

## **Effective Adult Formation Practices for Those in Maturing Adulthood (mid 50's-mid 70s)**

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### **Today's Real Life Stories**

Paul Connor, while away on a family vacation, checked into the motel with his recently-received AARP membership card to take advantage of the “senior discount” while, at the same time, inquiring about the children’s playground and children’s activities available at the motel and surrounding areas. In his mid-fifties, Paul often feels he is trying to figure out his identity. He has worked diligently for more than 30 years, is in good health, a parent of still-growing children, and, yet, often, he is tired. He realizes – sometimes with eagerness, sometimes with worry – that he will probably be in the work force for another twenty years. Perplexing questions and thoughts often are in the back of his mind: “is there a category to describe people like me? I feel like I’m not either-or; not either young or old, not either a retiree or a parent of a traditional age. I’m often tired and drained, but not ready to retire, nor able to afford retirement. In past generations, the fifties and sixties meant grand-parenting, retirement, early bird specials, and senior discounts. Much of that has changed for me because of today’s opportunities and expectations, because of longer, healthier life spans, and often because of today’s economic realities.”

Betty Granger, after raising her family, became another member of the growing phenomenon of “gray divorce,” baby boomers facing divorce after many years of marriage. Betty’s work career had been as an insurance agent. At the same time, she responded to the needs around her as a type of social worker. She was always one of the first people on the scene after a car crash, a house fire or death, wherever there was a need. She offered not only comfort, but was also a champion, advocating on behalf of her low-income or elderly clients. At the age of 63, newly-divorced and witnessing procedures and protocols in the insurance business that were treating people uncaringly and/or unjustly, she felt that all meaning in her job had disappeared. Betty quit her job, sold her home, went back to school and got her master’s degree. She was quickly hired by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, working to alleviate the causes of homelessness, a job she relishes as she works to contribute to the betterment of life for people who are hurting and needy.

Frank and Carol Palmer recently retired at the ages of 72 and 70. Their lives today, though, are far from being withdrawn from the busyness and fullness of life. Their days are active: volunteering, exercising, reconnecting with friends and making new ones, travelling, and even though in good health, little things are beginning to appear which require more-frequent doctor visits than they were used to in the past. A large part of their time is absorbed by family needs: four grandchildren, two young adults who have moved back home and two aging parents who need frequent care and companionship. Unlike Betty, Frank and Carol have no plans to move. Aging where they are have been is desirable since this is where they have established their lives and many connections.

These stories illustrate a few of the many realities of today's adults between the mid-50's – mid 70s, such as:

- In 2015 the number of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to be 88.5 million, more than double its projected population of 40.2 million in 2010. By 2050, 83.7 million Americans will be 65 or older, compared with 43.1 million in 2012. Fewer than 10 percent were older than 65 in 1970. (U.S. Census, 1)
- The first wave of aging Baby Boomers reached full retirement age in 2011. For the next 20 years, 74 million Boomers will retire. This means that 10,000 new retirees will be added to the Social Security and Medicare rolls each day. (Demographics of Aging)
- “We are witnessing the emergence of a new stage of life between adult midlife – typically focused on career and child-rearing – and old age, traditionally marked by increasing frailty and decline. This new stage of life spans several decades and is characterized by generally good health, relative financial stability, and an active, engaged lifestyle.” (Roberto, 35) “Demographers talk about this new distinctive chapter of life as characterized by people – between fifty and seventy-five – who are considered ‘neither young nor old.’” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 10)
- Only about 1 in 4 Boomers fit the profile of married with adult children who have left home. A significant number still have children at home, the rise of the boomerang "adultolescents" means that adult children are back in the home and older parents may live in the home and require care. (Focalyst, 2)
- A third of Boomers - over 23 million – are single. More than ever, the singles population consists not just of widows and widowers, but of those who have been separated or divorced, as well as those who have remained single all their lives out of choice. 8 million Boomers never married and another 4 million are living with a partner, but not married. (Focalyst, 2)
- The typical Boomer regularly participates in an average of 10 activities and the participation extends beyond going to church or gardening. (Focalyst, 5)
- Boomers have typically been portrayed with the self-centered label the "Me Generation," but from their actions in later adulthood, Focalyst finds that a label of "We Generation" is more accurate. They are caring for others and caring for the world. (Focalyst, 6)

Thus, all research and projections are telling us we are getting older; those in their later years will be a larger segment of the population than the youth. “Nearly every industry in society, from health care to entertainment, is scrambling to respond to this age wave that is crashing on our shores.” (Roberto, 35)

Certainly the ministry of adult faith formation needs to respond (to scramble), especially in new ways, and not just for 2050 but for right now. A question for all adult faith formation, and uniquely pertinent for this age group, calls us to reflection: If all our resources, personnel, time,

and spaces are going toward children's faith formation (as important as that is), what are we "saying/teaching" by our actions? Are we conveying the idea that our faith is a child-like faith? (Are we willing and ready to ardently and enthusiastically "say" that faith formation is really lifelong?)

### **Some principles for adult faith formation, especially those which touch mature adults**

We have been privileged (since the work of Malcolm Knowles and many others) to have a body of research and practices which describe the ways adult learn. The following are only a few of the many principles and guidelines.

- Adults' readiness to learn is directly linked to need – needs related to fulfilling their roles as workers, spouses, parents, Christian disciples, etc. and coping with life changes (divorce, death of a loved one, retirement, etc.) "The content of programs offered in parish ministry for maturing adults rises out of the real situations in which such people live, including moments of transition and daily life." (Johnson, 16) "From the idea of developmental tasks, the concept of 'teachable moment' emerges: the idea that one may need to learn something new in order to cope with the tasks of a certain developmental stage." (Dean, 11)
- All ongoing learning and formation, relating to real life, needs to take people beyond, to help them grow in new understandings, new ways of acting. "Our ministry to maturing adults needs to have utility. Maturing adults asks: *How can this improve my life in a concrete way?* Theory is nice, but it's too removed from the everyday lives of spiritually maturing adults to sustain their interest. They are looking for great ideas, inspiring concepts, motivational insights, and global perspectives, but they want them in ways that make a down-to-earth difference right now." (Johnson, 21)
- Because today's older adults are living longer, are healthy and energetic, ministries for/with them needs to be viewed as being *with* and *through* older adults rather than *to* older adults. Zanzig reminds us: "Build the faith community 'from the inside out,' not from the top down. We will listen, discern, dream, plan, and minister *collaboratively*, i.e. as a genuine community of disciples with a shared mission." (Zanzig, 5)
- Ministry for/with maturing adults needs to be both age-specific and multigenerational. This flows from many realizations about the way people grow; it also flows from the both-and reality of Christianity; one way, one perspective isn't the totality, the wholeness of life. Intergenerationality and communities-of-like interest are both needed: the comfort of our own environments as well as the challenge that comes from different ways of thinking and perceiving, deeper experiences of understanding and doing. "The church is most healthy when it offers diversity. Age diversity is perhaps the most universally recognized diversity in most churches. All the various age groups in the church are intertwined. The ability of one cohort of people in a church to successfully meet the developmental challenges of one stage provides the needed communal context for other cohorts of persons to successfully address their proper and appropriate developmental tasks as well. We are not in isolated developmental boxes; we are all in the same pot.

When one ingredient doesn't or can't express its unique flavor, then the others cannot express themselves fully either. One part or element of the parish or faith organization system affects and is affected by every other part....” (Johnson, 44)

- Adult faith formation is all-encompassing: “...parish ministry for maturing adults pays attention to three dimensions of growth: spiritual, psychological, and physical.” (Johnson, 15)
- Adult faith formation is all-encompassing. As we will explore later, the “content” for adult faith formation for maturing adults needs to be broad, wide, and deep. 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.

One tool (among many) to help parishes become more aware of the needs of their adults, especially their maturing adults (as well as plan for the future) is “What Are We Providing for Adult Faith Growth?”

<http://www.janetschaeffler.com/AFF-Helps.html>

- Adult faith formation is all-encompassing. “We know from research that adult learners will choose the learning activity that best fits their learning needs, preferred modes of learning, and time constraints. In order to accomplish this, faith formation with Baby Boomers needs to provide a variety of content and learning activities, and a variety of models for faith formation that include activities in physical places and virtual spaces.” (Roberto, 39)

“Realize that one ministry type does not meet all the needs of older adults. Some older adults will enjoy meeting together for a weekly or monthly noon luncheon program, while other older adults would rather be part of a mission team or take part in a community service project. Some older adults will be available during the day; others will be working and available only at night or on weekends. ... some older adults will enjoy singing ‘old familiar hymns,’ while others enjoy singing praise songs. Remember: no two older adults are exactly alike; therefore, no single ministry will reach everyone.” (Gentzler, 54)

Opportunities for the maturing population need - always and in every way - to include various methods:

- individualized: online opportunities, reading, videos, etc.
- within home life: conversations, prayer and rituals, etc.
- in small groups: taking place in various locations (church, restaurants, libraries, homes, etc.)
- in large groups: retreats, workshops, speakers, etc.
- throughout the life of the church: worship, service, ministry and leadership
- within the neighborhood, the community and world: opportunities offered by various civic, religious, educational organizations

These various methods/opportunities remind us of another important principle (which can relieve the worry and workload of a pastoral staff): One parish doesn't have to do everything. They can be a clearing house, a curator, by alerting the maturing adults to the vast array of educational, formational, prayer and reflection and service opportunities in the area.

- Adult faith formation is all-encompassing. The reality of virtual learning was mentioned above, but its importance needs to be reiterated. 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 ten-to-fifteen 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?

As the directions for "What Are We Providing for Adult Faith Growth?" (<http://www.janetschaeffler.com/AFF-Helps.html>) 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?

#### **A summary of some characteristics of mature adulthood which influence learning**

Gary McIntosh describes the Baby Boomer generation as educated, media-oriented, independent, cause-oriented, fitness conscious, activists, quality conscious, and questioning of authority. He describes the church members of today who are Boomers as:

- Committed to relationships, rather than organizations
- Wanting to belong, rather than join
- Supportive of people, rather than programs
- Longing to live their faith, rather than only talk about it
- Wishing to be seen as unique individuals, rather than a monolithic group
- Desirous of designing their own programs, rather than only attending ones developed for them
- Yearning to serve others, rather than only being served
- Craving meaningful activity, rather than empty days (McIntosh, 300-303)

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot reflects on the journey of learning in the *Third Chapter*: it "crosses borders and covers landscapes that are rich with complexity and color. The geography is rocky and irregular, beautiful and tortured, full of hills and valleys, open vistas and blind alleys, and menaced by minefields. The path moves forward and circles back, progresses and regresses, is both constant and changing. The developmental terrain grows more layered,

- patience trumps speed,
- restraint trumps ambition,
- wisdom trumps IQ,
- 'leaving a legacy' trumps 'making our mark';
- and a bit of humor saves us all." (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 173)

I recently encountered a woman in her early 60's who had just completed her doctorate. Her family and friends encouraged her to take a break since she had been in some type of learning process for many years. However, devoted to continual growth, she found an online book club, able to tell her protective family and friends that it wasn't really another exhaustive learning opportunity; it was "just" a book club.

Most adults in their mid-50 – mid-70s are eager for continuous learning and growth. "...research indicates that maturing adults may require more change, more growth, and more personal development in their senior years than they did at any other time in their lives. There are two reasons for this. First, maturing adults gradually experience a new freedom from societal, career, and familial accountability. This new freedom in and of itself can usher in new perspectives, new thinking, and a new view of themselves. Routine ways of thinking, feeling, choosing, and acting are prime for change. ... Second, maturing adults experience more losses than at any previous stage. Adult developmentalists are discovering that loss can best be seen as behavioral change stimulators. In most cases, when loss is properly framed and compassionately understood, it enhances rather than inhibits interior growth and development." (Johnson, 13-14)

Anyone working in adult faith formation has realized that a motivation for ongoing learning flows from the needs of the participants. Moberg categorizes the needs of maturing adults into several categories; categories, of course, which are overlapping in life and learning:

- *The Need for Meaning and Purpose:* This need relates closely to the deeply ingrained desire to maintain one's personal dignity and self-esteem (a need that often surfaces for newly-retired people).
- *The Need for Love and Relatedness:* Sharing companionship, conversation, intimacy, laughter, a hug, or caressing touch and giving one's self to others by work or service help to satisfy this need.
- *The Need for Forgiveness:* Most of us have experienced failures ... these can be resolved through accepting the forgiveness of God and others.
- *The Need for Spiritual Integration:* We need to know and to feel ourselves spiritually integrated beyond our own existence into an absolute order of existence.
- *The Need to Cope with Losses:* Even losses can enrich one's life journey for each provides an opportunity for spiritual growth and development.
- *The Need for Freedom to Raise Questions:* Usually it is cathartic for people to share ... questions with a sympathetic listener.
- *The Need for Flexibility:* Moving along in mature adulthood can be a period of life in which many changes are imposed upon people, despite whether they desire and seek them.

- *The Need to Prepare for Dying and Death:* Much of this preparation seems purely physical and materialistic, but also old emotional accounts from past mistakes and grudges can be settled.
- *The Need to Be Useful:* This is a form of the need to love others and, in turn, to receive love from others. One of the reasons that adults are choosing to stay very active in part-time work, in service, etc. after retirement flows from this need.
- *The Need to Be Thankful:* The life review (an approach we will look at in more detail later) can stimulate a balanced perspective that includes one's happy experiences, profitable accomplishments, and good circumstances.

### **Some possible topics/themes to be included for mature adults**

**The breadth and depth of content for learning of maturing adults.** As obvious from the research and a look at the characteristics of maturing adults, those in their mid-50 – mid-70s crave continuing learning. More and more today, practioners in adult faith formation (and the needs/wants of the mature adult) are realizing that there are no dividing lines in the “content” of ongoing learning and formation (that would be a dualistic world) Thus, we need to consider and plan ongoing religious learning as well as learning which, at first glance, might not be considered religious.

“Ideally, religion is coextensive with life. The so-called secular experiences of adults are pregnant with the possibility of religious meaning...When adult religious education concentrates solely on topics perceived as sacred or holy, the implication is that a host of educational needs and interests arising out of daily life are trivial, a sort of second-class reality. What shapes a person's religious response, however, is the totality of his (her) experience and not simply that part of life experience perceived as sacred. Likewise, a person's religious response influences the manner in which he (she) experiences all of life and not just a segment of life designated as sacred.” (McKenzie and Harton, 6)

“Since all experience has the potential for learning, the division between sacred and secular fades away. In viewing life's experiences as God-given, and our capacity to take note and organize those experiences into meaningful frameworks as a gift of grace, our journey of lifelong learning is at every moment a sacred one. Whether the experience and struggle to make meaning of it are painful or joyful, the whole process is sacred. Whether the learning event takes place within a religious context or outside of one, the moment is God-given. Lifelong learning and the faith journey are one and the same.” (Brillinger)

People in their maturing years understand this one-ness, or are seeking to, in unique ways. It is part of the aging process.

**Themes which touch everyday life.** Parishes are called to provide workshops, resources and support aimed at addressing all the realities of the maturing ages of life: e.g. simplifying life; ways to share faith with grandchildren; caring for grandchildren; the transition of retirement; the

transition to a new job; the empty-nest reality; marriage relationships in the older years; understanding wills, living wills, organ donations, official forms (Social Security, Medicare, etc.); managing transitions; nutrition and fitness; travel and leisure; discovering/developing artistic/creative expression; understanding and living with loss; the meaning of suffering; death and dying. One example of a series helping older adults determine their funeral plans can be explored at [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems\\_13.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems_13.pdf)

McKenzie and Horton suggest some topics for ongoing faith learning for mature adulthood; a few of them are:

- Life after Retirement: Writing the Next Chapter
- As Roles Change: Understanding Aging Parents
- Being the Story-bearer: Sharing Your Story
- Now that the Nest is Empty
- A Different Kind of Investment: Exploring Ways to Give Yourself Away (McKenzie and Horton, 267-273)

Another life-issue that touches many in this age group is sudden unemployment (for various reasons). Churches are offering various helps to walk this journey. St. Joseph, Lake Orion, MI hosted several sessions which are now available online (<http://www.stjosephlakeorion.org/stewardship/resources/unemployment.html>): the spiritual challenges of being unemployed, thoughts from an employer, the emotional effects of unemployment, and practical tips for seeking re-employment.

**Topics to explore the life of faith.** In May 2010 an article in *U.S. Catholic* magazine advocated for Yellow Banana Schools of Theology in our churches. “I don’t buy green bananas. I may not still be here when they ripen and turn yellow.” (Donovan, 29) This proposal was precipitated by the realization that most parishes give much time, resources, and personnel to children, and some to adults, but very little to the maturing population and the elderly.

These Yellow Banana Schools would be an “endeavor powered by the urgency of age. The courses, like a ripe banana, should not only be short but also sweet. ... Yellow not green! Short and interesting if not fun. The sweetener would be the choice of a dynamic, questioning facilitator to run the sessions instead of an answer-giving teacher or a dull, lecturing scholar. Most courses would run one session, seldom two, and never three. The curriculum would be determined mostly by the students themselves, because as we age, our felt needs increasingly become our real needs....

What to teach? Professional educators would no doubt refer to a student body that is over 55 as being “nontraditional,” like the student bodies found in the nation’s community colleges. It is said that about 60 percent of what is taught in community colleges is remedial. This remediation is needed not because the students are slow but because, for one reason or another, they need updating. The same can no doubt be said of the students in the proposed Yellow Banana School of Theology. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults introduces those interested in Catholicism to its beliefs and practices. The Yellow Banana School would aim at updating mature Catholics.” (Donovan, 29-31)

**Responding to the motivation to learn when facing life's transitions and losses.** 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.

Schuster 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.” (Schuster)

This reality is also affirmed by Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson 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. (Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 64-67)

Dean reminds us that transition is a constant reality. “Adulthood is characterized by periods of stability followed by periods of transition. This is a direct finding of Levinson’s studies, but also can be implied from Erikson’s work. It seems as though we ace tasks with which we try to cope, only to find that there are more tasks after that. Resting (a stable period) is short-lived. In Erikson’s terms, once a crisis is successfully resolved, there’s a new crisis waiting around the corner.” (Dean, 12)

As crucial as congregations are at these times of transitions, Miller 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.” (Miller, 159)

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

Johnson suggests a program of mini-courses flowing from the life transitions of older adults, such as: The 12 Keys of Successful Aging, How to Find Peace and Purpose, The

Dynamics of Personality in Later Life, 10 Spiritual Developmental Tasks of the Middle Years, A Faith-based Perspective of Sickness, A Holy Understanding of Wellness, Praying: the Heart of the Spiritual Journey. (Johnson, 60-106)

**Prayer.** More and more researchers in developmental theory – as well as practioners/leaders in our parishes – point out that the maturing adults are at a place and space in life where prayer can deepen. Feldmeier explores various prayer methods which open the door for people at this stage in life: meditation, *Lectio Divina*, centering prayer, contemplative prayer, Ignatian contemplation, consciousness examen. (Feldmeier, 194-201) For various ideas on what some churches are doing to encourage the journey of prayer see “A Best Practice: Prayer Forms ([http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS\\_45.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_45.pdf)).

**Spirituality.** Coupled with this, of course, is a deepening understanding of spirituality (especially if spirituality is understood to encompass all parts and parcels of our everyday life, not just our prayer life (as important as that is).

When beginning to think about on-going learning for the mid-50s – mid-70s, often we think of “expanding their religious knowledge,” using a catechism of sorts, or classes that are re-runs of doctrine and teachings. For most of the elderly, they already know all the dogma and doctrine they need to function as members of the church. They need fresh ideas. (I listened to a 65-year-old woman recently who thought I might think her odd because she wanted to explore more deeply what it means to be a contemplative in prayer and action today – and so did many of her friends. They were afraid to ask their church to help them.)

What maturing adults do need is to be invited to optimistic, growth-filled, practical information and formation regarding a maturing spirituality. They welcome how-to’s which enable them to stay active, energetic, involved and open to spiritual growth and change which will affect their entire lives.

Some resources that could be used in various venues (e.g. book clubs, retreats, mid-life spirituality groups, online conversations) to explore the deepening of spirituality:

- Borg, Marcus J. *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*. HarperOne, 2014.
- Chittister, Joan. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian. *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*. Jericho Books, 2014.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. HarperOne, 2013.
- Rohr, Richard. *Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation*. Franciscan Media, 2014.
- Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Holy Longing*. Image Books, 2014.
- Christians from all over the world have explored and supported each other in mid-life spirituality through STM Online: Crossroads’ (Boston College) course, *Autumn Blessings* (<http://www.bc.edu/crossroads>).

**In summary.** Various authors remind us of the scope of adult learning as maturing adults.

“There are two types of programs that every ministry for maturing adult ministry should have: spiritual education and outreach programs.” (Johnson, 54)

Hanson proposes three essential components for creative ministries with maximum impact for Baby Boomers: 1) service; 2) spiritual growth; and 3) intergenerational relationships.

Koepke suggests five categories of opportunities for ongoing learning and growth for maturing adults, opportunities which certainly overlap one another; paying attention to all of them addresses the breadth and depth of formation in the maturing years:

- Spiritual development
- Continued education
- Opportunities to serve
- Opportunities to be served
- Community building (social interaction) events (Koepke, 50)

### **Effective practices and approaches for adult faith formation for the maturing adult**

In reality, we have already touched on a few approaches and practices (everything is intertwined). As we move into this section, we explore a few more specific approaches and practices, many of which are foundational for all adult faith formation; but certainly ones that specifically respond – and challenge – the needs of today’s mid-50s – mid-70s.

**Learning for middle adults in the virtual world.** Originally I was going to end with this approach, but decided to lead with it so that we might view all of the subsequent approaches and practices through this lens. As was already mentioned previously, a question to always keep in mind: in whatever topic/theme/program, process and/or resource that is going to be available for adults in middle adulthood, is there a way to offer it virtually as well as in a face-to-face opportunity? For instance:

- Learning opportunities: for example: 1) small groups involved in Bible study, sharing and daily life-challenges via Skype: <http://storage.cloversites.com/nafscs/documents/The%20Strong%20Challenge.pdf>; 2) parish Scripture study via a closed Facebook account: [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems\\_11.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems_11.pdf)
- Sharing of resources and online opportunities: the Internet is brimming with possibilities which people can use on their own and/or which can supplement real-time gatherings. We just need to be curators, helping people to find them, for instance: Spiritual Assessment (<http://www.cor.org/ministries/the-journey/welcome-to-your-self-assessment/>); 3Minute Retreat (<http://www.loyolapress.com/3-minute-retreats-daily-online-prayer.htm>); LifeTree Café (<http://lifetreecafe.com/>); Caregiving Resource Center (<http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/?intcmp=AE-HF-CRC-TERTNAV-HOME>); and The Five Loaves (<http://www.thefiveleaves.com/>).

- A combination of real-time and the virtual world: During a workshop in the fall of 2009 at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Rev. James Shopshire, Sr., professor of Sociology of Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary, observed: “One method of adult Christian education many like, is to receive by e-mail a news story, text and questions, which they see ahead of time then can meet on Monday to discuss, ‘God’s views on the news.’”

Another example is seen at The Episcopal Church of the Annunciation, Cordova, TN in their linking of Bible study with an ongoing blog:

<http://www.buildfaith.org/2014/10/15/a-church-reinvents-adult-education-with-a-bible-and-a-blog/>

- Learning about technology: Even though the research shows that the Boomer generation (and older) are becoming more and more proficient in the use of technology, many still have questions – and want to learn more (because there is always more to learn in this area). Often libraries and community education programs provide learning opportunities; might our churches do the same? Can our churches have a tech room where people can learn, where people can use computers (if theirs is currently creating problems, etc.)? For a delightful example, see <http://cyberseniorsdocumentary.com/>

The virtual world holds all kinds of promise and potential for ongoing faith formation. Miyamoto suggests *Ten Principles for Internet Applications* (and then shares some real-life examples of them in a church setting):

- Draw people to the local faith community.
- Make a space for reflection.
- Make a space for conversation.
- Make time for conversation.
- Build trust.
- Give up control.
- Include activities for social change.
- Provide for diverse spiritualities.
- Recognize triggering events.
- Encourage relationships. (Miyamoto, 30-45)

**Partnering with Existing Programs.** Much of the online opportunities that we can provide involve linking to resources already created. This is also possible and easy-to-do with face-to-face opportunities. Our surrounding community services, educational institutions, cultural opportunities provide much that we can link to and/or partner with.

Does your area have opportunities similar to:

- Roosevelt University Institute for Continued Learning: <http://iclru.org/>
- Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Bradley University: <http://olliatbradley.blogspot.com/>
- Institute for Lifelong Learning, Bucknell University: <http://www.bucknell.edu/lifelonglearning>

Of course, the online opportunities – of various kinds - abound:

- The Open University on iTunes U: <http://www.open.edu/itunes/>
- Online courses from major universities: [http://education-portal.com/articles/Universities\\_with\\_the\\_Best\\_Free\\_Online\\_Courses.html](http://education-portal.com/articles/Universities_with_the_Best_Free_Online_Courses.html)
- STM Online: Crossroads (Boston College): <http://www.bc.edu/crossroads>
- Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation (University of Dayton): <https://vlc.udayton.edu/>
- STEP (Notre Dame University): <https://step.nd.edu/about/>

**Conversation.** The pervading approach in all adult faith formation is the necessity for active participation of each and every person through ongoing and spirited conversation. “Adults grow in their faith best when they have the opportunity to engage in conversation with other adults about things that matter.” (Regan, 71)

Regan explains how and why “sustained, engaged and critical” conversations are an “important dynamic in enhancing a faith that is living, explicit, and fruitful:

- enhances our ability to express our faith
- gives us the opportunity to come to clarity about what we think and believe
- provides a context for seeing connection between faith and life
- strengthens our faith as we hear about the faith of others” (Regan, 72-73)

In a recent discussion on LinkedIn, within the Adult Faith Formation Professionals group, I commented and asked: “Some of you have mentioned that some people (especially older learners) prefer lecture. Knowing what we know about adult learning (e.g. people learn better and remember more if they are involved, engaged, participative, etc.), are there things that you do to supplement “lecturing?” One gentleman responded, “My past experience regarding older adults preferred way of learning was to sit and listen has changed. For the past seven years in my present parish, most attempts at “teaching” we’re not well received, maybe us old folks are beginning to realize that we can learn more from each other . . . Go figure!”

Commenting on recent research regarding brain health, and suggesting seven scientifically proven, results-oriented exercises, Rosenthal recommends: “When you read a book or article share what you learn with someone else. Rather than just recounting the facts, identify and discuss the theme(s) in what you read and how they relate to your life.” (Rosenthal) So many advantages of conversations about things that matter!

Our task is to create learning environments that invite mature adults to participate in transformative teaching and learning that leads to more faithful living. Such emancipatory education involves open and dialogical experiences where deep listening, on-going reflection and mutual respect are practiced. Being free to raise hard questions and to explore "what if" possibilities can help older adults grow in faith and in discipleship which exude compassion and encourage works for justice.

No matter what the gathering or occasion – face-to-face or virtual – opportunities for conversation are crucial.

**Small groups.** One key method for conversation, of course, are various small groups that are prevalent throughout parishes (and society) today. More and more research encourages adult faith formation opportunities to include some version of small groups. (Winseman, chapter 8)

“Our parishes have become so large, so anonymous, and we’ve been allowed to attend them instead of participate in them. Today, people don’t drop out of Church as much as drop in – occasionally! My hope is that little faith-sharing groups will continue to emerge, connected to parishes. The base community and the institutional parish need one another. The parish needs the small fervent group to keep it honest, to allow and encourage those who want to ask the deeper questions, those who want to go further, those who want to learn to pray, to minister, to study, to advocate, and to lay down their lives for the poor. And the small group needs the parish to avoid becoming sectarian, narrow, or lost in personality and trendiness. They must regulate, balance and challenge one another.” (Rohr and Martos)

Weber reiterates four benefits of small groups:

- “Community Building: A small group serves as a community or congregation within the congregation.
- Educational development: Small groups provide a wonderful opportunity to engage people in study.
- Spiritual enrichment: Far too many Christians limit their prayer life to one minute before meals and one minute before going to sleep. Many find themselves just too busy to pray.
- Mission Outreach: Each small group is required to look beyond themselves by engaging in ministry beyond the group.” (Weber)

The online ShareFaithMagazine expands Weber’s thoughts, suggesting “10 Reasons Why Your Church Should Have Small Groups:”

1. “Small groups foster close relationships and integral community.
2. Small groups provide a comfortable introduction for nonbelievers to the Christian faith.
3. Small groups provide an ideal way to care for the needs of people within the church.
4. Small groups provide a way for Christians to live out their faith instead of merely hearing more preaching or teaching.
5. Small groups participate in focused prayer for one another.
6. Small groups provide a comfortable atmosphere for openness.
7. Small groups allow for mutual edification among believers.
8. Small groups encourage better learning.
9. Small groups provide a source of encouragement and accountability.
10. Small groups help to cultivate leadership within the church.” (ShareFaithMagazine)

These small groups can take various forms (some of which we will explore further in the following pages):

- Parker Palmer invites adults to a challenging (as well as comforting) one: circles of trust. (Palmer, 22)

- Study Groups. These groups meet to study Scripture, recent books, movies and videos, justice and peace issues, or a variety of other topics. Their main goal is for the on-going growth and learning of the participants.
- Gift discovery and strengths development groups. Winseman recounts the experience of St. Gerard Majella Parish in Port Jefferson Station, New York and their journey to become an alive, engaged parish. One of the helps in their pastoral plan was to use the Clifton StrengthsFinder followed by groups that focused on identifying parishioners' gifts and talents, which created a unifying bond among their members. In this experience, as group members encourage one another in developing their talents into strengths, the spiritual journey they take together deepens their faith. (Winseman, 113-123)
- Accountability groups. These groups meet in order to help participants face the challenges of everyday life and become better people. Members hold each other accountable for living up to the expectations of their faith tradition, and encourage each other in their efforts.
- Support groups. These groups address the various circumstances and/or challenges people live with in their lives, and offer the encouragement and assistance of others who are facing or who have faced similar situations and difficulties.

People who have been members of small groups for a long period of time have shared their thoughts concerning what makes small groups thrive:

- Having a shared vision: knowing why they are gathering
- Taking the time and effort to identify and dedicate themselves to common goals
- Prayer and ritual holding a prominent place in the life of the group
- The work of the group, facilitating, hosting, hospitality, is shared
- Strong relationships providing the groundwork and are built through social time, good communication, mutual respect, etc.
- Regular evaluation and review of expectations
- Doing something together bonds the group. Service/social justice is one of the most important ways of doing something together.
- Engaging in earnest dialogue/conversation and spirituality call members back. The conversation may be an in-depth sharing of members own experiences, feelings, and thoughts or dialogue about matters of faith and justice.

Bill Easum, author and noted church consultant has said, "Conversion may happen through the primary worship service – but discipleship happens in small groups." (Wiseman, 138)

**Book clubs.** Even though many people today garner a great deal of information through the internet and the media, there exists a core desire among many (especially the maturing adult) to feed a longing of mind and spirit that can't be satisfied by technology. For many this need is met through what the younger generations call the "antiquity" of the written word, namely books.

Book groups can be a beneficial way to:

- nurture spiritual growth

- build community
- promote lifelong learning
- help members make new friends and expand their horizons, etc.

Book clubs, of course, run the gamut, encompassing the reading of all types of books. Some devote themselves to one kind, one theme, but many are eclectic. As has been mentioned before, spirituality – and life’s core questions – can be found everywhere. In a September 2001 article in *U.S. Catholic*, Patrick White, professor of English at St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana, commented, “You can’t get people together to talk about literature in a serious way over time without touching on spiritual matters.” He adds, “Let’s face it, no one is going to say to each other, ‘Hey, let’s get together...and promise that we’ll grow together as spiritual beings.’ It’s too terrifying. So we say, ‘Do you want to get together and read some books? Oh yeah.... And it will also be fun and interesting.’”

Book clubs can happen face-to-face (at churches, homes, coffee shops, etc.) or virtually. A few of the many that occur all the time:

- <http://www.doers.org/faith-formation/book-clubs/>
- [http://trinitypressc.org/book\\_club](http://trinitypressc.org/book_club)
- <http://www.saintjoanofarc.org/parish-life/parish-book-club-0>.

The diverse timing and formats of book clubs lend themselves to the schedules and life situations of the maturing adult. Wanting to be involved in the parish but unable to do something at night, a 74-year old woman began a daytime book club at St. Regis Church, Bloomfield Hills, MI, inviting all parishioners.

At another church, a woman, realizing that many mid-50 – mid-70s adults are caring for aging parents, making time away from home a challenge, began an online book club. Since many of the members are in this life situation often their books focus on this reality:

- Gross, Jane. *A Bittersweet Season: Caring for our Aging Parents – and Ourselves*. Vintage, 2012.
- Shaffer, Stefania. *9 Realities of Caring for an Elderly Parent*. Pressman Books, 2013.
- Spring, Janis Abrahms and Michael Spring. *Life with Pop: Lessons on Caring for an Aging Parent*. Avery Trade, 2010.

For various helps and suggestions for books and/or questions, there are a multitude of online sites:

- [www.bookclubs.ca](http://www.bookclubs.ca)
- [www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs](http://www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs)
- [www.ezinearticles.com/?Book-Club-Questions&id=222106](http://www.ezinearticles.com/?Book-Club-Questions&id=222106)
- [http://classiclitt.about.com/od/bookclubs/a/aa\\_bcquestions.htm](http://classiclitt.about.com/od/bookclubs/a/aa_bcquestions.htm)
- [www.americamagazine.org/content/catholic-book-club.cfm](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/catholic-book-club.cfm)
- [www.uscatholic.org/bookclub](http://www.uscatholic.org/bookclub)

See also

- [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems\\_14.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems_14.pdf) for a unique process of inviting and gathering adults for a parish book study

- [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS\\_54.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_54.pdf) for various ideas for enjoying and sharing books

Many book clubs, with members in their mid-50s – mid-70s find this opportunity ideal to share thoughts and insights about their time in life. A few (of the many) books that have been used in various book clubs:

- Atwell, Robert. *Soul Unfinished: Finding Happiness, Taking Risks, & Trusting God as We Grow Older*. Paraclete Books, 2012.
- Chittister, Joan. *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully*. BlueBridge Books, 2008.
- Gallagher, David P. *Aging Successfully: How to Enjoy, Not Just Endure, The Second Half of Life*. Wipf & Stock, 2012.
- Griffin, Emilie. *Green Leaves for Later Years: The Spiritual Path of Wisdom*. IVP Books, 2012.
- Griffin, Emilie. *Souls in Full Sail: A Christian Spirituality for the Later Years*. IVP Books, 2011.
- Larsen, Dale and Sandy. *Living Your Legacy: A Guide for the Later Years*. IVP Connect, 2012.
- Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Rolheiser, Ronald. *Sacred Fire: A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity*. Image, 2014.
- Ryan, Thomas. *Remember to Live: Embracing the Second Half of Life*. Paulist Press, 2012.

**Support groups.** Support groups – of various kinds – can be a powerful and real opportunity for the ongoing formation which maturing adults are often craving, support for the day-to-day, real life challenges and events. Members of a support group typically share their personal experiences and offer one another emotional comfort and moral support, feeling less alone. They may also offer practical advice and tips for coping and thriving, to feel more empowered. The advice and help may take the form of providing and evaluating relevant information, relating personal experiences, listening to and accepting others' experiences, providing sympathetic understanding and establishing social networks. Sometimes a support group may also work to inform the public or engage in advocacy.

Support groups come in a variety of formats, including in person, on the Internet or by telephone. They may be led by professional facilitators or by group members. Just a few of the many life issues which support groups – for those in their mid-50s – mid-70s - may be centered on:

- married life
- empty nest syndrome
- young adults returning home
- divorce and separation
- death of a spouse
- death of a child
- depression

- living with cancer or other diseases
- addictions
- family members in the military
- grandparents raising children
- caregivers
- adults of aging parents

In August 2014, the magazine *U.S. Catholic* published an article on retirement, “The Good Life.” In October 2014 several letters to the editor responded to the article: “I for one (along with a growing crowd) am experiencing a dying with retirement, aging and death. ... Support groups for us in the dying phase of living, anyone?”

**Gift discovery and strengths development.** A Hasidic tale tells of the old man Zusya saying, “In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” (Buber)

God calls each of us to be who we are, who we uniquely are created to be, with our gifts and strengths. More and more parishes are seeing this as one of the goals of adult faith formation: to encourage and support each person – in the maturing and deepening of their strengths and gifts as they grow to be their best selves, who God created them to be.

Tools abound today to help congregations walk with their members in discerning their strengths and gifts:

- Called and Gifted: <http://www.siena.org/Called-Gifted/called-a-gifted>
- StrengthsFinders: <http://strengths.gallup.com/110440/About-StrengthsFinder-2.aspx>
- Spiritual Gifts Survey for Maturing Adults (Johnson, 107-113)

As adults in their mid-50 – mid-70s discover new journeys in life, a deeper understanding of who they are, the uniqueness of their gifts and strengths can be a crucial support for the new ventures. The fascinating and helpful reality is that many parishes are not simply providing tools for people to discover their strengths, but continuing to walk with them as they understand more deeply, use them in many areas of their lives and direct them toward new adventures. See “Empowering the Living of Gifts” at [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS\\_19.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_19.pdf) for several ideas.

### **Programming for 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.” (McKenzie and Horton, 120)

All we have to do is look at our parishes 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

“Use lifestyles, not age, as the determining factor for ministry. Chronological age is not important in ministry with persons at midlife and beyond. Rather, lifestyle issues are more important. For example, grand-parenting concerns are not just for people who are retired. ... the question becomes: ‘what are the common concerns that all grandparents, of whatever age, may experience?’” Create small groups around common interests, concerns, or careers.” (Gentzler, 53)

Certainly, there are times when “mixed groups” are extremely important; we learn from the wisdom and experiences of each other (we’ll look at that more closely just below). Yet, many parishes tell us that they have better responses to offerings when the opportunities 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 baby boomers, for those just retiring, etc.
- Would specific groups in your church be attracted to offerings, such as: Effective Grandparenting; Relating Effectively to your Adult Children; Balancing Love, Work and Life; The Loneliness of the Empty-Nest; Support Group for Adult Children of Aging Parents; Planning to Age Gracefully (and Have Fun Doing It)?

**Intergenerational Opportunities.** We just explored programming for communities-of-like-interest. Since the reality of living, the reality of our Catholic faith, is always both-and rather than either-or, intergenerationality is crucial in our ministry to all members, especially with those adults in their mid-50s – mid-70s.

“People who age well often have growing relationships with younger people and are involved in learning and growth opportunities.” (Gentzler, 54)

During a workshop in the fall of 2009 at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Rev. Ramonia Lee, chaplain of the Interfaith Center at Leisure World, recounted that age-segregated ministries often do not appeal to Boomers; “...they will take advantage of every possible opportunity to mix with the generations,” Lee said. “They want partnerships with other groups in the church and the community, including mission groups, choirs, coffee conversation groups, even confirmation classes with older members studying with the children.”

Likewise, intergenerationality benefits the younger generations: “Social scientists have worried about how few opportunities our contemporary culture offers for intergenerational exchanges, and the extent to which this generational segregation deprives younger people of the opportunity to witness the generativity, engagement, and aging of older people.” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 241) Kotre claims that, for any culture to flourish, younger people need the examples, witness and stories of real-life people growing older and acquiring wisdom. (Kotre, 41)

“Wise elders play an important role in various indigenous faith traditions, and the emergence in our time of more older people embracing Fowler’s universalizing stage has substantial cultural and spiritual implications for the future of human civilization. We know the world population is growing older with a promise of future hope that only a few researchers have noted (Roszak). Our youth also lack inspiring adult models – at several levels. “Cultivating wise elders needs to become an integral dimension of adult catechesis for the future.” (O’Murchu, 118)

Fortunately the awareness of – and the planning for – intergenerational learning is growing. See

- Intergenerational Faith Formation: <http://www.intergenerationalfaith.com/>
- *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating, & Serving Faithfully* by Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, & John Roberto (Lifelong Faith Associates, 2014)
- *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* by Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross (IVP Academic, 2012)

Road Scholar reports that their grandparents-grandchildren travels/programming are their fastest growing offerings.

[http://www.road scholar.org/Programs/search\\_res.asp?Type=A&ProgDesc=Intergenerational](http://www.road scholar.org/Programs/search_res.asp?Type=A&ProgDesc=Intergenerational)

Churches respond to intergenerationality in numerous ways: small groups, faith formation opportunities, prayer and worship, service and outreach. One example of bringing the generations together in service is exemplified at Grace Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX where they participate in Church Apartment Ministry (<http://www.churchapartmentministry.org/apartment/home.php>), in which Grace Presbyterian maintains an apartment for families of patients coming for cancer treatment at the Texas Medical Center. The Encore 50+ Ministry coordinates this outreach; the young adults of the congregation do most of the cleaning and maintenance as well as helping the families move in. The older adults visit the families and patient, offering to bring them to church, and provide meals.

Another activity employed by many parishes for enjoyment - as well as learning - is movie afternoons or evenings. Some parishes host these events only for adults, or only for teens, or only for children, but many bring all generations together. “Movies at the Parish,” at [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS\\_\\_38.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS__38.pdf) provide a variety of ideas.

One way to connect with and build on intergenerational programming, especially in faith formation, is to shape all offerings of the congregation – intergenerationally as well as with specific age groups - around one specific theme. If the year’s theme is prayer – in addition to the intergenerational learning opportunities – events and offerings can continue that theme for those mid-50’s – mid-70s:

- A day of reflection on prayer styles and methods for mature adulthood
- A trip to a retreat center
- Connections to websites of prayer for those in retirement, empty-nesters, etc.

For an illustration of how three different churches have incorporated the themed-approach, see [http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS\\_44.pdf](http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_44.pdf).

**Personal and Communal Practices.** Many mid-50s – mid-70s grew up when their identity flowed from a life of spiritual practices. In recent years, more and more people have advocated for the return of spiritual practices, with an enlargement of the possibilities (e.g. hospitality, Sabbath moments, living gratefully, seasonal celebrations and rituals, service/justice, savoring beauty, nature, pilgrimages, forgiveness, suffering, art, mindfulness, journaling, simplicity, wonder, quiet). This return to spiritual practices especially appeals to maturing adults because there is a link to the past coupled with broader opportunities. Effective and valuable adult formation within our parishes would include not only a study/reflection on the meaning and understanding of each practice, but various occasions to experience and live the practices.

Some helpful resources:

- Huston, Paula. *A Season of Mystery: 10 Spiritual Practices for Embracing a Happier Second Half of Life*. Loyola Press, 2012.
- Jones, Tony. *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*. Zondervan, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian. *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Thomas Nelson, 2010.
- Richmond, Lewis. *Aging as a Spiritual Practice: A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser*. Gotham, 2012.
- Yamasaki, April. *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal*. Herald Press, 2013.

**Life Reviews.** For many, life reviews and legacies are a meaningful spiritual practice and effective faith formation experience. “In our later years, the pace of making sense of our entire life quickens. Internal and external forces converge, giving us the opportunity of gaining a global perspective of how God has been at work in all the days of our lives. We search for the patterns, themes, successes, and failures that have combined into the amazing amalgam we call our life. In our later years, we arrange the facts of our life into a cohesive whole. We take stock of our life as we never have before. We see new themes, new strands, new waves in our life that we missed in our day-to-day living.” (Johnson, 102)

Inviting and equipping people in mature adulthood to purposefully reflect on their lives is a constructive approach to cherish life, to deepen meaning, and to share legacies. Keeping in mind the varying learning styles and people’s different preferences, there are numerous ways to invite people to participate in this: writing memoirs, previewing and assembling photo albums, taping memories and stories, expressing life moments and history through art, creating memory

gardens, giving away mementos/distributing possessions to others, developing family histories or genealogies, making trips to family homes or pilgrimages to locations of family/spiritual significance and autobiographies or life histories.

Incorporated into these life histories, adults in their maturing years might also be invited to reflect on their legacy. What are they passing on to the 7<sup>th</sup> generation (a Native American tradition)? A reflective time to think about the following questions, and perhaps write them down for their families, can be very affirming:

- What are four of the spiritual gifts God has given you?
- To whom would you like to give these gifts?
- What are four of the talents God has given you?
- To whom would you like to leave these talents?

One idea for a spiritual autobiography is given by Johnson (101-103).

At one church, a person's real-life journey of writing a spiritual autobiography touched many others. Mary had no idea why but she felt led to begin writing her life story. It was a few months after her husband died, a very difficult time in her life. No one suggested journaling, jotting down her thoughts and feelings, or writing the story of her life, but, all of a sudden, Mary felt a yearning to write her story. An outline formed in her mind, flowing from "the houses she lived in" and thus her spiritual autobiography began.

After its completion two years later, Mary gave copies to her children, brothers and a few friends. With its conclusion, Mary realized many things, among them:

- the writing of her story brought much healing during a time of grief
- although she didn't start out to intentionally write about the God moments, how God was present, it became obvious that those times just naturally surfaced

A couple years later Mary participated in an archdiocesan adult faith formation conference, *Becoming Well, Wise and Whole in our Maturing Years* with Richard P. Johnson. As Johnson spoke of some topics that are helpful to maturing adults, he mentioned the power of writing a spiritual autobiography. Mary said, "All the bells went off. I knew all the good it had done for me; I was very sure of the beneficial things it could do for others."

Thus, with the support and encouragement of the adult faith formation coordinator at the parish, Mary created a workshop on "The Whys and Hows of Writing a Spiritual Autobiography." The purpose of these gatherings was to share with the participants a method, some tips and helpful do's and don'ts for writing a spiritual autobiography. The original plan was to meet three times; at the third gathering, the participants asked for a fourth session. As the participants began writing, and then re-gathered at each subsequent session, they talked about what they had written, about their experience of writing, about what was happening to them in the process writing. In this sharing, people experienced being a community standing on holy ground. A complete description of this endeavor can be seen at <http://store.pastoralplanning.com/beprspau.html>.

A few resources:

- Johnson, Richard P. *All My Days: A Personal Life Review*. Liguori Publications, 2004.
- Renner, Peter. *The Art of Teaching Adults*. Vancouver, Training Associates, 2005, pages 102, 125-128.
- Wakefield, Dan. *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*. Beacon Press, 1990.

**Service.** As has been mentioned previously, formation happens all the time, through multiple (every) opportunity of our lives. Service is perhaps the most formative experience.

Many experts challenge congregations to create compelling opportunities for service and outreach, for as a researcher at Peter Hart Associates commented: “For this generation of older Americans, volunteerism is about something much more substantial and real than taking up time in their day ... it is about filling a need, their need to both make a difference and be involved.” (Hart, 3)

“...not only do outreach program stimulate individuals, they motivate and galvanize your entire ministry around an identifiable purpose that is clearly visible. This needs to be seen as a vocation, not simply volunteer activities.” (Johnson, 55)

The variety of opportunities for the mature adult planned and offered throughout parishes include service within the congregation as well as outreach to the community and beyond: e.g. Meals-on-Wheels, providing transportation, mentoring programs, serving in homeless shelters and soup kitchens, coaches or companions to people in need, sharing their job skills and expertise with community projects and organizations, nursing home and home shut-in visitation, phone calls to shut-ins, choir concerts, choirs for funerals, lunches for Habitat for Humanity, and home repair for single moms and widows.

K.I.T. - Keeping in Touch - is an Outreach Ministry for those 55+ at Southcliff Baptist Church, Fort Worth, TX where volunteers care for others through cards, phone calls, and personal visits. <http://www.southcliff.com/adults/senior-adult-ministry/kit-keeping-in-touch/>

Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN, invites those in middle adulthood to be involved in homebound visitation, Vespers devotionals in nursing homes, and 2PC short-term mission trips.

A comprehensive program for four groups of older adults is planned at Ascension Lutheran Church, Thousand Oaks, CA: active seniors; transitional seniors; frail seniors; and caregivers. A view of the possibilities for service are: Stephen Ministry, teaching in the Sunday School program and/or VBS, prayer buddies, prayer shawl ministry, SAM's Tram, Telecare, videotaping faith stories, Project Response, and their Peru mission. <http://www.alcto.org/pdfs/SAMChartJuly2012.pdf>

Many churches connect with the Corporation for National and Community Service (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps>) which sponsors Senior Corps, currently linking more than 360,000 Americans to service opportunities, using their skills, knowledge, and

experience to make a difference to individuals, nonprofits, and faith-based and other community organizations throughout the United States.

As congregations plan for service and outreach opportunities for their 55+, they also are cognizant of the reality that an ideal adult faith formation process is to invite/help people to reflection *after* the service: e.g.:

- Has my worldview changed?
- What happened to me because of this service?
- How will my life be different because I participated in this opportunity?

“We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.”  
(John Dewey)

As we conclude, remembering the reality that everything is formative, McIntosh’s recommendations challenge us in a vivid way:

1. “Build a ministry for Boomers that is **adventurous**. Rather than mall walking, consider hiking in the mountains, cross-country skiing, or snowshoeing. Remember: Boomers have always seen themselves as a youthful generation, and they still do!
2. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **fun**. Rather than potluck luncheons, consider catered parties, fishing trips, paint ball competitions, and team-building camps. Remember: Boomers are not looking for a seniors’ ministry; they are seeking an older youth ministry.
3. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **significant**. Rather than being served, consider serving others by building a home for Habitat for Humanity, assisting missionaries, helping out-of-work people to find a job, or tutoring children. Remember: Boomers desire to make a difference in the world by taking on great causes.
4. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **educational**. Along with Bible studies, consider CPR, basic first aid, personal health, managing finances, and public speaking classes. Remember: Boomers are an educated generation, and they wish to continue learning to the end of their days.
5. Building a ministry for Boomers that is **spiritual**. Rather than offering simplistic formulas, consider prayer walks in the neighborhood, intercession teams, and a variety of small group sharing. Remember: Boomers are a mosaic of sub-groups, and it will take a multi-dimensional approach to spiritual formation to reach them.” (McIntosh, 300-303)

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