



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Becoming a Center of Lifelong Learning

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(Sixth in a series on developing a lifelong learning paradigm)

The articles in this lifelong learning series have introduced the concept of a lifelong learning paradigm, proposed a vision of lifelong maturing in faith, explored how people learn today, and described how to personalize faith formation. This sixth article proposes that churches have the potential to become centers of lifelong learning and faith formation for all people—in the church and in the wider community.

Read the following description of what one organization does. Can you name the organization that I'm describing?

- ◆ It provides resources, programming, and live events for all ages from young children through older adults.
- ◆ It provides resources, programming, and services in physical locations and online formats for all ages.
- ◆ Its resources, programs, and services are provided in multiple languages and in ways that are inclusive of people with special needs and disabilities.
- ◆ It offers after-school programs for children and teens, including help with homework.
- ◆ It provides in-person and virtual career services and mentoring.
- ◆ It provides Wi-Fi access for all ages and assistance in using technology.
- ◆ It offers resources, support groups, and programs for parents beginning with babies and toddlers and moving through the high school years.
- ◆ It offers family-centered programs throughout the year, and a variety of programs and experiences for children and families during the summer time—in person and online.
- ◆ During the height of the pandemic, its parking lot was filled most days with families, jobseekers, telecommuters, and students taking advantage of free Wi-Fi to participate in Zoom meetings, distance learning, job interviews, and telemedicine appointments.

- ◆ During the pandemic it distributed materials such as free craft supplies and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) kits, supported distance learning, and offered Wi-Fi hotspots.

Did you figure it out?

The organization I am describing is a **library**! Present in almost every community—large and small—the library has evolved into a center for lifelong learning. Julius C. Jefferson, President of the American Library Association, writes that during the pandemic, “libraries kept Americans connected in ways that brought our communities closer. Buildings may not have been open, but libraries were never closed” He describes library workers as essential “first restorers” or “second responders.”

The Lewis and Clark Library in Helena (MT), for example, reached out to seniors in isolation at assisted living facilities, helping children to send cards, postcards, drawings, and words of encouragement to residents as part of its “Mail to Our Seniors” program. A virtual karaoke event organized by Madison County (KY) Public Library, was music to the ears of those at a local assisted living community. The McArthur Public Library in Biddeford (ME) offered virtual story times, read-alouds, and cooking demos. BYOB took on a new meaning when Russell Library in Middletown (CT) adapted their book club program to facilitate social distancing in the great outdoors—and asked their patrons to bring their own boats. Book-Yak- on-a-Kayak featured selections focused on kayaking and canoeing. The boaters wore masks for the event, but they couldn’t mask their enthusiasm—without the library’s innovative spirit, their book club would have been canceled.

“Libraries are going to recognize that their role is not just within the walls of their buildings, but it is across the landscape of their community and in people’s homes,” says Lisa Guernsey, director of teaching, learning and tech at New America. “We have to build new pathways to the library for those who would benefit from our services and for whom the library is inaccessible for many reasons. The library must move outside its four walls and go to those communities in many different ways” (Rosen). Libraries are building more points of entry to the library. Outreach hubs (physical and digital) reach those in the community who do not use the library but would benefit greatly from its services.

The research arm of Gensler, the architecture and design firm, has been studying libraries for several years. In a 2019 report Gensler found that libraries were now “people-centered not collections centered.” Gensler asked librarians which attributes would “comprise the next generation of libraries.” Those ranked the highest were:

- ◆ community and social services
- ◆ decentralized library space
- ◆ more pop-ups and bookmobiles
- ◆ low-touch kiosks

- ◆ drive-up pickup
- ◆ webinar-based story times and programs
- ◆ technology-integrated conference spaces available to the community
- ◆ remote reference and information search services. (Cowell)

In addition librarians suggested curating learning pathways through the library’s content, hosting experts and personalities to encourage a broadening of knowledge and spark learning pathways, art installations and experimental exhibitions/demonstrations that link to the library, curated “Spotify” Playlist of readings from their collections, and having well-known authors give presentations and read from their books. (Cowell)

The New York City Public Library is conducting a Welcome Week 2021 from October 18-23 (<https://www.nypl.org>). Their promotion: *Come learn about all the free services available at the Library—now with no more late fines! Join us October 18–23 for open houses at branch locations across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island to meet your local librarians, participate in fun Welcome Week events, borrow books and other materials, learn about all the services and resources the Library offers, and more! Plus, when you visit during Welcome Week, you can get a free "welcome back pack" filled with school supplies—while they last!*

What Can Churches Learn from Libraries

As you might imagine I think that the ways libraries are adapting, responding, innovating, and broadening their scope and outreach offers churches a living example from which to learn. Libraries, like churches, are rooted in the community. Both face similar challenges with changing demographics and needs, funding and staffing, broadening the scope and outreach to unserved or underserved groups—to name just a few. Libraries are among the “bright spots” in our communities and there is much to learn from their experience and their practices.

So what can your church learn about lifelong learning from libraries? Spend a little time exploring the libraries in your area and a few of the libraries listed below (rated as some of the best libraries in the U.S.) Review the scope of library programs and services, and how they are embracing a lifelong perspective. Be sure to check out the New York Public Library for the breadth of their programs and services. After your exploration answer the reflection questions.

- ◆ New York Public Library: <https://www.nypl.org>
- ◆ Seattle Public Library: <https://www.spl.org>
- ◆ San Diego Public Library: <https://www.sandiego.gov/public-library>
- ◆ Kansas City Public Library: <https://kclibrary.org>
- ◆ Philadelphia Free Library: <https://www.freelibrary.org>
- ◆ Chicago Public Library: <https://www.chipublib.org>
- ◆ McAllen Public Library (TX): <https://mcallenlibrary.net>
- ◆ Ann Arbor District Library (MI): <https://aadl.org>

Application to Your Church

- ✦ What characteristics of the modern-day library—its approaches, services, and programming—can be applied to churches and faith formation?
- ✦ What do libraries teach us about lifelong learning?
- ✦ What do libraries teach us about engaging a diversity of people, especially the underserved and unserved?
- ✦ What can we learn from libraries about becoming centers of learnings?

Next Article

The next article will present ideas for how churches can become centers of lifelong learning and faith formation. Stay tuned!

Works Cited

- Cowell, Jane. “The Future of Libraries in a Post-Covid World—thoughts from Gene Tan - Parts 1 and 2.” Access at <https://janecowell8.medium.com/the-future-of-libraries-in-a-post-covid-world-thoughts-from-gene-tan-part-1-c8fa37e13856> and <https://janecowell8.medium.com/the-future-of-libraries-in-a-post-covid-world-662f5acb1875>
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