

Lifelong Learning & Faith Formation Collection

(Articles from the *What If...* Series from Lifelong Faith)

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WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Embracing a Lifelong Learning Paradigm

John Roberto

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

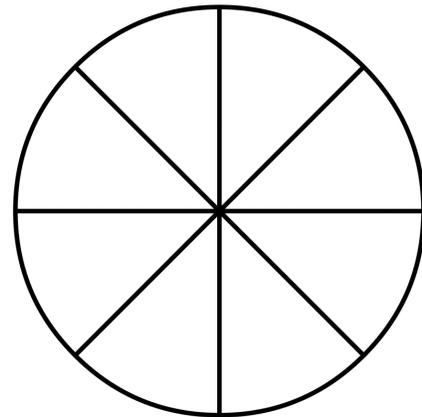
36% of all adults) are professional learners—that is, they have taken a course or gotten additional training in the past 12 months to improve their job skills or expertise connected to career advancement. (Pew Research Center, “Lifelong Learning and Technology,” March 22, 2016)

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



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Envisioning Lifelong Maturing in Faith

(Second in a series of articles on a lifelong learning paradigm in churches)

John Roberto

In the first article of this series “Embracing a Lifelong Learning Paradigm” we explored how the paradigm of education has shifted 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. 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 the shift to lifelong paradigm is a systemic way to address so many of the challenges that church communities face today.

The shift to a lifelong faith formation paradigm in churches begins with a vision of maturing in Christian faith. In order to develop a lifelong paradigm a church needs of lifelong vision of faith maturing that can guide its practice of faith formation. I would suggest that this vision be expressed through goals for maturing in faith that apply to the whole life span. Faith formation in each stage or season of life would be guided by one vision of faith maturing expressed through specific goals and life stage appropriate faith formation.

I am proposing ten goals for maturing in faith—informed by the Christian tradition and supported by research on faith maturing. Each goal incorporates knowing and understanding more fully the Christian faith (informing), developing and deepening a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community (forming), and living the Christian faith in every aspect of one’s life (transforming).

1. To develop and sustain a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and make the Christian faith a way of life.
3. To read and study the Bible and apply its message and meaning to living as a Christian today.

4. To learn the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular faith tradition and integrate its meaning into one's life.
5. To worship God with the community at Sunday worship, in ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year.
6. To pray, together and alone, and seek spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines.
7. To live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and apply Christian moral values to decision-making.
8. To live the Christian mission in the world by serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally.
9. To be actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community.
10. To practice faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world.

Guided by the ten goals, churches can ask what they can do to help faith and discipleship flourish in the lives of people from childhood through older adulthood. The ten goals can be thought of as a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+). The goals provide a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. Churches (and individuals) can visualize how faith can mature from childhood through older adults.

Focusing on goals for maturing in faith reflects a significant shift from a provider-centered, program- and content-driven approach to a *person-centered* approach to faith formation. In the church-centric focus on providing curriculum, courses, classes, programs, and activities, there was often little reference to how we see faith flourishing at each stage of life. Becoming goal-centered opens multiple ways (activities, methods, programs) to promote faith and discipleship through developmentally appropriate faith-forming experiences at each stage of life. We build faith formation around the maturing in faith goals and then create and curate programs, activities, and resources that are needed to foster faith growth.

At each stage of life, people experience faith-forming experiences with the whole community (intergenerational), with the whole family, and with their life stage (peer) groups. Faith formation at each stage of life blends intergenerational, family, and age group settings into a holistic approach, centered around the ten characteristics of maturing in faith. This reflects a significant shift from the age-segregated or siloed approach where faith formation with children, adolescents, and adults is primarily age-group-only without significant intergenerational and family faith-forming experiences.

Faith formation designed around these goals for maturing in faith needs to be responsive to the diversity of people's religious practice and engagements. We can identify four distinct spiritual-religious identities in people of all ages: the *Engaged* who demonstrate a vibrant faith and

relationship with God and are actively engaged in the faith community, the *Occasionals* who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith and practice is less central to their lives, the *Spirituals* who are living spiritual lives but not involved in a church community, and the *Unaffiliated* who are not affiliated with a church or religious tradition and have little need for God or religion.

The ten goals are a starting point. They need to be contextualized within each specific Christian tradition, the identity and mission of a local church community, and the unique social, cultural, and ethnic make-up of the community. Every church needs a shared vision and goals for maturing in the Christian faith.

Bringing a Lifelong Vision of Faith Maturing to Life

To bring the vision of maturing in faith to life, develop a six-season (ten decades) plan for lifelong faith formation. Each season can have a particular focus or theme reflecting the most essential content and experiences, designed around the unique developmental characteristics, life tasks and issues, and religious and spiritual needs of people in each season of life. No decade would be viewed in isolation—each would be seen as part of a ten-decade view of faith growth and maturing in faith. Use the following process to explore how faith formation in your church today works toward achieving your goals for maturing in faith with all the seasons of life.

Step 1: Formulate Goals for Maturing in Faith

What are your church's goals for maturing in faith and discipleship? What does maturing in faith look like? Use the ten goals presented in this article as a starting point for developing your church's goals.

Step 2: Develop a Profile Using the Goals for Maturing in Faith

What is your church trying to accomplish in the lives of people at each stage of life from childhood to older adulthood? Using the ten goals (or the goals you have developed for your church), identify how your church implements the goals through experiences, programs, activities, and resources in each season of life.

- ◆ Childhood (0–10)
- ◆ Adolescence (11–19)
- ◆ Young Adults (20s–30s)
- ◆ Midlife Adults (40s–50s)
- ◆ Mature Adults (60s–70s)
- ◆ Older Adults (80+)

Step 3: Analyze Faith Formation through the Lens of the Goals

Analyze the ways that your church nurtures faith growth through the six seasons and stages of the life cycle by reflecting on these three questions:

- ◆ Which goals are being addressed most effectively through programs, activities, and experiences?
- ◆ Which goals need to be addressed more effectively by strengthening or improving programs, activities, and experiences?
- ◆ Which goals need new initiatives so they can be addressed effectively?

Step 4: Explore New Ways to Strengthen and Expand Faith Formation for Each Season of Life

There are several ways to strengthen and/or expand faith formation based on your analysis. Here are two approaches to get you thinking:

You might find one or two goals that need attention with all ages. Make these goals a “whole church” focus for a year of faith formation—planning intergenerational, family, and life stage programs, activities, and experiences.

You might find one or more life stages that need attention. Develop a multiyear plan for developing faith formation with each life stage. Begin with a few new initiatives that you want to test in the first year (guided by the goals). Evaluate their effectiveness and expand them in years two and three. Continue to develop new programs, activities, and experiences for year two and year three. Evaluate and expand.

Conclusion

The ten goals provide a vision and a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+).

They provide a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. They are a great way to begin the move toward a lifelong learning paradigm in your church.

To assist your planning be sure to check the resources on the www.LifelongFaith.com website. If you have questions or need assistance finding resources, you can email me at jroberto@lifelongfaith.com.



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How People Learn Today

(Third in a series of articles on a lifelong learning paradigm in churches)

John Roberto

An important element of embracing a lifelong learning paradigm is to design faith formation experiences that reflect our best understanding of how people of all ages learn. Over the last twenty years we have been blessed with substantive research on how learning happens and how people learn best. In a recent study, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures* (2018), The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine updated their 2000 report with new research and conclusions. The report begins by saying, “There are many reasons to be curious about the way people learn, and the past several decades have seen an explosion of research that has substantially expanded understanding of brain processes and what they mean for individual learning, schooling, and policy. In 2000, the report *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition* (National Research Council, 2000) was published and its influence has been both wide and deep, but 20 years later the research landscape has evolved still further. *How People Learn II* provides a much-needed update.”

This article presents the major conclusions of the study, excerpted from Chapter One, organized into the following categories:

1. The Influence of Culture
2. Types and Processes of Learning
3. Knowledge and Reasoning
4. Motivation to Learn
5. Implications for Learning
6. Learning Technology
7. Learning across the Life Span

You can download the PDF of the entire report, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*, from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine website: <https://doi.org/10.17226/24783>.

The Influence of Culture

Learners function within complex developmental, cognitive, physical, social, and cultural systems. Research and theory from diverse fields have contributed to an evolving understanding that all learners grow and learn in culturally defined ways in culturally defined contexts. While humans share basic brain structures and processes, as well as fundamental experiences such as relationships with family, age-related stages, and many more, each of these phenomena are shaped by an individual's precise experiences. Learning does not happen in the same way for all people because cultural influences are influential from the beginning of life. These ideas about the intertwining of learning and culture have been reinforced by research on many facets of learning and development.

Conclusion #1: Each learner develops a unique array of knowledge and cognitive resources in the course of life that are molded by the interplay of that learner's cultural, social, cognitive, and biological contexts. Understanding the developmental, cultural, contextual, and historical diversity of learners is central to understanding how people learn.

Types and Processes of Learning

Learning is a remarkably dynamic process; from before birth and throughout life, learners adapt to experiences and their environment. Factors that are relevant to learning include influences from the microscopic level (e.g., lead levels in the learner's blood) up to the macro level (e.g., qualities of the learner's neighborhood, society, and culture). Even at the most basic individual level, brain development and cognition (and the connectivity between cortical areas) are influenced and organized by cultural, social, emotional, and physiological experiences that contribute to both age-related and individual variability in learning. Different situations, contexts, and pedagogical strategies promote different types of learning.

Conclusion #2: The individual learner constantly integrates many types of learning, both deliberately and unconsciously, in response to the challenges and circumstances he or she encounters. The way a learner integrates learning functions is shaped by the learner's social and physical environment but also shapes his or her future learning.

Conclusion #3: The brain develops throughout life, following a trajectory that is broadly consistent for humans but is also individualized by every learner's environment and experiences. It gradually matures to become capable of a vast array of complex cognitive functions and is also malleable in adapting to challenges at a neurological level.

Conclusion #4: The relationship between brain development and learning is reciprocal: learning occurs through interdependent neural networks, and at the same time learning and development involves the continuous shaping and reshaping of neural connections in

response to stimuli and demands. Development of the brain influences behavior and learning, and in turn, learning influences brain development and brain health.

Conclusion #5: Successful learning requires coordination of multiple cognitive processes that involve different networks in the brain. In order to coordinate these processes, an individual needs to be able to monitor and regulate his or her own learning. The ability to monitor and regulate learning changes over the life span and can be improved through interventions.

Conclusion #6: Memory is an important foundation for most types of learning. Memory involves reconstruction rather than retrieval of exact copies of encoded mental representations. The cues available in a learner's environment are critical for what she will be able to recall; they also play a role in the way the learner begins to integrate new information as knowledge.

Knowledge and Reasoning

Learners identify and establish relationships among pieces of information and develop increasingly complex structures for using and categorizing what they have learned. Accumulating bodies of knowledge and the capacity to reason about them are key cognitive assets throughout the life span. The strategies that have shown promise for promoting learning help learners to develop the mental models they need to retain knowledge so they can use it adaptively and flexibly in making inferences and solving new problems.

Conclusion #7: Prior knowledge can reduce the attentional demands associated with engaging in well-learned activities, and it can facilitate new learning. However, prior knowledge can also lead to bias by causing people to not attend to new information and to rely on existing schema to solve new problems. These biases can be overcome but only through conscious effort.

Conclusion #8: Learners routinely generate their own novel understanding of the information they are accumulating and productively extend their knowledge by making logical connections between pieces of information. This capacity to generate novel understanding allows learners to use their knowledge to generalize, categorize, and solve problems.

Conclusion #9: The learning strategies for which there is evidence of effectiveness include ways to help students retrieve information and encourage them to summarize and explain material they are learning, as well as ways to space and structure the presentation of material. Effective strategies to create organized and distinctive knowledge structures encourage learners to go beyond the explicit material by elaborating and to enrich their mental representation of information by calling up and applying it in various contexts.

Conclusion #10: The effectiveness of learning strategies is influenced by such contextual factors as the learner’s existing skills and prior knowledge, the nature of the material, and the goals for learning. Applying these approaches effectively therefore requires careful thought about how their specific mechanisms could be beneficial for particular learners, settings, and learning objectives.

Motivation to Learn

Conscious learning requires sustained effort. To learn intentionally, people must want to learn and must see the value in accomplishing what is being asked of them. Numerous factors and circumstances influence an individual’s desire to learn and the decision to expend effort on learning. Engagement and intrinsic motivation develop and change over time; they are not properties of the individual or the environment alone, and they are strongly influenced by cultural and developmental processes.

Conclusion #11: Motivation to learn is influenced by the multiple goals that individuals construct for themselves as a result of their life and school experiences and the sociocultural context in which learning takes place. Motivation to learn is fostered for learners of all ages when they perceive the learning environment is a place where they “belong” and when the environment promotes their sense of agency and purpose.

Conclusion #12: Educators may support learners’ motivation by attending to their engagement, persistence, and performance by:

- helping them to set desired learning goals and appropriately challenging goals for performance
- creating learning experiences that they value
- supporting their sense of control and autonomy
- developing their sense of competency by helping them to recognize, monitor, and strategize about their learning progress
- creating an emotionally supportive and nonthreatening learning environment where learners feel safe and valued

Implications for Learning

While focusing on learning that occurs throughout life, the research has implications for learning in formal educational settings. The following five conclusions reflect the implications of the research for learning in formal educational settings.

Conclusion #13: Effective instruction depends on understanding the complex interplay among learners’ prior knowledge, experiences, motivations, interests, and language and cognitive skills; educators’ own experiences and cultural influences; and the cultural, social, cognitive, and emotional characteristics of the learning environment.

Conclusion #14: A disparate body of research points to the importance of engaging the learner in directing her or his own learning by, for example, providing targeted feedback and support in developing metacognitive skills, challenges that are well matched to the learner’s current capacities, and support in setting and pursuing meaningful goals.

Conclusion #14: A growing body of research supports adopting an asset model of education in which curricula and instructional techniques support all learners in connecting academic learning goals to the learning they do outside of school settings and through which learning experiences and opportunities from various settings are leveraged for each learner.

Conclusion #15: Purposefully teaching the language and practices specific to particular disciplines, such as science, history, and mathematics, is critical to helping students develop deep understanding in these subjects.

Conclusion #16: Assessment is a critical tool for advancing and monitoring students’ learning in school. When grounded in well-defined models of learning, assessment information can be used to identify and subsequently narrow the gap between current and desired levels of students’ learning and performance.

Learning Technology

There is strong empirical support for the effectiveness of learning technologies, but there is no one universally ideal learning technology. The effectiveness of technology depends on the characteristics of the learner, the types of learning being targeted, sociocultural context, and support from instructors in the use of the technologies.

Conclusion #17: The decision to use a technology for learning should be based on evidence indicating that the technology has a positive impact in learning situations that are similar with respect to:

- the types of learning and goals for learning
- characteristics of the learners
- the learning environment
- features of the social and cultural context likely to affect learning
- the level of support in using the technology to be provided to learners and educators

Conclusion #18: Effective use of technologies in formal education and training requires careful planning for implementation that addresses factors known to affect learning. These factors include alignment of the technology with learning goals, provision of professional development and other supports for instructors and learners, and equitable access to the technology. Ongoing assessment of student learning and evaluation of implementation are

critical to ensuring that a particular use of technology is optimal and to identifying needed improvements.

Learning across the Life Span

Individuals learn throughout their lives in every setting. What and how much they learn, particularly outside of compulsory education, is largely directed by their own choices and circumstances. Learners' capacities and resources shift over time. For example, both reasoning and knowledge increase up to early adulthood, when their paths begin to diverge. One's abilities to quickly generate, transform, and manipulate factual information begin to decline, while knowledge levels remain stable or increase. However, the brain adapts throughout life, recruiting and orchestrating its resources to compensate for declines and adapt to circumstances.

Conclusion #19: People continue to learn and grow throughout the life span, and their choices, motivation, and capacity for self-regulation, as well as their circumstances, influence how much and how well they learn and transfer their learning to new situations.

Conclusion #20: People learn continually through active engagement across many settings in their environments; learning that occurs outside of compulsory educational environments is a function of the learner's motivation, interests, and opportunities. Engagement with work (especially complex work that involves both intellectual and social demands), social engagement, physical exercise, and adequate sleep are all associated with lifelong learning and healthy aging.

Works Cited

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. (Free Download) <https://doi.org/10.17226/24783>



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)

John Roberto

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!



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

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

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

John Roberto

In Part One of this article we explored the concept of *personalizing* faith formation—guiding families and individuals toward greater maturity in faith. Personalizing faith formation gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Personalizing and fashioning faith formation involves the following elements:

1. Helping families and individuals at every stage of life discern where they are in their religious and spiritual journey, and then tailoring faith formation experiences to fit their needs.
2. Identifying key characteristics of growing in the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping families and individual discern their faith growth needs.
3. Developing a *pathways guide* to help people chart their growth in each of the essential characteristics of growing in the Christian faith.
4. Guiding people in creating a *faith growth plan* with the experiences, programs, activities, and resources that best match with their faith growth needs.
5. Helping people discover a variety of resources that can help them take their next best steps in their spiritual and religious journey.
6. Incorporating discernment and a faith growth plan into family and age group formation, and into milestones and sacramental moments, such as marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation, graduations, retirement, etc.
7. Accompanying people through mentoring (one-on-one or in small groups) to discern their faith growth needs and create a plan.

Designing a Process for Personalizing Faith Formation

The centerpiece of the personalizing process is to create a **Pathways Guide** for a particular audience. A Pathways Guide is created around characteristics of maturing in faith that can be used to help people discern their faith journey and chart a path for growth.

A **Life Stage Pathways Guide** can be created for every of stage life: children and families (0–10), adolescents (11–19), young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (mid-50s–mid-70s), and older adults (75+). The Guide can be used at the beginning of a new year of faith formation programming to provide a personalized experience for people as they select faith growth experiences from the church’s gathered programs and online experiences. It can be used at parent meetings and family programs to discern parents’ faith growth needs as well as the faith growth needs of the whole family. It works best in an environment where you can guide people in discerning their faith growth needs and connecting them to faith formation. It’s helpful to create a faith formation catalog (print, digital) with all of the faith formation experiences, programs, activities, and resources that people can access to create their personal or family faith growth plan.

A **Milestones Pathways Guide** can be created for the preparation of individuals and families for a significant life milestone, life transition, or sacrament. Milestones pathways guide can be created for Christian initiation and new member formation, marriage preparation, parent formation for the baptism of their child, family preparation for first communion, preparation of adolescents for confirmation, and more. It’s helpful to create a catalog that is specific to the milestone with faith formation programs, activities, and resources (online and in-person) that people can use to create their faith growth plan.

Design Process

Step 1. Identify a target audience for the *Pathways Guide*: life stages or milestones or another audience.

Step 2. Develop the characteristics of growing in the Christian faith that would serve as the basis for helping discerning faith growth needs. A Life Stage Guide can use the ten goals I have proposed for lifelong faith formation as a starting point. A Milestones Guide can use the ten goals or can use the “content” of the milestone to be more specific.

Characteristics of Growing in Faith

- ◆ Personal relationship and commitment to Jesus
- ◆ Living the Christian faith in daily life
- ◆ Reading and studying the Bible and its application to living today
- ◆ Understanding and integrating the Christian story and tradition into one’s life
- ◆ Worshipping God on Sunday, in rituals, and through the church year

- ◆ Praying, together and lone, and growing spiritually
- ◆ Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and moral values
- ◆ Serving people in need, caring for creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace
- ◆ Being engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community
- ◆ Using one’s gifts and talents in service to the church and world

Step 3. Develop a stages of growth discernment rating to help people identify where they are currently in their faith journey. The stages of faith growth should be designed as a continuum of deepening faith practice and commitment. Try to incorporate at least three categories. Use age-appropriate language as you determine the names for each category. Here are several examples of growth ratings.

- ◆ Searching—exploring—beginning—growing—maturing
- ◆ Inquiring—learning—growing—sharing
- ◆ Exploring—growing—maturing—rooted
- ◆ Beginning (getting started)—growing—maturing (going deeper)—sharing (ministering)

Step 4. Create a *Pathways Guide* for your target audience that combines the stages of growth with each item (goal or description). You can develop the *Guide* by creating a grid with goals listed in one column and the stages of growth in the other columns, like the example below.

Goals or Characteristics				
Growing in a personal relationship with Jesus	1	2	3	4

Rating Scale

- 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.

Your *Pathways Guide* can also include short descriptions to illustrate the stages of growth for each goal. Here is an example for the Bible:

Goal: Reading, studying, and applying the Bible to my life

1. *Beginning:* I feel drawn to the story of God in the Bible and want to learn how to read the Bible and be open to God.
2. *Growing:* I am reading the Bible regularly and learning how to interpret the Bible and its meaning for today.
3. *Maturing:* I am reading and praying with the Bible and studying the books of the Bible and their message for today.
4. *Sharing:* I am sharing my understanding of the Bible and leading Bible activities and programs.

Step 5. Add questions to *Guide* people in reflecting on their future growth in faith. For example:

- ◆ Areas Where I Need to “Get Started”
- ◆ Areas Where I Need to “Grow”
- ◆ Areas Where I Want to “Go Deeper”
- ◆ Areas Where I’m Ready to Share My Faith and Gifts

Step 6. Develop the format for introducing and using the *Guide* to help people discern their faith growth needs. For example, it could be introduced in a large group setting with time for discernment and small group interaction, or in small groups facilitated by a guide or mentor, or in a one-to-one setting with the guidance and support of a mentor. Provide time for people to reflect on the results of their discernment using the questions in Step 5.

Step 7. Guide people in matching faith formation programs and experiences (the catalog) with faith growth needs and creating their *Faith Growth Plan*.

Step 8. Provide continuous support (small groups, mentors, and more) and opportunities for people to reflect on their progress in fulfilling their *Faith Growth Plan*.

Next Steps

Develop a pilot project to personalize faith formation by identifying a target audience, designing a Pathways Guide, and providing mentoring or small group support.

Check out the examples of pathways guides on the *See All the People* website and download “Developing a Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations” at www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system .

Check out examples of pathways guides created by Rev. Kathy Pittenger, Director of Children’s Initiatives for the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church on the Lifelong Faith website: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/oct-5-2021.html>.



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Becoming a Center of Lifelong Learning

John Roberto

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

The articles in this lifelong learning series have introduced the concept of a lifelong learning paradigm, proposed a vision of lifelong maturing in faith, explored how people learn today, and described how to personalize faith formation. This sixth article proposes that churches have the potential to become centers of lifelong learning and faith formation for all people—in the church and in the wider community.

Read the following description of what one organization does. Can you name the organization that I'm describing?

- ◆ It provides resources, programming, and live events for all ages from young children through older adults.
- ◆ It provides resources, programming, and services in physical locations and online formats for all ages.
- ◆ Its resources, programs, and services are provided in multiple languages and in ways that are inclusive of people with special needs and disabilities.
- ◆ It offers after-school programs for children and teens, including help with homework.
- ◆ It provides in-person and virtual career services and mentoring.
- ◆ It provides Wi-Fi access for all ages and assistance in using technology.
- ◆ It offers resources, support groups, and programs for parents beginning with babies and toddlers and moving through the high school years.
- ◆ It offers family-centered programs throughout the year, and a variety of programs and experiences for children and families during the summer time—in person and online.
- ◆ During the height of the pandemic, its parking lot was filled most days with families, jobseekers, telecommuters, and students taking advantage of free Wi-Fi to participate in Zoom meetings, distance learning, job interviews, and telemedicine appointments.

- ◆ During the pandemic it distributed materials such as free craft supplies and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) kits, supported distance learning, and offered Wi-Fi hotspots.

Did you figure it out?

The organization I am describing is a **library**! Present in almost every community—large and small—the library has evolved into a center for lifelong learning. Julius C. Jefferson, President of the American Library Association, writes that during the pandemic, “libraries kept Americans connected in ways that brought our communities closer. Buildings may not have been open, but libraries were never closed” He describes library workers as essential “first restorers” or “second responders.”

The Lewis and Clark Library in Helena (MT), for example, reached out to seniors in isolation at assisted living facilities, helping children to send cards, postcards, drawings, and words of encouragement to residents as part of its “Mail to Our Seniors” program. A virtual karaoke event organized by Madison County (KY) Public Library, was music to the ears of those at a local assisted living community. The McArthur Public Library in Biddeford (ME) offered virtual story times, read-alouds, and cooking demos. BYOB took on a new meaning when Russell Library in Middletown (CT) adapted their book club program to facilitate social distancing in the great outdoors—and asked their patrons to bring their own boats. Book-Yak- on-a-Kayak featured selections focused on kayaking and canoeing. The boaters wore masks for the event, but they couldn’t mask their enthusiasm—without the library’s innovative spirit, their book club would have been canceled.

“Libraries are going to recognize that their role is not just within the walls of their buildings, but it is across the landscape of their community and in people’s homes,” says Lisa Guernsey, director of teaching, learning and tech at New America. “We have to build new pathways to the library for those who would benefit from our services and for whom the library is inaccessible for many reasons. The library must move outside its four walls and go to those communities in many different ways” (Rosen). Libraries are building more points of entry to the library. Outreach hubs (physical and digital) reach those in the community who do not use the library but would benefit greatly from its services.

The research arm of Gensler, the architecture and design firm, has been studying libraries for several years. In a 2019 report Gensler found that libraries were now “people-centered not collections centered.” Gensler asked librarians which attributes would “comprise the next generation of libraries.” Those ranked the highest were:

- ◆ community and social services
- ◆ decentralized library space
- ◆ more pop-ups and bookmobiles
- ◆ low-touch kiosks

- ◆ drive-up pickup
- ◆ webinar-based story times and programs
- ◆ technology-integrated conference spaces available to the community
- ◆ remote reference and information search services. (Cowell)

In addition librarians suggested curating learning pathways through the library’s content, hosting experts and personalities to encourage a broadening of knowledge and spark learning pathways, art installations and experimental exhibitions/demonstrations that link to the library, curated “Spotify” Playlist of readings from their collections, and having well-known authors give presentations and read from their books. (Cowell)

The New York City Public Library is conducting a Welcome Week 2021 from October 18-23 (<https://www.nypl.org>). Their promotion: *Come learn about all the free services available at the Library—now with no more late fines! Join us October 18–23 for open houses at branch locations across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island to meet your local librarians, participate in fun Welcome Week events, borrow books and other materials, learn about all the services and resources the Library offers, and more! Plus, when you visit during Welcome Week, you can get a free "welcome back pack" filled with school supplies—while they last!*

What Can Churches Learn from Libraries

As you might imagine I think that the ways libraries are adapting, responding, innovating, and broadening their scope and outreach offers churches a living example from which to learn. Libraries, like churches, are rooted in the community. Both face similar challenges with changing demographics and needs, funding and staffing, broadening the scope and outreach to unserved or underserved groups—to name just a few. Libraries are among the “bright spots” in our communities and there is much to learn from their experience and their practices.

So what can your church learn about lifelong learning from libraries? Spend a little time exploring the libraries in your area and a few of the libraries listed below (rated as some of the best libraries in the U.S.) Review the scope of library programs and services, and how they are embracing a lifelong perspective. Be sure to check out the New York Public Library for the breadth of their programs and services. After your exploration answer the reflection questions.

- ◆ New York Public Library: <https://www.nypl.org>
- ◆ Seattle Public Library: <https://www.spl.org>
- ◆ San Diego Public Library: <https://www.sandiego.gov/public-library>
- ◆ Kansas City Public Library: <https://kclibrary.org>
- ◆ Philadelphia Free Library: <https://www.freelibrary.org>
- ◆ Chicago Public Library: <https://www.chipublib.org>
- ◆ McAllen Public Library (TX): <https://mcallenlibrary.net>
- ◆ Ann Arbor District Library (MI): <https://aadl.org>

Application to Your Church

- ✦ What characteristics of the modern-day library—its approaches, services, and programming—can be applied to churches and faith formation?
- ✦ What do libraries teach us about lifelong learning?
- ✦ What do libraries teach us about engaging a diversity of people, especially the underserved and unserved?
- ✦ What can we learn from libraries about becoming centers of learnings?

Next Article

The next article will present ideas for how churches can become centers of lifelong learning and faith formation. Stay tuned!

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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 available, 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.

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WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

Networks of Lifelong Learning – Part Two

John Roberto

(Eighth and final article in a series on developing a lifelong learning paradigm)

The seventh and eighth articles in this series explore how churches can become centers of lifelong faith formation through a network approach to learning. This article concludes the series. For all of the articles go to the Lifelong Faith website: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/articles.html>.

In “Networks of Lifelong Learning—Part One” we explored the concept of a network approach to learning and faith formation as a way to move away from the one-size-fits-all approach of so much of today’s faith formation toward a more multi-faceted approach built around the lives of people at every stage of life.

We now have the ability to design faith formation 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..

A network approach is designed around the vision and goals of lifelong maturing in Christian faith.

A church’s goals for lifelong maturing in faith can be thought of as a framework for designing developmentally appropriate experiences, programs, activities, and resources for each stage of life: children, adolescents, young adults (20s–30s), midlife adults (40s–50s), mature adults (60s–70s), and older adults (80+). Lifelong goals provide a seamless process of fostering faith

growth from birth through older adulthood because everyone shares a common vision of maturing in faith. Each goal needs to incorporate knowing and understanding more fully the Christian faith (informing), developing and deepening people's relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community (forming), and equipping people to live the Christian faith in every aspect of their lives (transforming). I am proposing ten goals to guide faith formation:

1. To develop and sustain a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. To live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and make the Christian faith a way of life.
3. To read and study the Bible and apply its message and meaning to living as a Christian today.
4. To learn the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular faith tradition and integrate its meaning into one's life.
5. To worship God with the community at Sunday worship, in ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year.
6. To pray, together and alone, and seek spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines.
7. To live with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and apply Christian moral values to decision-making.
8. To live the Christian mission in the world by serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally.
9. To be actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the Christian community.
10. To practice faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world.

A network approach is person- or learner-centered, placing the individual or family at the center of faith formation.

Making this shift from program to person highlights the need for sensitivity to the individual differences among people. People differ in many ways: prior knowledge, ability, learning styles and strategies, interest, and motivation, as well in linguistic, ethnic, and social background. People also differ in their spiritual and religious practices and commitments: the Engaged who demonstrate a vibrant faith and relationship with God and are actively engaged in the faith community, the Occasionals who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith and practice is less central to their lives, the Spirituals who are living spiritual lives but not involved in a church community, and the Unaffiliated who are not affiliated with a church or religious tradition and may have little need for God or religion.

A network approach embraces learning and faith growth as a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing within the individual.

Motivation for learning is intrinsic to the person and is driven by a need for autonomy (self-directedness), mastery, and purpose and meaning. The traditional model of schooling conditioned people to perceive the proper role of learners as being dependent on teachers to

make decisions for them as to what should be learned, how it should be learned, when it should be learned, and if it has been learned. Today people are accustomed to searching out what they want to know, when they want and need to know it. People are becoming more and more self-directed in their learning, and they have almost unlimited access to information through the internet and the wide variety of print and media learning resources available.

A network approach provides the faith-forming experiences to personalize learning and faith formation around the lives of people.

Personalization means tailoring faith-forming experiences around each person's spiritual and religious strengths, needs, and interests. It enables faith formation to be individualized and differentiated. Personalization gives people choice in what, how, when, and where they learn; and equips them to make decisions about the direction of their learning and faith growth, which gives people more ownership over their learning and faith growth. Personalizing faith formation gives people an active role in shaping their own learning and moving along their own personal trajectories of faith growth. Personalization allows the time, resources, and support needed to master knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. A personalized approach provides more time to achieve mastery for those who need it, while allowing those who want to move ahead or dive more deeply into a topic to do so when they are ready. (See the previous articles in this series on personalizing faith formation.)

A network approach provides a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of people of all ages.

A network approach provides a variety of methods for learning, ways to learn, and styles of learning.

A network addresses the whole person and how people learn best by offering programs, activities, and resources that incorporate different ways to learn (multiple intelligences: word-centered, verbal- linguistic, logical, musical, visual, intrapersonal, interpersonal, naturalist, and bodily-kinesthetic); and different styles of learning (hands-on experiences, reflective observation, exploration and analysis, and active experimentation).

A network approach incorporates a variety of formats for learning—on your own, with a mentor, at home, in small groups, in large groups, in the church community, and in the community and world—delivered in physical gathered settings and online settings.

A network approach provides a way to offer a diversity of programs in different formats and to offer one program or experience in multiple formats, expanding the scope of faith formation offerings and providing people with more options to participate

A network approach is built on a digital platform for faith formation.

People are connected to the content (programs, activities, resources) and to each other. There's continuity for people across different learning experiences, and it's available anytime, anywhere. The digital platform provides for seamless learning across a variety of experiences, resources, locations, times, or settings; and fosters a strong connection between faith formation at church, at home, in daily life, and online.

A network approach nurtures communities of learning and practice around shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities.

People can connect with each other through these shared activities, programs, or experiences. With a diversity of programs and activities targeted to different needs and life stages, groups will form naturally as people connect with others who share their interests, life issues, or religious and spiritual needs. Participation in these groups and their shared activities develop relationships, provide a supportive community, promote learning, and encourage the application of learning in practice.

Examples

Westwood Lutheran Church has been using a network approach to their youth programming. Check out Westwood U at <https://www.westwood.church/westwoodu>.

I am building a demonstration network to illustrate the key features of a network approach. Check out an adult network on the Bible: <http://seasonsofadultfaith.weebly.com/bible.html>.

Conclusion

Over the course of these eight articles, I have tried to demonstrate how churches can become centers of lifelong learning for every season of life from young children through older adults. I believe that a lifelong approach provides a way to engage people in learning and practicing faith at every stage of life through a variety of faith forming experiences. A church as a center of lifelong learning is a church that is ready to reach and engage people of all ages and generations in transformative experiences of learning and growing in faith. And that is our mission!