



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#27 - March 2013

## THE CONTENT OF ADULT FAITH FORMATION

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

In last month's newsletter, [GEMS #26](#), we began to **explore three themes regarding the content** of adult faith formation. We looked at the first theme: the possible expanse of content for adult formation.

With that in our minds, we now turn to two other themes which also expand our thinking and our possibilities for adult faith formation:

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

## CONTENT RELATED TO PEOPLE'S LIVES AND EXPERIENCES

In 2007, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted an [extensive survey](#) on Religious Beliefs and Practices. Of those who left Catholicism for another church, 71% said that they left the church because their **spiritual needs were not being met**.

Thus, our first theme for this issue revolving around content, flowing from and intricately related to the first theme we explored last month, challenges us, as this Pew Forum study does.

The following imperative from *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*, #82 focuses us as we plan for adult faith formation:



*"Effective adult faith formation 'must begin by accepting adults where they are' in their faith, their life situations, their experiences, and their preferred learning styles.*

***Our programs and ministries must be in touch with people's real circumstances and concerns."***

When people learn to read their own lived experience in the light of faith, they are impelled to accept the invitation of the Holy Spirit to:  
conversion,  
commitment,  
hope,  
gradual discovery of God's plan for them.

- *On Good Soil*, #74  
(*Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*), quoting the  
*General Directory for Catechesis*, #152

In 2006, NCCL (National Conference for Catechetical Leadership) conducted a best practices study in adult faith formation. In this study, the **number one factor** responsible for success in adult faith formation efforts was paying **attention to what is going on in the lives of adults**.



"Paying attention to what is going on in the hearts and minds of adults, what is going on in their lives, is crucial and cannot be overstated. This happens in numerous ways both formally and informally. It is not about what we think they need but rather what they say they need." (David Riley and Jack McBride in *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation: A National Study*. Washington, DC: NCCL, 2006. #28)



"...effective content blends biblical knowledge and insight with significant engagement in **the major life issues** each age group faces. To a certain extent, these life issues have a value component in which one is called upon to make decisions. For adults, they include global, political, and social issues, and issues related to cultural diversity." (Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin in *Effective Christian Education: A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life*. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990. #54)

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This same study found that effective adult Christian education “emphasizes life experiences as occasion for spiritual insight” and “the natural unfolding of faith and recognizes each person’s faith journey as unique.” (Benson and Elkin, #55)



We have all experienced the necessity of beginning with people’s needs and concerns. “Contrary to what we might hope, the lives of most Catholics are not deeply influenced by religious social structures that touch their lives. Rather, they are **impacted by economic, work-related, and family-focused issues.**” (Matthew Hayes in “The Challenge to Be Relevant and Effective: A Response to The Social and Cultural Content of Adult Religious Education” in *Agenda for the 90’s: Forging the Future of Adult Religious Education* (USCC, 1989), pages 65-70.)



“Within its evangelizing mission, the Church seeks to assist people to integrate their faith in all aspects of their lives and to reach a level of spiritual development that will serve them well no matter what situation or question they may encounter. ...

...this need for ongoing catechesis becomes clear as a person goes through a transition in life, such as entering into marriage or becoming a parent. At other times, a crisis may become a catalyst for re-examining one’s life, such as when a loved one dies suddenly or one is diagnosed with a terminal illness.” (*On Good Soil*, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, #42)



When we do it well, what a difference it makes – and we have the potential to do it well! “...the church may be one of the few places where adults can feel safe enough to ask aloud the moral and ethical questions that arise out of their daily lives at home, at work, at play, and in the community.

- What do I do when an employer asks me to compromise my integrity?
- How can I treat my employees justly?

- What is my responsibility as a Christian in my neighborhood, community, nation and world?”

(Eugene Roehlkepartain in *The Teaching Church*.  
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.)

## Wondering GEM:

How are our parishes, our vicariates and regions, our (arch)dioceses safe places?

The life experience of human beings often causes them to seek “more”: the good, the holy, the meaningful, the intelligible. Human “interests, questions, hopes, anxieties, reflections and judgments” in the lives of people “converge to form a certain desire to transform (our) existence.” and has the potential for learning.

- *On Good Soil*, #74 (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops), quoting the *General Directory for Catechesis*, #152

This reality – responding to people’s needs – reiterates some core adult faith formation principles:

- The necessity of **continual needs assessment**
- The importance of having “**the recipients**” of **adult faith formation involved** in the discerning and planning process



“A theory of needs may explain why a program initiated by learners is more successful than a program initiated by the institution. Organizations will more closely meet the needs of their members when opportunities are provided for participation in the direction and planning of activities.

In spite of the many things which could be taught and the eagerness of the adult religious educator to impart knowledge to learners, educational events will be dull and uninspiring **when answers are given to questions which have not been asked or for which there is no expressed need.**

Successful programs will be about **the real concerns and issues in the present, concrete, personal and social lives of participants.**” (R.E.Y. Wickett in *Models of Adult Religious Education Practice*, Religious Education Press, 1991.)



Richard Johnson (<http://www.senioradultministry.com/>) has often said in his workshops that we have three master teachers in life: relationships, sickness and aging.

The most teachable moments in a person’s life may be when he or she is negotiating these critical passages, living with/through these everyday life events. It is precisely then that people need assistance, need support. According to Abraham Maslow, the presence or absence of timely assistance at these times may determine their further development.

**Wondering GEM:** As we look at the goals and programs for adult faith formation offered in our parishes

- Do they touch on these areas of people’s lives?
- Do our programs connect these inevitable everyday experiences and realities of life with faith?



“Adults expect relevance and timeliness for their learning. There is a moment of readiness when their journey takes them to a point of openness and receptivity for the learning event. They want the learning to be pertinent to their life journey, with immediately useful application.” (Margaret Fisher Brillinger in *Adult Religious Education: A Journey of Faith Development*, Marie A. Gillen and Maurice C. Taylor, eds., Paulist Press, 1995.)



People’s feelings and needs are “present tense...directly related to the learner’s current life experience, tasks, relationships and problems and indirectly related to his past experiences. These present tense

feelings and needs must be respected and recognized.” (Donald H. Brundage and Dorothy MacKeracher in *Adult Learning Principles and their Application to Program Planning*. OISE, 1980.)

Another core consideration to keep in mind (and this should lighten the hearts and workloads of adult faith formation coordinators), when we look at the many needs of people in our parishes: **we don’t have to provide everything.**



“A task which should be included in the DARE’s (Director of Adult Religious Education) job description refers to the broader community. The adult specialist should not only develop working lists of community resources for adults but help adults relate to these resources. Thus this specialist will be in touch with counseling, welfare, medical and educational agencies, and a variety of other agencies servicing adults and their families.” (R. Michael Harton in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, Nancy T. Foltz, ed., Religious Education Press, 1986)



In the words of John Roberto, our role is shifting to become a **curator in faith formation.** “A content curator is someone who continually finds, groups, organizes and shares the best and most relevant content on a specific subject to match the needs of a particular audience.” (John Roberto in “Becoming a Faith Formation Curator,” in *Lifelong Faith*, Spring 2011. <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/lifelong-faith-journal.html>)



## THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF ADULT FAITH FORMATION LEADERS/PARISHES IN PROVIDING FOR ADULT FAITH FORMATION

We move now to our third theme – the last, but perhaps the most important. We just reflected on the necessity of responding to the needs and interests of our people. Is there a time and place for providing **opportunities which parishioners haven’t requested?**

Is it the role of leadership to raise awareness and consciousness, to invite people to go a little deeper, a little broader?

This lengthy quote from Diana Butler Bass provides much reflection for us as leaders in adult faith formation:



“Part of your job is to navigate between two tensions:

1. Do you **accommodate** or **challenge the congregation’s views** on God, the Bible, holiness, ethics, and spirituality? Is your job to **comfort** or **discomfort** them?
2. Do you follow what **they** think they need or what **you and the clergy** think is needed?

These are not either-or choices, but represent the poles around which you must make some decisions.

At the parish where I served, for example, I typically **accommodated** the congregation when it came to **style** (as a Washington, DC area congregation, my parish had great respect for well-educated experts; I invited many highly qualified guest professors to lead classes), but I always **challenged** them in terms of theological **content** or Christian **practice**. I tried to both comfort and disturb the congregation at the same time.

Although I listened for what the congregation wanted theologically, I made the decision to usually follow clergy and leadership preference when choosing content. I chose bible study materials or theological works that supported the ministry of the Word as presented in the pulpit.

I always picked materials that pushed people to **new understandings** of the Bible and theology – or toward embracing **new practices** of faith. But it all came wrapped in a navy blue Washington suit.

...As we discussed the role of adult formation, my friend, Scott, said, ‘You know, Diana, in privileged churches like ours, our job is NOT to provide spiritual enrichment, to create more privilege. Rather, our job is to **challenge and provoke** so that the Holy Spirit may transform us.’”

Scott stated it so clearly: enrichment or transformation? Some parishes, particularly those in minority, disadvantaged, or struggling communities, need enrichment. Mine, however, was already rich. It needed God’s transforming power. So, I opted to discomfort them with content that the

leadership thought necessary for change. Adult Formation was lively and controversial – and always risky – but it also forwarded the overall mission and vision of the parish. Certainly it is possible – and sometimes desirable – to make less unsettling choices.” (Diana Butler Bass, “Process, Not Program: Adult Faith Formation for Vital Churches.”

<http://www.congregationalresources.org/sites/congregationalresources.org/files/ProcessNotProgram.pdf>)

Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

- Finley Peter Dunne

## Wondering GEMS:

- Does your parish accommodate or challenge, enrich or transform? Both?
- Do your parishioners need comfort or discomfort in order to deepen their commitment to God and one another?
- What topics/themes are the people not asking for, but are needed to live as disciples in today’s world?



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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*.