



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#19 - May 2012

A Best Practice: Empowering the Living of Gifts

Do you remember the Hasidic tale of the Rabbi Zusya? When he was an old man Zusya said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” (*Tales of the Hasidism: The Early Masters* by Martin Buber, Schocken Books, 1975).

God calls each of us to be who we are, who we uniquely are created to be, with our gifts and strengths.

Perhaps that is one of the goals of our parishes, one of the goals of adult faith formation: to encourage and support each person – in the maturing and deepening of their strengths and gifts as they grow to be their best selves, who God created them to be.

One of the tools used today, by individuals, corporations, educational enterprises, healthcare professionals, employers – as well as churches – throughout the world is the *StrengthsFinder* from the Gallup Organization.

In 1952, a young graduate student, Donald O. Clifton looked around at psychology’s hyper focus on deficits and illness and wondered:

**“What would happen
if we actually studied what is right with people?”**

In his career, Clifton was to be Gallup’s board chair and lead a team of Gallup researchers whose work today has resulted in helping people around the world identify their talents and develop them into strengths – for themselves and others.

As parishes and churches throughout the world have looked for ways to

- help people discern their gifts
- continue growing into maturity
- engage people, through their gifts, in belonging

the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* is one tool that is being used – in various ways – in every corner of the planet.

The beginning process is simple. Participants answer an online survey, which takes approximately thirty minutes to complete. Gallup has narrowed down personal attributes into thirty-four signature strengths. Within minutes of taking the survey, each individual’s top five signature strengths are emailed to them.

Gallup offers several publications which suggest various strategies for using and deepening these strengths: *Living Your Strengths: Discover Your God-Given Talents and Inspire Your Community* by Albert L. Winseman, Donald O. Clifton, and Curt Liesveld is the Catholic edition.

Most Americans do not know
what their strengths are.
When you ask them, they look at you
with a blank stare, or they respond
in terms of subject knowledge,
which is the wrong answer.

-Peter Drucker

In the Foreword to *Living Your Strengths*, Monsignor Bill Hanson (pastor of Church of St. Gerard Majella, Post Jefferson Station, New York) recounts that his parishioners have three reactions when they take the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*:

- **“Amazement at its accuracy:** ‘How could they know this about me?’

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- **Genuine surprise:** ‘I always thought (or was told) that this particular behavior of mine was a weakness. I never thought of it as a valuable talent!’
- **Gratitude:** ‘In the last three years since learning our Signature Themes, I have come to understand my spouse better than in the previous thirty years.’ People are also saying this about their teenagers, parents, bosses, co-workers, friends and even people consider their enemies!’”

A description of how *StrengthsFinder* was used at the Church of St. Gerard Majella can be found in *Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop Doing Church and Being the Church Again* by Albert L. Winseman (The Gallup Organization, 2007).

Why are some congregations
and parishes flourishing
while others are failing?
What makes the difference?

The difference is *engagement*.

-Albert L. Winseman in
Growing an Engaged Church (Gallup Press, 2007)

Clifton StrengthsFinder is being utilized more and more in our parishes throughout our country (and beyond) to help people know, understand, appreciate and live their giftedness.

Jean Fitzgerald, Pastoral Associate at the Church of St. Anselm, Chesterland, Ohio, responded to the **GEMS** best practice survey with the unfolding story of discerning and living giftedness in their parish.

And it began simply...

The staff members of St. Anselm, having first learned about *StrengthsFinder*, became familiar with the process. Several of them, then, participated in the online inventory, discovering their Signature Themes.

The pastor, Fr. Tom Sweany, especially, was interested. He and the staff realized the potential this held for each adult parishioner on their own faith journey.

The staff invited speaker and facilitator, Dr. Dobie Moser, family counselor and strengths coach, to plan a retreat day on the topic **for the leadership** of the Church of St. Anselm and their cluster parish, St. Francis of Assisi, Gates Mills, Ohio.

Members of the Parish Pastoral Councils and Finance Councils took the survey and participated in a large group training provided by a local speaker on strengths and engagement.

The initial decision and planning...

The Parish and Finance Councils of both parishes were in-serviced together. Since St. Francis of Assisi was in the midst of an on-going stewardship process, they chose to continue using their existing ministries. St. Anselm Parish decided to pursue the strengths and engagement process and formed a short term (eight-week) Task Group to develop a proposal for applying the Strengths and Engagement Process at St. Anselm.

The idea of providing parishioners with the opportunity to learn and live their strengths was based in the fact that people become more engaged in their church or organization when they contribute by sharing what they love doing. The hope was to increase the sense of belonging or engagement for the parishioners of St. Anselm.

The Task Group's proposal was presented to the St. Anselm Pastoral and Finance Councils and implementation was approved.

Within two months a new Strengths and Engagement Advisory Committee (SEAC) was begun. Membership was comprised of individuals

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representing:

- parishioners-at-large
- parish pastoral council
- staff

SEAC's monthly mission was to implement and build upon the initially proposed plan. Their main purpose was to share the strengths concept with as many parishioners as possible and thereby increase engagement.

**God has gifted us.
Do we know our gifts?**

**Are we grateful?
Are we using our strengths?**

A Communications Committee worked simultaneously – alongside SEAC - to promote initial parish-wide events.

To plant the seeds...

The first launch was scheduled for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord during all the weekend liturgies. The Communications Committee began their enticing publicity with **progressive messages** for the whole community during the Advent/Christmas season.

These short, progressive messages were hung on gift tags on a large wrapped (appliance) box in the gathering area during this time when gifts were on people's mind.

The messages were:

- *You are gift.*
- *You are gifted!*
- *Believe in your gifts!*
- *Your gift keeps on giving.*
- *God has another gift for you to be opened on January 10th.*

- *Seventy-five people have unwrapped the gift of their strengths.*

(The photos of these seventy-five people were hung on the gift boxes along with their names and top five strengths.)

- *Celebrate your Strengths and Engagement on January 21 from 6:00 – 9:00 PM.*

Go within every day
and find the inner strength
so that the world will not
blow your candle out.

-Katherine Dunham

The Inaugural Launch – Part I

On the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Fr. Sweany preached:

- on the value of living one's strengths
- sharing his own top five, and
- invited people to learn about their top five strengths.

He explained to the assembly gathered for each liturgy that books were available after liturgy, if they were interested in learning their own strengths, delving into more of the reality of who they were – who and how God had created them to be.

The book, *Living Your Strengths*, was available in the hall adjoining church. People were told the parish was accepting a \$10 donation for each book (they had been obtained at a bulk rate of \$15). Many made the donation.

Three hundred people obtained the book on this weekend.

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A colorful detachable card accompanied each person's copy of *Living Your Strengths*, which gave them the information on the process:

Welcome to the StrengthsFinder Process at St. Anselm Parish

1. Take the StrengthsFinder survey online, according to the directions in your book.
2. Then email your name and your top five strengths to the parish secretary.
3. Our parish secretary will enter your name and strengths in our parish StrengthsFinders database and create a name tag for you with your name and five strengths listed.

The Inaugural Launch – Part II

Ten days later every parishioner was invited to a **full-parish gathering** – an in-depth study of Strengths and Engagement.

The Sunday before (the Sunday after the Baptism of the Lord), the presenter for that evening, Dr. Dobie Moser, Executive Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry in the Diocese of Cleveland – and the facilitator who had worked with the parish staffs, spoke for two minutes at all the liturgies, inviting people to this gathering the following Thursday. One hundred seventy people registered.

Since the evening began at 6:00 pm, a light supper was offered. This **provided a feeling of welcome and hospitality**, with many people sitting at random tables as they arrived and meeting new people.

The evening was designed by Dr. Moser to assist participants in claiming and learning more about their top five strengths. In addition, he brought a welcomed theological component to the strengths process always adding that, as Catholics, the **greatest strength possessed by each of us, all of us, is our foundation in the Pascal Mystery**

Dr. Moser elaborated on the reality that while as children all strengths are available, the child develops preference; by the time a person is 15 years of age one's strengths are firmly wired.

Parishioners participated in an exercise in **small groups discussing their strengths**:

- whether they were surprised by them
- how the strengths were or were not affirmed in childhood or at work
- how they enjoy using them today

A large group exercise followed in which the description/behavior of a particular strength was described. Participants were invited to place themselves around an imaginary "U" shape at the perimeter of the room:

- one arm being "that's me to a T"
- the base of the U being "that's me sometimes"
- the other arm being "that is definitely not me"

People came to know and value their own strengths, the strengths of others and that strengths are of equal value.

I can do all things
through Christ
who strengthens me.

-Philippians 4:13

The Inaugural Launch – Part III

During the large group gathering, forms were provided for people to sign up to participate in one of seven **small groups** to further explore their strengths. Seventy people registered for one of these options during which they further explored their individual strengths.

These small groups met for five sessions at different venues in the parish setting in a wide variety of timeslots. Parishioners who had done

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facilitation in the past, e.g. at *Christ Renews His Parish retreats*, served as facilitators for the small group process.

The goals of these groups were to:

- help people become familiar with the strengths language
- affirm each other in doing what they do best
- look at further ways to become engaged in learning their strengths

The groups used *Growing Stronger in Faith and Action* by Leisa Anslinger, educator and consultant. Leisa skillfully integrates theology and Church documents with a **focus on giftedness and stewardship** into each segment with extensive opportunities for faith sharing and dialogue.

Recently this resource has been revised and expanded because of the experience of several parishes involved in strengths/engagement. The updated resource, *Knowing and Leading Parishioner Strengths*, is now available at <http://store.catholiclifeandfaith.com/guyopatoliit.html>.

“A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a ‘gift for me.’”

- Pope John Paul II

The Motivation behind the participation...

The Strengths and Engagement Process had been launched!

As the staff reflected on some of the motivating factors for their parishioners:

- people were interested in learning more about themselves and becoming better at what they loved

- parishioners knew that seventy-five others in the parish had already learned about the process and discovered their strengths
- they knew that they would have fun while learning something new about themselves
- they were aware of how the pastor integrated his own strengths in his life
- persons who were not adept at computers were invited to come to the parish where a staff person would assist them in taking the online survey

The Continuation of Strengths and Engagement

Within an eighteen month period, Dr. Dobie Moser led three large group sessions with parishioners ranging in age from seventeen to eighty-seven. Participants learned that they are **much more effective** when **operating out of their top five strengths** vs. continuing to work hard at something for which they are not equipped.

These large group gatherings were followed by the continuing cycle of small group conversations and exploration for all participants.

Individual Strengths Coaching was made available for parishioners who desired continuing the exploration even more deeply.

A member of the parish’s Strengths/Engagement Committee and Jean Fitzgerald (pastoral associate) received Gallup Coach training at a two-day workshop with Gallup's Dr. Curt Liesveld.

That training day enabled the participants to understand more deeply who they are, because of their strengths, and to take responsibility for doing the best in the work they are called to do. The training focused on:

- strength recognition
- offering application of strengths at work, church, and in personal life

Because of this staff experience and training, the parish **offered individual strengths coaching** to any interested parishioner who had participated in and completed the small group experience.

The Deepening of Strengths and Engagement

Staying Engaged After Your Marriage, a workshop building upon couple's strengths, has been offered twice, with enthusiastic participation from the married couples of the parish.

Dr. Dobie Moser returned to lead these opportunities, helping couples focus on what is good and right in their marriages, their strengths, rather than whatever may create discord. Dobie integrated faith, media, and humor.

Currently, the book, *Living Your Strengths*, is made **available to new parishioners** who are interested in identifying their strengths. This occurs at their Monthly Welcome Breakfasts. During these breakfast meetings, the process for doing the online survey is explained for them. The new parishioners are invited to email their top five strengths to the parish secretary. They are also given a parish phone number to call if they would like individual strengths coaching.

Jean Fitzgerald, the pastoral associate, makes a follow-up call to all who have received books to discuss their strengths and answer questions. This opens the door to suggest parish activities or ministries which may be compatible with the person's strengths.

Gallup's research tells us that we have
a 1 in 278,000 chance
of meeting someone in our lifetimes
who has the same top five strengths as ourselves.

We have a 1 in 33 million chance
of meeting someone with our same top five strengths
in the same order.

We are each created truly unique in God's image,
gifted to do something special,
strengthened for the work of God's Kingdom.

The Effects ... from the View of Parishioners

Comments from various parishioners are illustrative of the impact of this process on all areas of their lives:

- "Learning my top five strengths **helped me understand myself much better**. It really opened my eyes as to why I do what I do, and especially the way I approach things in life. Understanding my strengths helped me to see that there are so many ways to approach a goal or a problem, and my way works for me, but others may not see a situation the way I do, and their way works better for them. But the end result is often the same. Many different roads can lead to the same destination."
- *One person had the unique experience of translating new strengths knowledge into a new profession:* "The Living Your Strengths program at St. Anselm Church was introduced at a time of real transition in my life. I loved what I had been doing professionally, but I recognized the need for a change to allow more time for my family and my personal emotional, physical and spiritual development. By naming my strengths, focusing on them and working with a coach and others who were realizing their strengths in their daily living, I continued to **ponder what would be the next step for my life**, and I knew it wouldn't be going back to what I had done before.

I recently was offered a position where the job requirements and list of responsibilities appear to be a restatement of my list of top five strengths! I was not actively looking for a new job, but when the opportunity was presented, I was able to recognize the potential of taking my career in this new direction.

I look forward to living out my strengths in my new career while continuing to allow myself to develop at home, in my church and personally. And I cannot help but to look for strengths in others and help them realize their own potential."

- "Learning my strengths **gave me a new framework to evaluate** my actions, desires, and disappointments."

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- “The privilege of leading one of the small groups was a great way to **connect with others** and help them with the evaluation of their strengths.”
- “My company uses strength finders as part of **improving the overall performance** of its people and the company. I have daily/weekly reinforcement.”
- *Related to the Marriage workshops one parishioner states:* “It’s definitely made me more tolerant of my husband. He’s an activator, and part of that strength is, he won’t quit until the problem is solved. So, that’s why he spent 2 hours trying to dig out my daughter’s car from the yard, when she had AAA. Or why he was at a friend’s house until 1:00 am on a Friday night fixing a computer problem for them. When that strength came up for him, my jaw just dropped! That is so him, and **now I understand him better.**”

Can we harness our own gifts
and talents as individuals and
as a community to make the ‘good news’
live in our hearts and in our communities?

-Bishop William F. Murphy
in *Living Your Strengths*

The Effects ... from the View of the Staff

The pastoral staff of St. Anselm has several reflections concerning this on-going process:

- People are talking about their strengths.
- Staff members are more accepting of each other based on knowledge of individual strengths.

- Some parishioners have offered to share their strengths with the parish, although we made an effort to communicate that knowing their strengths **would improve their relationships at home, work, parish and world.**
- I recently searched to replace an Evangelization Committee member. In reflecting on possible candidates, I went to our Strengths Database searching for someone who had both “Belief” and “Relator” in their top five strengths. John’s name surfaced, so I approached him one Sunday morning and explained the Committee and its mission. He smiled and his comment was simple, “I’ve often thought about wanting to reach out to others in faith.”

The outcome of this encounter is that, John just attended his first Evangelization Committee meeting and has committed to serve a two year term in evangelization committee work. He will have ample opportunities to live his strengths by helping craft outreach to people who have drifted away or are otherwise inactive.

- Our staff **welcomes ideas** about how to continue to make our parish engaging for all age groups.
- We have found that learning strengths and applying them is not magic, it **requires tedious work and reflection.** The outcome of doing this work alongside our members is that, we find that, **people are validated in their giftedness.**

They choose to use *their own* strengths at strategic times and at other times to find someone with different specific strengths other than their own to help them reach a goal. Learning and living our strengths has been well worth the effort and parish engagement has increased as exhibited in the sense of belonging we witness:

- in our Baptistry before and after weekend liturgies
- in staff conversation and
- at adult faith formation events

Some Resources for Strengths and Engagement

In addition to the books and resources mentioned throughout this newsletter, the following are some of the many other helps available:

- As of March 2012, Gallup has revised and enhanced a course which prepares participants to provide feedback and consultation to individuals about their top five themes as assessed by the Clifton StrengthsFinder: *Faith Strengths Advisor*.

<http://www.gallup.com/consulting/faith/145076/Faith-Strengths-Advisor.aspx>

Strengths Advisor participants learn strategies and tactics to help others discover and use their talents to meet personal goals and serve their faith communities. Participants in the course are able, then, to minister in their communities by:

- helping parishioners discover their greatest talents
- teaching others to develop and leverage strengths for greater personal engagement and service
- aiding others' understanding of the dynamics of their greatest talents and how they affect relationships, engagement, service, and spiritual health

- www.CatholicStrengths-Engagement.org
- http://www.thegenerousheart.com/engagement_and_strengths
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2WV_JYG1es
- <http://www.gallup.com/consulting/61/Strengths-Development.aspx>
- <http://www.gallup.com/consulting/faith/101782/Books-Articles.aspx>
- <http://www.gallup.com/consulting/faith/101770/Gallup-Faith.aspx>

- <http://www.osv.com/tabid/7636/itemid/1318/StrengthsBased-Leadership.aspx>
- <http://www.seattlearchdiocese.org/Stewardship/PS/Engaged.aspx>
- http://dioceseofbaker.org/growing_an_engaged_church.htm
- *Turning Hearts to Christ* by Leisa Anslinger (Twenty-Third Publications, 2010)

Wondering Nugget

Take time to consider Donald Clifton's question (from page 1) and its further implications: "What would happen if we actually studied (*believed in, and acted on*) what is right with people?"



Golden Nuggets From You

will return next month. (*We welcome your comments, thoughts, suggestions, ideas, etc. Email them to jansch@juno.com any time.*)

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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*.

