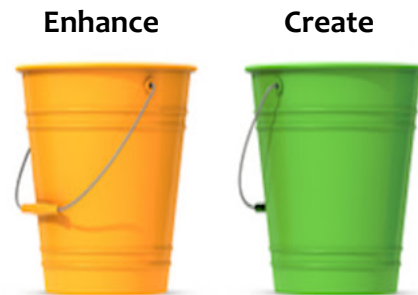
Continuing to Innovate

Innovation is a continual process. Designing and launching innovations are the important first steps in the process; sustaining and expanding innovations are the next critical next steps. To resist the forces that will tempt us to return to the earlier forms of church life and faith formation practiced before the pandemic, we need continual innovation. Our world has changed, is changing, and will continue to change—and the pace is accelerating. Being innovative is the essential skill for leaders in post-pandemic faith formation.

Our eyes have been opened to new ways of doing faith formation. We have just begun to tap the potential of new approaches and tools for faith formation in a post-pandemic church. How can you plan for innovation? Consider the following questions:

Sustain:
- What have you learned about the impact or influence of the innovation on the lives of people? Do you have feedback from participants (stories, reports, videos, audio, images) that describe the impact?
- What resources—people, technologies, media, and materials—do you need to sustain what you have begun?
- How will you integrate your current innovations into the 2021-22 faith formation plan?
- What will you stop doing (from pre-pandemic faith formation) so that you can make room for the new innovations?

Expand:
- How can you expand your current innovation to reach more people in your target audience?
- How can you "export" an innovation you have already implemented to another area of faith formation or a new target audience? How can you use the approach, technologies, methods, etc. that you have already developed to create a new innovation?

Create or Enhance:
- What new insights have emerged from the lives of people in your community—their needs, issues, concerns, hopes, struggles, and joys? What are the implications of these insights for planning post-pandemic faith formation?
- What innovations can you create to enhance pre-pandemic programming or improve the delivery of programming?
- What innovations can you create to reach new audiences such as underserved life stages, the uninvolved, or the unaffiliated?

Suggestions for Moving Ahead

In *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* Chip and Dan Heath offer insights for how to guide the process of change. Here are several suggestions, based on their wisdom, for sustaining, expanding, and creating innovations that "stick." (*By the way: If you have not read the book, make it a priority. I think it's the best book on change available*.)

1. **Focus on the bright spots of innovation:**
   - When creating an innovation, investigate what's working in other churches (or organizations) and adapt it for your context.
   - When sustaining or expanding an innovation, collect feedback from participants in the form of stories, videos, audio, and images that describe their experience, and share it widely.

2. **Point to the destination for the innovation:**
   - Designing and implementing an innovation is easier when you know where you're going and why it's worth it.
   - Paint a rich, detailed picture of what the innovation looks like when it is operational. Be concrete: imagine it is happening. Be motivational: share why it's a destination worth working toward.
   - Avoid metrics, like participation, as destinations. Focus on the innovation fully operational and having an impact on people. Focus on people's experience! What's happening in their lives because of the innovation?

3. **Script the critical moves from design through implementation:**
   - Don't think big picture—which can overwhelm your team—think in terms of specific behaviors or actions to implement. Outline all of the steps (moves) from design to implementation and then script out each step and be clear on how your team should act and what they should do.
   - Be sure each critical move is do-able for your team. It can be hard and challenging, but within the team's grasp.

4. **Find the feeling behind the innovation:**
   - Knowing something isn't enough to cause change and implement an innovation. Make people feel something. Build an emotional and rational case for the innovation.
   - Make the need for the innovation visual. Things people see are more likely to evoke emotion that things they read. Use video, images, graphics, etc. woven together into a story to help people find the feeling. What could you show your team, and eventually church leaders and the community, that would help them see what's possible? What could you show them that would touch their hearts?

5. **Plan for small wins that lead to significant innovations:**
   - Prototype your innovations with a "soft opening," similar to what new businesses do, so that you can work-out the "bugs" in the innovation. Select a segment of your target audience to test-out the new innovation.
   - Discover the small wins from the prototype experience so that success does not feel distant to the team.
   - Celebrate the small wins so that your team builds confidence and develops an innovation mindset.
   - Evaluate the prototype, revise it based on feedback, and then scale the innovation to engage a wider audience.

Innovation is possible! Learning how to create, sustain, and expand innovations is the pathway to planning post-pandemic faith formation.

Works Cited

Anthony, Scott D., David S. Duncan, and Pontus M.S. Siren. "Build an Innovation Engage in 90 Days." *Harvard Business Review*, December 2014. (Accessed at https://hbr.org/2014/12/build-an-innovation-engine-in-90-days)

Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. New York: Broadway, 2010.

Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. *Switch Your Organization: A Workbook.* (Accessed at http://heathbrothers.com/resources. (Available on the Lifelong Faith web site, accompanying this article: https://www.lifelongfaith.com/what-if.html)