A View from the Community:
What Today's Experiences Are Telling Us about Adult Faith Formation

Janet Schaeffler, OP

- "In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists." (Eric Hoffer)

- "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #41)

- "The seven last words of a dying organization: we never did it that way before." (Anonymous)

- "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do." (Johann Wolfgang vonGoethe)

- "We need a new apologetic, geared to the needs of today, which keeps in mind that our task is not to win arguments but to win souls... Such an apologetic will need to breathe a spirit of humanity, that humility and compassion which understand the anxieties and questions of people." (Pope John Paul II)

- "Affairs are now soul size.
     The enterprise is exploration into God.
     Where are you making for? It takes
     So many thousand years to wake,
     But will you wake for pity's sake?" (Christopher Frye)

- "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." (Benjamin Franklin)

- "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." (William Butler Yeats)

- "I learned most not from those who taught me but from those who talked with me." (St. Augustine)

- "Sometimes when you don't know the answer to a question that keeps playing over and over again in your mind, it's because you're messing with the wrong question." (Anonymous)

Does this seem like a list of unconnected or disjointed quotes from various people throughout the ages? As I reflect on them, often keep them before me, they're not. In various ways they say significant things about who we are, where we are today, and the challenge and wonder of

adult faith formation in our church. They remind us of our successes and triumphs; they prompt us forward to work for and live "for the more."

As we embark on this short overview and reflection on adult faith formation today, that is what we will do here:

- Reflect on some signs of growth, some best practices, in our ministry of adult faith formation over the last several years
- Explore some continuing challenges for areas of development and progression for the years ahead

(And, for now and the days ahead, you might use these quotes – yourself and with your adult faith formation committees/teams – to ask: what does this call us to in our ministry within our adult-centered communities?)

Background/Sources for these Reflections
Where do these reflections on the signs of growth, the best practices, and the continuing challenges come from? For me, they are a result of several experiences in which I have been privileged to be involved:

- Ministering as Director of Catechetics and Adult Faith Formation at several parishes
- Serving as Director of Adult Faith Formation for an archdiocese
- Conducting a best practices study of adult faith formation of the parishes within one archdiocese
- For the last three years (and ongoing) conducting an international best practices study of adult faith formation
- Having the privilege of working with countless leaders of adult faith formation from across the country as they pursued a Certificate in Adult Faith Formation through the University of Dayton's VLCFF (Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation
- In my present ministry, working with and in parishes and (arch)dioceses around the country through various adult faith formation opportunities

Some of the vision, ideas, and best practices that were generated in the archdiocesan best practice study can be explored in Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation (http://store.pastoralplanning.com/iboplbeprfor.html).

To participate in the current international best practices study, email jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org for a simple survey. Monthly newsletters, GEMS (Great Endeavors Mined and Shared), are published, sharing the practices, methods, imaginative and innovative programs and processes shared in the ongoing study. All past issues are archived at Faith Formation Matters (www.janetschaeffler.com). To be placed on the email list and have them delivered directly to your email, contact Janet Schaeffler, OP at jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org.

Other reminders and best practices can be found in 40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation (http://www.faithalivebooks.com/e-books/; scroll down).

Let us, first then, explore some signs of growth in our understanding and practice of adult faith formation over the last several years which are evident as any of us look around; which, for me, stand out in the various opportunities that have been shared in the two best practices studies with which I have been involved.

Best Practice 1: Leadership
Adult faith formation doesn't just happen. Wherever there is a thriving community, committed to ongoing growth in the faith journey, there is dedicated – and designated – and formed leadership.

For years, many practioners have advocated for the profession of adult faith formation ministry. "Giving focus to adults through provision of a specialist can mean more significant ministry to all adults and increased quality of educational efforts with them….The Director of Adult Religious Education is more than a promoter of denominational programs for adults or an 'activities director' for adults. … The Director of Adult Religious Education must be an educator in the truest sense, establishing philosophy, cooperatively setting program objectives, assessing needs, and facilitating adult learning through the widest possible array of learning avenues." (R. Michael Wharton in "Working with Educators of Adults," in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, ed. Nancy T. Foltz. Religious Education Press, 1986)

While adult faith formation is the responsibility of the entire congregation, it nonetheless needs to be the specific responsibility of one staff member (and some church members serving on teams/committees) to lead this ministry.

The various best practices (in the two studies) usually were from churches in which there was a dedicated staff person and a church committee/team, working with them. One comment from a church member: "I thought we were doing a great deal to provide resources and opportunities for adult faith growth. It has just multiplied a thousand-fold since we have added a staff person who is dedicated to adult faith formation – in all its possibilities."

Yet, the challenge is that more and more anecdotal accounts, from around the country, as well as in the best practices studies, are telling us that less and less church staff are taking on more and more responsibilities (at a time when the needs of people are increasing). If someone becomes a "jack/jill of all trades, are they a master of none"? Will the catechetical vision of our congregations suffer, in particular the vision of the centrality of adult faith formation?

This key staff person needs the credentials and the time to devote to the ministry of adult faith formation. It's not just about planning a program here or there; bringing in three speakers a year! Adult faith formation is the way a congregation lives. This individual will advocate for the primacy of adult faith formation, helping everyone to view all dimensions of parish life through the lens of adult faith formation. This takes time and energy.

"If the designated leader is the parish director of religious education or another staff person, adjustments may be needed in job descriptions so as not to shortchange the amount and quality of time and energy they can devote to adult faith formation. Otherwise their many responsibilities may

prevent them from devoting sufficient time to this essential priority." (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: The U.S. Bishops Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States,* #136)

Best Practice 2: Needs assessment

One of the principles of adult learning reminds us: Adults learn best when they have input into the what, why, and how they will learn.   They are motivated to participate when they have been part of the planning.

One of the ways to be attentive to this is to do continual needs assessment, using various methods. The most successful best practices (in these two studies) are ones in which the needs of the people determined what was planned/offered.

A few of the many ways to do needs assessment:
- The evaluations which are done at the conclusion of adult faith formation events
- Continual reflection on the demographics of your parish/congregation: through an up-to-date census, as well as the statistics/demographics available from the local area (the city, county, region, etc.)
- Self-assessment inventories
- Invitation to people to be part of one-time focus groups and think tanks
- Interviews
- Parish surveys, especially ones done electronically, e.g. SurveyMonkey
- Staff and parish leadership (committees, teams, commissions, leadership groups, etc.) being observant and sensitive whenever they are present with church members: What is being talked about? What are the everyday concerns of the people?
- Pay attention to the minutes of the parish pastoral council/the church board: What are they spending their time on? What doesn't get time?

Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton, in *The Religious Education of Adults (*Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), remind us what the congregations with best practices have experienced. "… interests and needs are not the same, though they are frequently confused by religious educators. An interest is an expression of some degree of desire, while need connotes a deficit. Religious educators often make the mistake of assuming that because adults express an interest in a topic, they will participate in a program addressing that topic. … Where genuine needs are concerned, the religious educator may confuse ascribed needs and perceived needs. Unfortunately, religious educators often observe adults or examine literature describing the life situation of a group of adults…, then they ascribe needs to the adults, proceeding to plan programs to address those ascribed needs. However, if adults do not perceive that these needs are real, they will not be motivated to participate. Ascribed needs may be the starting point in the assessment process, but they are never sufficient basis for program planning."

Therefore, planning goes beyond the various means of needs assessment. In the words of McKenzie and Harton,
- "Prospective participants should be brought into the decision-making process regarding the total educational program."

- Adults should be invited to help the religious educator implement and administer the educational program.
- Adults should be invited not only to provide evaluations of the educational program but should also be involved, as is feasible, in the planning of program evaluation."

Best Practice 3: An environment of welcome and hospitality

More and more books, articles, websites and blogs are discussing the importance of and providing suggestions for congregations to nurture an atmosphere of belonging for all.

Research has shown that people will engage in the life of the parish (e.g. respond to ministerial calls, participate in adult faith formation) because of the atmosphere/environment of the church. One of the key features of this environment is being welcomed/a feeling of belonging.

In most cases, belief does not lead to belonging, but rather, belonging leads to belief, according to current research by the Gallup Organization (*Growing an Engaged Church* by Albert J. Winseman, Gallup Press, 2007).

Hospitality (in all its ramifications) is a key ingredient *of* adult faith formation, but the atmosphere of the parish, its theology of welcome, precedes adult faith formation. Without a welcoming, hospitable environment, very few parishioners – and visitors - will be interested in or motivated for adult faith formation.

Best Practice 4: Adult ways of learning

It is obvious today, especially where best practices are happening, that ministers and committees understand and appreciate that adults learn differently than children.

We understand andragogy. Originally used by Alexander Kapp (a German educator) in 1833, andragogy was developed into a theory of adult education by the American educator Malcolm Knowles. Knowles asserted that andragogy (Greek: "man-leading") should be distinguished from the more commonly used pedagogy (Greek: "child-leading") when working with adult education.

Knowles' theory can be stated with six assumptions related to motivation of adult learning:
- Adults need to know why they need to learn something before learning it.
- The self-concept of adult is heavily dependent upon a move toward self-direction.
- Prior experiences of the learner provide a rich resource for learning.
- Adults typically become ready to learn when they experience a need to cope with a life situation or perform a task.
- Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; education is a process of developing increased competency levels to achieve their full potential.
- The motivation for the adult learner is internal rather than external.

These assumptions have led to much reflection and best practices regarding [the principles of adult learning](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Adult_Learning_Principles__2_.pdf).

Best Practice 5: Involvement – participation

One of the significant signs of growth in adult faith formation – seen in the best practices studies - is the tendency to "ban the lecture" as a means of adult faith formation.

"Lecturing is the process whereby the notes of the teacher become the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either." (Mortimer Adler)

"There should be less talk. A preaching point is not a meeting point." (Mother Teresa)

Even though many "programs" still revolve around guest speakers, workshops, various courses, etc., there is a growing realization that "adults learn best when they are in conversation with other adults about things that matter." (Jane Regan in *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation*, Loyola Press)

Significant time for conversation and exploration, as well as varied activities and all types of interaction, is the centerpiece of adult faith formation in thriving communities.

Best Practice 6: Responding to the needs of communities of like interest

Nearly a century ago Henry Ford invented the famous assembly line that is credited with putting Detroit, and the world, in the "Mass Production" business. When he introduced the Model T, the marketing message was essentially, "You can have any color you want as long as it is black."

Donald Tapscott, the author of several books on today's digital world, uses a different term to describe what drives business today: "Mass Customization." In effect, "you can have whatever you want customized to your wishes."

What does this mean for adult faith formation? We can no longer approach adult faith formation with a "one-size-fits-all" mentality. "…adults will be interested in (and need) different aspects of the religious according to their personal faith development and expression. An approach of 'corned beef and hash for everyone' (which is tantamount to 'We don't care what you need, this is what you get because this is what we've got') and programs based simply on what the religious educator or pastor wants to teach are too capricious." (Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton in *The Religious Education of Adults*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing).

All we have to do is look at our congregations and we easily realize the diversity and, therefore the reality, that different groups need different things, for instance:
- Parents of young children need something different than empty nesters
- Those who have just lost a job have unique needs
- People who are new in the faith need something different than those who have been deeply practicing the faith for years

Certainly, there are times when "mixed groups" are important; we learn from the wisdom and experiences of each other. Yet, many parishes/congregations tell us that they have better responses to offerings when the offerings are for specific groups, for communities of like interest.

- Scripture study programs for men, often at times convenient for their work schedules, seem to attract more men than a generic Scripture program.
- A program exploring various forms of prayer can be offered for couples, for those in grief, for new parents, for baby boomers, etc.
- Would specific groups be attracted to offerings, such as: Effective Grandparenting, Relating Effectively to your Adult Children, Balancing Love, Work and Life, Support Group for Adult Children of Aging Parents, Juggling the Rhythms of Family, Planning to Age Gracefully (and Have Fun Doing It)?

Seth Godin, a prolific author and the past Director of Direct Marketing for Yahoo could be talking to adult faith formation directors and congregational leaders when he says in *Small Is the New Big: and 183 Other Riffs, Rants and Remarkable Business Ideas* (Portfolio, 2006): "A product for everyone rarely reaches anyone."

There are many more signs of growth, examples of vitality in adult faith formation. Unfortunately, they can't all be explored here. Let's move to some of the continuing challenges for areas of development and progression which lie before us for the years ahead. These challenges surface, in various ways, as one observes and examines the best practices prevalent today.

Challenge 1: An integrated approach of pastoral planning
Even though there are meaningful things happening in adult faith formation throughout the various churches, how are they planned?

In some congregations, one or two people think of an idea for an adult faith formation program. Eight or ten people show up. Three months later, the same one or two people think of another idea and the same eight to twelve people come.

People wonder why "it's not working."

Adult Faith Formation – like anything worthwhile - has to be systematically planned. It can't be sporadic; it can't belong to just a few people.

Adult Faith Formation is the work of the parish. It needs strategic, pastoral planning.

In some instances, congregations have a "flashbulb approach" to planning adult faith formation. Someone has an idea; thus a 4-week Scripture series is planned for next month. In a few months, someone (or the same person) has another idea; a three week series on prayer is scheduled, beginning in two weeks.

Are there vision and goals behind this approach in order to have a comprehensive, integrated plan? Is there a sense of: Where are we going? Are there specific programs and processes that are

planned to fit together rather than scattered programs and projects that are thought of and plopped in at the last moment?

At the same time, and this might seem contradictory, but it's not. (It's the way of realistic planning today: both/and.) This is a fast-changing world. We also need to be able to adapt, within our long-range plans, adapt to changing conditions and needs while not losing our focus or our vision. "Adaptive planning," "tweaking" our integrated long-range plan is frequently a necessary step with today's fast-paced, ever-changing world, if we are going to be open and ready to meet the needs that arise and surprise us. Our long-range plan of three or five years – necessary as it is -- can't be set in stone; conditions change.

Some churches have commented in the best practices study:
- "Our most successful programs were in response to what was happening in 'popular, everyday' culture – the needs of the people."
- "What people needed were responses/help to what was happening in their lives, our nation's life, our Church's life which we didn't know was going to happen when we set our long range plan."

Often, too, when we think of pastoral planning, we think of naming/scheduling all the programs. In reality, programming is not the first thing that happens, even though that is the most visible part of adult faith formation ministry. Much needs to precede it and surround it.

Some possible components of a parish pastoral plan for adult faith formation:
- Church mission statement
- Church mission statement for faith formation
- Church vision statement for adult faith formation
- Name the leadership model
- Goals for adult faith formation for the following 3-5 years
- Strategies and objectives
- Implementation Process
  - Budget
  - Marketing/publicity
  - Facilities
  - Time line
  - Schedule

- Methods of Evaluation
  - Individual programs
  - Annual evaluation of plan
  - Evaluation from the standpoint of the staff, committee, facilitators

Some (not all) fundamental reminders about pastoral planning for adult faith formation which can be gleaned from today's best practices:

- It's never ended! The congregation is always changing. Even though the plan may be "set" for three-to-five years, it always needs to be evaluated. Is it meeting the current needs of all members?

- A successful plan touches everyone. How can the most people have input into it? How will you provide for people's voices, their needs, dreams, interests, to be heard as you explore the questions: who are we as a congregation? What are we about? What has to happen if we are to continue to be disciples of Jesus in the next five years?

- Continually use various means to do needs assessment, to listen to the interests and desires of all the adults of your congregation.
  - What are the life issues: family, work, suffering/grief, relationships, etc.?
  - What are the life tasks facing them in their particular age/stage in life?
  - What are the current milestones/transitions being faced: birth, celebration of first sacraments, career changes, unemployment, retirement, illness, separation and divorce, death of family and friends?
  - What are the religious needs: connecting faith and life, making moral decisions, living the teachings of the church?
  - What are the spirituality needs: growing in relationship with God, living as disciples in everyday life, deepening prayer, connecting justice and spirituality, etc.?
  - What are the experiences and needs of each of the cultural communities in the congregation?

- Therefore, there will probably be various tracks in a pastoral plan for adult faith formation to allow adults to follow their interests and to minister out of their strengths.

- Everything we do teaches. Thus, can the very act of creating the plan help church leaders and members deepen their realization of mission? The mission of a congregation – and each member - is the mission of Christ: to reveal the good news of God's love, to build the Reign of God. How concretely does a specific congregation do that?

Challenge 2: Adult Faith Formation is all-encompassing; it is not a "program"
Even though a typical definition that comes to mind when one hears "adult faith formation" might be: "intentional learning experiences that deepen, expand, and make explicit the learning in faith that is, hopefully, already part of the life of the believing community," adult faith formation goes well beyond that!

Adult faith formation is much more than programs, much more than intentionally planned learning experiences. Even the intentionally planned learning experiences can (should) happen in a myriad of ways; but it is also obvious there are other ways that faith grows and deepens within the church setting. To name just a few:
- celebrating weekly worship

- participating in outreach activities, especially if there is an opportunity to reflect with others on how the experience personally effected the "givers"
- joining with others to sign a petition for a justice issue
- celebrating the sacramental life of the church
- helping build a house with Habitat for Humanity
- prayer groups
- spiritual direction available at/through the church

For twenty centuries the church has lived the mission of Jesus, by helping each person to participate and contribute, to be always more fully a faithful, prayerful, serving and learning member of the Body of Christ through:
- koinonia (community)
- leiturgia (prayer and worship)
- didache (teaching)
- kerygma (proclamation)
- diakonia (outreach)

All of these ways are formational! Each of these ways teaches, help a person grow in faith. Truly, each is adult faith formation.

Adult faith formation is much more than programs; the parish is the curriculum (*Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* by Maria Harris. John Knox Press, 1989). Each of the ways mentioned above is unquestionably formational. Everything forms the curriculum, the "course of study," for our faith growth.

The Gospel message is always being communicated (or contradicted) in everything congregations do:
- budget decisions
- the way a secretary answers the phone
- the prayerful atmosphere of all gatherings
- the living of the social justice teachings of the church
- the emphasis placed on following Scripture, etc.

…all communicate and form the faith of everyone in the parish.

Does the parish pastoral council, boards and committees annually ask themselves the question: In everything that we are living, doing, and ways that we are functioning as a parish, what are we teaching people?
- about God
- faith and life
- about prayer
- about being Church
- about justice and peace
- about living and bringing about the Reign of God?

Adult faith formation is not just about planning six week programs; it is about the way a parish lives moment by moment.

Adult faith formation is much more than programs; it's about being a learning community. In *Toward an Adult Church*, Jane Regan says: "…being a community that fosters adult faith is not primarily specific programs, but… lifelong learning… What needs to be formed is a parish that is a learning community."

In her chapter, "The Aim of Catechesis" in the book *Horizons and Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, Jane names four of the many significant implications she sees flowing from this:
- Adult faith formation within the parish as a learning community is an integral part of parish life at all levels.
- Structures are created within the parish which provide space for genuine conversation among adults.
- The wisdom of all members of the parish community is consistently recognized and affirmed.
- The overarching goal of adult faith formation is to foster a sense of mission rather than simply to enhance membership.

Adult faith formation is much more than programs; it can (and does) happen anywhere. Most adults live their faith at church 3% of their time; the rest of their time they are living it at home, in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, etc. They live it and deepen it by things such as:
- answering a question from a co-worker about what they believe
- making Lenten resolutions
- praying with their spouse/family
- struggling with a decision and talking it over with other people of faith
- forgiving at home, forgiving in their neighborhood, forgiving in their community
- responding with care, compassion, and kindness – often on the spur of the moment

Frequently, busy lives today don't always allow time for people to show up for scheduled "six-week programs" but that doesn't mean they're not learning/growing in faith. What are we doing to enable them to understand/appreciate their on-going growth?

Adult faith formation is much more than programs; it's about who we are. The search for God, the call to discipleship, is rooted in all we are, all we do. It is the very essence of everything we do. Diana Butler Bass (*Process, Not Program: Creating Congregations of Learning and Practice*. Herdon, VA: Alban Institute) says: churches "are communities of transformation - places where people come to encounter God and know God more deeply."

The goal of catechesis - to help bring people into intimacy with Jesus Christ - is at the heart of everything that happens in and at the church. Adult faith formation pervades everything; it is happening all the time.

Diana Butler Bass goes on to say, "Adult faith formation is the gathering and strengthening place for learning to be a Christian, for mentoring others in faith, and for practicing faith corporately. It is the heartbeat of churchgoing in the twenty-first century."

In the same vein, noted author Kathy Coffey said in a *National Catholic Reporter* podcast: "We don't go to an art museum to see art on the wall there. We go to an art museum to be sensitized to beauty everywhere. It is much the same with church. We go to church to be sensitized to the holiness that is everywhere."

Our very *being* the Church teaches. What are we "teaching" this week? each and every week? all the time?

Challenge 3: Content, Opportunities, and Delivery Systems Need to be Comprehensive
People's needs are many. Our congregations are, naturally, filled with people at various stages of faith development, people with various life needs, people engaged with the Christian community in differing ways.

Adults today learn in multiple ways. There was a large body of research conducted during the 1980's about adult learning. The consensus was that roughly 85% of what adults learned then was not in a formal setting, classroom, or lecture hall. That was 10-15 years before the Internet. There has been a significant paradigm shift with adult learning today driven by the Internet and since 2007 by the Wiki world (peer to peer sharing). If 85% was the informal percentage in the 1980's, just think what it would be today. What it will be tomorrow?

Part of the pastoral planning and programming, then, needs to ensure that, in every instance (content, opportunities, locations and schedules, and delivery systems, etc.) everyone is thinking outside the box, is planning comprehensively. What we've done, the way we've always done it, is not adequate today.

One tool (among many) to help congregations/parishes evaluate their present processes and programs, as well as comprehensively plan for the future is What Are We Providing for Adult Faith Growth?

As the directions for this process state, looking at the delivery systems is as important as the content. Not every need has to be responded to with a "three-week program," "a lecture series." There are multiple delivery systems available today. Are we expanding our understanding and conviction of the many ways, places, methods which enable adult learning today?

Challenge 4: Motivation to learn when facing life's transitions
As crucial as it is to have designed, scheduled opportunities for ongoing faith formation in congregations
- consider your own life,
- think about your family's life,
- When were the life-changing moments?

Probably most of them happened outside of "pre-planned" self or family improvement sessions or adult faith formation sessions on various church themes. Upon reflection, most people realize that usually their deepest faith growth occurred during the unpredictable situations – and even crises – of normal, everyday life.

Diane Tickton Schuster ("Placing Adult Jewish Learning at the Center," *Agenda: Jewish Education JESNA*, Issue #16 Summer 2003), names our reality: "Adulthood is filled with transitions: geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, unanticipated illness, divorce, and the loss of loved ones. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to "finish unfinished business" or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive educational institutions as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help regain 'order and stability' in their lives."

This reality is also affirmed by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson in *The Adult Learner,* sixth edition. Elsevier, 2005) as they summarize the research which constitutes the foundation of adult learning theory:
- "Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.
- Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience."

As crucial as congregations are at these times of transitions, Rex Miller (*The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church* Jossey-Bass, 2004) reminds us that our response, our walking with people during transitions, takes many forms; it's not only "information." "Discipleship is not a small group or classroom topic. It is a lab project, a choreographed dance, an art taught under the eye of a master."

Thus, the task for churches is to be aware of all the transitions which are touching the lives of people today. Since adult faith formation is all-encompassing, what are the programs, processes, support, resources – and even challenges – which people need during the various transition times?

Challenge 5: The quest for spirituality, for living faith
All we need to do is listen to today's adults for five minutes and it becomes obvious that they are searching for ways to connect faith and life, to experience God, to live spiritually and faithfully in their everyday world, to probe for ways to answer – and live – the questions of the day. They are searching for life, for living – not simply knowing.

In *The Future of Faith: The Rise and Fall of Belief and the Coming Age of the Spirit* (HarperOne, 2009), Harvey Cox divides church history into three ages: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and the Age of the Spirit.
- The Age of Faith (the time of Jesus to 400): Christianity was a way of life based upon faith (trust *in* Jesus)
- The Age of Belief (400 – 1900): A period of emphasis on creeds and beliefs (belief *about* Jesus)
- The Age of the Spirit (1900 – today): A Christianity based on an experience *of* Jesus. This time is also concerned about *practicing* the faith, rather than simply *knowing about* it.

The findings related in the book, *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21ˢᵗ Century Churches* (Gallup Press, 2002), reiterate this: "The churches of America, in these opening years of the twenty-

first century, face an historic moment of opportunity. Surveys record an unprecedented desire for religious and spiritual growth among all people in all walks of life and in every region of the nation. There is an intense searching for spiritual moorings, a hunger for God."

In *Christianity After Religion* (HarperOne, 2012), Diana Butler Bass reminds us: "Belief is not going to disappear, and it will not become a relic of the religious past. Rather, as religion gives way to spirituality, the question of belief shifts from *what* to *how*. … *What* is not the issue – the world of religion is full of *what*. Instead, they have asked *how*. Belief questions have become, 'How do you believe?' 'How could I ever believe?' 'How does this make sense?' 'How would believing this make my life different?' or 'How would this change the world?'

… *How* moves us around in the question. Instead of being above the information, giving an expert opinion about something, *how* weaves our lives with the information as we receive, renew, reflect, and act upon what we sought. *How* provides actionable information… *How* is a question of meaning and purpose that pushes people into a deeper engagement in the world, rather than memorizing facts."

What does all this mean for congregational life and for adult faith formation? Many things! A few:
- When we plan for adult faith formation, where do we begin: with church questions or life questions?
- Does every opportunity of adult faith formation, help – challenge – people to ask the "so what" question? What does this have to do with my everyday life? What am I going to do about it?
- The quest for spirituality, for living what I know, is the search today. Do all our opportunities engage people in that quest?

Challenge 6: Formation for critical thinking
We live in a challenging, constantly-changing world. As Jane Regan said ("Adult Faith Formation: Will It Catch on this Time? *America*, September 22, 2003): "…adult faith formation invites the believing community to look beyond their own community to the wider mission of the church."

The US Bishops' Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, challenges us to remember and live that one of the goals of adult faith formation is to "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* …faith formation seeks to help each adult believer become 'more willing and able to be a *Christian disciple in the world*.'" (#72-73)

To be disciples we are called to make a difference in the world, to transform the world. In the midst of that responsibility today, there are unprecedented challenges, questions, and actions waiting for us. Mature adult Christians can respond because they have grown and developed several characteristics: living as a person of wisdom, not only knowledge; the ability of discernment, and skills of critical thinking.

Thus, as we invite adults on the journey of faith-growth, through varied adult faith formation opportunities, do the programs and processes provide an environment for formation and transformation, in addition to information? Are we equipping people to live – and act as a disciple – in today's real world?

Challenge 7: Embracing the Digital World
Life is not the same as it was even ten years ago. It never will be again. Much of the change and way of life we experience today is because we are immersed in a digital world, even when we don't recognize it.

Fortunately today, we have many helps and supports to aid us in navigating this world, especially for adult faith formation:
- Catholic Web Solutions (http://www.catholicwebsolutions.com/)
- Catholic Tech Talk (http://catholictechtalk.com/)
- Internet Toolbox for Churches (http://www.internettoolboxforchurches.com/)
- Catechesis 2.0 (http://catechesis20.wordpress.com/web-2-0/)
- *Click 2 Save: The Digital Ministry Bible* by Elizabeth Drescher and Keith Anderson
- *Tweet If You Love Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* by Elizabeth Drescher
- *The Word Made Fresh: Communicating Church and Faith Today* by Meredith Gould
- *Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul* by Lynne Baab
- *Preaching the Social Media Gospel* by Meredith Gould
- *The Parish Guide to Social Media* by Clarissa Valbuene Aljentera
- *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* by Daniella Zsupan-Jerome (Liturgical

These are only a few; resources abound.

The best practices studies often illustrate that the challenge is that congregations are the last to embrace the potential of all that communications technology offers. Some best practices respondents said:
- "We aren't very advanced in the world of technology …"
- "We are just starting to use technology …"
- "We could use some help in this area!"

Countless opportunities can be lost for connection, for hospitality, for formation if the churches are not active contributors and users of all that is possible.

Challenge 8: The Challenges of the Digital World
As we just explored, our digital world is here to stay and has unimaginable potential for adult faith formation. The possibilities only multiply each day.

At the same time, there can be consequences and implications which – in some instances – might be undesirable. Do we, can we, as church walk with people, serving as a balancing influence, helping people consciously navigate this brand new world, rather than be controlled by it?

In 1966 Martin Heidegger remarked that thoughtlessness is an uncanny guest who comes and goes everywhere in today's world (*Discourse on Thinking,* translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. Harper and Row, 1966). If that was true in 1966, how much more so today.

A few of the characteristics and ramifications of today's instant, digital world might be:
- We have access to much information; yet, information and knowledge are not the same as wisdom.
- With so much available to us, do we keep searching for more and more or do we also take time for reflection, for assimilation?
- Is speed effecting our decisions? The crush of technology often forces us to respond immediately. Do we blink when we need to think? E-mail, social media and 24-hour news are relentless. Our time cycle gets faster every day. Do we take the time to step back and think about the big picture?

The wisdom of our traditions provides a life-style and spiritual practices which empower people to live in this digital world, maximizing its potential as well as coping with some of the undesired consequences.

How much do we accentuate these advantageous practices for and with our people within all of our adult faith formation opportunities, within all of church life:
- Time for reflection and meditation
- The restorative powers of Sabbath time
- The call to live simply – and slowly
- Significant time and opportunities for sacred conversations
- Reminders and methods for living in the present moment

Recall, if you can, life in our churches thirty, forty (or more) years ago. What was the "state of adult faith formation?" Taking a look back illustrates how far we've come. As disciples, as leaders, we know we want to continue striving for more. The needs of today's people demands it.

The commitment of each one of us is echoed in the conclusion of *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*: "we move ahead full of hope, knowing this vision of adult faith formation can become reality. Jesus the Risen One is still with us, meeting us on the pathways of our lives, sharing our concerns, enlightening us with his word, strengthening us with his presence, nourishing us in the breaking of the bread, and sending us forth to be his witnesses. … Let us do our part with creativity and vigor, our hearts aflame with love to empower adults to know and live the message of Jesus. This is the Lord's work."

This article appeared in *Lifelong Faith*. Volume 6.3; Fall 2012 (http://www.lifelongfaith.com/lifelong-faith-journal.html)