



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#23 - November 2012

## THE CONTENT OF ADULT FAITH FORMATION

...as revealed in our Best Practices Study (Part II)

The exploration of **content** in adult faith formation, of course, cannot stand alone. It is intricately related to

- the various resources that will be used
- the processes and methods that will be utilized
- the numerous delivery systems available to us today
- needs assessment, continually listening and determining the interests/needs of the people in your unique community

These topics will be explored in greater detail in future issues of **GEMS**.

As we continue to explore some thoughts about “content” in adult faith formation, these are the themes of the best practices that have been shared with us so far in our on-going best practices study in adult faith formation:

Focus of the Adult Faith Formation Best Practice	Number of Times Mentioned
Scripture	41
Sacraments, Liturgy and Liturgical Year	34
Catholic Beliefs and Tradition	27
Spirituality	23
Prayer	11
Family and Parenting, including Religious Parenting	9
Life Transitions	7
Parish Life/Parish Renewal/Community	6
Human Growth	5
Catechist Formation	4
Jesus/God	3
Social Justice/Outreach	3
Leadership	2
Ecumenism/Interfaith Studies	2
Morality/moral issues	1
Connecting faith and work	1
Current Catholic Topics needing to be discussed	1

**Some Wondering GEMS:** As we consider these responses from the best practices survey once again (in the next two issues, Parts II and III of this series), perhaps they lead us to several (perhaps unrelated, yet inter-connected) **wondering reflections**. In this issue we will explore four of these wonderings:

- Responding to adult learning
- Relationship with the Trinity
- Missed moments
- What else?



**Responding to adult learning:** All adult learning theorists agree that “the best time to learn anything is when whatever is to be learned is **immediately useful** to us.” (Goodwin Watson, “What Do We Know About Learning,?” quoted in *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson. Elsevier, 2005)

Which categories – in our chart of best practices - would seem to have immediate “usefulness,” not simply information/ head knowledge, to the learner, to the mature, growing disciple? Do some stand out more than the others?

That is **not** to say, of course, that all the categories do not have immediate usefulness. If they are adult faith formation, by their very nature, they should.

The question always is: in the way they are structured, do they **include information, formation, and transformation**, as we explored in [GEMS #22](#).

- One comment which accompanied many of the best practice responses, particularly the Scripture-focused processes/programs, was echoed in words such as: “relating it to everyday life;” “intersection of Scripture

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and life;” “Scripture-based and applicable to life;” “how to live faith everyday.”

- Even though this one question on the survey centered on the “content” of the best practice, many respondents spoke to the **necessity and inclusion of process within their best practice:**
  - Participants desired time for reflection and discussion, interaction in a variety of ways.
  - Many respondents used the term “faith-sharing” to describe the process/content of their best practice.



**Relationship with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit:** The chart of content themes in our best practices surveys reveals that Church teachings and tradition were a large concentration of the best practices. Looking through those – wonderful offerings, and very needed – three of them explicitly centered on Jesus, God, and/or the Holy Spirit.

What, of course, we need to keep in mind is that we’re only looking at a small cross-section of our adult formation offerings: those reported in this survey. There is much more happening than what is reflected in this survey.

We also realize that it wouldn’t be possible to explore Scripture, sacraments, liturgy, spirituality, Catholic beliefs, etc., without focusing on God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, this might give us an opportunity to reflect on two realities:

- Are our programs/processes built around an exploration of the reality of Christ as the center of our faith, of the wonder of our God, of the on-going, life-giving presence of the Spirit with us?

During a talk, “Do Ask, Do Tell: Evangelizing Post Modern Catholics,” at the “Lessons from St. Paul Conference,” (Sacred Heart Major Seminary,

Detroit, MI, March 2009), Sherry Weddell, Co-Director of the Catherine of Siena Institute in Colorado Springs, CO, commented that most RCIA processes focus upon Catholicism primarily and deal with Jesus as a “belief” or “topic” within Catholicism. This can reinforce an “impersonal or institutional understanding of becoming a Catholic.”

If our goal is intentional discipleship, all adults – new Catholics and all who have been on the journey – need to continually **meet Jesus intimately**, not simply as a “belief” or as a “topic.”

- When we do “spend time” in our offerings on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, how do we do it? Do we “tell” the Church’s teaching and tradition (extremely important!), but do we also provide time for:
  - prayer and reflection
  - conversation, time for adults to talk about their experiences of God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit in their daily lives?

Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity years ago of the book, *The Shack*, was just that. It gave people an opening to talk to one another about their questions, their experiences of God in their lives.

Adults need to question, probe,  
and critically reflect on the meaning of God’s revelation  
in their unique lives  
in order to grow closer to God.

- *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, #52



**Missed Moments:** In looking at the smaller numbers of programs/opportunities in the areas such as

- life transitions

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- connecting faith and work
- social justice and outreach

another wondering comes to mind: are we missing opportunities of:

- attracting adults and walking with them
- helping them to make sense of their everyday life experiences in the light of their Catholic faith?

If all that we do is connected to intentional discipleship (see page 2, column 2), does everything we do, teach/learn, and model reflect the reality that our relationship with God and our relationships with one another are so closely bound together that

- we **never see any separation**, any dividing line
- we always live our relationship with God through how we respond to others?

Does every adult faith formation opportunity call people to healing relationships, to caring relationships?



**What Else?** One guideline to keep in mind as we, planners of adult faith formation, continually lead: keep asking the question: **what is missing?** What haven't we done that is a need which could broaden our perspectives, deepen our faith, our awareness, our consciousness, our prayer, our actions, our service as disciples of Jesus?

In looking at the vast array of topics/themes that were covered in the best practices that have been submitted thus far, the question also arises: what topics/themes weren't addressed? However, it is certainly **very possible that they are being covered.** There is much adult faith formation happening throughout our countries which is not represented in our best practices survey.

Thus, it is with great trepidation that the following are suggested (in no particular order). These are a few topics that could be/should be/might be topics for adult faith formation that didn't appear in the best practices, but are probably happening in myriad creative ways.

Yet, since they didn't appear yet in the best practices surveys, have you considered:

- **Faithful Citizenship:** During election times, we often reflect on our role as faith-filled citizens. Yet, our role in the world, as followers of Jesus occurs 24/7/365. For beginning resources and ideas: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/>.
- **Media literacy skills:** It is so obvious that we are surrounded today by media and technology. Are we discerning consumers? The *National Directory for Catechesis*, (#69.C) reminds us that the media is a subject, a content area, for catechesis. Catechesis "...should help people develop their knowledge and skills as viewers, listeners, readers, and users so that they might understand and evaluate the media in the light of the Gospel. ... Television and the internet now occupy so much time in the lives of the people of the United States that catechesis should focus especially on developing a critical understanding of these media."
- **Our use of leisure time** (*Lumen Gentium*, #34; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2185-2187): In a society where people root their identity in jobs or career advancement, are relentlessly challenged to increase productivity or are addicted to workaholicism, do we help adults today look at what is in our tradition concerning the gift of Sabbath? Recently Pope Benedict XVI quoted Bernard of Clairvaux in a letter to Pope Eugene III reminding us that "much work often leads to hardness of heart."
- **Peaceful Living, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping:** This deepening awareness and theology of non-violence is a "content area" which could multiply and expand, for it touches so many areas: ourselves, our homes, our cities, and our world.
- **Racism:** Though not a new document, the Pastoral Letter from the U.S. Bishops on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, written in 1979 (<http://nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>), is a continual and constant challenge – and significant help for adult formation – as we continue toward "decisive action to eradicate it from our society."

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- **Discussion/Reflection on national and local issues:** such as: suicide or sudden death of a young person in the community, comprehensive immigration reform, the U.S. health care reform, etc. Do we provide a hospitable place, inviting people to come and talk about their feelings, their thoughts? Within that conversation, do we then, ask: what is in our tradition which will give us guidance, which will help us get through this happening together, understand and respond to this issue from our Catholic tradition?
- **After a local, national or international event** (such as Katrina, 9/11, etc.), do we invite shared reflection: What have we learned? Did it change my life? My thinking? Is there something I/we should be doing differently?
- **Support groups for all life transitions and everyday needs**, e.g. retirement, empty nesters, parents who have had a child die, unemployment, separation/divorce, military families (especially in military towns), caregivers for family members with Alzheimer's, recovery groups, study groups, contemplative groups, to name just a few. *(There are many support groups in existence; are there others that people need? Each parish does not need to do their own. Do we know where various support groups are available so we can help people find the resources?)*

You cannot help but learn more as you take the world  
into your hands.

Take it up reverently, for it is an old piece of clay,  
with millions of thumbprints on it.

- John Updike

- **Marriage Enrichment:** There are many creative approaches to support and engage married couples, at various points and milestones of married life. One parish, after having their first evening event (dinner, movie and discussion), invited the participants to remain together as a

small faith-sharing community, always connected with a social. One event was a “learn to dance” night; another centered on “Couple Prayer.” The variety of the offerings – and the hospitality – appealed to the numerous needs and interests.

- **Interfaith marriages:** Can our parishes and programs be a welcoming gathering place for interfaith couples to have supportive conversations?
- **The home as the domestic church:** Since the Second Vatican Council we have celebrated the actuality that parents are the first teachers of the faith. How do we help our parents and grandparents (and all the extended family) appreciate and live the awesome reality of being the domestic church?
- **Spirituality of retirement:** Now that the baby boomers are retiring, it is estimated that the US will see 4-5 million new retirees each year for the next fifteen to twenty years (Robert Margetic in *How to Survive the Coming Retirement Storm*, Xlibris, 2011). Are parishes and adult faith formation processes there for them, in all aspects of this transition, spiritually, emotionally, practically, etc.?
- **Our multicultural society/Church:** The global sense of who we are today graphically illustrates that “we” are not the only ones; “we” are not the norm. What does that practically mean? How can we explore it in our adult faith formation processes?
- **Vatican II:** We are now in the midst of the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Council. Undoubtedly, there are numerous programs commemorating and relooking at its message, meaning and vision for today. Yet, do we wait for an anniversary year or is this a topic, a content area, which is ongoing, because:
  - Church historians tell us that it takes forty-five to one hundred and twenty years for the teachings/vision of a Council to really begin to be understood and take root
  - Many of today's younger Catholics were not alive at the time of the Council (and might think that Vatican II is the Pope's summer home or the papal airplane)

- **Ecological awareness:** Do our parish practices care for the earth? Do some of our adult faith formation opportunities help people to explore today's realities and the needed actions? Pope Benedict XVI's *Messages for the World Day of Peace* from 2007, 2008, and 2010 - each describe how ecological considerations and the pursuit of peace are mutually informing. The 2010 Message ("If you want peace, protect Creation,"), cites the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in proclaiming that: "creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God's works,' and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind [sic]."

- **Spirituality of Work:** Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, in *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) tell us that, in this century, corporations have begun – and will continue – to try to address the spiritual and emotional needs of their employees. If they see it as a need/a necessity, do we?

Are there ways that parishioners can experience their parish supporting them in their careers and work life? Have we considered going to their places of employment and offering opportunities rather than expecting them to always come to us?

- **Spiritual Practices:** Books, websites, and magazines are filled today with much discussion on spiritual practices. There is a renewed and deepened interest in our traditional practices, such as: worship, the many ways of prayer, silence, sacraments, retreats, service and outreach. There are many others which bubble up when people begin reflecting on all the realities which can and do help them connect to God, such as: living in the present moment, reading, music, savoring beauty, forgiving, hospitality, giving thanks, generosity, small faith-sharing groups, simple living, etc.

How do our adult faith formation programs call people to reflect on their spiritual practices, inviting them to go deeper as well as begin new ones?

- **Spirituality:** Even though this is a category into which some of our best practices fell, it bears repeating that this is crucial.

“(Adults) want to see and feel God active in their lives. If we focus our efforts to help adults grow in their spiritual lives they will participate. While learning about the faith tradition plays a role in this process, it is not the most fundamental reason that adults are part of church. They will learn about the tradition to the extent that it helps them in their journey with God. Adults seem to want to look *through* the tradition as a lens for seeing their life, more than to look *at* it.” (David Riley and Jack McBride in *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation: A National Study*. Washington, DC: NCCL, 2006. #27)

During his talk, “The Future of Catechesis: Three Claims for Leaders to Consider,” at the RCL Benziger Symposium on the Future of Catechesis, June 2008, in Baltimore, Michael P. Horan, Ph.D. said: “The future credibility of catechetical leadership rests on a willingness to get under the surface debate about church and foster real communication about the experience of God, and to promote the same in the people of God. ...

The effectiveness of adult catechesis in the present and future rests on getting under the ecclesiological divide that Catholic adults experience when talking about their church. The consolation as well as the task of catechetical leadership today is to create spaces and situations in which people talk about deeper concerns that are worthy of real discussion:

- their relationship with God
- questions about God
- experience of God
- the role of God in their lives
- speaking about these things with competence, confidence, and freedom from fear of being wrong.”

- **Simplicity:** Another topic which abounds in bookstores and on the internet is the desire and art of simplifying life. This, of course, encompasses many and varied areas of life, and will mean different things for different people: managing schedules, accumulation of possessions, reducing the noise around us, the way we shop, use of technology in one's life, reducing clutter, changing the way we eat, wholistically balancing life, etc. How is this a part of our adult faith formation programs?



## Your GEMS to Share

These topics have been mentioned because they were not included in any of the best practice surveys received thus far. However, many of you have probably **incorporated them into your adult faith formation processes/programs** through various venues and delivery systems. You're invited to share them, so they can be passed along in future newsletters. Email your thoughts and reflections about your endeavors to: [jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org](mailto:jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org).

What **other topics**, not mentioned above or in the best practices surveys, have you offered (remembering, too, that there are many delivery systems and ways of providing on-going formation)? Your ideas will be shared with others as they're received ([jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org](mailto:jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org)).



## Golden Nuggets From You

Last month we invited you to share your responses to some of the **Wondering GEMS** concerning the mission of adult faith formation: **informing, forming** and **transforming** today's adult.

One parish has shared their reflections and discussions:

- What methods, materials, opportunities and processes does your parish use to **“inform”** adult believers of the “heart and meaning” of the Christian message and the church's tradition?
  - Homilies, Bible studies (11 running currently), speakers, educating through the children's classes and home-communications, the bulletin, website, Facebook, Twitter, encouragement to take seminary classes, Alpha, RCIA, prayer teams, Teams of Our Lady, Legion of Mary, Lenten

Mission, Men's Fellowship, Young Adult Group, Christian Service opportunities, and more

- What aspects of Church teaching are covered well through your adult faith formation opportunities, through the life of the parish (the parish is the curriculum)?
  - Scripture, liturgy, prayer, sacrament, morality
- What aspects of Church teaching might need more attention?
  - Relationship to God, mission

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- What methods, materials, opportunities and processes are used to **“form”** adult believers?
  - All of the above also form our people in any well-drawn-out “event.”
- What activities and opportunities that “form” adults in living the faith work well for your parish?
  - Offering a very large variety of types of formation works well because everyone comes to Jesus using the gifts He has given them. We have over 40 ways to participate in Christian Service, for example.
- What aspects of “living the faith” does your parish do well?
  - We tend to do liturgy, service, and caring for the sick/dying really well.
- Are there aspects of “living the faith” that might need more attention for your parishioners?
  - Small groups, personal relationships

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- Has our parish life changed, grown, developed as a result of adult faith formation?
  - Each adult who invests in any faith formation changes all of us in a rippling-out manner. We are one body.
- What methods, practices, events or materials have helped “transform” our adult believers, our parish as a learning community?
  - The Stephen Ministry, RCIA, and Alpha are certainly transformative. So is any moment/activity/conversation that takes root in our hearts.
- In this area of transformation, what are we doing well?
  - This happens through continuing to let God guide us, by listening to the Holy Spirit. It is never only about a book or a program or a set of to-dos. It is personal, specific, and relational. Metanoia is an action of the Spirit; we can only escort people to the door of their hearts and ask them to turn the handle. Surrender is their choice.
- Are there things we could do better?
  - Keep asking them. Keep trusting Him. Do not fear. Do not be discouraged.
    - *Marian Bart, Parish Catechetical Leader*
    - *Regina Simony, Adult Faith Formation Coordinator*  
*St. Anastasia Parish, Troy*

(We welcome your comments, thoughts, suggestions, ideas, etc. Your views and practices continually support and encourage others. Email them to [jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org](mailto:jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org) any time.)



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at [www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com).

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://ecatechist.com>. Click on ebooks for: *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*.
- [www.pastoralplanning.com](http://www.pastoralplanning.com). Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.