



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#16 - February 2012

## Hospitality in Adult Faith Formation (Part 2)

**GEMS #15** continued the exploration of how crucial the welcoming atmosphere of the parish is to the success of the ministry of Adult Faith Formation which was begun in [Best Practices #3 through #9](#).

As Neil Parent says so well in *A Concise Guide to Adult Faith Formation* (Ave Maria Press, 2009):

*“When it comes to perception, a parish that exudes warmth, hospitality, and friendliness will have an easier time attracting parishioners to its programs. And that removes one more motivational hurdle.”*

This hospitality and welcome of the parish will, of course, overflow and permeate the Adult Faith Formation programs and processes of the parish. As we think of “hospitality” in Adult Faith Formation, we realize that it is a multi-faceted gem; it consists of many components.

**GEMS #15** looked at an important component: food. This month’s newsletter delves into another element that is equally significant. This element itself contains many components, various ramifications.

Where we meet, the spaces and places for Adult Faith Formation, creating hospitable environments (and all the various components of these respectful, welcoming environments), are an integral part of hospitality. As R. Michael Harton says in his essay, “Working with Educators of Adults” in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education* edited by Nancy T. Foltz (Religious Education Press):

*“Many religious educators are unaware of how important it is to create a conducive climate for adult learning. A poor physical environment, for example, can result in many de-motivators which hamper learning (e.g. inappropriate furnishings).”*

The old adage “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say” rings especially true when it comes to adult learning environments.

## Imagine:

The parish Adult Faith Formation Coordinator invites fourteen parishioners to a gathering to discuss the formation of an Adult Faith Formation Team. The only facility available for the meeting is a second-floor classroom (no elevator) with desks for seventh graders, florescent lights, glass block windows and the lingering smell of chalk dust and pencil shavings.

## Wondering GEM:

If this were to happen, what might it “say” to the parishioners before the conversation ever began?

Physical space is more decisive in creating community than we realize. Most meeting spaces are designed for control, negotiation, and persuasion. While the room itself is not going to change, We always have a choice about how we arrange and occupy whatever room we are handed.

- Peter Block in  
*Community: The Structure of Belonging*

## Creating hospitable spaces for learning

When adults host others in their homes, they know how to provide hospitality, how to make others feel welcomed, and comfortable.

All that is needed in those moments and occasions of welcome and warmth is also necessary (along with other additional considerations) for adults in a learning situation:

- safety

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- respect
- comfortable seating; adult furnishings
- rooms available for large and small groups
- areas for gathering in convenient locations
- peaceful and attractive surroundings
- handicap accessible buildings and gathering spaces
- adequate restroom facilities
- properly-timed breaks
- high-quality sound system
- good lighting
- temperature control
- sufficient ventilating

We know that adults continue to learn; learning certainly does not end with the end of adolescence. What might change, however, are the physical comfort levels. Children and youth might be oblivious to some things which adults notice right away and absolutely need.

In addition to the important details just mentioned, Malcolm Knowles, Elwood Holton and Richard Swanson, in *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Elsevier, Inc., 2005) remind us:

*“More subtle physical features may make even more of an impact. Ecological psychologists are finding, for example, that color directly influences mood; bright colors tend to induce cheerful, optimistic moods, and dark or dull colors induce the opposite.”*

The renowned author, Parker Palmer, in *The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) suggests:

*“We seem to have forgotten that the environment in which we meet has an impact on the quality of what happens within us and between us. Fortunately, there is a simple formula for a setting that welcomes the soul...”*

- *Let the room be neither cramped nor cavernous, with enough space to allow for a circle of comfortable chairs that (if the group is large) can easily be moved and gathered into small groups.*
- *Let there be eye-level windows to provide visual relief and allow the outside world to come in.*
- *Let the décor be warm and inviting, with simple grace notes such as fresh flowers.*
- *Let there be carpet on the floor so the sound does not bounce around and acoustics that permit soft voices to be heard by all.*
- *Let the lighting be incandescent and warm, not florescent and cold.”*

“Physical space is more decisive in creating community than we realize. Most meeting spaces are designed for control, negotiation, and persuasion. While the room itself is not going to change, We always have a choice about how we arrange and occupy whatever room we are handed.”

- Peter Block in  
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Parker Palmer’s vision is, perhaps, the ideal. We know that not **all** things are possible, but **some** things are **always** possible.

Let’s continue, then, to explore the **realities** and the **possibilities**.

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At the November 2008 Wisconsin Directors of Religious Education Federation (WDREF) Convention in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, Sr. Angela Ann Zukowski, MSHS, Director of the Institute of Pastoral Initiatives, at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, recalled for the participants:

*“Environment is the first step in catechesis. I believe environment sets the mood for true hospitality and learning. When the newcomer, stranger, or neighbor walks through our doors, the space should feel sacred. Soft instrumental music, candles, a cloth draped on the gathering table and sacramentals like a crucifix and Bible help to visually set the mood, teach and welcome before any words are spoken.”*

**What are some other ways we can (in addition to Sr. Angela Ann’s important reminder) in Peter Block’s words, “arrange and occupy whatever room we are handed?”**

In *A Concise Guide to Adult Faith Formation* (Ave Maria Press, 2009), Neil Parent relates his experience:

*“...if the program were going to invite participants to share elements of their personal faith journeys, I would bring in floor and table lamps so that I could turn off the harshly bright overhead florescent lights. The more subdued and warm light tone changed the room’s ambiance to one that was more conducive for participant’s to speak about aspects of their faith life. You could ever hear the difference in their softer voice tones as they spoke to each other in their groups.”*



Sr. Marie Gillen recounts this incident in her article, “Fresh Air and Fresh Ideas: The Importance of Learning Climate for Adult Learning” in *Insight for Adult Religious Education – Number 3* (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1990):

*“...he was assigned to teach a course in an absolutely dismal looking room in the basement of an old, poorly repaired church. Since there wasn’t much he could do about the room space as there was no other, he decided that the only solution was to decorate – but how? And besides, he didn’t*

*have much time. Travel posters flashed in his mind so he hurried off to a local agency where they knew him and he was supplied with colorful pictures of different sizes. When students arrived that night they were surprised by the colorful décor and a bit amused, too. In addition to color, the posters stimulated some “ice-breaker” conversation as well.*

*This is a simple story and the poster solution is a straightforward one, too, but Roby’s point was important.*

- *He was encouraging us as adult educators to be imaginative and creative.*
- *He also was getting across the point that every factor in the learning environment is of critical importance.*
- *He encouraged us to be forceful, too, and not to accept dismal rooms when better facilities were available or could be easily found.*

*Since then I have found myself “digging in my heels” on more than one occasion when spaces I was offered for learning programs were less than adequate. It is amazing how space can be found when attention is called to the inadequacy of an assigned location.”*

“An ‘empty wall is a testimony to the insignificance of the human spirit,’ observed pioneering street life researcher William H. Whyte.  
Our job is to affirm the significance of the human spirit and filling the walls with photos and with art ... is very doable.”

- Peter Block in  
*Community: The Structure of Belonging*

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A similar experience is described in *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition:

*“I was meeting with a class of about 50 students in a large classroom in the basement of one of our university buildings. The windows were small and transmitted very little light, so we had to have the yellow ceiling lights on all the time. The walls were painted dusty institutional beige, and two walls were tinged with black chalkboards.*

*During the third meeting of the class, I became conscious of the fact that this class wasn’t clicking the way most classes do, and I shared my feeling of discouragement with the students. It took them no time at all to diagnose the problem as being the dolorous environment of our meetings.*

*One of our learning/teaching teams agreed to experiment with our environment at the next meeting. They went to the dime store and bought brightly colored construction paper and a variety of other materials and objects, the total cost of which was under \$5, and made collages for the walls, mobiles for the ceiling and simulated flagstones for the floor.*

*What a happier mood characterized our fourth meeting!”*

## Some GEMS for Pondering:

- Are there spaces and places for Adult Faith Formation which you can enhance? How?
- Do you have a sub-committee (of the Adult Faith Formation Committee) for Environment?
- Does part of your environment always include a prayer space?
- Do people feel they are entering a sacred space, a welcoming space, a place of comfort and respect?

“One can sense rather quickly  
on entering an institution  
whether it cares more about people or things,  
whether it is concerned about the feelings  
and welfare of individuals or herds them through  
like cattle, and whether it views adults  
as dependent personalities  
or self-directed human beings.”

- Malcolm Knowles

## Survey Responses

On the best practices surveys, there were no comments concerning the physical space, environment and atmosphere for Adult Faith Formation at the parish.

- Might that be because we all have great spaces and environments and provide hospitable places so well?
- Perhaps this component of hospitality didn’t occur to the survey respondents?

The following are **all** the responses that **were** received on the surveys concerning creating a hospitable environment for Adult Faith Formation, the majority recounting experiences in homes:

- The sisters have opened the convent living room to us, so the atmosphere is “homey” and comfortable.
- The hospitality committee created a warm welcoming environment.
- Having the program in someone’s home provides a friendly atmosphere.

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- Seating, etc. was comfortable and the gathering took place in a private home where all felt “at home.”
- Most groups were hosted in homes, which helped create an inviting atmosphere for all participants.
- Creating a welcoming, comfortable atmosphere facilitates interaction and participation.
- Hospitality was very effective for those groups who met in homes; it was much less effective for those who met in parish facilities. The parish just couldn’t compete with the homes for making people feel more relaxed and comfortable.

## More GEMS for Pondering:

- Have you had experiences of Adult Faith Formation opportunities meeting in homes? What are the advantages? Are there disadvantages?
- Are there ways we can create “homey,” comfortable environments at the parish?

## A Wondering GEM

We have talked a great deal about “arranging and occupying whatever room we are handed.” Often that is our task.

Might there also be times when we are involved in the designing of new spaces or advocating for new spaces and places?

Even though the following passage talks about civic spaces, can there be applications, corollaries to our realities? Peter Block in *Community: The Structure of Belonging* challenges:

*“The argument against great design is always cost and speed. The discussion about cost and speed is not really about cost and speed. It is an*

*agenda that declares that human experience is a low priority. The argument against the importance of the aesthetic is an argument against human freedom. Low cost and quickly-constructed buildings and spaces become warehouses designed to keep under one roof and under control those people whom we do not value. We measure their value in dollars and economy.*

*We have too often seen the construction of ugly spaces and buildings in the name of cost, or of saving taxpayers’ dollars. It is not about the money. When a hallowed institution like a sports franchise or a large employer threatens to move out of town, we have all the money that is needed.*

*Don’t ever take the argument about **no funds** and **no time** at face value. Our stance about cost and speed is simply a measure of our commitment. In every case, **low cost** and **fast action** are really an argument against the dignity of citizens and a more democratic and humanly inclusive process.”*

## A Remembering GEM

Take a moment to recall the story from [GEMS #3](#): “Jacquelyne Witter, EdD, tells us (*FaithWorks, March 2005*) that at the completion of an adult faith formation series, a participant told her that she didn’t always come because of the topic or the speaker.

‘Sometimes I just came because I knew the room would be beautiful and the food would be good and that’s what I needed that day,’ she confessed.

She also then commented, as she thanked Jacquelyne, that even though she might not have come for the content, she usually discovered something new or grew in some way.”

The motivation and power of a hospitable environment!

## GEMS #17

A hospitable environment for learning isn’t just about food and the physical atmosphere. There is even more. We will explore those components next month in [GEMS #17](#).



## Golden Nuggets From You

“This ([Gems #15](#)) is definitely food for thought as we have recently begun leaving out food to decrease parish expenses. Just offering coffee and water.

As a non coffee drinker I have felt somewhat left out myself. I am now thinking that food is important to inviting and welcoming and must be considered more important to our mission.

I especially appreciated the references to Jesus’ ministry with people that involved food and welcoming. I also feel that while the easy answer is often cookies that we should be more focused on healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. It is also more considerate of those who are diabetic, gluten intolerant, overweight, etc.

And as a parish nurse I consider it to be my responsibility to help people to remember that we need to take care of our bodies in healthy ways that respect them as gifts from God.”

- *Theresa Humenik, R.N., Parish Nurse, Catholic Community of St. Jude, DeWitt MI*

(We welcome your comments, thoughts, suggestions, ideas, etc. Your views and practices continually support and encourage others. Email them to [jansch@juno.com](mailto:jansch@juno.com) any time.)



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at [www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com).

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