



# WHAT IF...

## *Imagining Possibilities*

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### Embracing a Lifelong Learning Paradigm

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In 1992 Joel Barker's, *Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future*, was the catalyst for a global discussion on the role of paradigms in shaping organizations. Parker described a paradigm as "a set of rules and regulations (written or unwritten) that does two things: (1) it establishes or defines boundaries; and (2) it tells you how to behave inside the boundaries in order to be successful" (32). Every organization has a paradigm that guides or governs their operation. A paradigm is the "taken for granted world" of people within an organization and guides how they think, feel, and act—whether they are aware of its power or not.

The paradigm of education has shifted over the last several decades. Most fundamentally it has moved from an *instructional, schooling paradigm* focused primarily on children and youth in age-graded classroom settings to a *lifelong learning paradigm* focused on people learning in a diversity of settings for the whole of life. Paradigms shift slowly over time, so we may have missed the significance of this change.

The new lifelong learning paradigm emerged when the older paradigm of education could no longer address the rapid changes in society. In a society where the growth of knowledge was relatively slow, the older paradigm worked well. People could receive an education in their younger years knowing it would last for a lifetime—and prepare them for a career and job that would also last a lifetime. With the exponential growth of knowledge in our world today, it's impossible to acquire all the knowledge needed in the early years of one's life. You have to become a lifelong learner.

The embrace of lifelong learning in the U.S. has happened relatively quickly. A recent Pew Research Center study showed that 73% of adults consider themselves lifelong learners; 74% are personal learners—that is, they have participated in at least one activity in the past 12 months to advance their knowledge about something that personally interests them. These activities include reading, taking courses or attending meetings, or events tied to learning more about their personal interests. The study also found that 63% of those who are working (or

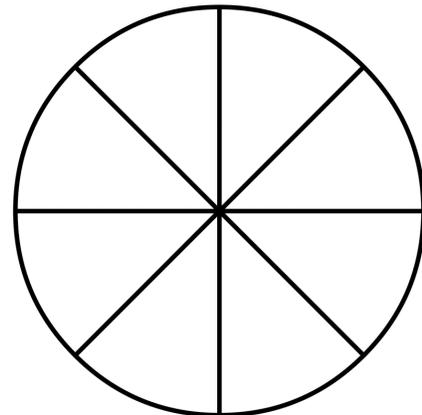
36% of all adults) are professional learners—that is, they have taken a course or gotten additional training in the past 12 months to improve their job skills or expertise connected to career advancement. (Pew Research Center, “Lifelong Learning and Technology,” March 22, 2016)

Supporting this new paradigm of lifelong learning is the fact that we have become a ten-decade society. People are living into their 90s and even 100s. This expansion of the life cycle is changing society as a greater share of the population are 60 and over—and they want to continue learning. For example, Road Scholar (formerly Elderhostel—notice the strategic name change) offers 5,500 learning adventures, serving more than 100,000 participants annually. Their programs combine travel and education to provide experiential learning opportunities featuring an extraordinary range of topics, formats and locations, in every state in the U.S., 150 countries, and aboard ships on rivers and oceans worldwide. And this is only one example of the huge interest in lifelong learning among adults 60 and over.

Every church operates from a paradigm that governs how leaders design and conduct faith formation. Try this simple activity to uncover the paradigm at work in your church. All you need is a sheet of paper or an Excel spreadsheet to create a pie chart.

Imagine a pie representing 100% of your church’s investment in faith formation: people, time, energy, resources, money, and programming. What would the percentages look like for the following categories? Create your **nine** “pie slices” to represent the size of the percentage.

1. Children (0-5)
2. Children (6-10)
3. Adolescents (11-19)
4. Young Adults (20s-30s)
5. Midlife Adults (40s-50s)
6. Mature Adults (60s-70s)
7. Older Adults (80+)
8. The Whole Family Together (church and home)
9. All Ages Together Learning (intergenerational)



Reflect on the results of your pie chart by using the following questions to help you uncover your paradigm.

- ◆ *What does the pie chart tell you about your church’s paradigm of faith formation?*
- ◆ *How would describe your current paradigm of faith formation?*
- ◆ *What assumptions is your church making about growing in faith: How? When? Where? With Whom?*
- ◆ *What assumptions is your church making about learning?*

If you found that your church spends a large percentage of its faith formation investment in only one or two groups on the list, while not give attention to other groups, then the big question is how can your church embrace a paradigm shift toward lifelong learning and faith formation.

I believe that the shift to a lifelong faith formation paradigm can enable churches to become centers of lifelong learning for every season of life from young children through older adults—providing a way to engage people in learning and practicing their faith at every stage of life.

I believe that a shift to a lifelong faith formation paradigm provides a way to address the challenge of transmitting faith to new generations by focusing on the family and beginning faith formation from birth. It provides a way to connect all generations in learning and faith practice through intergenerational relationships, practices, and community life. It addresses the diversity in faith and practice among people today by personalizing formation around their lives.

I believe the shift to lifelong paradigm is a systemic way to address so many of the challenges that church communities face today.

In the next several *What If. . .* articles we are going to explore how to make the paradigm shift to lifelong faith formation for churches who are just beginning the journey, and how to enhance and expand the shift among churches who have already begun. Stay tuned.

### **Works Cited**

Barker, Joel. *Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future*. New York: HarperBusiness, 1992