

## Formation Possibilities for Adults in these Times

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One of the laments of parish staff and parish committees ministering in adult faith formation is that people don't come to the programs planned at the parish/vicariate. (This is only one way of adult faith formation, but it is a very important one, so it is a crucial concern.)

Perhaps some of the questions that need to be looked at include:

- What are we offering?
- Are we meeting the needs, offering opportunities that are pertinent to people's everyday life?

Research shows that among adults engaged in learning, 83% do so because of life changes and 56% are drawn to topics related to career. Another 16% study family issues, while 13% focus on leisure. Then there is a significant falling off of percentages, to where art, health and religion garner 5%, 5%, and 4% respectively, of the adult learners. Issues of citizenship only attract 1% of the adult learning population. (Robert M. Smith, *Learning How to Learn: Applied Theory for Adults*, Follett Publishing Co.)

There are frequent reports on television today that when most businesses/organizations are showing a decline in customers/respondents, the one institution that is thriving, that has a surge in its enrollment is community colleges. The reason: they are responding to today's need. They are offering discounted or free tuition to people who are currently unemployed so that they might learn new skills to find a different type of job.

Are we doing all we can? Are we who are engaged in adult faith formation in our parishes and vicariates (the U.S. Bishops' pastoral plan, *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*, says that responsibility belongs to all of us, not just the one staff person who has been designated) seeing this as an opportunity to respond to people's needs?

How are we responding to the needs of those who are unemployed?

Many of our parishes/vicariates are doing an unbelievable job!

- Job fairs which match employers with people who are searching for jobs
- Parish website pages with speakers/help/reflections for this difficult time
- On-site speakers concerning various issues to help people deal with the reality, the implications of these economic times

Have we tried these possibilities:

- Rather than sitting at home, people who are unemployed might appreciate a place to gather at their own parish. Create a coffee house atmosphere. Invite people for given hours each day to drop in for coffee, prayer, discussion; a time to just be with other people.
- Outreach projects. This might be the ideal time to organize more service/outreach projects of people helping others. Invite people who are unemployed to take a leadership role. Don't forget reflection times to give people a chance to talk about what is happening to them during these times.

- When was the last time your adult faith formation program/process explored prayer? The many ways, forms, methods we have of prayer? Prayer, of course, is always a part of our lives, but, at crisis times people have a tendency to turn to prayer. This might provide the opportunity to explore our rich tradition of prayer and deepen people's awareness of all we richly possess.
- Open the church, the chapel, once a day or once a week. Encourage your parishioners to take time for stillness/quiet for prayer. You might offer different forms of prayer on different days: quiet time, Liturgy of the Hours, Taize Prayer, Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, etc.
- Many television news shows are currently giving tips for saving, for cutting costs. Host a conversational Swap Meet. Invite people to bring their best ideas of how they've changed their lives, simplified their lives – what's working, what's not.
- Have we ever explored the role of leisure in our lives in our adult faith formation programs? During unemployment, this, of course, is not leisure that has been chosen, but people find themselves in a new situation. When we live in a world that glorifies work, puts all our identity in work, we don't know how to live the Sabbath / participate in leisure. Perhaps this is a time that we can all learn anew (or for the first time).
- What flows from this, of course, is self-identity and self esteem. If people define themselves by their work, that influences all their relationships – family, friends, neighbors, parish, God. Exploring this would be crucial in a faith context. Jesus

said, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus was calling each of us to be our best selves. How do we do that?

- Support groups. Bringing people together (in face-to-face groups, through online discussion groups, etc.) to share their feelings, struggles, joys and hopes can be supportive and faith-filled. Begin groups for: those who are unemployed, the families of the unemployed, the employers who have had to let people go from their jobs.
- Invite people to Book Clubs that discuss books that touch upon today’s reality and what we might do about it. One you might explore: *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth* by David C. Korten (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

Reminder: this is a “to-do” for all parish/vicariate adult faith formation events, but especially for the ones mentioned here. Publicize much further than your own parish: local newspapers, posters in neighborhood stores, local cable channels. Reach out to all in your parish and to all in your community.

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