



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#94 - October 2018

## A Best Practice: Needs Assessment (Part IV)

In the past three issues we've explored ways to get to know our parishioners and ways to listen to them so that our programs and opportunities of adult faith formation can be built on their needs.

Often when we think of discerning needs, our thoughts go to taking a survey. In this issue, then, let's explore some ideas for **surveys** (and we'll continue our look at some of the other ways next month).

“Adults learn best in a climate where learners are involved in the decision-making process with regard to what is learned.

Malcolm Knowles believes that adult learners will take ‘ownership’ for learning if involved in the planning of the activity.”

Linda Knight  
Thomson

Many people have shared various thoughts – advantages and disadvantages – of using surveys to determine the needs of parishioners.

To begin our exploration of the pros and cons, the whys and hows, we'll listen to the voice of a parish priest, author, and leader in adult faith formation for over fifty years, Fr. Gerard P. Weber. (<https://www.alibris.com/search/books/author/Gerard-P-Weber?aid=5354843>).

The following thoughts from the article, “Adult Religious Education,” appeared in an early issue of *Chicago Studies*:

“Three approaches can be used to ascertain the needs. ...

- *The first way is for those in charge to suggest what they think the people need.*
- *The second way is to take some sort of poll.*
- *The third way is to listen long and carefully to what people are looking for to have a fuller, richer, and more Christian life.*

*Although there are times when the first two approaches seems to work, they are not really effective.*

*The first approach of someone deciding what people need works only when the program implemented responds to a felt need of the parishioners. Programs such as Renew or Crossroads of Faith are brought into a parish by a staff person or even by the mandate of a bishop who feels that they are needed. Usually they respond to the felt needs of the people in the parish for a stronger sense of community and for an opportunity to talk freely about their faith experiences, questions, and doubts.*

*Although this approach is still very common, most Directors of Adult Education know that suggestions for classes or programs very often fall flat, even though the course or the program in itself is excellent. Recently a local pastor and I thought there was a need for a group of managerial type people to get together and discuss business ethics. He talked to six people. They agreed to attend. After five meetings, we were down to one man. The others said they saw a need for such a group, but that need did not have a high priority in their lives.*

*The second approach is to take a poll. This does seem to give people a chance to express their preferences. Responses to questionnaires as to what kind of programs people want often are based on what the respondents think other people need. For example, in a parish in an area where a very fundamentalist Bible church is drawing large number of Catholics, 350 out of 600 people at Mass one Sunday voted for more Bible classes. The pastor organized six lectures by the best speakers he could find. 35 people showed up for the first talk, and the audience went down from there. Too late, he discovered that his people were expressing what they thought other people needed, not what they felt they personally needed. They hoped that such classes would bring back the young adults who were going to the Bible church.*

*Another factor which distorts such polls is that they are usually done in church. That setting suggests that overtly religious topics such as Bible, sacraments, prayer, and changes in the church are the proper type of answers to give. If a group from that parish had gotten together in someone's home and talked about the things that they needed to have a bit more peace in their*

As Brant Cooper and Patrick Vlaskovits, authors of the *Lean Entrepreneur*, put it: Getting to know your customers is just like fishing. Any amateur fisher can catch fish once in a while with a bit of luck. But, professional fishers who have to bring back fish day in and day out need to truly understand the type of fish they are seeking to catch, including where it lives, how deep it goes, and what bait it likes.

The same goes for your customers. You can create general personas and jump to assumptions. You can know roughly who they are and the kinds of things they probably are dealing with. You'll be able to get a few customers to your product that way if you're lucky. But, you won't be able to connect with users on a larger scale if you don't understand who you are talking to.

Thus, the idea is not to create personas but to focus on the actual people who are or will be passionate about your product. The better you understand them, the more likely you are to build a product that not only addresses their need but also resonates at an emotional level.

*Alice Default*

*lives, and to have a richer, more Christian life, Bible study might not have been first on their list.*

*The third approach is listening to what people really want. This takes patience and time, but ultimately is more rewarding. This listening can take the form of hearing one person's needs and checking with many others to see whether they feel the same need.*

*A permanent deacon had gone through a severe mid-life crisis. When he was well on his way to coming out of it, he realized that if he had understood it better and had the support of some of his peers, it would not have been so traumatic. He made the suggestion that something should be done along these lines for other men who were going through the same thing. The pastor encouraged him to talk to other men his age to see whether they felt the same need.*

*He found 15 men who were interested in the spiritual challenges posed by mid-life. They had a weekend seminar at which they talked about their lives and their needs. ... a priest and family therapist volunteered to work with the group. For over two years now, these men have met twice a month after the 8:00 Mass on Saturday. The group has grown to more than 30 and a second group in another parish is forming."*

Fr. Weber reiterates several things we've explored in our first three issues and challenges our thinking and actions regarding surveys.

## Advantages of Surveys

- Surveys are one way of helping people to have a voice.
- Surveys give the opportunity of expression without fear or embarrassment.
- Surveys can reach many people in a short time.
- Surveys are relatively inexpensive.
- Surveys have the potential of yielding data that is easily summarized and reported.
- Surveys have the possibility of addressing some big issues in the parish and on people's minds.
- Surveys are one way to discover what issues need to be addressed.

## Disadvantages of Surveys

- Surveys may be difficult to construct in a way that will yield the information we are looking for.
- Respondents might not always take the surveys seriously at they complete them.
- Surveys might not be answered by a cross-section of the parish. The "usual suspects" might respond, but not the quiet people who the parish really needs to hear from.
- Responses to survey questions as to what kinds of programs people want many times are based on what the respondents think other people need.
- Because survey respondents are self-selecting, they might tend to respond based on their interests, not necessarily their needs. If adults have not previously thought seriously about their needs in their on-

Asking someone to answer a survey has a very real cost.  
Is the survey worth it?

Are you asking questions capable of making change happen? ...  
It feels like it's cheap to add one more question, easy to make  
the question a bit banal, simple to cover one more issue.  
But, if the answers aren't going to make a difference internally,  
what is the question for?

Are you push polling? The questions you ask actually end up  
changing the person who is responding. Ask me if I'm unhappy  
and I'm a lot more likely to become unhappy. Ask me who my  
favorite customer service person is and I'm more likely to look  
for good customer service people.

This is a challenge that most census-structured customer service  
surveys have to deal with. If you ask someone if they're satisfied  
and then don't follow up later, you've just made the problem a  
lot worse. If you ask your best customers for insight and then  
ignore it, you've not only wasted the insight,  
you've wasted goodwill as well.

Here's a simple test I do, something that has never once led to  
action: In the last question of a sloppy, census-style customer  
service survey, when they ask, "anything else?" I put my name  
and phone number and ask them to call me. They haven't,  
never once, not in more than fifty brand experiences.

If you're not going to read the answers and take action,  
why are you asking?

Best question to ask about a survey:  
Do we actually have to run this?

*Seth Godin*

[http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2016/03/survey-questions.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2016/03/survey-questions.html)

going faith growth, they may not know what they need or they may not know how to articulate what they need.

## Some Tips for Surveys

Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of surveys, some reminders can guide us:

- Each parish should create its own questions based on their particular situation rather than using a template or a survey from another parish.
- Invite parishioners who have some experience in communications and surveying to help design the survey: the type of questions, the wording of questions that will be most helpful to the respondents and will yield the data you are looking for.
- Pretest and revise the survey as needed.
- It is helpful to use a variety of methods: completion of sentences, multiple choices, questions regarding a short, written response, etc.
- Participants need to know why the survey is being done and what will be done with the results.

As Larry Duffany, currently Chair of the Religion Department, St. Paul Catholic High School, Bristol, CT, said when he was Director of School Support Services, Office of Catholic Schools, Archdiocese of Hartford: "One thing that we have become very sensitive to in our office is asking people to do things without telling them how we are going to use the information. Surveys work, but only so well. Some people might have become jaded as to how the information will or will not be used. Now, in our office, we tell participants exactly how we will use the information we are asking for. This has helped increase response rates."

See also Seth Godin's comments in the accompanying sidebar.

- It might be preferable not to do the survey during liturgy:
  - There is not enough time.
  - People might resent this as an imposition and/or give less than thoughtful responses.

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- Because they are in church, their answers might be what they think they should respond (churchy topics) rather than talking about their everyday life needs. (Recall Fr. Weber's comment about this on pages 1-2 above.)
- Many parishes have found online surveys to be the most useable today since people find it easier to respond via their computer or iPad rather than writing out a printed survey. Printed surveys, though, always need to be available for those who would rather avoid technology.
- Once the surveys are returned, report the results as soon as possible. Give reports to the parish pastoral council, education commission, adult faith formation committee, and stewardship commission. Provide a clear, succinct report to the parish, including action plans.

One adult faith formation director reflects: *"How many of us have surveys that are taken, then they sit in a drawer and no one looks at them again or uses them? We just did a parish wide survey, a combined effort to assess parish engagement, surface likes/dislikes, and help our parish nurse ministry to get information about health and spiritual needs.*

*The most important effort came after the survey was conducted, when we spent hours analyzing the results, and planning how we were going to communicate the results to the parish. It was four months ago and we are still studying the results, mentioning it in the bulletin, and using the insights gained as part of our planning process. If we are going to ask the questions we have to be ready to receive the answers, and take them seriously and incorporate the feedback we receive into our planning."*

## Some Examples of Questions

Even though our first tip above reminds us: Each parish should create its own questions based on their particular situation rather than using a template or a survey from another parish, here are some samples that might be considered – and always adapted to each parish situation:

- What steps do you take to grow in faith (daily prayer, spiritual reading, Scripture study, faith-sharing group, workshops at the parish, retreats, etc.)?

- Have you attended an adult faith formation opportunity in the last two years? If not, what was the reason (topics didn't interest me, I didn't know about it, didn't have time, etc.)?
- What are your concerns/questions about God, spirituality and faith (types of prayer, Scripture study, who is Jesus, images of God, etc.)?
- What are your questions about the church (being Christian in today's culture, comparison with other religions, Vatican II, etc.)?
- What are your questions/concerns about everyday life (communications in marriage, dealing with age and sickness, ethics in the workplace, etc.)?
- How satisfied/comfortable are you with your understanding of the following (the sacrament of Reconciliation, the sacrament of Anointing, the role of laity in the church, what it means to be Catholic, Catholic Social Teaching, etc.)?
- I would be interested in being part of the following (parenting skills, single parenting, divorced and separated, grief and loss, retirement issues, women's issues, men's issues, etc.).
- I am interested in topics for the following groups (single adults who have never married, parents of teens, widowed, etc.)
- What types of learning formats do you prefer (lecture series, group discussion, panel discussion, retreats, study programs at home, movie nights, online courses and discussions, support groups, Catholic websites, etc.)
- The best times for me to attend activities are (day: \_\_\_\_; time: \_\_\_\_, season: \_\_\_\_).
- Are there any obstacles that would prevent you from participating in adult faith formation programs? Please list in order of importance. (babysitters, disinterest in learning, anxious about going alone, lack of information about the program, lack of transportation, times at which the activities are scheduled, other: \_\_\_\_)?

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- How would you like to hear about future adult faith formation opportunities (bulletin, website, announcements at Mass, Facebook, text, etc.)?
- I have a particular talent, interest and/or profession I would be willing to teach to adults: \_\_\_\_\_.

## 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.



## Adding New Luster to an Older Gem

In **GEMS** issues #86-88, we explored gardening as a spiritual practice, as formative in our faith journey. You might want to look at these additional reflections and resources:

- An Exercise in Spiritual Growth:  
<https://www.pathwaystogod.org/resources/ignatian-insight/exercise-spiritual-growth>
- Never Too Late to Grow a Garden:  
<http://www.dailygood.org/story/1918/never-too-late-to-grow-a-garden-rev-dr-charles-howard-charissa-faith-howard/>
- Lessons from My Garden:  
<https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201512/gardening-30490?utm>
- Delayed Gratification:  
<http://www.dailygood.org/story/1692/delayed-gratification-alanda-green/>



## Golden Nuggets from You

“Speaking from a grandparent’s perspective and in the process of learning “grand-speak” and “texting,” this (**GEMS #64**) “rocks.” There is absolutely nothing in this earthly life that compares to being a grandparent. And I need the ideas on long distance relationships since half of my grands are in Papua New Guinea. Thank you!”

- Linda Smith, Co-director of adult faith formation and RCLIA,  
Holy Cross Catholic Church, Atlanta

“I just consumed and tagged your **GEMS #70** for October on adult faith formation. Thanks for all the "veins" ... there were some new ones for me. Your page came at just the right time as I am going to start curating today. #loveGodstimming”

Marge Babcock  
Catechetical and Digital Media Consultant, Diocese of Syracuse



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at  
[www.janetschaeffler.com](http://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](http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html) and <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>