



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

We Need to Become System Thinkers

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“No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” (Luke 5:36-38)

We are living through a dramatic change in religious participation and practice in the United States. (No this is not another article documenting the change and leaving you frustrated, overwhelmed, or just depressed.) This dramatic change – a 21 percent drop since 1999 in the percentage of US adults who belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque (it’s now 47 percent in 2020) – is primarily due to the rise in Americans with no religious preference, and the replacement of older, actively practicing Christians, with younger generations who are less engaged in religious congregations and religious practice.

In this post-pandemic world, churches are expending huge amounts of energy and social capital trying to get people back into the ways we did Sunday worship and faith formation programming in 2019. Many churches are struggling to make the old ways work, and then frustrated that their efforts are not producing results. ***It’s time for all church leaders to realize that we are never going back to the world of 2019.*** The pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives. It has created new needs (think of the urgency of people’s mental health today) that call for new responses from our churches.

The combination of the changes in religious participation and practice with the impact of the pandemic feels like a perfect storm. Our immediate response may be to create targeted programs and strategies to solve the problem that have surfaced: *How can we keep our teens involved in church? How do involve young adults who have left our churches? How do we make sure our families are practicing their faith at home and bringing their children to church and classes? Etc.*

While the initiatives that are created may be excellent, they are not systemic. They make us think the problem lies with the people – teens or young adults or parents –and all we need to do is design something to “fix” the problem. In large part, the changing religious participation and practice trend is a failure of the whole system of faith forming in churches. *This trend is a religious belonging challenge; a religious identity challenge; a religious content challenge, and an educational approaches and methods challenge.* Nothing short of re-thinking everything we do will address this challenge.

So, how can a lifelong and life-wide approach to faith formation provide a systemic response to addressing the challenges of religious change and post-pandemic life?

Systems thinking is a way of helping us view a church’s faith forming systems from a broad perspective that includes seeing the whole life span and the context of people’s lives today, rather than seeing only specific issues or concerns (e.g., we’ve got to solve the youth problem). By focusing on the entire system of faith formation, we can attempt to identify solutions that address as many problems as possible in the system. The positive effect of those solutions leverages improvement throughout the system. Thus, they are called “leverage points” in the system. This priority on the entire system and its leverage points is called whole systems thinking.

How Can We Think Systemically and Create Leverage Points?

Here are five ways to think and plan systemically, and create leverage points or bright spots that can improve everything your church does in faith formation.

First, become goal-centered, rather than program-centered. Envision your church’s goals for maturing in faith for lifetime and design faith formation to make these goals a reality in people’s lives. Consider:

- ◆ What is your vision of maturing in faith and discipleship for a lifetime?
- ◆ Toward what ends or goals are your church’s faith formation efforts directed?
- ◆ What is your church try to accomplish in the lives of people at each stage of life from childhood to older adulthood?

Second, develop a lifelong mindset. See every age and stage of life connected to the whole life span and the other five generations. Don’t try to design or improve faith formation with adolescents without considering their family’s faith, childhood faith formation, and the challenges that teens will face living their Christian faith in their 20s. Don’t try to design or improve faith formation with adults in their 60s and 70s without considering their connections to other generations in the church and in their family (e.g., many are grandparents).

Third, start early in life and engage the whole family (three generations: children, parents, and grandparents) throughout the childhood years. We need to start early in the family and build a foundation for a life of faith in the new generation if we hope to address the decline in passing on

faith from generation to generation. In most churches, it would be a systemic change to shift priorities and energies to focus on families with young children (0-5 years old) and families with grade school children – moving beyond a “classroom” approach to engage the whole family—at church and at home. We know that the research leads us to this priority:

1. Parents are the most significant influence on the religious and spiritual outcomes of young people.
2. The primary way by which a religious identity becomes rooted in children’s lives are the day-to-day religious practices of the family and the ways parents model their faith and share it in conversation, collaboration, and exposure to outside religious opportunities.
3. The family is the primary community where Christian faith practices are nurtured and practiced.
4. The quality of a parent’s relationships with their children or teens and the parenting style they practice make a significant difference in faith transmission.

We need to enrich the faith life of parents and grandparents and equip them to transmit the Christian faith to the young.

Fourth, design faith formation for the unique spiritual and religious profiles of people today. We need to stop agonizing over the change in religious practice and belonging, and address people where they are. We need to personalize our approaches so that we offer content and methods that specifically respond to the diverse spiritual and religious lives of people today, for example: the Engaged, the Occasionals, the Spirituals, and the Unaffiliated.

We already see three and even four of these religious profiles reflected in church life and faith formation programming. Parents who bring their children for baptism can reflect the whole spectrum, from parents with a vibrant faith to parents who are unaffiliated but the grandparents are active in the faith community. Children participating in Vacation Bible School come from families who include all four of these profiles, as do adolescents participating in a confirmation program.

Fifth, move from one-size-fits-all programming to a network approach for each season of life (children, teens, young adults, midlife adults, mature adults, and older adults) – that provides a variety of experiences, activities, content, programs for diverse needs and interests; in a variety of formats (on-your-own learning, mentored, small group, large group, church-wide, in the community); with gathered in-person, online, and hybrid models of faith formation.

For more ideas about developing a systemic lifelong approach see:

Book: *Lifelong Faith: Formation for All Ages and Generations*. John Roberto. Church Publishing, 2022.

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