



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: *Free to Be*

Fortunately, today there are many ways our parishes (and dioceses) offer adult faith formation – ways to gather in community and ways to grow in faith and the journey of living our spirituality. Some (of the many) possibilities include:

- Study and reflection on the Sunday Scripture readings
- Prayer
- Reflections from various people
- Book studies
- Small group sharing

This issue of **GEMS** includes all of these (and much more)!

How It Began ... and Grew

In 1989 at St. Timothy Parish in Laguna Niguel, CA a small group of women who wanted to lose weight began to gather. The group was called ***Free to Be Thin***. After a short time together, they asked the Staff Spiritual Director, Bernadette Snyder to join the group. She led them to spirituality, dropped ***Thin*** out of the name and the group became ***Free to Be***.

When Bernadette died in 2014, a volunteer from the group, Barbara Holcomb led the group. When Barbara needed to leave that role because of family care-giving, Helene Markel, who had been hired by the parish in 2016 as a Spiritual Director, began leading the group in 2018.

In 2018 there were about 40 women active in the group. There are currently 200 on the roster, averaging about 100 ladies each week. Helene reminds them that since they are ***FREE TO BE*** they are free to come when they can, encouraging them to engage with the reading and be ready to share their reflections and experiences.

They also recently began a summer 6-week series during which they read fun books.

Helene is convinced: “There is such a need for woman to gather. My goal is to have everyone feel like they are a part of something, that they belong. I

also want them to have a purpose, so I encourage them to join our hospitality committee or program committee. Lastly, we are a safe place where they are able to share their stories and transcend closer to our Lord. This job and community of women has been one of the biggest blessings in my life!”

Format and Process of the Group

The group meets weekly from September through May (excluding holidays) from 9:30-11:30 am. In addition to the gathering at the parish, each session is also offered via zoom.

The format includes community-building, prayer, reflection, learning, and sharing ... including participation from everyone and leadership from many:

- Hospitality before meeting: coffee and treats
- Business/Announcements
- Opening Song
- The Sunday Gospel proclaimed by one of the women
- Gospel reflection offered by one of the women
- Presentation: Helene offers a 20-minute presentation on the chapter from the book that they have read.
- Break
- Group Sharing at assigned tables (approximately 30 minutes)
- The gathering ends with closing poem, prayer, decade of the Rosary led by one of the women followed by individual personal prayer requests.

Key Element: Group Sharing

One of the women commented on the power/support of the group sharing. It certainly includes their reflections on the book they have read but also incorporates the reality of what is going on in their lives. She reflected that that type of sharing reminds her that life is not just all the wonderful things written on Facebook but also the common struggles that are shared.

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

This openness to personal sharing is witnessed by Helene. During her presentation on the book chapter she uses stories and examples from her own life. Helene comments that she is purposefully vulnerable, hoping the women will also be vulnerable in their sharing at their tables: "All of my life, worries, fears and faith are woven into my presentations."

During Covid

During COVID the group met via Zoom. Helene reflected (as many experienced during the pandemic): "It was important to continue meeting since many of the women are widows or elderly. They always look forward to coming to the gathering, a spiritual and social event they can look forward to. During COVID several of our committee members made prayer shawls

embroidered with scripture. This allowed the women to be held in love until we met again in person. We had a drive by pick up."

Other Diverse Experiences

In addition to the gathering offered each week (with the process described above), many other opportunities have been added.

- ❖ They have begun a yearly field trip. Some have been:
 - a visit to the Cathedral who was hosting the Sistine Chapel exhibit
 - a retreat morning at Mission San Juan Capistrano Cathedral with Fr. David Robinson
 - Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day, Christ Cathedral
 - An ecumenical visit to St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church to learn about their church filled with Icons
 - Trip to Homeboy Industries/Cathedral of the Angels in Los Angeles
 - An Ecumenical visit to Temple Beth El to learn more about the Jewish faith
 - Lenten Retreat at the Center for Spiritual Development with Julie Mussche on "Forgiveness"
- ❖ The group has also sponsored guest speakers for the parish including Fr. Richard Leonard, Fr. Robert Spitzer and Fr. Greg Boyle.
- ❖ In 2022 the group did the 19th Annotation Spiritual Exercise of St Ignatius using Fr. Kevin O'Brien's book, *The Ignatian Adventure*.

- ❖ They also try to have a craft-type day once a year: a hands-on artistic experience. The committee has brainstormed and arranged for the making of crowns, prayer journals, and crosses adorned with jewels. This year they will be offering a Kintsugi experience (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi>).
- ❖ The women love to celebrate. They have a Christmas brunch every year and end the season with a May Crowning liturgy and celebration.



Women from Free to Be at Homeboy Industries with Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ

Some (of the many) books that have been read and discussed by the group

- *Healing Life's Hurts* by Dennis Linn and Matthew Linn
- *The Friendships of Women* by Dee Brestin
- *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck
- *Praying with Theresa of Avila*
- *Gift of the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh
- *The Artist's Way* by Julie Cameron

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- *Healing the 8 Stages of Life* by Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant, and Dennis Linn
- *Happiness is an Inside Job* by John S. Powell
- *Vein of Gold* by Julie Cameron
- *Mother-Daughter Wisdom* by Dr. Christiane Northrup
- *Traveling Light* by Max Lucado
- *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* by James Martin, SJ
- *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* by James Martin
- *Proof of Heaven* by Eben Alexander
- *Why Bother Praying* by Fr. Richard Leonard
- *In His Spirit* by Fr. Richard Hauser
- *The Friendship of Women* by Sr. Joan Chittister
- *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen
- *The Law of Love* by Fr. Richard Leonard
- *Divine Love Song* by Elizabeth Mulloy
- *My Life with the Saints* by Fr. James Martin
- *Let This Be the Time: Spiritual Essentials for Life's Second Act* by Sr. Janet Schaeffler, OP
- *The Book of Forgiving* by Desmond Tutu
- *The Sign of the Cross* by Bert Ghezzi

Meeting with the Authors

For some of the books recently, the authors have joined the session via Zoom:

- James Martin, SJ as they were reading *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* and *My Life with the Saints*
- Fr. Richard Leonard during their reading of *Why Bother Praying* and *The Law of Love*
- Elizabeth Mulloy as the group read *Divine Love Song*

- Sr. Melanie Svoboda, SND while reading her book *Traits of a Healthy Spirituality*
- Sr. Janet Schaeffler, OP during their reading of *Let This Be the Time: Spiritual Essentials for Life's Second Act*



Free to Be women on one of their field trips: St. Paul Greek Orthodox Church

Comments from some of the women of *Free to Be*

- My first day at *Free to Be*, I walked in and thought “Wow. I will never fit in here;” everyone seemed so OLD - was I that age now too? But Charmaine welcomed me and guided me to my table and I felt, “Ok maybe this will be all right.” Through the past several years, the women at my tables have made me feel so LOVED and cared for. They listened to me and gave me such good advice. I have felt lifted in prayer so many times. I have met so many amazing strong, faithful women. I am so glad I stayed and kept coming back. (Mary Kaye Ashkenaze)

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- After being a member for 26+ yrs., I have to say, “Wow, we have read and shared so much together, and thanks for friendships built because of this faith sharing!” (Pat Koepke)
- We in *Free to Be* are always excited to come. We plan our week around it. To see the joy in their eyes and the kindness in their words is a beautiful thing. But to feel that love and compassion wrap around you is astounding. Sometimes when I look around the room and look into their eyes I am humbled. Humbled because it’s easy to see the Holy Spirit among us. Humbled because they are the seekers, doers, and lovers. Sometimes I want to rise and twirl around them and spread the joy that overflows at each table. (But I realize I am old and awkward in my movements and they might be mistaken for a seizure.)

This is the spirit of *Free to Be* at St. Timothy and I am proud to be a member. I can see God’s loving spirit in and among all of us. This is where we are fed and nurtured and loved. And this where we gather up our talent, strength and courage to go forth and serve our Lord.

Helene is a most amazing leader. By her example we see that God’s love and grace is with us always despite life’s setbacks. She has become our mentor, our friend, and our most enthusiastic cheerleader. She shows us, by her example, that God’s love is with us all the time despite life’s setbacks.

The format of our meetings have become an essential part of growing together in love and compassion. Through our discussions at our table groups, we get to know and care for each person. Their lives matter to me.

After each book we switch table groups and we have a new group of wonderful women to share and grow with. Thus, over the years, we have woven a tapestry of strong love and friendship that goes beyond the room.

“You are a Miracle!” Helene whispered as she passed by me at a crowded event. Those four words changed me and my life. Just that little spark of love and encouragement has enabled me to step up and step out of my “what ifs - what if they don’t like me, what if I say the wrong thing, what if I make a mistake.”

Those things that restricted me, also held me back from offering kindness and love to others. When I saw how those four words bolstered my confidence I realized that I too wanted to be a cheerleader in life. I now smile at that one moment in time when a whisper changed me.

I can now say what’s on my heart in a kind and loving way to many people. The words on my heart that I never let out are now freely given (at least most of the time). And I smile because they are well received and I know I am spreading God’s love!

I cannot pass up the opportunity to tell you of the power of prayer witnessed and felt among all of us. When any one of us is experiencing health issues, family crisis, or just a friend in need of prayer, Helene puts out a prayer request via email. This request is like calling a band of angels. The power of this prayer can be felt among all who pray and among those we are praying for. I have witnessed it many times. (Betty Foy)

- Members of the *Free to Be* group support each other with hugs, share tears, joyful laughter in good and tragic times. The *Free to Be* women are generous when needs are made known. For example, we supply toilet paper and other items to our St. Timothy food pantry weekly. We support other programs such as a woman’s shelter on Mother’s day collecting funds and wallets. (Cindy Brauer)



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