



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#95 - November 2018

A Best Practice: Needs Assessment (Part V)

Our past four issues have explored:

- the necessity of building our programs on the needs of our people
- ways to get to know our parishioners
- methods and approaches of listening for the needs
- the use of surveys for discerning needs

We continue our review this month by looking at some additional ways to do needs assessment.

1) Evaluations of Current Offerings

Hopefully, each opportunity that is offered in the parish includes some type of evaluation. Needs and interests can be discerned from these evaluations. What else might the participants be interested in? Where do they want to go from here?

We'll look at the extensive topic of evaluation in future issues of GEMS, but a variation on the traditional "end of the program approach" might be to have one or two question evaluation forms after the sections of a program when breaks are scheduled.

2) Focus Groups or Think Tanks

Invite people to a one-time meeting – no commitments, no on-going responsibilities. Serve food and make it a light-hearted invitation and evening (or afternoon).

The agenda for the time would depend upon your specific needs, the thoughts, feelings and suggestions you'd like to hear. Two possibilities:

- The following questions – based on an Appreciative Inquiry approach – could be used within a think tank. These tend to be general question about parish life; they could be tweaked to very specifically invite people to reflect on their needs for on-going formation.

1. When you are feeling best about your membership in our parish today, what image of parish life comes to mind?
2. What is the single most important thing our parish has contributed to your life?
3. 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?
4. 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 or visitors?
5. In your opinion, what are the two or three best resources and greatest examples of vibrancy in our parish?
6. 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?

(To learn more about Appreciative Inquiry:

<https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/learn/appreciative-inquiry-introduction/>)

The preparation and outline of one think tank ("Ideas Mushroom in a Think Tank") can be found here:

http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Ideas_Mushroom_in_a_Think_Tank.pdf

"How
Do I
Listen to others?"

As if everyone
were my Master

Speaking to me
His
Cherished
Last
Words.

Hafiz

You might go through your database and randomly select people (e.g. every tenth name); or you might invite people that you know, but their "admission" is to bring someone with them – someone that the parish staff/committee probably doesn't know.

- One catechetical leader imagined a possibility to host a focus session for people who don't seem to be involved in the parish, naming it a radical, expensive and energy-consuming idea – but it might work in some places. She envisions sending an invitation (letter, phone call, etc.) to attend a brainstorming three-hour evening session which includes a meal.

“It is important that church leaders work from reality and not perceptions. An outdated understanding of who constitutes the church community can be an obstacle to good planning.

...

A church formation “check-up’ can be very helpful in identifying how the church currently encourages the spiritual development of its various groups. Taking time to consider all groups: young adults, parents at different stages of child-rearing, singles, the elderly, the homebound, the marginalized, people with disabilities, the unchurched in your area, can bear great fruit.

Just the discussion of who is ‘marginalized’ in your faith community can be a challenging and healthy exercise. Who are the poor, captive, blind or oppressed in your community? Inviting

- The invitations would let them know that the purpose is to hear their ideas and experiences on how the parish could help them in their faith growth, participate with them in their real life issues, etc.
- They'd also be told that there will be \$25 gift cards available for the first 100 participants or a raffle for five \$100 gift cards (or whatever can be found in unrestricted funds or donated for this purpose) - and childcare will be provided.

She advises that this gathering would have to be well-planned, but it may reveal surprising results that surveys are not able to generate.

Parish Assembly

Many parishes hold a town hall or assembly for all parishioners once a year to assess needs and continue visioning and planning.

Two examples of parish assemblies are described:

- In the Process is the Growth:
http://www.janetschaeffler.com/In_the_process_is_the_growth.pdf
- The Planning Process Involves Everyone:
http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Planning_Process_involves_Everyone.pdf

Interviews

This method is time-consuming but affords a unique opportunity for listening to people's opinions, feelings and suggestions.

These can be done in person or on the phone. The group who would be doing the interviewing (e.g. parish staff, adult faith formation committee) would meet first to review tips about listening, not judging responses, etc. – as well as designing the list of questions (so everyone is asking the same questions in the same way).

Birds of a feather flock together. You might want to do a needs assessment with specific target groups within the parish, e.g. parents of young children, older adults, those who are very involved in the parish, those who are not very involved, etc.

One parish catechetical leader recounts how their faith formation commission members have one-on-one conversations with parishioners focused around some broad questions and then a few directed “how is....” questions.

After designing the script, each commission member phoned to elicit responses from a dozen families at each grade level. They were given a list of all families in that grade level and then called randomly. (They were asked to avoid people with whom they had personal relationships. They probably already knew their thoughts.) When calling, they inquired if the person had time at the moment; if they didn't, they were asked if they could be called back at a later time.

“Consider using the following categories to identify the needs and interests of adults in your church.

Life Issues: How can faith formation help adults view the myriad dimensions of human life – family, work, leisure, relationships, sexuality, suffering/grief, social and political issues, community issues – in the light of the Gospel and tradition?

Life Tasks: what are the developmental life tasks facing adults in the major life periods?

Milestones and Transitions: what are the significant milestones/transitions in adulthood that can be a focus of adult faith formation, such as geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, retirement, unanticipated illness, divorce and the loss of loved ones?

Religious Needs: How can faith formation provide adults with opportunities to deepen understanding of the Bible and faith tradition/beliefs, and relate their Christian faith to life today?

Spiritual Needs: How can faith formation assist adults in growing in their relationship with God and in living as disciples of Jesus Christ in their daily life at home, in the workplace, in the community and the world?

Ethnic/Cultural Needs: How can your church offer culturally-specific adult faith formation for each ethnic/cultural community in the parish, and, when appropriate, in the language of the people? How can faith formation be inclusive of the traditions, heritages, and unique gifts of each ethnic/cultural community in your church?

John Roberto

“Faith Formation for Every Adult in Your Church – It’s Possible Today!”
http://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/lifelong_faith_journal_3.3.pdf

At the end of the phone call the parents were invited to a meeting to talk with other parents in their grade level about the results. More people offered thoughts on the phone than came to the follow up discussion, but the option was available – for good communication and an opportunity to continue to contribute.

The interviewers would say that a few of the key results were:

- There were more positive responses than anticipated and more constructive attitudes than anticipated.
- Parents who came to follow-up gathering were genuinely interested and some became new volunteers.
- New ideas and ways to do programming sprang from the interviews and the gathering.
- The commission members realized that leading happens in a variety of ways. Listening to the parishioners is important when making decisions; often decisions are not based on voting but rather on discernment.

A Photo Reflection

This unique retreat day for the vestry of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, Mariposa, diocese of Los Angeles, with its photo project was designed to give the vestry the opportunity to take a closer look at their neighborhood. It was not intended to lead directly into strategic planning, but rather to shift their perspective and open their eyes to creative possibilities and creative ways of looking for God at work in their neighborhood and God’s call to them as a parish. To read an overview of their retreat day, go to: http://www.ecfvp.org/uploads/tools/files/Snapshot_tool.pdf

Designing an Adult Faith Formation Learning Resources System

John Roberto gives us a comprehensive template for a plan for adult faith formation which includes extensive methods to discern the needs of the adult parishioners. The plan comprises:

- Task 1: Form an Adult Faith Formation Task Force

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- Task 2: Prepare a Statement of Your Parish's Vision and Goals for Adult Faith Formation
- Task 3: Develop an Inventory of Your Parish's Current Adult Faith Formation Programming
- Task 4: Research the Life Issues and Learning Needs of Adults in Your Parish
 - Research and Discussion
 - Focus Groups
 - A profile of Life Issues and Learning Needs
- Task 5: Research Learning Activities, Leaders, and Resources to Address the Important Life Issues and Learning Needs
 - People Resources
 - Physical, Face-to-Face Learning Activity Resources
 - Print and Media Learning Activity Resources
 - Online Learning Activity Resources
- Task 6: Design and Implement Your Adult Faith Formation Learning Resources System Plan
 - Timeframe
 - Development of Integrated Faith Formation Learning Activity Plans
 - Balance
 - Leadership
 - Parish Website
 - Program Guide
 - Spiritual/Learning Assessment
 - Marketing
 - Evaluation
- One of these approaches (which we've looked at in these five issues) isn't enough. Listen to and consult with as many people as possible in as many ways as possible as often as it is necessary (and the necessity is always on-going).
- Don't forget any group within the parish. One group that you can probably count on to express their opinions honestly and constructively: adults who have been initiated or received into full communion. They usually see with newer eyes and clearer vision. They are especially receptive to new opportunities as they continue their lifelong formation.
- As you elicit needs, you will hear many and varied ideas. The reality, of course, is that you can't do everything. Your adult faith formation team can carefully listen with a discerning ear. What is best for your parish? What will best help your parishioners grow in their faith journey?
- In view of these varied ideas, what can you do now to continue your planning for adult faith formation in your parish? What could be your starting point so that you won't feel overwhelmed, but will begin to take some new steps?



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at
www.janetschaeffler.com

For a complete explanation and worksheets for the research and planning, see http://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/lifelong_faith_journal_3.3.pdf

A Few Reminders

As we close this issue and complete the series next month, a few reminders:

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>