



# WHAT IF . . .

## *Imagining Possibilities*

---

### Planning Faith Formation in a Post-Pandemic World

John Roberto

The pandemic forced pastors and faith formation leaders into a crisis leadership mode. The first phase is the **Emergency** or **Acute** phase when leaders try to stabilize the situation and buy time. We have seen this in the heroic efforts so many churches have made to introduce new approaches to faith formation suited to a pandemic world.

We have seen leaders becoming more responsive to the changing lives and needs of their people—of all ages and generations. They are expanding their vision of where church and faith formation happens. They are using new approaches (and digital tools, methods, and media); offering faith formation in synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (on your own time) formats with online and hybrid approaches; making faith formation mobile—bringing faith formation to where people live; and using social media platforms for connecting people, discussing faith, and sharing stories. (For more see the article “New Approaches to Faith Formation in the Midst of the Pandemic” online at [www.lifelongfaith.com/what-if.html](http://www.lifelongfaith.com/what-if.html)).

The second phase of crisis leadership is the **Adaptive Phase**, when leaders “take the underlying causes of the crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality” (Heifetz, Grashow, Linksy). Tod Bolsinger writes,

The Adaptive Phase comes next—if you choose to enter it. The Adaptive Phase is when “the emergency has passed, but a high-stakes, if somewhat less urgent, set of challenges remains. Having survived, how do you adapt to the uncertainties of a new reality in order to thrive. The crisis is far from over. The Adaptive Phase is when a leader chooses to utilize the shock of the crisis to “hit the organization reset button.” It’s the moment to look deeply at the underlying issues that people have not had the will to confront before the crisis. It’s the opportunity to *bring real, deep change*.

There is a predictable path through the Adaptive Phase toward the emergence of new patterns and stability, *if we choose to follow it.*

### **Old Order (The world prior to March 2020)**

There is an established way of doing things. In faith formation that usually meant in-person programming in physical settings at fixed times using an established curriculum and resources, or program model (classes, youth groups, Bible studies, mission trips, etc.)

### **Disruption (March 2020 and continuing)**

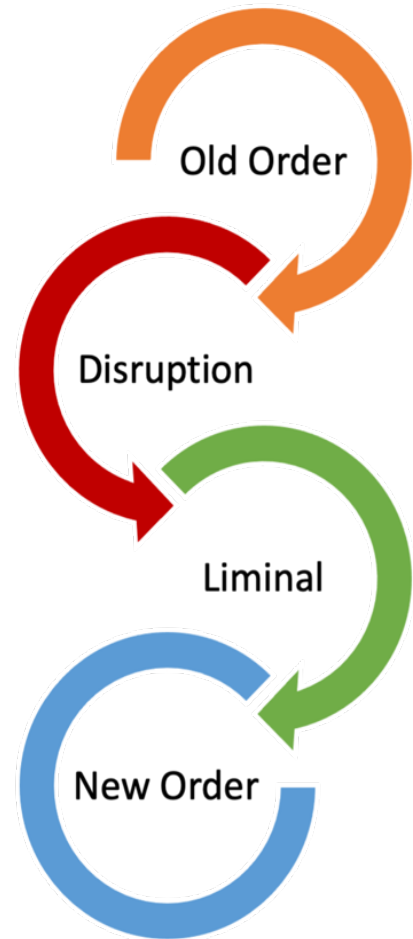
The pandemic caused a major disruption in the Old Order. The conditions that made the older approaches and models possible no longer existed. The Old Order could no longer be maintained. The pandemic was a systems-wide disruption across all sectors of society, including the church and its ministries and programs. There was this collective sense of loss—of stability, of programming, of work habits and patterns, of relationships with the community, and so much more.

### **Liminality (2020-2021-2022)**

The pandemic thrust churches into a liminal period—where earlier approaches no longer worked, but new approaches had not emerged. This is a time of ambiguity or disorientation. It is also the time when the greatest change is possible. This is a time for innovation—discovering new approaches and practices for faith formation in new conditions.

### **New Order Emerges (2021 and for many more years to come)**

The New Order (practices, approaches, methods) begins to take shape as the new innovations are integrated with practices, approaches and methods that are brought into the present from the Old Order. This new synthesis gives rise to the New Order. A key task is how to sustain and expand innovations, while continuing to create.



# The Adaptive Challenge

The hardest thing for leaders and their churches in planning for post-pandemic faith formation is the recognition that it begins with an **ending**. *We need to acknowledge that we are not going back to the normal of the Old Order!* It's a huge temptation to try to return to the security of the Old Order. You will hear people saying things like: "If only we could..." or "Remember when we..." or the most familiar of all, "But we've always done it that way at our church..."

The "temptation of return" tries to deny that anything substantive really happened—that we just had to "wait out" the pandemic and we would be able to get back to the ways we normally do things at church. The evidence is pretty clear that our world and church have been disrupted in significant and lasting ways—and that a return to the past is not possible. The lives of every person and family in our community have been disrupted and changed, and much of the change may be permanent.

The adaptive challenge in moving from the Liminal Period toward the New Order is to recognize the changing conditions and design responses that address the situation. Here is how I would frame the adaptive challenge in faith formation:

*Will churches try return to business as usual in faith formation—returning to the approaches, curriculum, programming, settings, and schedules they used prior to March 2020?*

OR

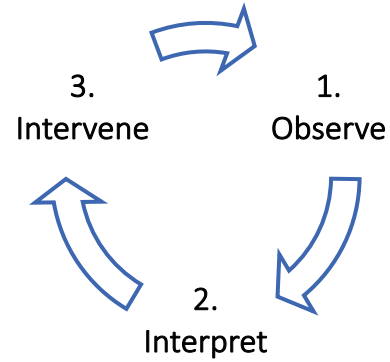
*Will leaders listen to lives of their people and their situation today; identify how their lives have been impacted by the pandemic and the issues, struggles, joys, and challenges they face; discern how to respond to this new context; and then develop new and innovative faith formation—content, approaches, methods, media—that responds to people today?*

The first choice is pretty clear: reinstitute pre-pandemic faith formation, even if the conditions are very different.

The second choice focuses on learning, adapting, and innovating. The second choice builds on the adaptation that has already been happening in so many churches during the pandemic as they use online and hybrid approaches to faith formation, emphasize at-home and small group settings, create digital platforms for faith formation content and experiences, and much more.

Churches that choose the adaptive path can begin a process of listening, analyzing, discerning, and then planning for a new future. The three activities of adaptive planning, developed by Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues, can be a useful tool for moving ahead. Each of these activities builds on the ones that come before it. It is cyclic so you repeatedly refine your observations, interpretations, and interventions.

1. **Observing** events and patterns around you
2. **Interpreting** what you are observing—developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on
3. **Designing** interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified  
(*Practice of Adaptive Leadership*)



Determine how you will **listen** to the different ages and families in your community over the next several months. You might conduct focus groups or interviews with people (meeting in-person or on Zoom or other platform). You might begin a journal of your **observations** of what’s happening in your community: how people are coping, how are schools and organizations addressing the pandemic, etc. (For a **Research Guide** with suggestions go to this article online at <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/what-if.html>.)

Be sure to engage a team of people to listen and observe with you so that you have multiple viewpoints. Utilize your team to help interpret the results of what is really going on in the lives of people and your community. An **Empathy Map**, developed by the Stanford School of Design, is one tool to synthesize observations and surface insights. Do this activity as a team and use newsprint to compile the findings for each quadrant.

<b>SAY</b> What do you hear people saying?	<b>DO</b> What actions and behaviors do you notice?
<b>THINK</b> What might people be thinking? What does this tell you about their beliefs/convictions?	<b>FEEL</b> What emotions might people be feeling?

In upcoming articles I will present ideas for developing and sustaining innovations—the third activity of the adaptive cycle (designing interventions).

### Works Cited

- Bolsinger, Tod. “How Not to Waster a Crisis—Even When You Are Exhausted.” *Church Leadership Initiative, DePree Journal*, September 16, 2020. (Accessed at <https://depree.org/how-not-to-waste-a-crisis-even-when-you-are-exhausted>)
- Heifetz, Ronald, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. “Leadership in a (Permanent)Crisis.” *Harvard Business Review*, 2009. (Accessed at <https://hbr.org/2009/07/leadership-in-a-permanent-crisis>)
- Heifetz, Ronald, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. Harvard Business Press, 2009.