



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#26 - February 2013

THE CONTENT OF ADULT FAITH FORMATION

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

Our [November](#) and [December](#) issues shared some **Wondering GEMS** which flow from looking at the array of topics that were covered in the best practices that were submitted/are continually being submitted in our best practices survey of adult faith formation.

What wonderings, thoughts, ideas and questions do the array of topics/themes concerning the content of adult faith formation ([GEMS #23](#)) spark in you?

In this issue, we turn to some **views and suggestions from practitioners and leaders** in adult faith formation. Look for this



GEM icon which will help you spot their thoughts and experiences.

As was mentioned in [GEMS #21](#), our major Church documents give valuable **guidance and direction regarding the content** for today's efforts in adult faith formation:

- *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community*, #34-53
- *National Directory for Catechesis*, #48.A.
- *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, #88-96

We now want to **explore three themes, perhaps three challenges, regarding the content** of adult faith formation:

- The possible expanse of content for adult formation
- Content related to people's lives and experiences
- The prophetic role of adult faith formation leaders/parishes in providing for adult faith formation

This issue will look at the first theme; the second and third ones will be explored in next month's newsletter.

THE POSSIBLE EXPANSE OF "WHAT CONTENT IS APPROPRIATE?"

Years ago one of our wisdom figures, Gabriel Moran (*Education Toward Adulthood: Religion and Lifelong Learning*, Paulist Press, 1979) reminded us of the reality: **"Since all life is sacred, all learning is religious."**

Evelyn and James Whitehead also reaffirm that adult faith formation includes all areas which enable our growth as disciples, to be disciples:



"Through Baptism all Christians are called to give service in the name of the Lord. All Christians are ministers. All the baptized are challenged to strengthen the body, to build the kingdom and to live in response to the word. Growth into Christian adulthood is crucial to this ministry. Adult catechesis, therefore, explores all areas that nurture and affect this growth." (Evelyn E. Whitehead and James D. Whitehead in *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adult Life*, Image Books, 1982.)

The content of adult catechesis
must be as comprehensive and exhaustive
as possible.

- *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community*, #42

Thus, many leaders in the field of adult faith formation have helped us to look at **the expanse of content for adult faith formation** today.

Several have suggested that the content falls into three categories, believing that adult faith formation is about the whole person:

- Topics/experiences that are **specifically religious or spiritual** and relate to the message and teachings of the Church
- Topics that respond to **social, economic and/or health education** needs of parishioners

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- Topics/experiences that **build community**

Some people might say that, since our goal is the religious development of today's adults, the content should only include *explicitly* religious content and topics.

Wondering GEM: Does that assume that human development can be compartmentalized, that various aspects of life can be isolated from one another?

Is this an example of an artificial separation of reality into the sacred and the secular? Who decides? How do we decide?



“Ideally, religion is coextensive with life. The **so-called secular experiences of adults are pregnant with the possibility of religious meaning...**”

When adult religious education concentrates solely on topics perceived as sacred or holy, the implication is that a host of educational needs and interests arising out of daily life are trivial, a sort of second-class reality. What shapes a person's religious response, however, is the totality of his experience and not simply that part of life experience perceived as sacred. Likewise, a person's religious response influences the manner in which he experiences all of life and not just a segment of life designated as sacred.” (Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton in *The Religious Education of Adults*, Smyth & Helwys, 2002.)

The Christian knows that every human event
– indeed all reality –
is marked by the creative activity of God
which communicates goodness
to all beings...

- *General Directory for Catechesis*, #16

Wondering GEMS:

- When we think of life as divided into sacred and secular, are we conveying the idea (sometimes loudly) that religion/faith is only

something we do in church on Sundays?

- Are we promoting a message that says our faith, our following of Jesus, has little to do with our Monday through Saturday everyday life?



We're challenged to think in more inclusive ways: “Since *all* experience has the potential for learning, the division between sacred and secular fades away. In viewing life's experiences as God-given, and our capacity to take note and organize those experiences into meaningful frameworks as a gift of grace, our journey of lifelong learning is at every moment a sacred one. Whether the experience and struggle to make meaning of it are painful or joyful, the whole process is sacred. Whether the learning event takes place within a religious context or outside of one, the moment is God-given. **Lifelong learning and the faith journey are one and the same.**” (Margaret Fisher Brillinger in *Adult Religious Education: A Journey of Faith Development*, Marie A. Gillen and Maurice C. Taylor, eds., Paulist Press, 1995.)

Many theorists and “people in the field” concur that **all learning, all life, is sacred and is the content for adult faith formation:**



“Religious learning can occur in educational activities that do not revolve around the study of explicitly religious themes. Adult religious education ... may be religious by virtue of the:

- explicit or manifest content of the educational activity
- cultural/psychosocial context in which the activity occurs
- intentionality of the learner
- intentionality of the teacher ...

Religion, ideally, permeates life. From this it may be inferred that a program of adult religious education may justifiably embrace topics that are labeled as secular.” (Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton in *The Religious Education of Adults*, Smyth & Helwys, 2002.)



“The function of religious bodies is to determine what areas of adult development need special treatment from a religious point of

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view.” (John L. Elias in *The Foundations and Practices of Adult Religious Education*. Krieger Publishing, 1982.)



“Solid religious education does not attempt to pour God into the experiences of adult life, but rather to assist the Christian adult in recognizing the holy that has always been active there.” (Jeanne Tighe and Karen Szentkeresti in *Rethinking Adult Religious Education: A Practical Parish Guide*. Paulist Press, 1986.)

These authors and practitioners are reminding us that adult faith formation, our very life, is about being holy and “whole-ly.”

Wondering GEM: For instance, if a parish offers a course in English as a second language for immigrants, with the intent being to help them live fully functioning, productive and meaningful lives, is that not religious, responding to the mandate of the dignity of each human person?

When a parish explores topics, such as those raised by the [National Issues Forum](#), are not the conversations intensive and reflective adult faith formation, by virtue of the cultural/psychosocial context and the intentionality of the learners and the facilitators?

A GEMS Suggestion: One current attempt to connect the resources and wisdom of our culture with faith life is [RE-TED](#) (Religious Education using TED.com videos). This is a faith formation discussion ministry using videos from the huge pool of wisdom found on [TED.com](#).

(TED is a nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading. It started out (in 1984) as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: *Technology, Entertainment, Design*. Since then its scope has become ever broader. Along with two annual conferences each spring, and the TEDGlobal conference in Edinburgh, UK each summer, TED includes the award-winning TEDTalks video site, the Open Translation Project and TED Conversations, the inspiring TED Fellows and TEDx programs, and the annual TED Prize. <http://www.ted.com/pages/about>)

While TED videos are not explicitly “religious,” the wisdom provided by the experts who are showcased on [Ted.com](#) comes ultimately from God through the speakers’ talents, expertise, insights learned from personal

experience, and in-depth study. [RE-TED](#) uses specially selected TED videos to provide food for Christian thought and spiritual growth, especially providing many discussion/faith-sharing questions to accompany the video.

All significant learning becomes part
of the energy of the Creator;
all experience has been God-given
and has the potential for learning.

- Margaret Fisher Brillinger

Wondering GEM: What about the power of community, the power of sharing life with one another?



“Religious meaning can be made available to adults not only through the study of religious themes, but also in the ‘lived experience’ of being with other adults in a community of learners. Religious meaning can be made available to people whose **everyday needs and interests are addressed in the context of the parish or local church.**”

The fruit of such ‘lived experience’ is not to be classified as some secondarily important meaning. The religious meaning made available to adults *en passant* in, say, a course on backyard gardening may be more profound and powerful than any meaning derived from the discursive study of an expressly religious theme.

An individual adult may experience the meaning of community and the meaning of agape in a course on financial planning, and not at all experience these meanings in a discursive study of the gospels.” (Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton in *The Religious Education of Adults*, Smyth & Helwys, 2002.)



“Adults do not grow in faith primarily by learning concepts, but by sharing the life of the Christian community, of which adults are members who both give and receive from the community.” (*Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community*, #28)

Another Wondering GEM: If adult faith formation programs/processes respond to the needs of the whole person, their everyday life needs and people experience hospitality and a helpful, practical learning experience for their lives, will they then **choose to continue learning**, perhaps in other areas which continue to deepen the journey of faith and their call to discipleship?



“An adult may attend a parish program on first aid in the home, a program on backyard gardening, and a program on family communications before the meta-language of the context urges that person to attend a peace and justice seminar.” (Leon McKenzie in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, Nancy T. Foltz, ed., Religious Education Press, 1986)

In this issue we explored the **possible expanse** of adult faith formation content. Next month we will look at two inter-related themes:

- Content related to people’s **lives and experiences**
- The **prophetic role** of adult faith formation leaders/parishes in providing for adult faith formation



Golden Nuggets from You

“Your good work continues to provide awareness, understanding of skill sets, and hope in providing ongoing relevant faith formation to so many.

What an informative issue ([GEMS #19](#)) you have provided for us today. I love the way you shed light upon valuing, identifying and living strengths. Your quotes, examples, accessible writing style and great resources hopefully will encourage others to take the plunge with some form of gift related ministry/formation.

I am humbly grateful to have collaborated with you in sharing the common mission of passing on the faith in this aspect of giftedness. Again

humbly, on behalf of other religious educators, I say "thanks for broadening our perspectives!"

- *Jean Fitzgerald, Pastoral Associate,
St. Anselm Church, Chesterland, Ohio*



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

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

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