WHAT IF. . .

Imagining Possibilities

Networks of Faith Formation
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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.

Designing Networks of Faith Formation

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

I have created two demonstration networks to illustrate the key features of a network approach. Check out: www.SeasonsofAdultFaith.com and www.FamilyFaithPractice.com.

Works Cited
Knowles, Malcom. *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. 4th ed. Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1990.