



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#24 - December 2012

## THE CONTENT OF ADULT FAITH FORMATION

...as revealed in our Best Practices Study (Part III)

In last month's issue, we began exploring some **Wondering GEMS**, flowing from reflections on the responses to the best practices survey question: "In one word (or phrase), summarize **the content** on which your Best Practice focused."

In this issue, we continue that exploration of wondering, as we examine these three areas:

- Some perennial questions
- Some annual questions
- How do we decide?



### Some Perennial Questions

In pondering the content categories of the practices identified in our on-going international best practices survey, **two wonderings** (among many others that could come to mind:

- Are some of **the questions raised years ago** still pertinent today?
- Do they still serve as a helpful "examination of conscience" and review for ourselves as we continually strive to provide the best in adult faith formation, as called for in *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* by our U.S. Bishops?

Many of the questions – in this first wondering – are **perennial questions** which touch upon the "content" of adult faith formation and the various factors which influence that content.

The following questions, these perennial questions, are adapted from *Rethinking Adult Religious Education: A Practical Parish Education* by Jeanne Tighe and Karen Szentkeresti (Paulist Press, 1986).

- What are the faith formation priorities of our parish? Is adult faith formation among them?
- Is our parish addressing the "tasks" an adult performs rather than the "person" an adult is?
- Why is the notion that all Christians are called to ministry largely unknown? -- and ministry not just within the parish, but ministry in the world?
- Are we using children's methods in attempting to meet adult needs?
- Is our parish "telling theological-scriptural-liturgical things" to passive listeners seated in rows of metal folding chairs?
- Are we mandating parent sacramental programs?
- Are we inviting adults to eighth grade classrooms and drafty gyms?
- Is our parish program in touch with the Church's directives (the U.S. Church and the universal Church) concerning the primacy of adult faith formation?
- Are we reluctant to develop "family centered," "life-centered," "problem-centered" programs?
- Are we focused on "content development" rather than on the development of "critically-reflective adults"?
- Do we realize that adult faith formation exists only in relationship to a living liturgy, a Christian community, and a community that is always learning?
- Are we supporting "dependent" models of learning for children, youth, and adults?

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- Do we realize that a parish budget is a theological statement?
- Are parish programs limited to Father's time schedule and expertise?

Our second wondering, another way to look at the perennial questions, goes far beyond the topic of "content," yet is very related to the "content" that is planned within our programs. This wondering - again - goes to the core, exploring the goal and reason for adult faith formation (which we also explored in [GEMS #22](#)).

Tom Zanzig has helped us to understand this, challenging us to keep this uppermost in our planning and providing of adult faith formation. Tom reminds us that each adult is always on a journey of conversion and spiritual growth, one that is cyclic. The elements of this cyclic model include:

- **Hunger:** even though hungers change throughout our lifetime, adults are always searching for "the more"
- **Search:** we are always in a quest to satisfy the hunger; at times the pursuit might be life-giving, at other times it could be death-dealing
- **Awakenings:** we see, hear, understand things in new ways; these realizations and stirring are not only intellectual, but can come through all the ways of being human and spiritual
- **Response:** dependent on many factors (openness, readiness, abilities, etc.) responses will be mixed and varied

Our very nature of who we are keeps impelling us; we never have it "all done." Each response moves us deeper into our hungers and the cycle continues.

Thus, **one of our foundational perennial questions** will always be: does each and every adult faith formation opportunity, everything we do as a parish, help and support adults in this cyclic journey of conversion?

To read more about this model of conversion, see Tom's website: [http://www.tomzanzig.com/Site/Handouts\\_files/Conversion%20Notes--Simple.pdf](http://www.tomzanzig.com/Site/Handouts_files/Conversion%20Notes--Simple.pdf).



## Some Annual Questions

The Perennial Questions (above) are questions which Adult Faith Formation Committees, Education Commissions and Parish Pastoral Councils continually ask themselves, as they strive to meet the everyday life and faith needs of the adults in their parish.

These questions provide the framework, the undergirding, which supports all that the parish does and lives in adult faith formation.

At the same time, in our pastoral planning for adult faith formation, there are annual questions, annual wonderings that always need to be at the forefront (in planning processes and content).

Our perennial questions challenge us to be inclusive and integrated, to pastorally envision **three-five year strategic plans** for adult faith formation rather than just having "flashbulb" adult faith formation projects, e.g.:

- a four-week Scripture series here
- a three week series on prayer there, etc.

Vision and goals allow us to have a comprehensive, cohesive plan. Where are we going? What will be the specific programs and processes that are planned to fit together rather than scattered programs and projects that are thought of and plopped in at the last moment.

At the same time - and this might seem contradictory, but it's not. We need to be constantly aware of the annual questions.

This is a fast-changing world. Adult faith formation planners need to be able to adapt, within their long-range plans, to changing conditions while not losing focus or vision. How do the changing conditions and needs coincide with the vision?

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“Adaptive planning,” “tweaking” our integrated long-range plan is frequently a necessary step with today’s fast-paced, ever-changing world, if we’re going to be open and ready to meet the needs that arise and surprise us. Our long-range plan of five years – necessary as it is -- can’t be set in stone...conditions change.

Being awake to the “annual questions” challenges us to be aware of all that is happening around us, realizing that in the everyday, real-life happenings dwell the greatest moments of change, learning, and transformation.

You will find stability at the moment  
you discover that God is everywhere,  
that you do not need to seek Him elsewhere,  
that He is here,  
and if you do not find Him here  
it is useless to go and search for Him elsewhere....

If you cannot find Him here you will not find Him  
anywhere else.

Esther de Waal  
in *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*

What do we do in these occurrences (and many other everyday events) to engage all parishioners in learning, in conversation, in prayer, in formation:

- **Anniversaries and commemorations** within the parish, our church, our country and/or the world?
  - e.g.: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II; the International Day of Peace (September 21<sup>st</sup>)
  - e.g.: is a parish anniversary an opportunity to explore: how have we, as a parish evolved? Who are we? Where do we choose to go?

- **The death or transfer of a pastor**
- **Tragedies within the community:** for instance, a devastating fire; a suicide; sudden deaths, especially of young children
- **Books and movies:** What is currently capturing the imagination and interest of today’s adults, both religious and popular?
  - There are numerous book clubs available, with guides for the most popular books of the day. Just a few:
    - [Amazon Book Club](#)
    - [Various book clubs](#)
    - [Book Browse](#)
    - [US Catholic Book Club](#)
  - Movie and TV reviews and helps are also numerous:
    - [Sr. Rose at the Movies](#)
    - [Catholic News Service Movie Reviews](#)
    - [Movie Reviews at St. Anthony Messenger](#)
    - [Film reviews at Spirituality and Practice](#)
    - [Hollywood Jesus](#)
    - [Spiritual Popcorn](#)
    - [Films at Spirituality and Practice](#)
- **Merging, clustering and closing of parishes**
- **National and International events:** events of suffering, events of celebration

As we peruse these “annual questions and events,” it is easy to realize that many of them are also much broader than the initial happening:

- A change of pastor, a merging of two parishes, etc. raises the issue of change and transition – which is the only constant in all of life.
- The death of a young person, a local – or international – event of crisis, brings up immediate feelings and questions, but also increases the awareness of core issues: what is the meaning of suffering? Where is God in all this?

As in all adult faith formation, the **ways and methods** that we use to address these everyday events, these “annual questions,” are multiple: materials for individual study and reflection, workshops, retreats, online learning, etc.

Live “life with elegance, beauty and a generosity of spirit.  
One caveat: Living gracefully during Sunday service or meditation or prayer doesn’t count.  
The spiritual path is not walked in the great halls of organized religion.  
At best, most of us spend an hour or so a week in formal worship or prayer.  
And let’s face it:  
It’s not hard to be pious for an hour.  
The bulk of our spiritual life is trekked through the grit and reality of everyday life.”

Susan Sparks  
in *Laugh Your Way to Grace:  
Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor*



## How do we decide?

How do we decide which “topics” to offer, what content needs our attention?

There are many ways; we’ll explore them in further issues in this series on the content of adult faith formation as well as in other topics in forthcoming **GEMS**.

### Simply, for now:

- Discern the needs of your people; **listen, listen, listen** to their needs, concerns and interests. Use many and varied ways of needs assessment (we’ll look at some in the future).

- Plan with Scripture and Church documents in one hand and the newspaper (or internet, media, etc.) in the other. **Connect faith and everyday life.**
- Listed below is an interesting entry from Seth Godin’s blog (a writer, speaker and agent of change) from November 24, 2010 - [http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2010/11/where-do-ideas-come-from.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2010/11/where-do-ideas-come-from.html).

This post, “Where Do Ideas Come From?” was not written with adult faith formation in mind. Yet, since we can learn from many sources, read it with our ministry in mind.

What does it say to you about **getting and deciding on ideas** for adult faith formation programming – within your over-all pastoral plan for adult formation?

1. *Ideas don’t come from watching television.*
2. *Ideas sometimes come from listening to a lecture.*
3. *Ideas often come while reading a book.*
4. *Good ideas come from bad ideas, but only if there are enough of them.*
5. *Ideas hate conference rooms, particularly conference rooms where there is a history of criticism, personal attacks or boredom.*
6. *Ideas occur when dissimilar universes collide.*
7. *Ideas often strive to meet expectations. If people expect them to appear, they do.*
8. *Ideas fear experts, but they adore beginner’s mind. A little awareness is a good thing.*
9. *Ideas come in spurts, until you get frightened. Willie Nelson wrote three of his biggest hits in one week.*
10. *Ideas come from trouble.*
11. *Ideas come from our ego, and they do their best when they’re generous and selfless.*
12. *Ideas come from nature.*

13. *Sometimes ideas come from fear (usually in movies) but often they come from confidence.*
14. *Useful ideas come from being awake, alert enough to actually notice.*
15. *Though sometimes ideas sneak in when we're asleep and too numb to be afraid.*
16. *Ideas come out of the corner of the eye, or in the shower, when we're not trying.*
17. *Mediocre ideas enjoy copying what happens to be working right this minute.*
18. *Bigger ideas leapfrog the mediocre ones.*
19. *Ideas don't need a passport, and often cross borders (of all kinds) with impunity.*
20. *An idea must come from somewhere, because if it merely stays where it is and doesn't join us here, it's hidden. And hidden ideas don't ship, have no influence, no intersection with the market. They die, alone.*

(Seth Godin)

## The January 2013 issue

Our exploration of “content in adult faith formation” is not completed; we will continue in the February 2013 issue.

In January 2013, we will pause to look at a best practice for Lent. Watch for this great idea which you might want to adapt.



## Golden Nuggets From You

“This is one of your best GEMS! ([GEMS #19](#)) At my parish the education commission has taken on the challenge of finding ways to help people discern their gifts. We all agree that if people are doing the things they like to do and also what they do best they will be in for the long haul in their selected ministries. We will be discussing your article at our meeting next week!

Also...our cluster adult faith formation committee read and discussed your last [GEMS #18 on hospitality](#). We are currently working on a hospitality check list!

You certainly are a good motivator!!!”

- Diane Seidel, Director of Religious Education,  
St. Boniface Parish, Bay City, Michigan

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



Janet Schaeffler, OP  
[www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com)  
[jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org](mailto:jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org)

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

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://ecatechist.com>. Click on e-books for: *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*.
- [www.pastoralplanning.com](http://www.pastoralplanning.com). Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.