



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Harvest House – A Parish-Based Ministry with Catholic Senior Adults

As far back as 1978, the bishops of the United States called attention to the needs of the maturing populations in our parishes, “In our pastoral approach to the elderly we must recognize ‘the principle of dynamic growth in every age span and give consideration to the spirituality of the aging as a resource in the Church.’ As we indicated a year ago in our statement *Society and Aged: Toward Reconciliation*, we intended to increase our efforts to insure that their pastoral needs are met, that they are included in all phases of the Church’s life and that Church agencies and institutions for social action give them high priority.

To Do the Work of Justice, a Plan of Action for the Catholic Community in the United States, May 4, 1978

In the last 45+ years, dioceses and parishes throughout the nation have - and still are - responded with renewed efforts to provide meaningful support, processes and programs to enrich the lives of older adults.

In the diocese of Wichita, KS, due to the initiative of (deceased) Bishop Eugene J. Gerber, Father Louis J. Putz, C.S.C of Notre Dame University, was invited to the diocese in April 1989, to help organize the first Harvest House program. The Harvest House program had been initiated by Fr. Putz in 1973. (To learn more about Fr. Putz, see <https://news.nd.edu/news/new-biography-memorializes-father-louie-putz/>)



What Is Harvest House?

Harvest House is a movement for adults age 55 or older. Membership is open to younger adults, if retired, and to both spouses even if one does not meet

the age requirement. Harvest House seeks to help older adults make their retirement years a rewarding experience by using this stage of life in a constructive way as they utilize and appreciate their well-deserved leisure time.

The term “Harvest House” connotes a richness of maturity. When a farmer harvests the riches of the fields, he/she brings in the ripest grain, and the wheat that is best able to feed those who hunger. This harvest is not the end of a life cycle, but in fact a new beginning.



Harvest House Philosophy

In its retired members, every parish possesses a hidden treasure. The parish family is enriched by uncovering and utilizing the collective wisdom, spirituality, knowledge and talent of its older generation, which has an entire lifetime of valuable experience to share with fellow parishioners, young and old.

Harvest House in the diocese of Wichita

Since its inception in 1989 the program expanded from three Harvest House Groups to flourishing groups in many of the parishes throughout the diocese.

This initial growth was guided by a team who worked toward the organization of the various centers: the Executive Director of Catholic Charities, Harvest House’s spiritual advisor and program director.

Throughout the years, Harvest House leaders assisted in the organizational meetings of prospective new Harvest House Groups. Currently, Harvest House operates under the auspices of the Diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life. Within that office, Sharon Witzell serves as the Program Coordinator of Senior Adult Ministries, including the coordination of Harvest House.

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Each parish plans the monthly events/gatherings for their Harvest House. Sharon visits each parish at least once a year during one of their gatherings.

The Harvest House Gatherings

Most Harvest House Groups meet at least monthly; these get-togethers correspond with the six goals of Harvest House which are focused on establishing the role of older adults as an important segment of the Church and of society.

The six goals are:

1. **Social Awareness/Awareness of the Reality of the Older Adult.** Since biblical times, older adults have made significant contributions to society. Harvest House provides mutual support and sets the stage for recognizing that older persons are valued citizens with much to contribute to the Church and society. A function of social awareness is to change prevalent negative attitudes towards older adults and to enable them to feel good about themselves. St. Pope John Paul II states in his 1999 *Letter to the Elderly*, “The Church still needs you. She appreciates the services which you may wish to provide in many areas of the apostolate, she counts on the support of your longer periods of prayer, she counts on your advice born of experience and she is enriched by your daily witness to the Gospel.”



2. **Service.** Harvest House members are motivated to take advantage of the countless opportunities to make productive use of their leisure time by volunteering their time and talent in the parish and community and in service to each other. Such service gives the elderly opportunities to share their expertise and make fruitful use of their time.



3. **New Religious Experiences.** Through the Harvest House program, many opportunities become available to deepen spiritual lives and remain active in the life of the church. Having a Harvest House Group in a parish calls attention to the special pastoral needs of older parishioners, since frequently more attention is given to younger people in the parish.



Some Harvest House groups open their meetings with the Eucharistic Liturgy and arrange for occasional celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

4. **Continuing Education.** Harvest House encourages opportunities where older adults can share their expertise and experience with others through peer ministry of teaching. In addition, various diocesan offices offer speakers who are knowledgeable in various fields and who are willing to share their knowledge and experience in a group forum. An example of this is the Office of Faith Formation’s Speaker’s Bureau. The Senior Adult Ministry Coordinator also keeps a listing of various speakers who are knowledgeable, specifically in areas that are of great benefit to our older citizens. (i.e. Caregiver support, Elder Law, etc.)



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5. Recreation and Celebration.

Christianity is a religion of joy and our Harvest House members have a unique opportunity to celebrate life, and exhibit this joy. Thus, Harvest House combines purpose with enjoyment by planning wholesome recreational activities in keeping with the pace and dignity of the members. Among the many recreational opportunities available, a favorite with Harvest House members are bus trips to local points of interest. Such travel experiences combine education and entertainment.



6. **Community Involvement.** In our country, at this time, there are over 50 million people age 65 or older. Sheer numbers make older adults a powerful source of influence on lawmakers. Thus, the sixth goal of Harvest House, community involvement, urges older citizens to contribute their wisdom and experience to the legislative process on the local, state, and federal levels.



To this end, Harvest House groups are encouraged to contact the diocesan Respect Life & Social Justice Office to inquire about various opportunities for learning and involvement. Through Harvest House, members can keep abreast of important issues and legislation that need their support or

opposition. Effectively uniting with other citizens in their age group enables Harvest House members to bring their political influence to bear on legislation affecting them and society as a whole.

Suggested Activities for Harvest House Groups

With these six goals in mind, listed here are various activities that are planned by the diverse parishes in the Wichita diocese, depending on the particular interest and needs of each group's membership.

Social Awareness/Awareness of the Reality of the Older Adult

- Communicating with members of all Harvest House Groups and other senior citizen groups
- Discovering needs of older adults and finding solutions
- Establishing and fostering the worth and dignity of the older generation
- Establishing public relations
- Round table discussions on social issues
- Inviting a speaker from the Diocesan Office of Respect Life & Social Justice
- Having speakers from social agencies throughout the city as the program for the monthly meetings to make people aware of the needs of the city
- Collecting food for the poor
- Hosting lectures on crime prevention, home safety
- Offering a guest column to the *Catholic Advance* on a quarterly basis through the Senior Adult Ministries Coordinator's office



Service

- Visiting nursing homes
- Having car pools, pickups, etc. for Harvest House members
- Doing volunteer work at the Catholic Care Center
- Volunteering at the Spiritual Life Center
- Welcoming new members in a parish
- Serving in the parish church (e.g. changing seasonal Missalettes)

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- Sending greeting cards to the sick
- Sending birthday cards

- Volunteering for Catholic Charities
- Hosting a Knitting Bee/ Sewing Circle to make mittens/ socks for the homeless



- Suggesting that each member bring a non-perishable food good/toiletry to each meeting for delivery to the Our Daily Bread Food pantry
- Having a once-yearly day of service at various ministries throughout the diocese (Our Daily Bread Food Pantry, The Lord's Diner, etc.)

New Religious Experiences

- Prayer Groups
- Religious films/slide presentations
- Prayer service on forgiveness and healing
- Visiting an Orthodox church

- Passion Play in Eureka Springs
- Retreats and days of Recollection
- Scripture study groups



- Touring the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Wichita, with a trained tour guide from the Cathedral
- Pilgrimages to churches in the Wichita area
- Pilgrimage to Shrine of St. Philippine Duchesne
- Pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Snows
- Having special devotions to Our Lady in May (e.g. Cantata Rosary)
- Inviting a member of the Diocesan Speaker's Bureau to give a presentation

Continuing Education

- Including education programs in some monthly Harvest House Group Meetings
- Lectures on various topics: Church Art, financial planning, health, safety, etc.
- Book reviews
- Workshops and/or seminars
- Educational Tours
- Attending education programs offered by various agencies in the Wichita community (e.g. Via Christi Regional Medical Center, Botanica, Wichita Art Museum, etc.)
- Visiting various Wichita or local centers for learning (Senior Wednesdays, etc.)
- Inviting a representative from the Great Plains Wildlife Refuge to speak



Celebration and Recreation

- Cookouts, picnics, potluck meals
- Annual Fall Festival
- OctoberFest
- Christmas Parties
- Sing-alongs
- Story telling
- Dancing
- Ice Cream socials
- Trips to Carthage to visit Precious Moments and Vietnamese Christmas display



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- Kansas City to see Christmas Lights
- Games (Bingo, card playing)
- Annual Harvest House Anniversary celebration

Community Involvement

- Getting to know political candidates and their issues; inviting them to speak at a meeting
- Informing political candidates about the needs of senior citizens
- Developing and/or maintaining an interest in legislative matters
- Harvest House Legislative Commission
- Voting at election time
- Writing letters to state and national legislators
- Participating in disaster surveys
- Helping to promote Marriage & Family Life/Respect Life Events and News



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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>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Studio: <https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com/>
- Seasons of Adult Faith website: <https://www.seasonsofadultfaith.com>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
 - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
 - https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf

GEMS Wonderings

- In what ways does your parish, your (arch)diocese, plan opportunities to meet the needs of adults in their growing older years?
- How does your parish respond to the six areas of the Harvest House goals: social awareness, service, new religious experiences, continuing education, celebration and recreation, and community involvement?
- What might be other needs of today's eldering adults in your parish? (See [*Let This Be the Time – Spiritual Essentials for Life's Second Act*](#)).
- Do your programs and processes for eldering adults provide time and opportunities for communication, education, social service, friendship, hospitality and sociability?