



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#91 - July 2018

A Best Practice: Needs Assessment (Part I)

George Bernard Shaw's comment (in the blue box) challenges us regarding our planning for adult faith formation. As we continue our design and shaping of formation opportunities for our parishioners, what conversations are we having with people in the pews in order to "take the measurements" of their on-going and ever-changing needs?

"The only man
I know who
behaves sensibly
is my tailor;
he takes my
measurements
anew each time
he sees me.

The rest go on
with their old
measurements and
expect me
to fit them."

George Bernard Shaw

We are reminded continually of the necessity of always "taking the measurements" from various voices.

VOICES WITHIN THE BUSINESS WORLD:

- Today's strategy of Design Thinking stresses needs assessment as always its first phase; for instance: "Gather Inspiration: Inspire new thinking by discovering **what people really need.**"

(<https://www.ideou.com/pages/design-thinking>) - or

"Discovery: Choose an affirmative, strategic topic. Gather data. Understand and **empathize with unmet needs.**"

<http://www.creativityatwork.com/design-thinking-strategy-for-innovation/>

- The Twelve Habits of Highly Effective ICT-Enabled (Information and Communications Technologies) Development Initiatives include: "Conduct a **thorough needs assessment** of the community to be served so you can plan to do what is actually required."
(<https://tulaneict4d.wordpress.com/2013/04/19/12-habits-of-highly-effective-ict-enabled-development-initiatives/>)

- "Many companies tend to focus too much on the product or service and forget to listen to what customers are telling them...listen to customers and **understand their needs.** The best way to do this is by listening to what they tell us. Actively seek their point of view. Ask questions, conduct surveys, and get specific."
(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alanhall/2013/05/17/listening-to-customers-yields-success/#62b5e3737014>)
- "It is all too easy to assume what a client needs and then create a proposal based on what you think he said rather than what he really wanted. To successfully interact with clients, you have to listen to what they are saying and listen between the lines to fulfill **what they really want.**" (<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/listen-clients-needs-10494.html>)

VOICES WITHIN OUR FAITH COMMUNITY:

- In the book *The Religious Education of Adults*, McKenzie and Harton state: "An approach of '**corned beef and hash for everyone**' (which is tantamount to 'We don't care what you need, this is what you get because this is what we've got') and programs based simply on what the religious educator or pastor wants to teach are too capricious."
- Likewise, the following imperative comes from the U.S. bishops in *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*, #82: "Effective adult faith formation 'must begin by accepting adults where they are' in their faith, their life situations, their experiences, and their preferred learning styles. Our programs and ministries must be **in touch with people's real circumstances and concerns.**"
- Pope Francis has challenged us: "Be shepherds with **the smell of your sheep...**" His injunction echoes the words of *Our Hearts Were*

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Burning Within Us: we “must be in touch with people’s real circumstances and concerns.” As leaders in adult faith formation, we have to be with the people (in all kinds of ways) so that we’re aware of who they are, what their hopes and dreams, joys and challenges, and everyday needs are.

“Personally I am very fond of strawberries and cream, but I have found that for some strange reason, fish prefer worms.

So when I went fishing, I didn’t think about what I wanted. I didn’t bait the hook with strawberries and cream.

Rather, I dangled a worm or grasshopper in front of the fish and said, “Wouldn’t you like to have that?”

Why not use the same common sense when fishing for people?”

Dale Carnegie

https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/adolescent_faith_formation_-_lifelong_faith_journal.pdf

- In the NCCL *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study* the number one factor responsible for success of adult faith formation efforts was: “Paying attention to what is **on the hearts and minds of adults**, what is going on in their lives, is crucial and cannot be overstated. This happens in numerous ways both formally and informally. It is not about what we think they need but rather what they say they need.” (David Riley and Jack McBride. *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation: A National Study*. NCCL, 2006.
- “Listening carefully means tuning into the **predictable learning needs** in the lives of adults that we draw from adult developmental research, as well as the **transitions and milestones in adult lives**, such as becoming an empty nest household, retirement, and geographic relocation. It also means being aware of current events and important social, political, religious, and moral issues **affecting the lives of adults.**”

Certainly, then, these reminders (and many more) signify that a best practice for the planning of adult faith formation is to know, discern, and pay attention to the real life needs of the adults within our parishes and (arch)dioceses.

Some Foundational Principles

Subsequent **GEMS** issues will look at various ways of needs assessment today. Before we do that, this issue explores five foundational principles and reminders to keep in mind:

- 1) Often we use various means (which we’ll look at later) to ask adults what they would like to see the parish offer; then when the parish responds, few actually attend! Therefore, “needs assessment” is about **more than asking adults about their needs** (as important as that is). The key task of determining needs is to find out who our parishioners are, what is important to them, what their concerns, worries, hopes and dreams are. This information, then, can reveal a great deal about their deepest needs and expectations.
- 2) As we get to know who our parishioners are, we realize that there is a **difference between interests and needs**.

Often – when we do needs assessment through a survey – it is really a survey of interests which asks about the topics that adults would like to see offered. In reality, this type of listing of program topics frequently say more about us (the programmers) than about the everyday needs of people.

Perhaps this type of assessment assumes that the motivation for on-going faith learning is present and the only decisions that need to be made are those concerning content.

Two mistaken assumptions might be at work here:

- People know and will honestly say what topics/programs they are interested in and need.

One of the accepted holy grails of building an organization is that you should fill a need.

Fill people's needs, they say, and the rest will take care of itself.

But...someone might know that they need to lose some weight, but what they demand is potato chips. Someone might know that they need to be more concerned about the world, but what they demand is another fake reality show. ...

There are things that people vitally need...and yet providing it is no guarantee you'll find demand.

If you want to help people lose weight, you need to sell them something they demand, like belonging or convenience, not lecture them about what they need.

Seth Godin

- People will actually come to programs that they say there are interested in.

Our role, then, is to search the deeper, basic felt needs that might be met through additional faith formation and to develop opportunities from this concrete basis than to jump right into a “program menu.”

- Who are our parishioners?
- What are their concerns, worries, and hopes?
- What are some of their struggles – personal, family, work issues?

3) There is **no universal need** or interest that all adults have. As planners, therefore, it is helpful to look at the various needs of groups or communities-of-like interest within the parish. See the book *Seasons of Adult Faith Formation* and several supporting articles:

- http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/25/T_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Format_ion.html
- <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/journal.html>.

The needs of parents of young children will be different from the needs of the newly-retired; the needs of young adults who are just

beginning their career will be different from a 60-something who is caring for aging parents.

Even in “programming” around a “universal” need such as prayer, people have different needs and interests. What might you plan for a busy millennial; what might you plan for those in their 80's; what might you plan for those struggling with a serious illness, etc.?

4) In discerning needs, **many parishioners need to be involved** – those in leadership who are discerning and planning as well as many parishioners to whom we listen and/or invite their thoughts/experiences regarding specific programming.

- For instance, if an opportunity for young adults is being planned by the adults faith formation committee, are young adults invited to be part of the planning, sharing their thoughts regarding what, where, when and how the opportunity takes place.
- See page 5 of [GEMS #67](#) which shares Sr. Emily's experience of working with young adults to plan their event.
- Author Paul Wilkes says, “Nobody washes a rental car.” That points out one of the foundational aspects of participation: ownership. People will get involved when they feel like owners.

5) Needs assessment is **continual and never-ending**. Our parishes are always changing. The life-tasks and challenges of our rapidly-moving culture are always evolving. In order to have the most complete picture as possible, our listening and discerning needs to be frequent and on-going.

Motivation determined by needs

Above we mentioned the reality that there is a difference between interests and needs. Many theorists in the field of adult learning and ministers in adult faith formation have looked at the mystery and challenge of motivation and its relationship to people's felt needs and interests.

Dr. Malcolm Knowles (often called the founding father of adult learning), considers motivation in terms of responding to a person's needs. Do these thoughts help you in ascertaining needs?

- Physical needs: People need to be able to see, hear, be comfortable, and have periodic times for rest. Programs that do not respond to these needs will not attract participants after the first session.
- Growth needs: There is an increasing awareness/urge among adults to keep on growing as a person; people will seek out programs that help them do this.
- Need for security: This goes beyond physical safety and includes one's self-respect and self-image. It often motivates people to be cautious and reserved in a strange setting. People need to be treated with respect.
- Need for new experience: People do seek security but there is also present a curiosity for adventure or excitement. They seek new friends, new ideas and experiences. Adults will not continue in programs which they perceive to be the same old thing.
- Need for affection: People need to be liked, appreciated and feel like they belong.
- Need for recognition: Every person needs to feel worthwhile and will try to satisfy this need by seeking status in some group.

Dr. Knowles points out that even though some people are not aware of these needs for themselves at all times, they are ever-present. Hence, the adult faith formation coordinator/team must understand them and take them into account in planning and implementing programs.

As your team/committee plans an opportunity/program and all its details, why not go through this list of needs, determining the ways you're planning to meet them for your target audience.

Motivation determined by interests

Malcolm Knowles also points out that interests are, necessarily, a strong motivating factor. Needs are often expressed by "want" or "desire," while interests are a "liking" or a "preference." Interests are very personal and therefore differ greatly from person to person. He groups interests under the headings of what people

- want to gain (confidence, time, knowledge, etc.)
- want to be (good parents, good Catholics, recognized, etc.)
- want to do (express themselves, improve themselves, etc.)
- want to save (risks, work, etc.)

Interests are influenced by many factors such as socio-economic level, education, occupation, etc. And, a person's interests change as one moves along the life cycle.

The previous ideas from Knowles are found in:

- *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy* by Malcolm S. Knowles, Association Press, New York, 1970. Chapter 5 presents a comprehensive approach to understanding needs and interests and many suggestions for assessing them.
- *Getting Started in Adult Religious Education* by James J. DeBoy (Paulist Press)
- *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* (6th edition) by Malcolm Knowles, Elwood F. Holton, II and Richard A. Swanson. Elsevier, 2005.

The 6 D's of Needs Assessment

As we close this first issue, you might find this summary helpful:

The 6D's of Needs Assessments

How can you be sure you're covering all the bases in your needs assessment? Document the 6 D's to ensure your research design yields a comprehensive, rational argument and an effectively-designed program.

DEFICIT
• What is the actual need requiring intervention? Document the gap between the current and desired situation you are proposing to address.

DEVELOP
• It's not just about the negatives. In the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, what are existing strengths the program could build on?

DESCRIBE
• What are the proposed participants' characteristics, e.g. age, experience, learning styles, barriers to attending, etc.? These help to inform the content and design of the program.

DESIRES
• What are the proposed participants' preferences for receiving the program, e.g. format, length, location, day, time, etc. These also help to inform the design and content.

DUPLICATION
• Are there similar existing programs that overlap and might reduce the chances of being funded? What is the unique niche that this program will address?

DEMAND
• Is there a demand? Would participants actually attend? Document this willingness, e.g. likelihood of attending, existing wait lists, etc.

Community Solutions
Planning & Evaluation
www.communitysolutions.ca

(<http://communitysolutions.ca/web/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/needs-assessments-6ds.pdf>)



Adding New Luster to an Older Gem

In **GEMS** issues #3-9, #15-18, #46-48 and # 56-58 we explored hospitality within our parishes and within adult faith formation. You might continue to explore this crucial reality of parish life with the following resources:

- An interesting focus to consider: <https://seths.blog/2013/01/clean-bathrooms/>

- Pope Francis has said: “Our parishes must be capable of generating a people, that is, of offering and creating relationships where people feel that they are known, recognized, welcomed, listened to, loved — in other words, not anonymous parts of a whole.”

<https://cnstopstories.com/2018/05/15/parishes-grow-only-when-people-are-welcomed-heard-pope-says/>

- This resource is a guide to using an STM Online: Encore presentation (from Boston College) as a conversation starter with members of a faith community. Each part of the presentation may be used separately, in combination with each other, or in a sequence over a period of time. The general nature of “Fostering Belonging” gives it broad application and makes it an excellent choice for a variety of groups. For example, consider using one or several of the segments with a parish council, a hospitality committee, catechists, Catholic school faculty, etc.

(<https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html>)



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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>