



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#110 - March 2020

A View from the Community: Today's Best Practices, Today's Challenges (Part II)

With our last issue, we've taken a break in looking at specific best practices and significant methods in adult faith formation. We're pausing in order to review where we are today.

- In our last issue we reflected on some signs of growth and some foundational best practices in our ministry of adult faith formation over the last several years.
- This month we will begin to explore some challenges for areas of development which lie before us for the years ahead. This issue will explore two; we will look at the others later.



Challenge 1: An integrated approach to pastoral planning

Even though there are meaningful things happening in adult faith formation throughout our parishes, how

are they planned?

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

Are there a 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?



A vision – goals and objectives for two or three years – then the planning of programs. If only it was that easy! Life always gets in the way.

Thus, important as a pastoral plan is (and we should always proceed that way), our fast-changing world compels us often to adapt our long-range plans, adapt to changing conditions and needs while not losing our focus or vision.

"Adaptive planning," "tweaking" our integrated long-range plan, is frequently a necessary step with today's 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 parishes have commented:

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- “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 include:

- Parish mission statement
- Parish vision statement for adult faith formation
- Goals for adult faith formation for the following 3-5 years
- Strategies and objectives
- Implementation Process
 - Budget
 - Marketing/publicity
 - Facilities
 - Time line
 - Schedule
- Evaluation
 - Individual programs
 - Evaluation from the standpoint of the staff, committee, facilitators
 - Annual evaluation of plan

Some (but not all) fundamental reminders about pastoral planning for adult faith formation which can be gleaned from today’s vibrant parishes:

- ✦ It’s never ended! The parish 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 we provide for people’s voices, their needs, dreams, interests, to be heard as we explore the questions:
 - Who are we as a parish?
 - 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 parish.
 - 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, marriage, 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 need to be **various tracks** in a pastoral plan for adult faith formation to allow adults to follow their interests and to live as disciples 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

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mission? The mission of a parish – 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 our parish 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!

Let’s explore five ways to understand – and expand - our “definition” of adult faith formation.

1) **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.

2) **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 that parishes and (arch)dioceses 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.

Do the parish pastoral council, boards and committees annually ask themselves this question:

By what we say and do within all of parish life, what are we teaching people

- about God
- about faith and life
- about prayer
- about being Church
- about justice and peace
- about living and bringing about the Reign of God?

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

“...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.”

-Jane Regan in *Toward an Adult Church*

3) Adult faith formation is much more than programs; it's about being a learning community.

In her chapter, “The Aim of Catechesis” in the book *Horizons and Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, Jane Regan names four of the many significant implications she sees flowing from creating a learning community:

- 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.

4) 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?

5) 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) reminds us: 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 parish. 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.”

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In the same vein, 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.”

GEMS Wonderings

- What part of this newsletter affirms you? What part challenges you and your parish?
- Which part would benefit your parish’s approach and procedures for adult faith formation?
- Who else on staff and on various committees would benefit from reading and discussing this issue?



Adding New Luster to an Older Gem

We have looked at the importance of hospitality as foundational for adult faith formation in several past issues (**GEMS** #3-9, 15-18, 46-48, and 56-58). You might want to peruse these additional suggestions:

- Welcome Station with Mini Children’s Library: <http://www.traci-smith.com/good-ideas-welcome-station-with-mini-childrens-library/>
- 5 Tell-Tale Signs Your Church is Geared to Insiders, Not Outsiders: <https://careynieuwhof.com/7-tell-tale-signs-your-church-is-g geared-to-insiders-not-outsiders/?fbclid=IwAR2AJrtgYEbnWpk8TZMChRhbmiaSXasaCp9wyigMZsIqf4Gi -7FSs6JV8U>

- Dear Regular Mass-goers: The Seats at the End of the Pew Aren’t for You: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/02/14/dear-regular-mass-goers-seats-end-pew-arent-you>
- Ten Signs of a Welcoming Congregation: <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/726/ten-signs-of-a-welcoming-congregation>
- The Home Page Welcome: Empty Fluff or Meaningful Greeting: <https://www.catholicwebsolutions.com/2018/11/13/the-home-page-welcome-empty-fluff-or-meaningful-greeting/>



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

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

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html and <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>