



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#93 - September 2018

A Best Practice: Needs Assessment (Part III)

In our previous two issues we began an exploration of needs assessment as a necessary step in planning for adult faith formation: all we do needs to flow from and touch the needs of our people.

Last month we looked at our key role: finding out **who our parishioners are**, what is important to them, what their concerns, worries, hopes and dreams are. Since we've explored some ways to do that – continually, constantly and creatively – let's begin in this issue to look at some specific ways to:

- Understand our parish more deeply
- Ascertain the desires and needs of the adult parishioners so that we might continue to provide on-going adult faith formation. (Additional ways will be explored in the following issues.)

“When you listen,
it's amazing
what you can learn.

When you act on
what you've learned,
it's amazing
what you can change.”

Audrey McLaughlin

Listening by Leadership

In past documents on catechesis (such as *To Teach as Jesus Did*) we witnessed Jesus as teacher. In *Our HWB* we see Jesus as listener, one who intently listens to the needs of the people. This is a major paradigm shift which has strong implications for us as leaders in AFF

The implication, of course, is that this is what we are called to do: continual listening to parishioners whenever and wherever the parish staff, adult faith formation committee, education commission, the family life, committee, the parish pastoral council are present to the parishioners. What are they talking about? What occupies their time, their hopes, their worries?

In many parishes, elected and appointed parish leadership people (as well as parish staff) are – as often as possible - present at parish events (as well as at soccer games, in the supermarkets, etc.) always with the desire to listen.

The listening that we do is about an attentive listening to what is on the hearts and minds of the people within our communities. When someone says, “I'm overwhelmed,” can we listen and try to understand what they mean. Are they simply busy or is there something deeper going on? Our ministry of leadership calls us to take the time to hear the depths of what the needs are so that our plans and programs have the most impact on real lives.

- At times you might casually ask parishioners a question (and/or they could be on tables at “coffee and donuts” to get people talking as parish leaders listen and join in). Some possibilities of questions could include:
 - What do you like about _____ parish? (speaks to the strengths of the parish.)
 - How long have you been a parishioner here? (puts things in a time frame)
 - What changes have you noticed in the time that you have been a member? (Opportunities/threats)
 - What are some of your best memories of coming to church here?
 - Is there something you would like to see us do?
- As you listen, try to become more aware of the various groups of people who make up your parish.
 - What are the issues involved in the different stages of the adult life cycle?
 - “Roll with the roles.” Every adult in our parishes is operating out of at least two of these four roles: family member, worker, citizen and parishioner (in reality, many more!). Listen for the needs and interests that flow from these roles.

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Watching/Seeing by Leadership

How do we pay attention? How are we noticing what people are doing with their time? Are we seeing the issues that adults and families are dealing with on a daily basis? Are we sensitively observing and understanding the reality of the demands that people are facing regularly? Do we notice the stress in the face of the single mother who is doing all she can to keep her family together? Do we see the worry that surrounds older parishioners as they face the death of loved ones, perhaps financial insecurity?

“To acquire knowledge,
one must study;

but to acquire wisdom,
one must observe.”

Marilyn Vos Savant

Have we ever walked outside of the four walls of the parish, taking a tour through our community and compassionately seeing the reality of what people are dealing with on a daily basis? Would that spark ideas for formational opportunities of support and encouragement?

During an online adult faith formation course, Larry Duffany (who, at the time, was Director of School Support Services, Office of Catholic Schools, Archdiocese of Hartford and is currently Chair of the Religion Department, St. Paul Catholic High School, Bristol, CT) remarked, “I have found the most effective needs assessment occurs when I am out with

the people, watching and listening.

- During liturgy, how many people know when to sit and stand – and why they do it?
- Do some people refer to the Anointing of the Sick as Extreme Unction?
- How is the marginalized person who walks through the door of the church treated?

When we pay attention to the way people act and speak, we get a sense of what they need.

Perhaps another way to look at conducting needs assessment is to pay attention to the minutes of the parish pastoral council. What are they spending time on or what are they not spending time on?”

All of these ideas for listening and watching should go on all the time; intentional times can also be planned:

- Staff and leadership can be very intentional about watching/listening for a three week period.
- At the conclusion of that time, they could come together to name the needs that they saw and heard.
- In doing this – and many other forms of listening for the needs of your people – keep in mind this empathy map:

SAY What do you hear your “group” saying?	DO What actions and behaviors do you notice in your “group”?
THINK What might your “group” be thinking? What does this tell you about their beliefs/convictions?	FEEL What emotions might your “group” be feeling?

Looking at what is already happening

Since “everything that we do teaches”/the parish is the curriculum, there probably is much formation happening all the time; sometimes we’re just not aware of it. There are various methods to survey and study what is already happening.

- One method: Consider the six dimensions of adult faith formation: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, communal life, missionary spirit. (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, #91-96) These are “content summaries to indicate what adult faith

formation programs and opportunities seek to accomplish.” (OHWB, #90)

Do a quick self-study. Create a six column table on your computer or on a piece of paper. Put one of these six dimensions at the head of each column. Brainstorm responses to this question, “What is our parish doing right now that forms adults in faith according to this dimension?”

Under “Knowledge of the Faith” you might include things like parent sessions, parish library, the Sunday bulletin, etc. “Liturgical Life” might list prayer services, reflections on the Sunday lectionary, and so on.

Remember to think about the five approaches that are mention in *Our Heart Were Burning Within Us*: liturgy, family or home-centered activities, small groups, large groups, and individual activities (#97-112). Not every adult faith formation opportunity takes place in a large group catechetical setting. Faith formation happens via mean venues.

Is your chart looking full? There may be more formation in the parish than you realize.

- A second method: Invite all the existing groups within the parish to think about some of activities or programs that they have been involved in during the past few years. Have them list and describe any current activities or programs in their group which they feel are formational/educational, that provides learning opportunities to grow in faith.

Third, invite them to list and describe any

formational activities that could or should be a part of their future activities.

Then ask: how can the adult faith formation committee and/or pastoral staff be more supportive of their present and future efforts to grow in faith?

- If you did this, what do you think you would learn?
- If you did this, would be any effect on the people who answered the questions?
- If you did this, what should/would/could you do with the information and new insights? Perhaps:
 - Affirm what is already happening. Highlight the activities in the Sunday bulletin.
 - Might there be increased parish-wide communication about the many learning opportunities provided by the various groups?
 - Is it possible to take some of the learning opportunities offered by/for various groups and begin identifying them as activities and programs to which all parish members are invited and welcomed?

- A third method might be the use of one or more of the charts, “What are We Providing for Adult Faith Growth?” found at <http://www.janetschaeffler.com/AFF-Helps.html>

- These charts look at who is in your parish through four different lens, as well as a look at what you’re doing and what you could be doing:
 - The lens of where people are in their faith development (and wherever they are is the right place for them), for instance: those who are seeking/searching; those wishing to share faith/desiring to belong to a small faith group; those wanting to express their faith through service
 - The lens of church/parish membership/participation, for instance: those who might be called to ministry in the

“In spite of the many things which could be taught and the eagerness of the adult religious educator to impart knowledge to learners, educational events will be dull and uninspiring when answers are given to questions which have not been asked or for which there is no expressed need.

Successful programs will be about the real concerns and issues in the present, concrete, personal and social lives of participants.”

R.E.Y. Wickett in
Models of Adult Religious Education Practice

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future; those who right now aren't participating in the parish; those who have celebrated sacraments; those inquiring about the Catholic Church; returning Catholics

- The lens of everyday needs, for instance: widows and widowers; engaged couples; empty nesters; those who are unemployed; single parents with teens; those who face moral dilemmas in business, education, legal and financial issues, etc.
- The lens of the six content areas for adult faith formation found in *Our Hearts were Burning Within Us* (mentioned above on page 3)
- The charts not only look at the “needs” of various people but also the reality that the opportunities can be offered in various ways: home study; large groups, small groups, online technology, intergenerational opportunities, in collaboration with other parishes, linking to existing programs, etc.
- A fourth method of listening and reflecting with parishioners on their experiences of what is happening might be the following questions – flowing from an Appreciative Inquiry approach – which might be used in informal conversations and/or during parish registration:
 - When you are feeling best about your membership in our parish today, what image of parish life comes to mind?
 - What is the single most important thing our parish has contributed to your life?
 - What can you envision our parish doing in the next two to three years to call you and our people to a deeper relationship with Christ, to living faith in everyday life?
 - When have you felt most welcomed and included at our parish? What in particular did people say or do that made you feel welcomed and included? How can our parish be much more welcoming to parishioners, to inactive parishioners, to visitors?

- In your opinion, what are the two or three best resources and greatest examples of vibrancy in our parish?
- If you could imagine or transform our parish in any way you wished, what one to three things would you do to enhance its life and vitality?

Helpful Resource

You might want to peruse these suggestions from a retired pastor in the Episcopal church. Do they offer ideas for us?

<http://www.cfv.org/vestry-papers/article/328/rethink-congregations>

More to Come

There are still several other methods that can be used to discern needs. We'll continue to look at them next month.



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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>