



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#15 - January 2012

Hospitality in Adult Faith Formation (Part 1)

One of the questions on the Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Survey asks, “How did hospitality contribute to making this (your best practice) a successful formation opportunity?”

Before examining the responses to this question in these newsletters, it was obvious there was a much deeper reality. Therefore, issues #3 through #9 of [GEMS](#) reflected upon welcoming and hospitality as foundational to the entirety of parish life.

One of the first requirements/foundations for Adult Faith Formation in a parish is that everything about the parish provides and exudes a welcoming, hospitable environment. Without this, very few parishioners – and visitors - will be interested in or motivated for Adult Faith Formation. It won’t be necessary to even plan for hospitality in Adult Faith Formation unless parishioners have a sense of belonging *within the parish* first.

[GEMS #3](#) reminded us that: “People **will engage in the life of the parish** (e.g. respond to ministerial calls, participate in Adult Faith Formation) **because of the atmosphere/environment** of the parish. One of the key features of this environment is feeling welcomed/a feeling of belonging.”

Just what is welcoming, hospitality? What first comes to our minds?

- Delicious food
- Friendly greeters

Does that encompass the entire reality of hospitality?

A pivotal question was asked in [GEMS #5](#): “Has welcoming/hospitality been reduced to a ‘ministry of hospitality’ or **are our parishes hospitable communities** ~ because **EACH AND EVERY PERSON** is living in **gratitude, inclusivity, welcoming and hospitality?**”

As we come now to look at the specific topic of *hospitality in Adult Faith Formation*, what came to mind as people answered the following

question on the surveys: “How did hospitality contribute to making this (your best practice) a successful formation opportunity?”

In an overview (*for we’ll look at this in more detail in the next few issues*) of the current 144 surveys (*more are always coming in*), these are the main topics that were included in the responses:

Refreshments, snacks, sometimes a meal	119
Icebreakers, greeting those nearby, conversations	17
Greeters, especially committee members	10
Inviting, comfortable environment	7
Name tags	6
In a setting other than the parish	5
Invitation, especially personal invitation	5
Welcoming facilitator, speaks to each as they arrive	5
Designated time for food and socializing before and/or after the “program”	5
Attention to “beauty” ~ tablecloths, centerpiece, etc.	3
Printed materials	3
Good signage	2
Keeping to the time frame	2
A sacred prayer area	1
An inviting and engaging website	1
Hospitality is the hallmark of the parish	1

A few beginning comments about this compilation:

- The numbers, of course, do not add up to 144, because many people mentioned more than one thing.
- At the same time, this simple compilation does not include everything, only most of the main items. There were many **unique ideas; significant, meaningful practices**. We’ll highlight several – in greater detail - as we go through the next issues.
- Not everyone answered the hospitality question.

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- Some people said “hospitality” was not applicable to their best practice.
- A few of the comments mentioned:
 - Convenience won out over hospitality.
 - Yes, but mostly no....when we had no food, people still enjoyed themselves.
 - We did provide food and the opportunity to socialize but it was not critical to the learning.
 - There really isn't time for food; there is too much to be done.
 - Not sure hospitality contributes much at this point.

In Jesus,
God came seeking hospitality.
This is why he makes the willingness
to welcome others in love
a characteristic virtue of believers.

- Pope John Paul II

A Wondering Nugget:

Looking at the compilation of the main responses to the question “*how does hospitality contribute to making your best practice of adult faith formation a successful opportunity*” a key wondering question again (as it did in [GEMS](#) issues #3 through 9) arises:

What do we understand hospitality to be?

There is much wisdom, experience and expertise – **from you** - in our best practice surveys, as well as in adult faith formation literature, concerning **the various components that harmonize together** to provide a welcoming, hospitable environment for parish, regional and/or (arch)diocesan Adult Faith Formation. As we summarize them in these next few issues, we **celebrate the royal welcome you are rolling out.**

Thus, that is what you and all the literature confirm: hospitality within Adult Faith Formation (and the entire parish) has **many components**, it is a multi-faceted **GEM**. In the next few issues we will explore several of these components.



In this first issue, as we explore the initial one that often comes to our minds – **food**, we don't have to go far to see its universal importance.

In a book which every Adult Faith Formation minister would find fascinating and beneficial, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), Peter Block says:

“In creating the conversation and social space that supports community, another dimension of welcome is what has traditionally defined culture: food.

- It brings the sacred into the room.
- It is the symbol of hospitality.
- It is as direct as we can be about a life-giving act.

When we take it seriously, we know how to do this right. What is needed is consciousness about having food and what kind of food fits our intention.”

Can what Art Smith says in *Back to the Table* (Hyperion, 2001) about families apply also to communities gathered for adult faith formation:

“This sense of security is underscored when a family regularly comes together for meals. When I hear laughter erupt in a quiet

dining room, I know I am home free.
Eating a meal together is almost magical
– and creating this magic gets easier the
more you do it.”

Through the lens of ministry, listen to Fr. Michael Papesh in *Good News Parish Leadership: Trust-Building Guidelines, Tools, and Ideas* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2008):

“Following from the pattern of life Jesus has shown us, the central place of hospitality in gospel ministry suggests that food and drink should be the largest single budget item for any parish community. To be church together requires our eating and drinking together.

Coffee and donuts after Sunday Mass really matter, and so do
cookies and milk at parish meetings,
meals at religious education events,
dessert at parish club and organization meetings,
a champagne brunch after Mass on the parish’s feast day,
wine and cheese to begin and end the council’s round of meetings each year,
and pizza or Sloppy Joe’s whenever our parish’s young people gather.



The experience of food and drink, hospitality at every parish event ought to be a **commonplace, ordinary, expected, most gracious, and downright lovely...always, without exception.**”

Food is our common ground,
a universal experience.

- James Beard

The Wisdom/Enthusiasm from the Best Practice Surveys

What do these following observations/comments tell us about people’s experiences of providing hospitality through the sharing of food during adult faith formation programs/processes?

- Always food and they will come!
- Helped people connect and build relationships.
- Definitely! This created the community of which we experience in Eucharist.
- The food is a huge factor in uniting.
- We did not have hospitality at first, then some parents suggested to have at least coffee and from there hospitality became an important factor. The hospitality helped keep the parents focused and attentive.
- The group must always have refreshments. Feed them and they will come.
- It doesn’t matter what, just break bread together somehow.
- A cuppa and biscuits were provided (*from one of our Australian best practices*)
- Jesus always fed people so naturally we had coffee, tea and one person brought in a “delight.” It sure does relax people.

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- A majority of the people would linger for refreshments after the presentations, continuing conversations.
- Food broke the ice at the beginning of each session, plus we would have a meal together at the end of each program.
- By offering tea and coffee and conversation we were able to get registrants who may not have attended otherwise.

- We use real glasses and dishes and put table cloths on the tables and use table skirts for the serving tables.
- I feel that hospitality is important. It can change a cool room into a warm and inviting one. We actually bake cookies to serve with coffee, etc. so that the fragrance lingers and many senses are engaged when one enters the room.

SPARKLING GEMS

Do these comments from the best practices surveys spark any thoughts or ideas in you and your various Adult Faith Formation committees of things you might do:

- A light supper was important since the event began at 6:00 pm.
- We had food that coincided with the theme (food that would have been around in Paul's time: pita, hummus, olives, cheese, etc.)
- Facilitators who host groups in their homes were trained to focus



on hospitality and welcoming. Refreshments were designed to draw people in, i.e. with the scent of freshly popped corn or baking cookies ... things that help people feel at home and comfortable.

- Hospitality has been different each month depending on the theme or topic or season of the year.
- We like to keep it healthy, heart-healthy, if possible; food for the various ages of the group.
- We had afternoon tea afterwards, and joined with an activities group which was already having afternoon tea in the centre.
(from one of our Australian best practices)

Hospitality is very important.
I feel it can make it or break it.
How would you feel
if you were given the cold shoulder and then
the presentation went well
and then upon leaving the cold shoulder again.
Probably would make someone feel unimportant.

- Theresa Alberts
St. Anne Parish, Lena, WI

To Return to the Beginning

As we close this first look at hospitality in adult faith formation, let's return to where we started: adult faith formation (in reality, all we do in the parish) needs to be **rooted in the underlying, undergirding "theology of hospitality" of the parish itself.**

Recently I was part of an online conversation during one of the courses in the Certificate in Adult Formation Leadership from VLCFF (Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation) at the University of Dayton. We were in a discussion specifically about marketing and advertising for adult formation when one of the participants commented:

"In advertising our adult faith formation opportunities in various ways in the media, I believe we must respond with our provisions 'on the ground.'

Advertisements made on our website attract people with a well described statement but a problem comes ‘on the ground’ – the desired attitude, communication and reception often illustrate an entire difference that discourages and turns people off.

As the saying of Norman Douglas (British novelist) goes, ‘Never take a solemn oath. People think you mean it.’”

The conversation continued as one of the participants recounted this real-life occurrence:

“On a website it was written, ‘We welcome all to our parish who wish to enjoy God’s blessing. Come and share our rich multicultural liturgy, and join our sessions on *growing unity in diversity*.’

Because of this advertisement, this message on the website, two couples came to a welcoming reception for new, interested parishioners for further explanation about the parish. All they got at the reception was: ‘Get the form, fill it out and then submit it to the secretary. She will tell you what to do.’ This was the end of their coming.”

GEMS for Pondering

Are we always aware that

- everything is connected?
- what we “communicate” via media/technology needs to match what’s “on the ground?”
- hospitality/welcoming is foundational for belonging; belonging is foundational for belief? (See *Growing an Engaged Church* by Albert J. Winseman, Gallup Press, 2007.)



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

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Best Practices can be found at www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.