



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

90 - June 2018

A Best Practice: Choices and Self Direction in Faith Formation

We don't have to think too deeply or too long to realize that people are hesitant (resistant) to participating in **mandated** programs and processes.

Some principles of adult learning remind us:

- Adults are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be **free to direct themselves**. Their teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. They must let them work on projects that reflect their interests. (Malcom Knowles)
- Adults prefer **self-directed and self-designed learning projects** over group-learning experiences led by a professional, they select more than one medium for learning, and they desire to control pace and start/stop time. (*30 Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning* by Ron and Susan Zemke; http://www.muskegoncc.edu/Include/CTL%20DOCS/XXIX_No4.pdf)
- Adults learn through **direct experience**; therefore, their training and learning interventions must include active and practical participation and offer implementable techniques and methodologies that will immediately improve their everyday lives. (*The 8 Fundamental Principles of Adult Learning* by Sarah Cordiner; <https://sarahcordiner.com/the-8-fundamental-principles-of-adu/>)
- Adult learning encourages collaboration. Adult learners thrive in **collaborative relationships** with their educators. When learners are considered by their instructors as colleagues, they become more productive. (*6 Top Facts About Adult Learning Theory* by Aditya Pullagurta; <https://elearningindustry.com/6-top-facts-about-adult-learning-theory-every-educator-should-know>)
- **Self-direction does not mean isolation**. Studies of self-directed learning indicate that self-directed projects involve an average of 10 other people as resources, guides, encouragers and the like. But even

for the self-professed, self-directed learner, lectures and short seminars get positive ratings, especially when these events give the learner face-to-face, one-to-one access to an expert. (*30 Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning* by Ron and Susan Zemke; http://www.muskegoncc.edu/Include/CTL%20DOCS/XXIX_No4.pdf)

- Inclusive teachers offer **flexibility, variety and choice**. Individual challenges and constraints can make traditional attendance and participation patterns unviable for many today. Inclusive practices ensure that a learner's commitment to learning is not affected by this, but rather alternative options for learning are offered. (*Inclusive Teaching in Higher Education*; <https://www.uow.edu.au/dvca/socialinclusion/inclusiveteaching/UOW157266.html>)

The art of teaching
is the art of assisting discovery.

- Mark VanDoren

Convinced of these principles and based on their own listening to the needs of people, Roberta Balsewicz, Director of Faith Formation (adults) and Jane Ehrlich, Director of Religious Education (children) at Holy Spirit Parish, Naperville, IL, have worked to offer events which people want to participate in and/or are grateful after having participated.



Some Things to Think About

As you read about some of Roberta's and Jane's efforts to design programs which allow for choice and flexibility in family and intergenerational programming, you might want to ask yourself:

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- How might we employ some of these techniques and methods (especially the Learning Centers) in all adult faith formation opportunities?
- Many of the following methods take place in face-to-face gatherings. What might be some ways that we can offer flexibility, variety, and choice through online opportunities?

*(In our next **GEMS** issue, we'll explore some more possibilities for choice and self-direction which incorporate both face-to-face and online opportunities.)*

Let's explore, then, some of the possibilities to offer flexibility, variety and choice that have been utilized at Holy Spirit Parish (and other parishes where Roberta and Jane have ministered).

Offering programs on different days and times

- Today one-size-fits-all doesn't work anymore. A variety of times better accommodates the wide range of family schedules today.
- Examples:
 - A parent-child retreat offered on a weekday evening and on a Saturday morning.
 - The same intergenerational event offered at two very different days/times, e.g. a Saturday morning from 9 am to noon and also on a Tuesday evening from 5 to 8 pm.
 - Daytime events: in the past many parishes often cancelled catechist formation, prayer groups, etc. due to lack of attendance as double income households became the norm. In their suburban setting, Holy Spirit Parish are finding that those offerings can be very well attended due to work from home situations that corporations have established and the seven-day work week culture which has developed. Since our culture doesn't maintain a Monday to Friday workweek, many adults have days off during the week and/or hours are



often flexible and so one group of women have scheduled a Wednesday morning bible study, flexing their work hours.



A weekday morning service project

Drop in:
collect, sort, create, deliver



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- Weekend events, especially Sunday: connecting events to a Sunday morning or afternoon seems to work for many. Sunday evenings work for many with teens and children as the weekend has come to a close. All ages in a family have that time available.



That Man Is You program meets every Saturday morning; men come and go as they are able. They do not have to attend each week; material is available on-line for those who need a break.



A visual faith experience self-directed on a Sunday afternoon

Differing Tracks

The catechetical program for middle school learners has been organized into a track approach. The year is divided into three tracks; each learner is required to attend two tracks at the parish and one track is done at home accompanied by other optional events.

- This allows a family to use Track A (fall) for home activities if the fall is the busiest time for them.
- If the family is busiest in the spring, they participate in Track A & B at the parish and then Track C is used for the at home learning and other events.

This approach benefits both the families and the parish:

- It offers accommodations for families' busy schedules.
- It helps the parish manage facility constraints.

Learning Centers

One effective – and enjoyable – approach which provides choices for the participants is the design of learning centers. The planning of learning centers begins with knowing the goals for the event and the participants. Flowing from these goals, a variety of activities are planned to accomplish them.

One possible design for a sacramental preparation workshop might be to plan an event which opens with a general session for everyone, giving an overview of some of the key meanings of the sacrament.

Several learning centers would then be available which would provide opportunities for the families to peruse additional aspects of the sacrament through a variety of methods. There might be an artistic area, a role-playing center, a video presentation, a food center, a touch 'n tell space, a prayer experience and a game.

Different areas have varied levels of physical participation, quiet space, time for talking within the family or sharing the experience with other families.

All the learning centers are active at the same time. Families are invited to participate in as many and whichever they choose.

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Some of the activities might be designated as necessary (because of their crucial importance) with all families being asked to include these during the workshop. For example, during a Eucharist retreat all families would be asked to visit the “How to Receive Eucharist” space sometime during the event.

There may be a space, such as a video, where there are designated start times. All of the other centers would have a free flow operation.

As a family finishes one center, they are able to move onto the next center and not have to wait until an entire group is ready to move. This allows some families to make their way through all of the options. A family that chooses to spend more time in one area has the opportunity to do just that.

All of the centers have facilitators present but some of the areas are self-directed with the facilitators acting more as guides than teachers. Some areas have more formality to the learnings and some of the areas are designed for families to talk about the areas with their family and teach each other through their participation.



Eucharist Retreat: A Few of the Many Choices

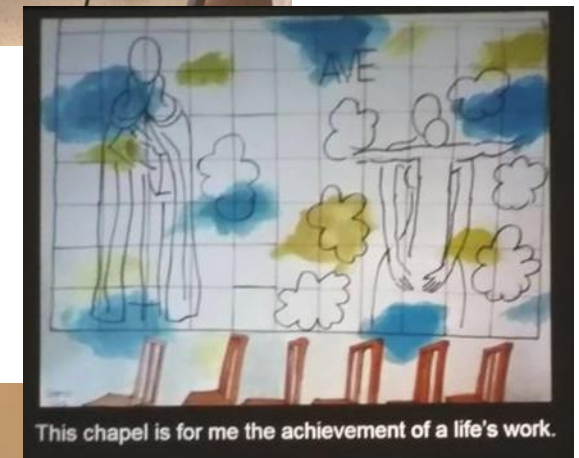
Some Guidelines for Learning Centers

- Facilitators and guides at some of the stations could be teens which promotes leadership among the youth and presents adults the opportunity to see the youth as capable, prayerful and pleasant.
- There is a planned timeframe with the expectation that the families take time to experience all the stations.
- Families then leave when they are finished.

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Some Findings from Roberta and Jane's experiences of Learning Centers with Families:

- Families like the opportunity to “teach” each other.
- Parents like the control of choosing, along with their children, what to participate in.
- Often families try to get to all of the stations.
- Families like being able to come and go through the stations as fits their family.
- Parents feel competent to lead their children – as they learn through the same activities alongside each other.
- Parents of other faiths feel comfortable at these experiences. They have the opportunity to learn alongside others and no one is singled out.
- The parents feel that the Church staff is being respectful of their busy lives.
- There is an attitude of partnership and parents relate that they feel the events are worth their time.
- Families build community as some areas allow time for them to socialize and some areas encourage working together.

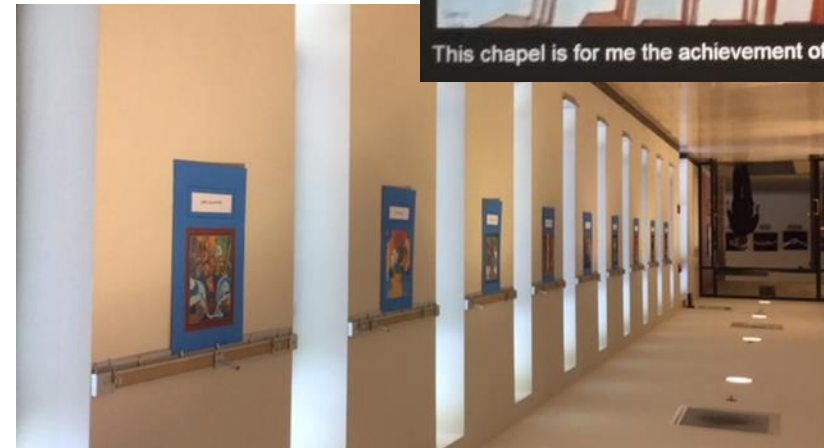


Learning Centers with Adults



Foods of the Bible event

Learn, listen, share, choose: Bible Study, Cultural learnings, Cooking, Eating



Prayer Choices and Learning Stations during a retreat for adults

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Drop-In Model

Roberta and Jane have used this model for Family Events and Intergenerational Learning Events (e.g. for Advent, Lent, sacramental preparation, movie event)

- There is not a prescribed start time but rather the event is open for a significant time (e.g. from 4 to 8 pm); people can start when they choose and leave when they choose; participating in what they choose.
- These events tend to have a longer time frame to allow for a larger number of families/participants to attend.
- There can be six different learning stations or activities. People are invited to take part in as few or as many of the activities as they choose. There might be time sensitive pieces where the doors open only at particular intervals, e.g. every twenty minutes but most of the activities would allow the participants to decide. The activities also keep in mind a range of ages from preschool to adult. The majority of activities are self-directed even if there is a guide available.



Family Advent Event –
Come and Go



For another example of this model for adults (or youth) see [GEMS #29: A Do It Yourself Evening of Reflection](#).

Summary

Providing flexibility, variety, and choice for participants in faith formation yields many positive results:

- Building community among the parishioners and relationships between the staff and the parish.
- Reminding families that they are in control of their faith development. The parish is there a partner: to support, encourage, and provide resources.

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GEMS Wonderings

- Is there some simple way you could begin Learning Centers for sacramental preparation?
- How might you employ some of these techniques and methods (especially the Learning Centers) in all adult faith formation opportunities?
- Many of the methods take place in face-to-face gatherings. What might be some ways that we can offer flexibility, variety, and choice through online opportunities?



Adding New Luster to an Older Gem

In [GEMS #38](#) we explored ways to use movies in adult and family faith formation. As you continue your planning you might be interested in *Movies are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings* (<http://www.patheos.com/books/book-club/josh-larsen-movies-are-prayers>).

[GEMS #74](#) took a look at icon writing as formative. In this article, “A Guide to Praying with an Icon,” author Jim Forest offers instructions for putting icons to good use. (http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201709/guide-praying-icon-31140?utm_)



Golden Nuggets from You

“As I am just now getting to several of your sharings, I read [GEMS #62](#) on Visual Arts in formation. I loved the example given by Joanne from St. Lawrence in Miami. I hope to use it myself, and am passing it along to others.

Just as a follow up, Stephen Binz has a new book out on Visio Divina combined with Lectio Divina. It is called *Transformed by God's Word*.

- Vicki Hawkins
Director of Faith Formation,
Nativity Catholic Church, Brandon, FL

“Good stuff, Sister Janet! I have really enjoyed these last three issues of GEMS ([GEMS #64-66](#)). As a grandparent I often times thank God that I am able to pass faith on to my young granddaughters in a much fuller way than I ever did with my own daughters. Must be that "wisdom with age" thing! I certainly am going to look for something to do with our grandparents as I truly understand how special they are!”

- Diane Seidel, Parish
Catechetical Leader,
St. Boniface Parish, Bay City, MI



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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>