

Adult Faith Formation Sends Us Forth

Janet Schaeffler, OP

There's a church in our area (not Catholic) which has a one-way driveway for entry and exit to its property. The posted signs say: "Enter to Worship" and "Exit to Serve."

That is our Baptismal call. One of the results of our increased concentration on Adult Faith Formation is, hopefully, the deepening of people's awareness, desire, abilities and skills to be missioned for their role in the world.

Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us reminds us of this so well in the third of its major goals for adult faith formation: "call and prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world. The Church and its adult faithful have a *mission in and to the world*: to share the message of Christ to renew and to transform the social and temporal order. This dual calling to evangelization and justice is integral to the identity of the lay faithful; all are called to it in baptism.

Accordingly, faith formation seeks to help each adult believer become more willing and able to be a *Christian disciple in the world*. As salt of the earth and light for the world (cf. Mt 5:13-16), adult disciples give witness to God's love and caring will so that, in the power of the Spirit, they renew the face of the earth." (#72-73)

In our archdiocese we've been doing research on best practices in adult faith formation in our parishes. One of the questions asked on the survey was: "Describe the

effects of this initiative (the initiative they identified as their best practice). How were the participants or the parish changed by this event or process?”

In analyzing the responses, the committee found that this was not the easiest question for the respondents (adult faith formation coordinators, directors of religious education, pastors, pastoral ministers) to answer.

Perhaps the committee asked it the wrong way. Perhaps it was too broad; not clear; not measurable. One person asked: “How does one evaluate this?”

The majority answered with responses such as:

- more involvement in the parish/new leadership has emerged
- enhanced their personal prayer life
- adults are excited about lifelong formation
- more aware of Scripture at Mass
- acknowledge the value of the “group” as a place to share faith with others and to be enriched by the sharing of others
- new sense of openness
- men were surprised they were able to share so much
- hunger for more
- sense of belonging is heightened among participants/within the parish
- helped them connect their faith with everyday situations and decision making
- broadened understanding of their faith

These are all very good results. Many of them, of course, would be dependent upon the type of program that was offered. What was the purpose/goal of the program? Was that achieved?

One of the things that struck the committee was that of the 105 responses to this question, there were three which said:

- greater consciousness with regards to social justice issues; talking about what they can do
- drawn closer together in unity of mission; increased outreach to those in need within and beyond parish boundaries; more global vision
- many are looking for concrete ways to encounter the poor

No one else had responses such as:

- getting involved in/making a difference in the community (even though they mentioned getting involved in the parish – which is a very important thing!)
- empowered people to become involved with others to seek solutions to poverty, racism, violence, environmental pollution in the community

It is very possible that many of these things happened, and the survey responders weren't aware of it.

These results also might not be a natural outcome of each adult faith formation opportunity. Should they be?

- “The laity, by their vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs, and by ordering them according to the plan of God.”

(Lumen Gentium, #31)

- The third of the major goals for adult faith formation is to “call and prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world.” (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, #72)
- Adult faith formation calls us to live what we celebrate. We need to call each other to community and mission, to being the Body of Christ. When we celebrate Eucharist each week, it is not just the bread and wine that are changed. We are changed into the Body of Christ, to leave our Eucharistic assembly and be Christ’s Body throughout the week.

What can we do to ensure that adult faith formation leads to being disciples in mission to the world?

- Whatever we do, whatever the program/process (in whatever format/media we’re employing) include the “so what?” question. What does this have to with my life? And not just my life, but how does this impact the common good?
- Invite/encourage people to tell stories. Listening to others’ experiences we become aware of the needs of the world.
- Signs of the Times. Is your parish faith environment and your program/processes filled with the signs of the times? Do you listen to what people are talking about? what their questions, needs, concerns are? Do the weekend General Intercessions reflect today’s needs (or were they written by someone else four months ago)? Are the adult faith formation programs that are offered a result of what the learners have asked for, a reflection of what is happening in their life circumstances?

- Become a place where people gather to talk about their questions, their feelings, explore how faith relates to the challenges of the day. When something happens in the life of the parish, the community, the Church, the nation, the international community, do people first look to the parish as a hospitable place and the place to gather to explore with others their wonderings, their questions and range of emotions? When 9/11, the sex abuse scandal in the Church, the tsunami, Katrina, the on-going war in Iraq, the Virginia Tech tragedy happened did the parish respond by inviting people to gather for coffee and brownies, wine and cheese, soup and bread (whatever is comforting food) and a chance to talk about how they were feeling. Not a class on the theology of these events. People need, first, to talk about their feelings, their concerns, their worries. Then, the question can be asked: what is there in our tradition that will help us through these events, these incomprehensible challenges to our lives today? Of course, it does not stop there. What does this mean for the way I'm called to live my life as a disciple? What can I do? What can we do together?
- To invite people together when an event occurs is one possibility. What if there was a hospitable gathering every week or twice a month for people to come together for prayer and reflective discussion of whatever was on their minds? Depending upon the topic of discussion, the facilitator (or any participant) could always be encouraged to mention needs in the community/world where people could respond.

Some people might come all the time; others might come whenever they felt a need. When an extreme need surfaced in the community/world, a welcoming place would already be there.

- Use all opportunities (infused into all adult formation sessions: speaker series, parent meetings, Church bulletins, blogs, websites, your e-newsletters, 30-second public service announcements on television, etc.) to raise questions about things in your community, country, world that aren't proceeding according to Gospel values.
- In homilies, connect the call to serve, the call to be a person-for-others, to Baptism and the Sunday Scripture readings.
- Revisit and stress the dignity, the call and responsibility of the laity in the Vatican II documents, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World/Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic exhortation that followed the 1987 Synod on the Laity, and the US bishops' documents, *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity* (1980) and *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995). "It is they (the laity) who engage directly in the task of relating Christian values and practices to complex questions such as those of business ethics, political choice, economic security, quality of life, cultural development, and family planning. New situations, especially in the realm of social justice, call for creative responses. We know that the Spirit moves among all the People of God, prompting them according to their particular gifts and offices to discern anew the signs of the times and to interpret them boldly in light

of the Gospel. Lay women and men are in a unique position to offer this service.”
(*Called and Gifted*, #21-22)

- Use “convoy learning” (field trips!). Go to where the people, the needs, are. We learn best by experience. Put the learners in vans and go to visit, be with, and experience various needs and situations that are different from what people’s daily lives usually hold.
- Invite people to do the do-able. When we talk about being missioned to the world and think about some of the world issues and/or begin to study some of the justice/peace issues of today, it can be daunting. Some people’s responses could easily be: what can one person do? Some people have all they can do to care for their elderly parent(s) and advocate for their rights. Is this not responding to human need, the human need where our life experience currently reveals God presence?

Some people who are homebound might feel they can’t be involved in touching the world beyond their home. My mom was very involved in a telephone ministry of calling people weekly, people she did not know (at the beginning), but whose names were given to her to check in on once a week.

Letter-writing about important issues of concern is another valuable way to be involved in making a difference in the issues of today.

- Outreach Fair. Our parishes often have Ministry Fairs, highlighting all the parish ministries in which parishioners are invited to become involved, because of their Baptism. These are important and need to continue. At the same time, do we have Service and Outreach Fairs, since we are likewise called to be missioned to

the world, to make a difference in someone else's life, in the life of our world?

Various groups/agencies can be invited which provide numerous avenues for awareness as well as involvement.

- Parishes also do a wonderful job of highlighting, commissioning, and/or thanking the various parishioners involved in the ministerial life of the parish. Can we acknowledge also that parishioners have taken seriously their call to be of service in the world? The sensitivity in doing that is to realize that people respond in ministry in many ways.
- Adult faith formation is about much more than imparting knowledge. It's about transformation. One of the ways to do that is to enable the person to develop skills: skills for ministry, for service, for outreach. Incorporate those practical sessions/opportunities into your programs. Don't presume that everyone has the skills.
- Don't let your "programs/processes" (no matter what kind/format they are...speaker series, online group, infused into existing structures, bulletin, websites, etc.) ever end. Give people ideas of ways to be involved with others, of ways to be of service. Link people with others, with groups who have like interests with theirs.