



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#34 - October 2013

Adult Faith Formation Efforts: What Didn't Work (#2)

Winston Churchill reminds us: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." In reality, most people will say that it's **in the failures that we learn most**, and, therefore, we continue on with courage.

A while ago I invited **GEMS** readers to share "what didn't work" as they have persevered in the ministry of adult faith formation. Our [June 2013 issue of GEMS](#) was our first newsletter to look at "what didn't work."

This issue continues that exploration, sharing some more experiences from our readers; **future issues will continue with more examples**. *If you have an incident or event to pass along, more are always welcome! (You can remain anonymous if you'd like.)*

As you reflect on each of the following instances, watch for the **new learnings** which surfaced for each person. Often the wisdom was already within each person but now deepened because of their reflection on "what didn't work."



"My experience that didn't work was going through the parish list with the pastor to find sponsors for the RCIA. We sent a letter inviting over 100 people to a reception (with cookies and coffee and the pastor) to discuss being a sponsor. Only two came and both had reasons why they couldn't do it. The letter wasn't sneaky - we told them what we were looking for but no one was willing to commit. Now, I pretty much ask people personally and we have quite a few reliable sponsors who are happy to do it again and again."

- *Brigid Johnson, Director of Religious Education,
Sacred Heart Cathedral, Knoxville, TN*

A Sparkling GEM

Brigid points out a core reality about ministry in the parish today. Ministry is a call which most often comes through personal contact, personal invitation.

A Wondering GEM

At times, do you think that for many people participating in the RCIA process, it might seem overwhelming? Their response to a letter, within a large group gathering, or to a bulletin article might be: "Do I really want to take this on? Who am I to do this?"

Perhaps, then, one-on-one personal contact can

- be more personal
- answer their questions
- point out their gifts, what they would bring to the RCIA process
- and reassure them that they don't have to do everything (that's the reason for an RCIA Team).



"An experience of something not working: attempts to implement a new process for registering new parishioners. Old ways are hard to change.

In planning the previous dinners for the new parishioners, "some" felt there needed to be an activity for the parishioners who were attending. When asking the people who attended, they preferred just to have time to ask questions of the staff in attendance. This was easy to change as the feeling in the room just wasn't right when trying the activities out.

An important reality that has worked during these dinners is to take notice of the demographics of those attending, e.g.:

- more families this month
- next month, more singles

With this in mind, invite current parishioners who match those demographics to attend the dinner with the new parishioners for the dinner.

The current members

- are able to answer many questions for the new parishioners
- as well as beginning new friendships."

- *anonymous*



“I had been leading adult faith formation for St. Mark Parish for several years and found it to be very rewarding and very successful except for this one “topic.” I personally was and am always interested in topics on prayer and the mystics. Therefore, I contacted an excellent speaker and pursued the topic “The Mystics for Today.”

Well, the attendance was the poorest I ever had experienced. People were very unsure what the topic was all about even after reading the blurb I had written regarding the content. The speaker realized that the group was not familiar with the topic, therefore, slowly guided them through a lighter version of “The Mystics” than we had planned. It was very clear that this was a mistake.

I learned two things from this experience.

- First, don’t allow personal interests to enter into your choices. At times our deepest “love” is not what others need.
- Secondly, I quickly learned to be sure that what is presented is always at the level of those participating or at least a gentle stretching. Be aware of what people are looking for through surveys and conversations.

It was a hard lesson but it paid off as after this event I returned to the topics that had brought so many participants.

An added note: advertising is most important. Reaching others and having them reach out to those in their parishes or friends makes things work well; more and more will benefit.”

- JoAnn Loria-Briffa, Retired Adult Faith Formation Director,
Clinton Township, MI

Some Wondering GEMS

- What are your experiences with surveys? Are there advantages/disadvantages to surveys? What questions might be asked in a survey to get at people’s real needs?

- How might we s-t-r-e-t-c-h people? One of our roles is to invite people to new understandings, to share with them new ways of seeing and appreciating. See [GEMS #27](#).
- How do we help people realize that going deeper, being s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d in their faith lives is a “felt need” which touches all parts of their lives?



“Excruciating Experiences: Lessons Learned

There are two experiences—and the resultant lessons—which immediately come to mind when people ask about bad experiences of adult education and formation.

The first was not a parish adult education event but a post-graduate course in public service administration that taught me a crucial lesson. We were all adults, post-graduate adults and all professional in not-for-profit organizations: recreation departments, government services, churches. The course began with introductions and sharing of experiences and current positions. Good adult process, right? Too bad it ended there.

The professor’s methodology was unique. He read his lecture with his back to us while he wrote key points on the chalkboard. He couldn’t, of course, see hands raised, students - adult students - eager to pose a question. So, the students, being adults, asked their questions anyway: ‘Excuse me professor, but could you clarify the steps in policy making?’ ‘Professor, what is the best way to approach change in a non-profit setting?’ Respectfully asked; rudely responded to: ‘Can’t you read what I wrote or can’t you read at all? If you were paying attention, idiot, you would have learned what to do.’

My classmates and I exchanged puzzled glances at first, but as the weeks went on, our frustration grew beyond puzzlement to frustration. The professor’s behavior did not alter. We eagerly awaited the respite that the break time brought. That is when we could complain, express our anger. How could this prestigious university employ such a person? Every prior negative learning experience paled in light of this new educational travesty.

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And then, like mature adult post-graduate professionals, we plotted our revenge. It was simple, but really, it was all that was in our power to do at the time. We decided that when break time was over we would not return to class until the professor came to get us. It gave us a modicum of satisfaction to make him come out and seek us and ask us to please return to class. Though it didn't matter whether we went back or not, the learning had died.

And it struck me forcefully as I reflected on that fact. The negative relationship between the teacher and the students had truncated the educational process.

- How do our relationships facilitate formation?
- What is the relationship of presenter to participants and how does that affect the success of an event or process?

The second event was a parish formation evening at which I was the presenter. It had been planned long in advance with the parish leadership and was aimed at parents and catechists and teachers. I worked to prepare the given topic, being sure to incorporate process and to connect with the experiences of the adults, to use examples that would relate to their real lives. And, having prepared thoroughly, I was ready when the night of the presentation finally came.

I arrived early to set up and be ready to greet the adults who would come. And then, one of the parish leaders approached me. 'We have invited the parents and catechists and teachers,' she said and then added, 'We also extended the invitation to the parish-at-large.'

I was mentally altering a few examples I had planned to give so that I would be inclusive of those who didn't have children or whose children were grown. It would be okay, and so I was about to tell the leader. But she had another surprise for me: 'Oh, and we told people to feel free to bring their children tonight, too.'

Now I was trying to adjust the presentation to a whole new audience. The stories, the examples, the connections had to now include children's experiences. And I had about ten minutes before the presentation would begin. I did tell the leader that this was my worst nightmare...to be invited to address a group and then to have an entirely different group attend.

I did the best I could, but it basically meant ignoring the adults - there were more children anyway, ranging in age from 7-13. I tried to make a few points directed to the adults, and I tried to invite them to respond, but it was all about the kids, really. Losing their attention would have been equally as disastrous as failing to engage the adults.

Two lessons:

- One, relationships are key when it comes to education and especially formation.
- Two, know why you are holding an event or process or experience. Know who is to be invited and, therefore, who is to be addressed. Articulate your goal for the event: 'This will have been a success if...'

And be sure that your presenter has or is capable of having a positive relationship with the participants: uses good adult methodology, is respectful, listens but is able to move the process along, too. And communicate not only the topic, but the goal you have in mind and who the audience is—age level, but prior offerings in formation as well.

These seem to be fairly fundamental concepts for adult faith formation, but these were not ancient experiences, they were recent. Sometimes, as we deal with increasing complexities of adult life and adult faith, we need to remind ourselves of the fundamentals. Otherwise they might not come back from the break and it will all be just kid stuff."

- *Dr. Carole Eipers,*
Vice President, Executive Director of Catechetics,
William H. Sadlier, Inc.

A Sparkling GEM

Thank you, Carole! You've named several issues. You've provided us with many essential points to remember as we plan for and facilitate gatherings with adults.

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A Wondering GEM

Carole's experience reminds us of the challenge of doing intergenerational experiences without "losing some people."

- How do we practically plan and host intergenerational gatherings which meet everyone's needs?
- What types of formats have you found successful?
- Are there helpful resources/methods that you've used?

This is not a rhetorical question

- What do you wonder about when you read about these instances of "things that didn't work?" What comes to your mind regarding things to remember, things to do/not to do?
- So that we can all reap the benefits from each other's experiences (as we share them in future issues), send your thoughts, wonderings and ideas to jschaeffler@adriandominicans.com



Golden Nuggets From You

"This ([GEMS #13](#)) is a great newsletter. Our cluster is planning an end of life series in January. I am taking this info to our meeting tomorrow night to see if there is an interest in adding a night for funeral planning. What great timing on your part!!! Thank you."

- Diane Seidel, St. Boniface Parish, Bay City, Michigan

"It is past time to let you know how much I enjoy reading the **GEMS** and appreciate the work you're doing for others to have enjoyable spirit-filled reading material.

I've shared your material with my Bible Study group and recently with our Adult Vacation Bible Study group. Although I am a member of St. Paul the Apostle in Baton Rouge, I recently completed a phenomenal 21-session

retreat named "Engaging Spirituality" at St. Aloysius in Baton Rouge. I found out about the retreat through a notice in our Sunday bulletin. As you network with others, some may be interested in Just Faith Ministry and can learn more at [JustFaith Ministries](#).

Once again, thanks..."

- Barbara (BJ) Haynes, St. Paul the Apostle Parish, Baton Rouge, LA

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



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

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

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