



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Becoming “Anticipators of the Future”

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Everyone is wondering when we will get back to “normal.” The short answer is that nobody knows for certain. I don’t think we will be going back to the pre-pandemic normal. It appears that world has been permanently disrupted by the pandemic. As Pope Francis has repeatedly said, “... (the pandemic) set before us a choice: either to continue on the road we have followed until now, or to set on a new path.” So what will we do? What will church and faith formation look like as we emerge from the pandemic in Fall 2021 and beyond?

We need to develop the mindset and skill of *anticipating*. The Cambridge Dictionary defines *anticipating* as “to imagine or expect that something will happen; to take action in preparation for something that you think will happen.” The Merriam Webster dictionary defines *anticipating* as “to give advance thought, discussion, or treatment to.” So we need to become “*anticipators of the future*”—embracing a role as keen observers of what is happening in our communities and churches—imagining in advance what shape life will take as the pandemic winds down and a new way of life emerges, and planning to take action.

I am practicing being an “anticipator” by listening to the pandemic experiences and questions of a wide spectrum of people, including colleagues, pastors, faith formation leaders. I’ve been watching and reading some of the best thinking on post-pandemic life and what this new life will mean for individuals, families, and communities. I’ve started my own list of “anticipations” for the future of church and faith formation to guide my thinking. Here are my five anticipations (in no particular order):

- ◆ Promoting the wellbeing of people, especially the young and parents
- ◆ Forming new life routines and habits
- ◆ Addressing the injustices and inequalities in U.S. society
- ◆ Embracing hybrid lives and hybrid Christian communities
- ◆ Reconnecting the generations

I hope these five might be a catalyst for developing your own list of “anticipations of the future” to guide your thinking and planning for faith formation in the post-pandemic church.

1. Promoting the Wellbeing of People, especially the Young and Parents

In the “Stress in America”™ 2020 survey, the American Psychological Association sounded the alarm: “*We are facing a national mental health care crisis that could yield serious health and social consequences for years to come.*” There is no question: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the lives of all Americans, and it will continue to do so. It has disrupted work, education, health care, the economy, and relationships, with some groups more negatively impacted than others.” (Read more about Stress in America”™ 2020: <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report-october>.)

The pandemic has been particularly difficult for those growing into adulthood and finding their place in the world. The ongoing uncertainty is taking a big toll on the young. The pandemic is affecting every milestone: graduation, entering school, leaving school; and for young adults: dating, marriages, jobs (if there are any). People in their teens and early 20s already exhibit higher levels of anxiety and depression than older generations, and the pandemic is increasing anxiety, stress, social isolation, and loneliness.

Parents have also experienced much higher levels of stress and anxiety. Nothing about parenthood is clear-cut any more. The number of responsibilities today’s parents are handling has no earlier precedent. They are working at home or working outside and risk bringing COVID-19 home with them. They have lost jobs or had one parent, almost always mom, leave the workplace to care for children who are at home. They have taught children at home (while working themselves). They have lost contact with outside support systems (family, friends), child care, and children’s activities like sports and arts. Mothers (and all single parents) are carrying the pandemic burdens disproportionately. It’s clear that parents will feel the impact of the pandemic on their families, jobs, and careers for months, and possibly years, to come.

Opportunities

There is a tremendous opportunity for churches and faith formation to focus on wellbeing through pastoral care, community life, support groups, educational programs/activities, and resources. We know from research that religious faith, belonging to a faith community, and practicing one’s faith contributes significantly to a person’s wellbeing. We can work on building a supportive community life for people, intergenerationally, as well as life-stage support groups. Life skills education and forming people in Christian practices, such as prayer (meditation, contemplation) and serving others, contribute to a person’s sense of wellbeing. Parent education, resources, and support can become a major focus of faith formation in the post-pandemic world.

Reflection

- ◆ *How can you listen for the anxieties, stresses, struggles, and worries of people of all ages, and especially of children, teens, and parents?*
- ◆ *How can the church community and faith formation proactively address the mental health needs of individuals and parents, and promote their sense of wellbeing, purpose, and meaning in life?*

2. Forming New Life Routines and Habits

The rhythm and habits of daily life that worked before the pandemic were dramatically changed by the pandemic. People are living in a “liminal time” when new rhythms and habits emerged to address life during pandemic. The pandemic separated us, almost completely, from the routine and events that usually root our lives in time—work, school, dates, social outings, sports events, ceremonies, travel, the things we plan for and look forward to. Life tends to be a blur without those anchors. For people working from home this disorienting effect is compounded by the collapsed boundary between work and home, and the now more fluid workday (when does the work day begin and end?).

Opportunities

With life so disrupted for everyone, there is an opportunity for churches and faith formation to assist individuals and families in forming new life routines and habits (including habits of faith practice). The post-pandemic world may provide a re-set on the busy lives people led prior to the pandemic. Churches can assist families to resist the pressure to return to their busy, often over-scheduled, pre-pandemic life; and instead build new routines and habits of family life that contribute to family wellbeing. There is an opportunity to help people of all ages re-balance their life, priorities, and time commitments. This could lead to simpler lives that promote wellbeing. Through programs, activities, resources, mentoring, and support groups, churches can help people establish new routines and habits for the post-pandemic world, infused with a Christian perspective.

Reflection

- ◆ *How can you listen for the new routines and habits that are forming or reforming in people’s lives?*
- ◆ *How can the church community and faith formation assist individuals and families in developing new life routines and habits, guided by a Christian faith perspective?*
- ◆ *How can the church community and faith formation creatively adapt to the new life routines and habits that will emerge as individuals and families develop post-pandemic lives?*

3. Addressing the Injustices and Inequality in U.S. Society

The pandemic has made visible the pressing social issues facing U.S. society (and religious congregations): racism and inequality, the economic disparity between rich and poor, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the poor and people of color, the inadequacy of health care for people of color and the poor, the growing impact of climate change, and the treatment of immigrants, to name only a few important issues. Studying these issues it becomes clear how systemic the injustice is and how it calls for a change of hearts and a change of structures. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the systematic racism against Black Americans that continues throughout our society today.

Opportunities

Addressing systemic racism, climate change, and inequality have captured national attention, but nowhere more clearly than in the lives of younger generations who are hungry for justice and already transforming the world today. This is a tremendous opportunity for the church community to join with the younger generations—to work as partners in transforming the world. Churches have been far too concerned about getting young people into the church. The opportunity now exists to get the church community engaged with young people in the world. This is a great opportunity for intergenerational connection and action—the young and old working together for justice. This is an opportunity for faith formation with all ages, but especially the young, to focus on justice issues, bring the Scriptures and Christian tradition into dialogue with the issues, and equip people to transform the world.

Reflection

- ◆ *How can you listen to the stories and struggles of people experiencing injustice?*
- ◆ *How can you observe and analyze the social forces in your community (and the nation) that give rise to injustice?*
- ◆ *How can the church community and faith formation educate people of all ages in a faith that does justice and engage them in transformative actions—personal, communal, and systemic—that address injustice: racism, economic inequality, climate change, immigration?*

4. Embracing Hybrid Lives and Hybrid Christian Communities

The enforced shift during the worst of the pandemic to virtual working, consuming, and socializing fueled a massive and further shift to virtual activity for anything. One paradox of this shift is that while people were self-isolating and studying or working remotely, many rediscovered social ties—sometimes with more people than before—as they participated in Zoom family reunions, birthday celebrations, and family check-ins; Facetime storytelling with family members and friends; virtual dinner parties, and so much more. A grandparent could

watch their newest grandchild grow from an infant to toddler using the new digital communication tools. People began to naturally turn to social media platforms to satisfy this most basic of human needs.

The pandemic has accelerated the development of our identities as hybrid people living our lives online and offline. Rather than think of these two as separate, we are now realizing that our lives embrace the in-person (physical) and online (virtual). We are living hybrid lives, and we now live in hybrid Christian communities as churches have incorporated digital tools, methods, and media into church life and faith formation. Churches are nurturing relationships, growing spiritually, worshipping, learning, and engaging in ministry in-person and online. Through social media, members are cultivating connections online that are not that different from the relationships that prevailed before the internet and mobile phones.

Opportunities

We now have the opportunity to create a *hybrid* future for church life and faith formation. Hybrid models hold together two important values: the importance of in-person relationships and faith forming experiences, and the importance of being responsive to the complexity of people's lives and their religious-spiritual needs. Hybrid models expand faith formation opportunities for everyone. We can become much more strategic and careful about when, where, how, and for what we gather people because we can now integrate online with in-person faith forming.

We can design new *hybrid* models of faith formation that integrate in-person gatherings at church or in family groups or in small group meetings with online playlists that provide a menu of learning experiences on the theme of the program. The creation of hybrid models of faith formation means that faith formation programming can be *synchronous* (real time) and *asynchronous* (on your own time)—thereby expanding the opportunities for people to engage in faith forming experiences that are responsive to their time, commitments, and availability. We can deliver multi-modal faith formation: *synchronous* using physical gatherings, live streaming, video conferencing, online courses, and online small groups; and *asynchronous* using online playlists, video and audio programs, online discussion groups, online learning platforms, websites, and more. *Hybrid models of faith formation are more resilient, flexible, and adaptable—just what we need to respond to the challenges of change in our world and in lives of our people!*

Reflection

- ◆ *How can the church community and faith formation create, strengthen and/or expand hybrid initiatives that utilize in-person settings with online platforms and digital tools, methods, and media for nurturing relationships, growing spiritually, worshipping, learning, and engaging in ministry in the post-pandemic world?*

5. Reconnecting the Generations

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the experience of isolation and loneliness across all generations. The pandemic experiences of lockdown and staying at home resulted in a loss of connection across all generations. Individuals and families shifted so many social things to the home—work, school, shopping, food, fitness, and even church—that they lost social connection. Older adults—to remain safe from the virus—dramatically reduced their outside interactions. Families with children and teens worked hard to limit outside exposure, and often selected particular family members or a few local families to create a safe “pod.” The majority (52%) of young adults, ages 18-29, were living at home with their parents.

The societal challenge in a post-Covid world is creating generational connection and collaboration in ways that benefit all ages, solve critical social problems, and mend the fraying social fabric. Despite all of the positive contributions of technology to keep people connected, people have a tremendous hunger for in-person relationships and shared experiences (like celebrating holidays, birthdays, and other milestones) with other generations. One of the best ways to overcome the loneliness and isolation people have experienced during the pandemic is to increase the number of opportunities for intergenerational relationships, experiences, and activities in every sector of the community.

Opportunities & Reflection

Reconnecting the generations—(re)building intergenerational community, relationships, and experiences—is a tremendous opportunity for every church community. This may be the moment when your church makes a commitment to become more intentionally intergenerational in all that it does. There are a variety of strategies that can help.

1. **Transforming multigenerational into intergenerational.** Every church has multigenerational environments in which at least two generations are participating in an event or activity—Sunday worship, church events, social gatherings, and more. *How can you transform multigenerational environments into experiences of intergenerational connection and community?*
2. **Transforming age-specific into intergenerational.** Age-specific programs and activities provide opportunities for intergenerational connection, relationship building, and shared experiences—children’s classes, vacation Bible school, youth programs, service and mission trips, retreats, Bible studies, and more. *How can you transform age-specific programs by adding intergenerational activities or by redesigning the program into an intergenerational experience?*
3. **Designing new intergenerational initiatives.** The first two strategies focus on redesigning for intergenerationality. The third strategy engages you in designing for intergenerationality through new initiatives (programs, activities, resources). This is the opportunity to create new programs, activities, or experiences that bring

together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, worshipping, and more. It is also an opportunity to eliminate those activities that work against intergenerationality and replace them with new initiatives. *Where are the greatest needs and/or opportunities for creating new initiatives that will contribute toward building an intergenerational culture in your congregation?*

4. ***Engaging with the neighborhood community intergenerationally.*** Faith communities can be catalysts for connecting the young and the old, fostering communication and understanding across generations, building community in neighborhoods with intergenerational events and activities, activating public spaces with intergenerational programming, advancing early care and education by engaging more adults 50+ with children, improving outcomes for youth and older adults through mentoring, increasing affordable housing by expanding intergenerational housing options, and much more. *How can your church be a catalyst for creating intergenerational connections and innovative projects that serve the common good in your neighborhood community? How can you mobilize your intergenerational community (the people) and intergenerational wisdom (knowledge and practices) to benefit your neighborhood community?*