

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Girlfriends in God

One of the prime ways to meet the needs of adults is to offer programs and processes for "communities of like interest" rather than opportunities planned generically, for everyone. One specific approach which many employ today is to respond to the unique needs of women and men, in the areas of spirituality, growth in faith, and their everyday life needs.

The diocese of Green Bay (among many other offerings) created a distinctive opportunity for women which has continued to grow and develop.

Where did the idea originate?

The idea for *Girlfriends in God* grew out of a women's ministry program in the Diocese of Green Bay. The desire was for a way to gather women from various parishes together to share their faith.

It was inspired by the book, *Defiant Daughters: Christian Women of Conscience* by Marcy Heidisch (Liguori Publications, 2010), which tells the stories of Christian women. The diocese wanted to create a place where women could tell and celebrate their own local stories of faith.

What were the purpose/goals?

The purpose of *Girlfriends in God* was to gather women of all ages from across the diocese of Green Bay:

- to pamper them physically and spiritually
- encouraging them to share their own faith journeys and
- listen to the experience and wisdom gained from other women's experiences of faith.

This day of pampering, good food and laughter gave busy women the opportunity to find their common ground as women of God. The day of reflection was inspiring and encouraging; the women left motivated and reenergized to continue deepening their faith journey with Christ and with their local parish community.

Who organized this endeavor?

A planning team of four women and diocesan support were the organizing committee, led by Julianne Stanz, Director of New Evangelization for the diocese of Green Bay.

How was the gathering advertised?

Girlfriends in God was primarily advertised through fancy personal invitations in mailboxes and parishes, hand-made cards, the diocesan newspaper, social media pages and word of mouth.



Was there a specific "audience" for Girlfriends in God?

In the initial planning, *Girlfriends in God* was planned for all women in the diocese of Green Bay, no matter their age, place in life or where they are in their faith journey. *Girlfriends in God* deliberately reached out to the women of the diocese who might not regularly participate in liturgy or parish programs. *All women were welcome*.

What do you think motivated people to participate?

The women responded and participated for many reasons: the time frame, liturgy, the demographic of women from all walks of life, lunch, the goodies bags, time to chat with girlfriends, the non-intimidating language of the advertising and a fresh approach to Catholic spirituality.

What was the format/the process?

The planning committee created a beautiful environment, much like a wedding, with fancy table settings, center pieces and event favors in goodies bags. There was great food, chocolate and everything women need to feel physically pampered, creating a calming atmosphere for the busy women to feel relaxed and open their hearts to spiritual pampering and support.

The day of reflection then unfolded:

- the celebration of liturgy
- opening and prayer
- first talk
- reflective activity
- lunch
- second talk
- hands on activity
- reflection and evaluation
- closing prayer

What was the specific content of the presentations?

Each of the following was presented by a different woman, the members of the planning committee.

Opening: Graced Gems: From Diamonds to Rocks

Love, life and laughter! A talk—combining the stories of women from Julianne's life in Ireland and women whom Julianne has encountered in her ministry in the United States—encouraged *Girlfriends in God* attendees to see themselves as standing on the shoulders of giants: those women and saints who have gone before us. As women we are often a rock of faith to so many; this opening helped the women to see themselves as that diamond in the rock of faith and hope.

First Talk: Refine and Reflect: Becoming a Polished Jewel

With God all things are possible! This presentation used personal anecdotes and Church teaching to share how women can take their relationships, their darkest places, and all that's difficult and challenging them in the world, making these realities beautiful by handing the suffering and challenge in life to God. This talk provided participants with heartened

inspiration to identify the face of Christ in every face and every situation they encounter.

Second Talk: Beyond the Sparkle

Just like the setting of a gem impacts its sparkle, beauty, and light, this talk revolved around the setting of a woman's life, the environment and the people that help a woman let God's light fully shine. This talk invited participants to examine their own lives and relationships, identifying the events and people who make them who they are: a woman who sparkles with the light of Christ.

Shining Forth

This short time of reflection and prayer gave participants the opportunity for time to reflect on how they would use this day of reflection and pampering to re-energize their faith lives. The closing included music, reflection, evaluation and prayer.



What did the participants say about their experience?

- I've never been to a day of reflection presented in this way; it was a welcome surprise.
- I need to have time like this: more time to reflect and talk with other women of faith.
- I cannot thank you all enough for opening my eyes, heart, and spirit to Christ in such a strong way.

- To see all the women in church for liturgy and the beautiful singing was uplifting, a great start to the day.
- All of the speakers were awesome; it's hard to pick out one! Holly really touched me with her story about her husband and Julianne with her story about her grandma.
- All the speakers were very inspiring! I appreciated the personal stories. Thanks for sharing.
- Very inspiring women. This makes everyone feel comfortable, "normal."
- Presenters showed true inner beauty through the Word of God.
- This day made me look within myself and at my self-worth.
- Thank you for the breakfast treats, lunch, gifts, crafts and the wonderful day with other Godly women. Loved every bit of the day! Looking forward to the next one!!
- This was the best thing I have been to in a long time. Thank you so much. It came at a great time.
- I have been struggling to find a group of women in a community to accept women where they are at. Thank you for making me feel accepted! We need more conferences such as these because there are so many of us that are wounded. It was a great opportunity!
- There are no negatives. All presenters were very relevant to the inner being of women. Presentations intertwined with personal stories were really beautiful

Did the committee have some thoughts about what made this offering successful/meaningful?

The committee reflected and responded to this question:

• "The opportunity for women of all ages and in all stages of faith to gather and be inspired by the everyday faith of others was the key to our success.

- It was a joyful event with just enough theology to encourage growth and reflection.
- The event met women where they were and affirmed their various vocations in life."

Women's Day of Reflection

"Girlfriends in God"

"Let the beauty of the Lord be upon us".

Psalm 90:17

Feeling less than your beautiful self?
Stressed? Frazzled?
If your calendar is full but your **soul** is on empty
Then this fun, fast and fresh day is for you.

Behold your beauty and pamper your spirit to be *inspired as a Girlfriend in God*! Bring your girlfriends and refresh your relationship with God, self and others—because you're worth it!



Was the committee surprised by anything?

"We were surprised by the amount of laughter and tears and the many women who expressed how much they needed and enjoyed the event. Also surprising was the generosity of our community to aid us in putting on the event and the graciousness and thankfulness of the women in our diocese."

Has the committee witnessed growth and ramifications flowing from *Girlfriends in God*?

The committee shared their experiences in these thoughts:

"This is a one-of-a-kind event because its focus is to meet women where they are, and that works.

- Last year's day of reflection had a waiting list, and this year women began registering before advertising was released.
- Women of our church are craving a place where they can be honest about where they are and what they need. An event of this kind provides them with that safe place.
- Both the reaction from the women regarding this need, as well as
 feedback from the evaluations, led to an expansion in programs
 in Adult Faith Formation and New Evangelization in the diocese.
 Schools of Prayer, including book clubs, were formed in areas
 throughout the diocese."

Following this first *Girlfriends in God* day, were there continuing plans? Any changes to the original plans?

The second (now annual) event (with interest from women and parishes outside the diocese) was planned around the theme: *Beauty*, which was inspired by "Let the Beauty of Our Lord God Be upon Us" (Psalm 90:17).

The schedule for the day included:

- Liturgy with Bishop Robert Morneau
- Breakfast and welcome
- First Reflection: Beauty Through the Ages
- Lunch with a reflection
- Third Reflection: Beauty in the Breaking
- Closing Prayer and Reflection

The location of *Girlfriends in God* has been changed to accommodate larger numbers. The desire and plan of the committee is to welcome every woman who wants to participate.

Flowing from the requests of the participants, the time frame was expanded to allow for more reflection, prayer and sharing.

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A few other programs

- To read about a similar endeavor for women which could be adapted in several ways by parishes and (arch)dioceses: <u>Gussy Up</u> <u>Your Spirit</u>
- Group Publishing offers several ideas for
 - o retreats for women
 - o <u>small group experiences</u>

Some resources: The following are not full programs, but some resources that might be used with women's groups and events for women:

• <u>Called to Holiness: Spirituality for Catholic Women</u>: This book series offers insight and encouragement for making sense of God and how faith fits into the world—all from a woman's perspective.

Covering such diverse topics as reflection on images of God, dealing with change and loss, nurturing families or combating social injustice, the eight *Called to Holiness* books help women find God in the midst of everyday life while empowering each on their individual faith journey.

Each volume in the series is penned by a Catholic woman theologian or expert and provides reading guides with discussion questions, rituals and applications to daily life as well as suggestions for further exploration of the topic.

- The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully by Joan Chittister (Bluebridge, 2010)
- The Cup of Our Life: A Guide to Spiritual Growth by Joyce Rupp (Ave Maria Press, 2012)
- Days of Deepening Friendship by Vinita Hampton Wright (Loyola Press, 2009)
- *Hidden Women of the Gospels* by Kathy Coffey (Orbis Books, 2003)

- Walking with Wisdom's Daughters: Twelve Celebrations and Stories of Women of Passion and Faith by Gloria Ulterino (Ave Maria Press, 2006)
- *The Jesus Women* by Marci Alborghetti (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006)
- *Women of Mercy* by Kathy Coffey (Orbis Books, 2005)
- Women in Church History: 21 Stories for 21 Centuries (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007)
- Women in the New Testament by Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan (Liturgical Press, 2001)
- 12 Strong Women of God: Biblical Models for Today by Marci Alborghetti (Twenty-Third Publications, 2004)
- *Twelve Apostolic Women* by Joanne Turpin (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004)
- Reading Between the Lines: The Hidden Wisdom of Women in the Gospels by Martha Driscoll, OCSO (Liguori Press, 2006)
- No Longer Silent: The Empowerment of Women in the Gospels by Susan Dehn Matthews (ACTA Publications, 2011)

A GEMS Suggestion: How might you offer something online similar to "Girlfriends in God?"

- Peruse <u>Days of Deepening Friendship Online Spiritual Journey</u> which provides an opportunity for spiritual growth through reflections, exercises and sharing.
- See <u>GEMS #11</u> for ideas on how to create an online group learning opportunity.



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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.
- <u>www.pastoralplanning.com</u>. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.