



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

New Approaches to Faith Formation in the Midst of the Pandemic

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What are we discovering and learning about faith formation, about our community, and about ourselves during these long months of the pandemic? I think we have learned a lot about new, mobile models of faith formation; about our people, especially about our families; and about ourselves. We are far more resilient and innovative than we ever thought, a sign of God's grace moving in and through us. In the midst of this terrible pandemic pastors and faith formation leaders have done amazingly creative work in faith formation, reaching and engaging people of all ages with tools and methods and media they never imagined using way back in 2019.

The pandemic forced pastors and faith formation leaders into a crisis leadership mode. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linksy write that crisis leadership has two distinct phases. "*First is the **emergency phase**, when your task is stabilize the situation and buy time.*" About this first phase Tod Bolsinger writes,

The emergency, or *Acute Phase*, is the disorientating and almost desperate stage that is like being wheeled into an emergency room. The goal of the Acute Stage is survival. Calm down. Stabilize the situation. Protect the organization, the team, the leader. Rest. Sleep. Breathe. This is the phase that many of us experienced when the pandemic first started. In the Acute Phase everyone pulls together so that we will make it through.

In the best case examples, leaders quickly redesigned faith formation programming from at-church classes and programs to at-home formation, family clusters (pods), small groups, and independent learning using digital tools and methods, such as websites, digital playlists, video conferencing, streaming, online classrooms, and social media platforms. This was nothing short of a remarkable transformation in the *how* and *when* and *where* of faith formation.

It's important to take time to reflect on what you've learned about your community, about faith formation, and about yourself as a leader. Here are several significant transformations I have seen emerge in response to the disruptions caused by the pandemic since March 2020. I think they provide the beginning of a roadmap to planning for Phase 2 of crisis leadership—the Adaptive Phase.

- ❖ **We are focusing on our people**—their needs, struggles, life issues, and more. Faith formation—and maybe the whole church—is becoming more person-centered (as opposed to church-centered or program-centered). Leaders have learned a lot about the lives of their people, especially parents and families, during the pandemic, and how everything in life has been disrupted. Leaders are listening first and then designing initiatives that address people's real needs and issues. Leaders are moving from a top-down (church-down) approach to the community to a bottom-up stance of listening first and learning from their people.
- ❖ **We are expanding our vision** of where church and faith formation happens. We've moved from a church-building mindset to a multi-space approach where faith forming happens at home, in online spaces, in small groups, in mentoring relationships, in independent learning, in the world. Church isn't the building; it's the people of God, the community of believers, the mystical Body of Christ. And it can't be contained by a physical space.
- ❖ **We are using new approaches** (and tools, methods, and media)—many of which have been available to us for a decade—that the pandemic has motivated (forced?) us to use as integral to faith formation. In the past we over-relied on faith formation in **Physical** spaces for the majority of our programming (at church, at camps, on mission trips, at retreat centers, in community places, and more) which the pandemic has made difficult, if not impossible. We are now using **Online** spaces (websites, social media, online communities, online classrooms, and more) as integral for forming faith. And we are using **Hybrid** spaces that combine physical gathering with online content and experiences. Using pandemic safety precautions, occasional group gatherings (such as monthly programs or classes) at church or family clusters (pods) at home or small group meetings are combined with online playlists that provide a menu of learning experiences on the theme of the program. In addition to gatherings in physical spaces, hybrid faith formation often includes streaming presentations and demonstrations, online classrooms, and online group meetings in Zoom or other video conferencing platforms.
- ❖ **We are offering faith formation in synchronous** (real time) and **asynchronous** (on your own time) formats with Online and Hybrid approaches—thereby expanding the opportunities for people to engage in faith forming experiences. We are delivering synchronous faith formation using safe physical gatherings, live streaming, video

conferencing, online courses, and online small groups. We are using asynchronous formats using online playlists of faith forming content, video and audio programs, online discussion groups (like Facebook Groups), online learning platforms, websites, and more.

- ❖ **We are making faith formation mobile**—bringing faith formation to where people live using the new digital tools, methods, and media. We are creating playlists of faith forming content for all ages on a variety of themes for families and people of all ages from children through adults. We have invested time and effort in providing faith forming experiences online so that people can access high quality content on a phone, tablet, or laptop.
- ❖ **We are usually traditional tools in new digital ways.** We are redesigning our weekly newsletter (or bulletin) into a content- and connection-rich resource that can be delivered directly to people’s inboxes using a service like MailChimp, Constant Contact, or Flocknote. Churches that relied on a print resource now find they can reach a wider audience with a newsletter delivered digitally.
- ❖ **We are using social media platforms for connection and sharing.** We are connecting and communicating with people of all ages, sharing and discussing faith and spirituality, engaging people to share what they are learning and how they are practicing their faith through videos, images, stories, and more.

And there’s much more that we are learning. We have just begun to tap the potential of these new approaches and tools for faith formation in the 21st century. Where do we go from here? The next **What If...** article focuses on sustaining and creating innovations in faith formation by addressing the challenge of the second phase of crisis leadership—the **Adaptive Phase**, “when you take the underlying causes of the crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality” (Heifetz, et al). Stay tuned!

Works Cited

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>)

Leader Reflection

Try to take time in your busy week to reflect (and even keep a journal) on what you are learning through your faith formation initiatives during the pandemic.

- ◆ *What are you learning about the people in your community?*
- ◆ *What are you learning about faith formation during the pandemic?*
- ◆ *What are you learning about yourself as a leader in faith formation?*
- ◆ *What new life do you see emerging in your congregation?*