



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Fashioning Faith Formation around the Faith Journeys of People – Part One

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

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In the first article of this series I introduced the concept of a lifelong learning paradigm. The second article proposed a vision of lifelong maturing in faith. The third article presented some of the key findings on how people learn today. In this fourth article we explore the emerging concept of personalizing learning and what it means for lifelong faith formation

You may be thinking that the title of this article is stating the obvious: *Isn't all faith formation fashioned around the faith journeys of people?* To fashion faith formation around the faith journeys of people means putting people at the center of all that we do. It means addressing the actual lives of people—their struggles and joys, needs and hungers, life tasks and issues, social and cultural context, and more. It means addressing the diversity of their spiritual and religious commitments, engagements, and practices. There are churches that have made this vision the guiding light for all of their faith formation practice. Unfortunately, this is not the common practice.

It is still commonplace in churches to develop faith formation in a one-size-fits-all approach. Churches purchase a curriculum resource that provides an age-graded program for grade school, middle school, and high school young people, assuming that because they are of a certain age or life stage they have similar experiences of religious socialization, lived faith practices, and engagement in church life. *How true is this assumption today with your young people?*

The one-size-fits-all approach is still used in adult faith formation. Even with all the life stage and religious 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. 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 needs the same topics and content. *How true are these practices in your church?*

I wonder if one of the major reasons people of all ages “give-up” on church is that we are not addressing their personal relationship with God, their personal spiritual and religious journey, and their real life situation. Is our current practice of one-size-fits-all faith formation contributing to the decline in engagement of people of all ages? Are we actually working against promoting lifelong growth in faith?

There is another way! Imagine would it would be like to fashion faith formation around the faith journeys of families and individuals at every stage of life.

- ◆ **What if** we could help families and individuals at every stage of life *discern* where they are in their religious and spiritual journey, and then tailor faith formation experiences to fit their needs?
- ◆ **What if** we could develop descriptions of *key elements* of the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping families and individual discern their faith growth needs? We could help people reflect on:
 1. their relationship with Jesus
 2. the ways they live their faith in daily life
 3. the importance of the Bible for their lives and growth in faith
 4. the importance of the Christian story and their own faith tradition in their lives
 5. the ways they worship God on Sunday, in rituals, and through the church year
 6. their prayer life and how they are growing spiritually
 7. the ways they live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and moral values
 8. the ways they seek to live their faith by serving others, caring for creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace
 9. the ways they are engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community
 10. the ways they use gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world
- ◆ **What if** we could develop a *pathways guide* for families and individuals that helps them chart their growth in each of the ten essential elements of the Christian faith using a simple tool with four ways to reflect on their journey?
 - 1 = I’m a beginner in this aspect of my faith.
 - 2 = I’m growing in this aspect of my faith.
 - 3 = I’m maturing and going deeper in this aspect of my faith.
 - 4 = I’m sharing my faith and gifts with others.

- ◆ **What if** we could guide people in creating an annual (or seasonal) *faith growth plan* with the experiences, programs, activities, and resources that best match with their faith growth needs?
- ◆ **What if** we could help people discover a *variety of resources* that can help them take their next best steps in their spiritual and religious journey? **What if** we could create an annual (or seasonal) *faith formation catalog* with all of the faith formation experiences, programs, activities, and resources that people could access to create their personal or family faith growth plan?
- ◆ **What if** we could incorporate discernment and the creation of a faith growth plan into the start of the program year for families or age groups (children, youth, adults), and into milestones and sacramental moments, such as marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation, graduations, retirement, etc.
- ◆ **What if** we could accompany people through *mentoring* (one-on-one or in small groups) to discern their faith growth needs and create a plan. What if we could utilize a mentor approach for the new couple at marriage, for parents and the family at baptism and first communion, for teens at confirmation, and much more.

The process I am describing is *personalization*. It's guiding each person in his or her growth toward greater maturity in faith. It's fashioning faith formation around the spiritual and religious journeys and needs of our families and individuals at each stage of life. It's moving from one-size-fits-all to a much more personal approach to faith growth that uses all of our resources—our people who will serve as mentors, our community life, our programs and activities, our online resources, and more.

Personalization gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. People should be able to clearly understand where they are in their faith journey and their next steps in faith growth. Personalization allows the time, resources, and support needed to master knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. A personalized approach offers more time for those who need it to achieve mastery, while allowing those who want to move ahead or dive more deeply into the Christian faith to do so when they are ready.

Coming Next

Part Two of this article will provide the practical how-to of fashioning faith formation around the faith journeys of people. Stay tuned!