



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#17 - March 2012

## Hospitality in Adult Faith Formation (Part 3)

Last month's newsletter, [GEMS #16](#), concluded with the real-life story that Jacquelyne Witter, EdD told (FaithWorks, March 2005) of the woman who came to an adult faith formation gathering, not specifically for "the content," but because she knew that welcoming, beauty and good food would be there and that's what she needed that night.

Jacquelyne Witter goes on to say:

*"...This incident is an important reminder that one of the most important considerations for the ministry of adult faith formation is hospitality. I haven't found any one who would disagree with this, but sometimes we have limited our understanding of this important reality. There is more to genuine hospitality than nametags, centerpieces and refreshments. It is not a trivial or incidental consideration. The external practice of hospitality is an outward manifestation of an interior disposition that is essential for those who are committed to effective formation of adults."*

- In [GEMS #15](#) we explored some ideas about refreshments and all its amenities
- [GEMS #16](#) began to look at the importance of a hospitable environment, through examining our physical spaces and places.
- We continue here to explore other components of a hospitable environment.

I see the setting of a climate that is conducive to learning as perhaps the single most critical thing I do as a facilitator of learning.

-Malcolm Knowles in  
*The Modern Practice of Adult Education*

## Qualities/Characteristics of a Hospitable Environment

The physical spaces and places which we explored in [GEMS #16](#) are crucial. At the same time, many intangible characteristics (or the social environment) will pervade an adult faith formation setting which is built on the groundwork and **theology of hospitality**.

Linda J. Vogel in *Teaching and Learning in Communities of Faith: Empowering Adults Through Religious Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1999) reminds us:

*"Creating a hospitable environment for teaching-learning experiences is a primary task for teachers. It involves being sensitive to both the physical and social environments. The creation of a social environment is the most critical. (Henri) Nouwen speaks of creating "a free and fearless space" with safe boundaries. It is a safe space that engenders mutual trust so that teachers and learners together can be present to each other (The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life by Henri Nouwen, Image Books, 1986, pp. 84-90).*

Let's explore just a few of the many intangible qualities, the characteristics of the social environment:

### ❖ Safe and confidential

Adults will be confident in a setting in which they feel secure; in a setting in which they know their opinions, thoughts and questions will "stay there," they will not be repeated or discussed outside of their learning space.

### ❖ Inclusivity

Many times within one adult faith formation gathering there is a broad range of participants: various ages, many cultures, different needs, etc. Facilitators of adult faith formation need to be always aware of this, for as soon as someone feels excluded in any way, adult learners will begin to lose their motivation and enthusiasm.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

If you'd like to experiment, try the following exercise called "Marginality and Mattering" ("Diversity Dimensions" by P. Frederick in *Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education News*, Dec. 1997, p 2). Invite adults to recall a recent time when they felt excluded or discounted – "*the only one like me in a group, not understood, or perhaps unaccepted.*"

After they have reflected on this, invite them to discuss in twos:

- How did you know?
- How did you feel?
- How did you behave?

Then invite them to recall a time when they felt that they mattered, were included or were regarded as important to a group. Invite them to discuss with their partner the same three questions again.

Invite them to reflect on both situations and to discuss:

- the patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that emerged
- the influence of those patterns on their motivation and enthusiasm
- how the changes in motivation and enthusiasm might relate to learning and teaching

As this will demonstrate, when we don't feel safe and respected, complex information is often blocked from passage to higher cortical functioning and memory storage, which slows learning and increases our frustration or withdrawal.

Exclusion – however slight or unintended – is not a hospitable environment.

## ❖ Respect for each individual

This flows from inclusivity; at the same time, respect pervades everything about our hospitable environment and all we do in our relationships with each and every person.

Adult faith formation is not about teaching workshops, courses, classes, various topics, etc. Adult faith formation is about accompanying people, journeying together with people on the walk of faith.

It is about being open to God.

- God is within me.
- God is within each and every person.
- We are on sacred ground together.
  
- How am I open to God in myself, in each of these people, in this experience?
  
- Does each person experience the profound respect I (and all their co-learners) have for them because of the hospitable environment of our session(s)?

The social and emotional environment  
is vitally important  
and should be welcoming, affirming, and safe.  
People need a place where they can be  
honest about who they are  
and pose their most troubling questions.

They need to know that there are  
no stupid questions and that any question,  
seriously asked, deserves a serious response  
(even if there does not seem to be an answer).

-Linda J. Vogel in  
*Teaching and Learning in Communities  
of Faith: Empowering Adults through  
Religious Education*

## ❖ Acceptance

To create an environment of hospitality, an environment for faith growth to flourish and deepen, all participants must know and experience that:

- questions are ok here
- all topics can be talked about
- opinions, insights and experiences are respected

*“It needs to be an environment where persons can express anger and doubt without being judged; it needs to be a place where persons can speak without embarrassment about how God has touched their lives.”* (Linda J. Vogel, *Teaching and Learning in Communities of Faith: Empowering Adults Through Religious Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1999))

Barbara Ann Brumm, D/CRE at St. Isidore Catholic Community, Osage, Iowa, commented on her Best Practice Survey:

*“A welcoming atmosphere is a #1 goal. Accepting your guests just as they were created and not as you want them to be, for each is a special gift and each of us needs to welcome that gift, that person, unconditionally.”*

Teaching asks first of all  
the creation of a space  
where students and teachers can enter into  
a fearless communication with each other  
and allow their respective life experiences  
to be their primary  
and most valuable source of growth  
and maturation.

-Henri Nouwen in  
*The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*

## ❖ Attitude of the Facilitator

There are so many things that could be said about the characteristics of the adult faith formation facilitator (perhaps another issue!). One which certainly builds the atmosphere of hospitality is joy.

Many years ago (405 A.D.), St. Augustine wrote a treatise on catechesis in which he encouraged adult catechists to exude joy in their ministry. “People listen to us with much greater pleasure when we ourselves take pleasure in this same work of instruction” he wisely said.

## SOME RESOURCES FOR FACILITATORS

- [Echoes of Faith Plus: Adult Faith Formation Module](#)
- [A Manual for Group Facilitators](#)
- [Some Facilitation Ideas](#)
- [Facilitating Learning](#)
- [Facilitator Guide](#)
- [Ideas for Facilitation](#)
- [Tips for Facilitators](#)
- [Tips for Facilitating a Small Group Discussion](#)
- [Facilitating Large Group Discussions](#)

## A Wondering GEM

These five characteristics are only a few of the many. What others would you – and your committees/teams -- suggest?

## Some Practical Suggestions and Methods

Flowing from these characteristics, there are several practices which you mentioned on the Best Practices Surveys and of which adult faith formation practitioners continually remind us. Some of them may seem very simple, very basic, yet they lay the foundation for a hospitable environment.

The popular song that was #1 in 1954 and was in the top 40 again in 1960, “Little Things Mean a Lot” is true. Even though some of the following practices might *seem* little and unimportant, so – we think - for the sake of time, they can be skipped, we might want to think twice. Are we providing a learning environment of hospitality and welcome which is

- joyful
- respectful of each person’s confidentiality
- accepting of people’s questions and experiences
- inclusive
- designed to form respectful community

Several practices – among the many – which you are already doing:

## ➤ Name Tags

Several survey respondents mentioned name tags, especially having the names large enough. It is often easier to begin a conversation with someone

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

when you can call them by name (especially if you should know their name but have momentarily forgotten).

Another alternative to name tags is name cards on the tables in front of each person (depending upon your session set-up). An advantage to these is that the names can be much larger, therefore, easier for the facilitator and other participants to read than the smaller name tags.

## ➤ Greeters

Often we think of greeters for our weekend liturgies, but again several survey respondents indicated that this was an integral part of their hospitality environment in adult faith formation:

- *We have greeters who are young adults at every event.*
- *We select a volunteer each week who greets them.*
- *The Adult Faith Formation Committee stationed themselves at the door*
- *Greeting people as they arrive and then we walk from table to table to speak personally with the people, and thank them as they leave*
- *Members of the Education Commission greeted our guests.*

In the article, “Hone your Hospitality Skills,” (*Today’s Parish, March 2011*) Sylvia DeVillers gives some tips for greeters:

- *“Always be on hand to greet early arrivals. This means being at entrances at least 30 minutes before the session begins. Remain there, and keep watch. Do not wander over to the refreshment table and risk missing someone.”*
- *Don’t overdo the greeting when a friend arrives. If the friend wants to engage you in a conversation about the latest news or latest family crisis, ask if you can talk later. Don’t neglect paying attention to other arrivals at the expense of greeting those you already know.*

- *Instead, introduce a hovering newcomer to that good friend of yours who just arrived. Both of them will benefit.*
- *Don’t limit your greeting skills to before the adult faith formation sessions... a casual but sincere ‘hope to see you again’ comment as people are leaving reinforces their connection with the parish community and their sense of belonging.”*

## SOME RESOURCES FOR GREETERS

Even though many of the following refer to church greeters (which we looked at in [Best Practices #3-9](#), the tips and suggestions are also applicable for Adult Faith Formation greeters:

- [3 Quick Fixes for your Greeter Ministry](#)
- [Greeter Ministry](#)
- [Bad Church Greeters](#)
- [Outside Greeters](#)

Introduce yourself....  
A few things about who you are,  
why you’re conducting the course...  
something you sincerely appreciate...  
that makes the situation distinct  
or special.

-Raymond J. Wlodkowski in  
*Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*

## ➤ “Icebreakers”

As all of these practices, ice-breakers or introduction exercises are not gimmicks or time-fillers. They are an opportunity to emphasize that each person is important, each person is unique; that the facilitator (as well as the other participants) is interested in each and every person. It is easier to learn together, to grow in faith together, when we know something about each other.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

The Best Practices surveys said it so well this way:

- At each gathering we invite participants to greet those around them
- Opportunity to introduce themselves and then sit in small groups they were comfortable in
- Always time for socializing
- Time to just “chat” before each session helped everyone get to know each other
- Take time to get to know one another as a way of building, fostering, and reaffirming community
- When we first meet (year long process) we spend several weeks getting to know each other
- We include ideas for “table talk” so folks around the table can get to know each other a little while they eat
- Each has a name tag and introduces themselves to the others
- Broke the ice at the beginning of each session
- There is always a welcome piece at the beginning
- Welcoming and asking an opening non-threatening question always warms up the group
- Introduction of participants to each other especially in a small group is important
- Although the advertised start time was 7 pm, the presentations followed the hospitality session. Beginning with hospitality offers the people the opportunity to learn through personal sharing over a cup of coffee or tea. It offers a relaxed beginning which breaks down nervousness and encourages interactions

## SOME RESOURCES FOR ICEBREAKERS

- [Top 10 Meeting Icebreakers](#)
- [Icebreakers for a Church Gathering](#)
- [40 Icebreakers](#)
- [Icebreakers](#)
- [11 Easy Icebreakers](#)
- [Icebreakers and Activities](#)
- [Icebreaker Questions](#)

### ➤ Deciding Upon Group Guidelines

Depending upon the nature of the adult faith formation offering, and especially the length of time that the group will be together, the facilitator and the group may want to agree to participation guidelines, especially because of respect and confidentiality.

Some that might be considered are:

- Listen respectfully, especially to differing perspectives
- Keep personal information shared in the group confidential
- Speak from your own experience, e.g. “I think...” or “In my experience I have found...” rather than “People say...” or “We believe...”
- Express perspectives without blaming or scapegoating
- Avoid generalizing about people or groups of people
- Don’t monopolize

### A Collection of Your Jewels

As this issue ends, it concludes with a varied collection of ideas and suggestions of things that are working for you in hospitality:

- ✦ Small gifts or devotionals are also given to participants on occasion as a “thank you” for coming. For example, in December we will offer participants free Catholic Cross-Words booklets (during a First Friday



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Breakfast Club). – *Angela McClellan, Corpus Christi Parish, Lansdale, Pennsylvania*

- ✦ We often have participants from as many as five or six different parishes. I always provide names and addresses and phone numbers. There is car pooling. We become a small faith community. – *Joan Vlaun, OP, St. John the Evangelist Parish, Schenectady, New York*
- ✦ The facilitators were very welcoming and shared their personal lives as witnesses to the issues at hand. – *Darcy Wharton, SS. Peter & Paul Parish, Rocklin, California*
- ✦ Our website is inviting and engaging (I think) and it makes people aware that our parish is inviting and engaging. Most parishes, in some way or another, invite, welcome and accompany people to their church. We go a step further, however, by inviting, welcoming, and accompanying (through interactivity) people into sharing their faith through unique means. – *Andy Duran, Church of St. Mary, Lake Forest, Illinois*
- ✦ There is always a welcome piece at the beginning...we celebrate birthdays for all. – *Susan Dazey, St. Patrick Parish, Dubuque, Iowa*
- ✦ We offered assistance with computers. – *Jean Fitzgerald, Church of St. Anselm, Chesterland, Ohio*
- ✦ Careful attention is paid information so that it is correct. ... Members of the committee are welcoming and walk with people to their destination. – *Mary Ann Keiner, Our Lady of Grace Parish, Noblesville, Indiana*
- ✦ We offered a bus to and from Pray 2010 (an archdiocesan conference) that can seat 29 people. – *Libby Blom, All Saints Parish, Albany Creek, Queensland, Australia*
- ✦ If participants are elderly, we take into consideration their physical limitations in moving around. As an example, we did one exercise where people had to stand up if something pertained to them. For our elderly participants, we gave them a puppet head on a stick, and told them they could raise them up high instead. – *Angela Caraher, Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Delanson, New York*

- ✦ A welcoming facilitator who speaks to each as they arrive, makes sure the environment is comfortable, provides writing paper/pens, enough handouts, etc. Introduction of participants to each other especially in a small group is important! – *Sr. Barbara Rohe, CDP, Our Lady Star of the Sea Parish, Washington, DC*
- ✦ A welcoming atmosphere is a number 1 goal. Accepting your guests just as they were created and not as you want them to be, for each is a special gift and each of us needs to welcome that gift, that person, unconditionally. – *Barbara Ann Brumm, St. Isidore Catholic Community, Osage, Iowa*
- ✦ Each registered retreatant is sent a letter of confirmation days prior to the retreat to confirm and outline the day. Each person is greeted at the door, signed in and given a booklet to help them with the day. ... the room is inviting, with the screen and presentation area surrounded by plants; low lamp light is placed around the room. – *Laura Broyles, St. Thomas aBecket Parish, Canton, Michigan*



## Golden Nuggets From You

“I couldn't agree more that the space for adults must be ‘friendly.’ ([GEMS #16](#)) Luckily, even though we are a former school, our parish center has three areas with couches, comfy chairs and even two with adult table space. I feel very lucky!”

- *Diane Seidel, St. Boniface Parish, Bay City, Michigan*

“Love those GEMS ... Had to respond to this issue ([GEMS #16](#)). Perhaps it's my family and Benedictine roots...HOSPITALITY has always been a priority for me. Ditto to your *Golden Nugget* in [GEMS #15](#)!”

- *Marilyn Lines, Christ the Redeemer Parish, Lake Orion, Michigan*

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

“Last night I began teaching a diocesan Introduction to Scripture course and 26 people signed up! Only half of them are teachers. The rest are interested parishioners.

We are able to meet in the new parish library. It's a lovely space built in the round, with large windows, cheerful paint, wifi access, a counter for refreshments, space for a prayer table, and is entered through a lovely courtyard.

However, the furniture is "temporary" until there are "more funds." So, adult bodies were sitting on metal folding chairs for two hours. Horrible! I told them that this was enough penance for the whole of Lent. No need to do any more. They laughed!

A member of the Parish Council is in the class. I think he will ask for better chairs... We shall see!”

- *Name Withheld upon request*

SO O O O GREAT! ([GEMS #16](#)) Thanks so much on behalf of the men and women (RCIA) with whom I'll meet in a few weeks for Breaking Open the Word. We meet in a wonderful parish hall, but the tables at which we meet could be made more creatively welcoming, and that IS doable, as you explain.

- *Maureen O'Reilly, Sacred Heart Parish, Dearborn, Michigan*

(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.)



Janet Schaeffler, OP  
[www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com) ~ [jansch@juno.com](mailto:jansch@juno.com)

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*.