



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#209 - March 1, 2024

A Best Practice: Small Faith-Sharing Groups

Many parishes today – fortunately – are encouraging, organizing and supporting small faith-sharing groups. In this issue we look at one parish who embarked in this endeavor in their unique way.

Conversion may happen through the primary worship service
– but discipleship happens in small groups.

~ Bill Easum

The Setting

As most parishes, St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Brighton, MI was deeply affected by the Covid pandemic. Coupled with that unprecedented adversity, the parish was experiencing significant pastor and staff changes. Even before these two challenges, their adult faith formation programs and processes had been languishing for several years; the parishioners were not really being served.

Thus, coming out of Covid and amid the changes and transitions, the staff and parishioners were committed to coming back to life.

- The Adult Formation Team was re-established.
- Numerous opportunities were available, such as:
 - Scripture studies

- “Pints & Ponderings” sessions with the pastor (5 or 6 Friday evenings throughout the year {averaging about 110 participants}); participants bringing their own beverages and a snack to share).

Then, Erin Wolfe, Pastoral Associate for Adult Religious Formation and Ministry, RCIA, and Infant Baptism, with members of the Adult Formation Team, decided it was time to begin to focus on inviting and establishing small faith-sharing groups.

As they looked at the numerous programs and processes that are available, the pastor suggested that they provide programming resources which they themselves would produce. This enabled them to design the content and process to meet the immediate needs and interests of their parishioners.

Small Christian Communities are focused on "Christians coming together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment.

These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on 'civilization of love.'"

~ Pope John Paul II

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

The Beginning Preparations

The Adult Formation Team began to dream about the name for the process. Because their Formation Mission Statement is “Fanning each spark of faith into flame,” they decided to call them SPARK Groups, deciding on what each letter stood for.



SMALL · PRAYERFUL · AVAILABLE · RELATIONAL · KERYGMATIC

S: **Small** Groups have 6-10 members.

P: **Prayerful** Where members pray for each other.

A: **Available** Where everyone is encouraged to join.

R: **Relational** Where relationships are nurtured.

K: **Kerygmic** Greek for Proclamation! Hear the Gospel proclaimed in a new way.

The Adult Formation Team, then, asked for leaders to volunteer. None of the materials were ready, but they put out the call anyway! 16 people volunteered! These group leaders set the dates, times, and locations of their gatherings.

The group leaders were provided with formation and time for development of skills for guiding a small group; of course, an important step in any adult faith formation process.

The endeavor was then introduced and explained to the parish and people were invited to sign up for one of the groups. More than 130 people signed up to participate.

The Process – and all the details – Continued

- An old office in the parish building was transformed into a recording studio.
- The outlines were prepared for the first 5-session series, *God Loves Me*. The videos for each session generally had one main presenter (various staff members) along with comments and story-telling from other members of the parish.
- The videos were on their YouTube channel so that all parishioners had access to them.
<https://www.youtube.com/@st.marymagdalen3967/videos>
- Each video was accompanied by a “script” for the session that had the entire gathering laid out for the many small group leaders.
- At the conclusion of these opportunities, evaluations were available – to help the Adult Formation Team continue to discern the needs for the future. (Glowing reviews!)

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED



SMALL · PRAYERFUL · AVAILABLE · RELATIONAL · KERYGMATIC

God Loves Me Session 3

Opening Prayer:

Lord God, we praise you and thank you for the immense love you have for each of us. Help us to truly recognize your love and what it manifests in our lives! You are present in all aspects of our existence, the ordinary and the extraordinary; the good and the bad. Let us feel the boundless love you have for each of us individually. Open our hearts and our minds to hear your voice today. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introductions (if anyone is new)

Question: "What is the oddest place you have found something you were looking for?"

Presentation: *Session 3: Where/How do I Experience God's Love in My Life?* by Josh Kenny

Discussion Questions (During Presentation):

- What are the three most important relationships in your life?
- Where are the three places you spend the most time?
- How might God's love be present in these relationships and places?
- At 16:05 in the video: "What are you feeling?"

Discussion Questions:

- If you did not cover this enough in the discussion during the presentation: Do you see God's love in the ordinary? (Spouse, family, friends, nature, etc.)
- Josh talked about the ways to see God's love in the ordinary times/places of life. Have there been any miraculous times when you have experienced God's love?
- Do you feel God's presence and love alongside you in your times of suffering?
- Josh mentioned that Jesus helps us carry our own crosses. What does this look like in your life?/How does Jesus help you? (Other people, peace in your heart, etc.)
- "Hindsight is 20/20, especially when we are looking for God's presence in our lives." Have you had this experience of looking back and recognizing how God was working in your life and showing love for you?
- Do the new ideas about how to be aware of God's love in the moment (from the brainstorming and Josh's presentation) help you find new ways to see God's love in your life?

Action Item: This week be more aware of the ways God shows you love for you.

Intentions

Closing Prayer:

Lord God, we thank you for the love you have poured out upon us this evening in our fellowship and sharing. Open our eyes to the myriad ways we can experience your love this week. Help us see your deep and abiding love for us in the people we meet, the places we go, and the experiences we have. Keep us safe and in your love until we meet again. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fellowship



SMALL · PRAYERFUL · AVAILABLE · RELATIONAL · KERYGMATIC

God Loves Me Session 4

Opening Prayer: Loving God, you send to us all varieties of spiritual blessings. Your heart speaks to our hearts. We are blessed beyond measure and know that you are with us always. We thank you for all your gifts. Open our hearts and our minds to hear your voice today. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Question: "In what ways did you experience God's love for you over the last week? What was your response to God?"

Presentation: *Session 4: How do I Experience God's Spiritual Blessings in My Life?* by Dcn. Devon & Erin Wolfe

Discussion Questions (During Presentation):

- When in your life have you had examples of inspiration or of answering God's call?
- Share a time of feeling God's refuge or strength.
- Share a time that you have felt forgiven or restored by God.

Discussion Questions:

- If you did not fully cover any of the above questions in the discussion during the presentation, feel free to revisit them.
- Do you find it hard to listen when you pray for inspiration? (Do you hear your voice or God's? Do you "get in your own way" and make it hard to hear God's voice?)
- If you have had an experience of following God's will, how did that feel? What helped you know that this was what God had intended for you? (Erin's Adult Formation story, for example.)
- "When we give or receive the gift of forgiveness to or from another person...we convey God's love to each other through our mercy." Do you feel God's love through forgiveness of and from others in your own life?
- "Our failings and our weaknesses are part of our journey to salvation because without those sins, God couldn't help us." How do you react to that statement? How does this help us feel God's love?
- Are there other spiritual blessings you have experienced in your life?

Action Item: This week look for the ways you feel God's love through the spiritual blessings in your life.

Intentions

Closing Prayer:

Father Almighty, we thank you for the time we have spent sharing how you have blessed us. We ask you to shower down your spiritual blessings on us this week so that we may clearly feel your presence in our everyday lives. Help us to hear your voice and feel your love deep in our hearts. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fellowship

“It seems timely therefore to form ecclesial communities and groups of a size that allows for true human relationships.

This will make it possible to live communion more intensely ... it will be easier to gather to hear the Word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this Word and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ.”

~ *The Church in America* (Pope John Paul II, 1999)

What Next?

After a successful 5-weeks during Lent, the Adult Formation Team decided that they needed to have monthly presentations for the summer so that the groups could continue gathering if they wished to. For these sessions, there were no videos, but content for the participants to read and a suggested song for prayer.

Thus, Summer Sparklers were created:

- A Picnic with Jesus: This session focused on how God feeds us abundantly, using the Scripture readings of the manna from heaven and the feeding of the multitudes. Participants were invited to enjoy a picnic with their groups.
- Come to the Water: This gathering concentrated on the Scripture passage of Jesus walking on the water. Parishioners were invited to meet with their groups on a beach or on a boat (since many people in the parish live on lakes and/or have boats).

- Gimme S'more Holy Spirit: This month centered on fire and how the Holy Spirit comes to us in our times of need, emboldening us to carry out God's will. The group members were invited to meet around a campfire and have s'mores.

The full guides for leaders of the small groups can be found at: <https://www.janetschaeffler.com/AFF-Helps.html>



Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com
jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org

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