WHAT IF. . .
Imagining Possibilities

Networks of Lifelong Learning – Part One
John Roberto

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

The sixth article in this series proposed the idea of churches as centers of lifelong learning and faith formation for all people—in the church and in the wider community. In the seventh and eighth articles we will explore how churches can become centers of lifelong faith formation through a network approach to learning.

In an earlier era of faith formation if you wanted to learn more about the Bible or a theological topic, you could take a course at a fixed time—at a church, seminary, college, or other education provider, or read a book—perhaps recommended by your pastor and borrowed from your church library or you could watch a video—on VHS of course! Your options would have been limited by both time and space. In the twenty-first century if you want to learn more about the Bible or a theological topic, or just about any other topic or interest, your options have greatly expanded.

Today, among many options, you can engage in any combination of the following learning experiences:

✦ Take a course at church or at a college or a seminary.
✦ Take a course online—at a scheduled time with a group or at your own time and pace—using a resource like Yale Bible Study (https://yalebiblestudy.org) .
✦ Read and view videos online for every book of the Bible at Enter the Bible from Luther Seminary (www.entertheBible.org).
✦ Join an online Bible study group at another church or in a Facebook group.
✦ Watch a video series on YouTube from a scripture scholar, such as N. T. Wright, as you read his book, or watch a video series produced by another church that is available for free on their website.

- ✦ Find a mentor in your church or online who will guide your self-directed Bible study.
- ✦ Listen to audio versions of your book as you commute to work each day.
- ✦ Develop your own course of study using the videos and podcasts on The Bible Project website (https://bibleproject.com).
- ✦ Download a Bible app (such as YouVersion: https://www.bible.com) to study the Bible, engage in daily Bible readings and reflections, and share your reflections with others who are studying the Bible using the app.
- ✦ Create a blog to post your thoughts on what you are learning and invite others to offer their insights.
- ✦ Organize your own learning group by gathering a group of people who are interested in learning more about the Bible and using print, audio, video, and/or online resources to guide your small group.

This example illustrates the dramatic shift in how we learn today. We now have the ability to construct our own networks of learning, utilizing a variety of new technologies and the abundance of high-quality print, audio, video, and online resources that are readily available to us. Learning networks not only provide access to a virtually endless array of opportunities that also offer us multiple points of entry, providing individualized pathways of learning and faith growth.

We are witnessing a transformation in the way we think about learning, reflecting the convergence of new technologies, digital media and tools, and network thinking. We are shifting from education to learning—digital media and technologies enable learning anywhere, anytime; from consumption of information to participatory learning—organized around learners' interests, enabling them to create as well as consume information; and from institutions to networks—where people of all ages can learn from a variety of sources in a variety of settings.

These key transformations need to be central to lifelong faith formation: putting learners at the center of our thinking, enabling and trusting them to be cocreators of their learning experiences, connecting learning authentically to life concerns and real world issues, making room for new modes of learning and new methods of teaching, fostering collaboration, and organizing structures around learners' needs.

Networks of Faith Formation

We live in the age of networks. We are all part of networks—families, schools, workplaces, religious congregations, social circles, and more. Networks— collections of people (and their resources) connected to each other through relationships—aren't new. They are as old as human society. Over the past two decades, facilitated by digital technology and tools, societies have become more connected. Network thinking and design now permeate social life. Increasingly education is being viewed and designed as a network of learning resources—

people, experiences, content, activities, and more—fashioned around the learning needs of people.

The concept of learning networks is not new. In 1975 Malcolm Knowles, the renowned adult educator, proposed a "lifelong learning resource system" in his book *The Adult Learner*. The model was based on the following assumptions:

- ✦ Learning in a world of accelerating change must be a lifelong process.
- ✦ Learning is a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing in the learner.
- ✦ The purpose of education is to facilitate the development of the competencies required for performance in life situations
- ✦ Learners are highly diverse in their experiential backgrounds, pace of learning, readiness to learn, and styles of learning; therefore, learning programs need to be highly individualized.
- ✦ Resources for learning abound in every environment: a primary task of a learning system is to identify these resources and link learners with them effectively.
- ✦ Learning (even self-directed learning) is enhanced by interaction with other learners.
- ✦ Learning is more efficient if guided by a process structure (a learning plan) rather than a content structure (a course outline). (Knowles 1975, 171–72)

He wrote this in 1975, but it sounds like it could have been written today! What Knowles called a "lifelong learning resource system" we would call a lifelong learning network today. What if we imagined lifelong faith formation as a network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources—in physical places and online spaces—for every stage of life organized around goals for maturing in faith for a lifetime? A network approach to faith formation moves us from a provider-centered, program-driven model to a learner-centered model where the content and experiences are designed around the people and where they have control over the what, when, how, and where of their learning. In a network model, faith formation shifts from "one size fits all" curriculum and programming to a variety of religious content and experiences that connect with people's spiritual and religious needs.

This represents a huge shift for churches where faith formation programming is still designed in a one-size-fits-all style. The assumption is that people of a certain age or stage of life learn in the same way, are in a similar place in their faith journey, have similar religious backgrounds, share common interests and learning needs, and, therefore, have the same religious and spiritual learning needs that can be addressed by one program. This mentality focuses churches on how to get everyone (whoever the audience might be) to participate in the *one* program.

Even though we all recognize the diversity of people's religious experience and practice, churches continue to design "one-size-fits-all" programming because that mindset is so deeply ingrained in our practice. We know that the one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and programming does not address the diverse spiritual-religious identities and needs of people. No one program, class, or resource can do that. Churches need to offer a wider variety of

content, experiences, and activities—guided by goals for maturing in faith—if we are going to help people to grow and mature in faith and discipleship. A network approach enables this to happen.

The most widespread approach to children's faith formation, even today, is a fixed time, weekly, age-graded program, usually using a textbook or curriculum resource that assumes that all learners at a grade level have the same spiritual, religious, and learning needs. Children in the same grade level or grouping are learning the same content with the same learning methods and resource.

Imagine creating a children's faith formation network with a wide variety of developmentally appropriate faith formation experiences that utilize the faith maturing goals as the framework and integrate intergenerational, whole family, and age group activities. Children would have intergenerational faith-forming experiences (Sunday worship, seasonal celebrations, intergenerational learning, mentoring relationship with older members, ministry opportunities in the church), and family faith-forming experiences (whole family programs at church, grandparent- grandchild activities, activities for faith practices at home), and age group faith-forming experiences (classes, courses, retreats, Vacation Bible School, Christmas play, service activities).

In a network approach, families with children could select from a menu of faith formation experiences to create their plan for the year or for a season of the year. The menu would include intergenerational, family, and age group activities. Churches could establish participation guidelines for families and children, so that each year or season they would select a certain number of intergenerational experiences, family at-home activities, and children's programs at church. This approach puts the learner (families and children) at the center of faith formation and gives them choice over what and when and where they will learn. Churches provide the network of faith-forming activities that reflect their goals for maturing in faith and provide holistic formation in intergenerational, family, and age group settings.

This same approach—with different content and activities—can transform the one-size-fits-all confirmation program, where one program is assumed to address the wider spectrum of adolescent religious practice and interests. Churches can create a network of faith formation experiences—intergenerational, family, and age group-specific—tailored to the religious experience and practice of the young people participating (those who are actively engaged in practicing their faith, those who are minimally engaged, those who are not engaged but participating because of their parents). For most churches it's not possible to offer three different programs. A network approach can offer enough variety to address diverse needs and provide pathways for adolescents to grow in faith in ways appropriate to their faith journey. A network provides a structure for offering experiences, programs, and activities designed to promote growth in faith for young people who want to grow deeper in the faith, for those who are inquiring or aren't sure the Christian faith is for them, and for those who don't need God or religion in their lives.

Even with all the diversity in adulthood, from those in their twenties to those in their nineties, churches still try to get everyone to participate in one type of small faith-sharing group or one Lenten series or one Bible study on one book of the Bible. In the network approach it is no longer about finding the "right" program to attract everyone. It is about addressing the diversity of the audience with a variety of content, experiences, and activities. It is about offering faith formation that is varied in content, expectations, depth, involvement, and timing. By expanding the options—a "something for everyone" approach—churches can engage more adults in faith formation, even if some of the offerings involve only one person (reading, watching videos, taking an online course). The new reality of adult faith formation programming is that churches can offer activities that cater to niches—individuals and small groups with a particular spiritual or religious need, interest, passion, concern, or life issue. They no longer have to worry about reaching a "critical mass."

The one-size-fits all mindset permeates everything. Churches with processes and programs for Christian initiation and new member formation often use a one-size-fits-all design that assumes every convert or new member has the same religious background, interests, and experiences; and therefore need the same topics and content. A network approach can address this diversity and provide pathways for people to grow in faith and discipleship that is suited to their own journey.

The movement from one-size-fits-all to a variety of faith formation offerings is made possible by the abundance of religious content and programming—print, audio, video, online, and digital—that is now available. And this abundance can now be made accessible to people by the creation of online platforms (websites and social media) and digital playlists that integrate, deliver, and communicate the content and programming with a variety of ways to learn that is easily avail- able, anytime and anywhere.

We can design 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.

Next Article

The next article will present features of designing a network approach to lifelong faith formation.

Works Cited
Knowles, Malcom. *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. 4th ed. Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1990.