



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#44 - August 2014

A Best Practice: A Themed Approach

Parishes employ various models and approaches to help adults on the journey of faith to:

- connect faith and everyday life
- approach faith growth in an integrated way
- foster community within learning experiences
- integrate adult faith formation with all other aspects of parish life and parish catechesis

This issue explores one of those methods: **a themed approach to adult faith formation.**

In *Forming a Community of Faith: A Guide to Success in Adult Faith Formation Today* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2014), Jane Regan summarizes the approach: “Pick a theme: One model that has proved effective is for the pastoral team to decide on a theme for the year around which all adult formation experiences will revolve. If a parish selects sacraments, for example, all aspects of parish programming would have that as a theme.

- A study group might read a book on the sacraments.
- The book club might use the lens of sacramentality of the world as the basis for choosing their books for the year.
- A retreat might be held for those caring for the elderly around the meaning of the sacrament of anointing.

With a particular theme in mind, it is easier to create a sense of cohesion to the adult offerings, so that the whole parish is talking about and thinking about the same general topic.”

We will “visit” here three parishes (in California, Illinois and Kansas) which have used/are using this approach, exploring their experiences with it.

In reality, we have observed, catechized and celebrated with themes many times. For instance, in preparation for the celebration of the [Jubilee Year \(2000\)](#) – the universal church was invited to – and, in various ways, creatively responded to – a [thematic structure](#) for three years which was outlined in St.

John Paul II’s apostolic letter, *Tertio Millennio Adventiente*.

Long-range Planning

A themed approach, of course, necessitates long-range plans, perhaps an over-all plan for three to four (or five or six) years, then a detailed plan for each year.

Pam Coster mentions in her article, “Drink for the Thirsty: Planning for Adult Faith Formation, in [the Fall 2009 issue of Lifelong Faith Journal](#): “An exhausted adult formation team helps no one. Ambitious plans are wonderful. Certainly we are ambitious for the Gospel! But steady, sure development is better than a long list of poorly done programs with no follow-up. Churches should know what is possible for their staff and team and plan accordingly. This is why an annual plan is so important.

- It takes the stress out of seasonal planning
- provides sufficient lead time for preparation and marketing, and
- gives everyone the opportunity for input in a calm and constructive way.

Once the plan is agreed upon, the team can execute it with confidence and support.”

A goal without an action plan
is a day dream.

- Nathaniel Branden

This approach, of course, is the opposite of what some parishes do: a “flashbulb” approach to adult faith formation:

- someone suggests a four-week Scripture study which gets plopped into the calendar
- a week later someone thinks of a three-week series on prayer which all of a sudden then appears on the parish calendar

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Long-range planning, a comprehensive, integrated plan with vision and goals, produces a very different approach. Specific programs and processes that are planned to fit together is the cohesive method, rather than scattered programs and projects that are thought of, and therefore, flash on people's screen (awareness) at the last minute.

At the same time – and this might seem contradictory - but it's not. We live in a rapidly-changing world. Therefore, we also need to be able to adapt, within our long-range plans, to changing conditions while not losing our focus or our vision.

“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 – is always also open to addressing new needs, new circumstances, etc.

Some parishes have said:

- “Our most successful programs were in response to what was happening in ‘popular, everyday’ culture – the needs of the people.”
- “What people needed were responses/help to what was happening in their lives, our nation's life, our Church's life which we didn't know was going to happen when we set our long range goals.”

These parishes were talking about events and happenings such as: 9/11; the sexual abuse crisis; popular books and movies which touch upon Scripture and religious issues; the unemployment crisis, Sandy Hook, etc.



ONE EXAMPLE: Ss. FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY PARISH, WINNETKA, IL

When Pam Coster was Director of Adult Faith Formation at Ss. Faith, Hope and Charity Parish, Winnetka, IL, a parish-wide catechetical theme was used. That theme was woven into the various offerings for all ages throughout the year.

For example, when the theme was discipleship, the year began with a focus on the saints in the fall.

- The family session for school and the faith formation program families was focused on the saints so that parents and youngsters came together for a morning of activities on that theme.
- In the spring the parish focus was on Mary, with the family session also exploring the life of Mary and her role with us.

Praying with the theme

To carry out the theme in another way, Pam created a series of meeting prayers around the theme of the Saints (and then Mary). The various ministries in the parish (and finance council, parish pastoral council, etc.) always began their meetings with prayer.

The committee chairs were delighted with the series of prayers. Some people are not always comfortable planning prayer to begin a meeting (a lot of Our Fathers are quickly prayed). For the semester on the saints, the prayer included a reflection about a given saint and a prayer written by that saint. The saints corresponded with the saints *My Life with the Saints* by Fr. Jim Martin, SJ, which many parishioners were reading in small groups.

Bringing the theme into the everyday meetings of the various parish committees and groups reaches many people. In this series of prayers on the saints, whether or not the people were reading the book, they became aware that there was formation going on throughout the parish. When these types of processes are continued, eventually many people will think, “Maybe I should check this out!”

On-going opportunities

Throughout any given year, in addition to the specific adult faith formation gatherings for that year, there are always the needs for on-going formation with existing groups and ministries. During the year centered on discipleship at Ss. Faith, Hope and Charity Parish, the fall and spring gatherings for the Eucharistic Ministers helped them to reflect and deepen their ministry, through an exploration of the theme of discipleship.

Themes and Examples

In their five-year plan for adult faith formation, Ss. Faith, Hope, and Charity Parish grounded all their efforts (and the faith formation efforts of the whole parish) in a specific theme for each year:

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- Year One: Discipleship
- Year Two: Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- Year Three: Worship and Prayer
- Year Four: Moral Life
- Year Five: Social Teachings

The goals for Year One (Discipleship) included: Adult members of the faith community will:

- be able to articulate what it means to be a disciple
- be able to describe Christ's mission
- identify their gifts and how they can be used at the service of Christ's mission in the faith community and beyond

Year One was divided into two parts:

- The feast of the Assumption to Advent: *Discipleship – The Saints*
- The feast of Mary, Mother of God (January 1) to Pentecost: *Discipleship - Mary, Our Model*

Some of the opportunities during *Discipleship: The Saints* included:

- Intergenerational event: *Saints by our Side*
- Scripture Study: *Jonah and Ruth – Love Crosses Boundaries* (Six Weeks with the Bible)
- Spiritual Book Groups (English): *My Life with the Saints* by Fr. Jim Martin, SJ
- Spiritual Book Groups (Spanish and English): *Santos Americanos/Saints of the Americas*
- Group discussion: *Communion of Saints: Key to the Eucharist* (Catholic Update)
- Youth discussion: *Teen Saints in Times Past* (Youth Update)
- Morning of Reflection: *True Disciples – Praying with the Saints*
- Meeting Prayers: Saints' Prayers and Discipleship Reflection Question
- Film Discussion: *Man for All Seasons*
- Field Trip: Tour of a church named after a saint
- Via the Sunday bulletin: *Saint of the Day* podcasts through iTunes

The second half of the year, *Discipleship: Mary, Our Model*, hosted the following gatherings and opportunities:

- Intergenerational Event: *Mary: The "Yes" that Changed the World*

- Scripture Study: *Being Disciples of Jesus* (Six Weeks with the Bible)
- Spiritual Book Groups: *Mary's Journey* by Fr. Louis J. Cameli
- Group discussion: *In Search of the Real Mary* (Catholic Update)
- Youth discussion: *On Mary: Truths and Connections* (Youth Update)
- Morning of Reflection: *Mary's Journey of Discipleship*
- Field Trip: Walk in a local garden or woods with Marian readings and reflection questions
- Film discussion: *The Nativity* (1952) to *The Nativity* (2006): Visions of Mary in Film
- Meeting Prayers: Marian Prayer and Discipleship Reflection Question

The conversation within the faith community begins to change. People in the community become aware of the theme. This common focus has been shown to attract people to activities as they feel they want to be part of what is affecting the whole faith community. It lowers barriers to entry into groups, which can sometimes be formidable, especially for new church members.

- Pam Coster in [the Fall 2009 issue of Lifelong Faith Journal](#)

Advantages of a themed approach

Pam Coster reflected on some of the advantages of this approach:

- It provides a focus for planning for the adult faith formation committee.
- It calls the committee (and the parish) to be cohesive and developmental in their approach to planning.
- This approach doesn't mean that a parish doesn't respond to "hot topic issues" when they surface, but it provides a lens for planning so that when wonderful resources, speakers, ideas come up, there is a place for them and it "fits."

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- It sounds like it is work, but it makes planning much easier. “Random” is much more difficult to do and allows people with an agenda to, at times, be in control.
- The real reason to plan thematically is that it provides systematic catechesis. The over-all plan is leading people somewhere; our Church documents on catechesis and adult faith formation call us to that.

The effects for the parishioners

During the third year of this pastoral themed plan, there was a meeting with the Cardinal regarding what the parish desired in a new pastor. One person said, "We need more offerings for adults like we have now!" That was an incredible statement because two years earlier, there was minimal adult faith formation happening and many people had the belief that they "didn't need it"!

Through the intentional planning and the multitude of offerings, many had begun to understand that adults were a priority; adults were important enough for the parish to be very thoughtful about their on-going formation. Ss. Faith, Hope and Charity Parish went from 300 people annually in adult faith formation to 1,200 in three years.



A SECOND EXAMPLE: STS. SIMON AND JUDE PARISH, HUNTINGTON BEACH, CA

In 2007-2008 the parish catechetical team of Sts. Simon and Jude Parish developed a six-year curriculum around church themes:

- Creed
- Sacraments
- Morality
- Prayer
- celebration and saints
- social justice

These themes resulted from the team’s study of *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* and the *General Directory for Catechesis*, specifically the focus on the six dimensions for faith formation (OHWB #88-94 and GDC #84-87).

The reasons for the focus on themes for each year resulted from the desire to provide many opportunities and unify their approach:

- to have children from the faith formation program and their parents participate in family catechesis as well as participating in the traditional method of children’s sessions
- to open these sessions – intergenerational/whole community catechesis – to the entire parish, especially inviting all adults to participate
- to plan adult faith formation opportunities around an organized theme
- to invite the teachers in the parish school to utilize the themes, connecting the youngsters to the broader life of the parish
- to bring together the families of the faith formation program and the families of the parish school within the learning sessions of the family/intergenerational program

As the years progressed, the number of family sessions has decreased, primarily due to the busy schedules of families (and all parishioners), the cost of the program (speakers, dinner or lunch for everyone), and the number of volunteers needed for each event.

What has remained constant throughout all the format/schedule changes is the planning for all faith formation through the lens of yearly themes.

The maturation of the Christian life requires that it be cultivated in all its dimensions: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit.

When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development.

- *The General Directory for Catechesis*, #87

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Integration of the themes

The designated themes for each year permeate everything: parish events, adult faith formation, the faith formation program for children/youth and the parish school. In addition:

- teaching-learning resources are provided for parents and adult parishioners focused on the theme
- Whenever possible, the priests incorporate the theme during homilies

The Kick-Off for Each Year

Each year begins in July with *Summertime Livin'* – an evening event which is designed for families, as well as offering opportunities for all adults.

Every *Summertime Livin'* evening begins with a barbecue. The parish provides the hamburgers and hot dogs; the participants bring a dish to share. After the meal, the learning-participative activity begins. Over the years, some of the opportunities that have been tried and have worked include:

- **Movie Nights:** Some movies that have been shown are *The Wizard of Oz*, *Horton Hears a Who*, and *Winn Dixie* (served with popcorn). After the movie adults and children form separate groups for conversations on suggested reflection questions. For children, a craft related to the movie was also enjoyed. For one movie a journal was created; it was created so that it would be something that parents could use with their children.
- **Magic Nights:** These evenings have been led by different people: a parishioner (a cantor) who combines magic and opera; a Dominican who integrates faith and magic.
- **Mini-Carnivals:** With activities for all ages, including face painting, games, coloring for all, etc.
- **Catholic Jeopardy:** This game of Catholic facts worked well several years ago and was brought back recently.

An Example of one theme

Sts. Simon and Jude Parish are currently in the Year of Justice and Service. All adult faith formation gatherings have been directed toward justice and service. Within the children and youth programs, they were invited to be involved in service which included formation.

The year began – for the adults – with a Bible Study on justice themes in Scripture and Church documents. Because of its success, a few months later saw a Bible study on the Gospel of Matthew.

The primary celebration of the topic was held in February with Jack Jezreel, the founder and director of [JustFaith](#), as the keynote speaker. This Saturday event also featured:

- A track for children
- Workshops on leadership
- A parish commitment to service
- Goodwill Industries and thrift store shopping and sharing
- [Rainbow Environmental Services](#): recycling and the environment

The Lenten series for adults included sessions on various “hot topics” related to social justice:

- Role of Women in the Church
- Immigration and Catholicism
- Why young people are leaving
- The homosexual in the Catholic Church
- Just war

The attendance for these events was astounding. The evenings presented sold Catholic information and the opportunity to enter into significant conversations about these issues.

Other events and opportunities which flowed from the year’s theme included:

- Some acts from *Dead Man Walking* were presented by the youth.
- All children of the parish were involved in activities such as food collections to projects which benefitted groups and needs within the community.
- The youth and young adults sponsored a parish-wide event on [TOMS Shoes](#).

Some of the After-Effects of These Endeavors

With such dedicated and planned emphasis on adult faith formation (and all faith formation), the effects trickle out and continue:

- Parishioners have indicated that they appreciate the format used: all adult faith formation (all faith formation) being designed around a theme. The drawback that they mention is that there are so many

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

important opportunities that it is hard to choose and/or participate in everything.

- After the Bible study on justice themes in Scripture and Church documents, about 80 people signed up for a meeting on how to form a Justice Commission in the parish in order to foster education on Catholic Social Teaching and service. From that core group thirty individuals have gathered, adults who have always had a passion for justice along with others who have been newly awakened: all coming together to build community through a common theme.
- Because of the various offerings throughout the themed years, small faith communities for adults and families, rosary groups, Bible study groups have arisen – at the parish and in home settings. Plans are underway to expand these groups, to offer a parish-wide invitation to everyone to ponder their involvement in a parish small faith community.

Some Other Advantages of the Themed Approach

Nancy Cunningham, Pastoral Associate for Catechesis at Sts. Simon and Jude Parish, reflected on some of the advantages that are evident:

- It is helpful to have a common direction for the year when planning and inviting speakers
- It provides many ways to get other parish ministries and groups involved
- Youth are attracted and desirous of assuming a more active role in putting on events
- It allows for emphasis in working with everyone: adults, children and youth
- A themed approach provides many ways for catechesis via the bulletin and parish website



A THIRD EXAMPLE: ST. VINCENT DEPAUL PARISH, ANDOVER, KANSAS

Located in Andover, Kansas, a little town just outside Wichita, St. Vincent DePaul is a parish of about 1200 families. For ten years now, they have

employed the model whole community catechesis. About 300 people each month participate in the intergenerational events: LIFE (Living Inspired Faith Everywhere). LIFE is primary offering in faith formation, rather than weekly sessions for children. It is supplemented by additional monthly programs for each age level in the parish.

Except for the first year, each year of LIFE has had a specific theme: sacraments, prayer, the Creed, the Mass, Scripture, Spirituality, Vatican II and morality.

Desiring to celebrate and do something important and special for their tenth year, this year's focus is on Jesus. It is also the first year that the theme will not only be for LIFE, but will be parish-wide. The Parish Pastoral Council will announce the year on Jesus during the month of May. The actual kick-off will be in August.

Who are the primary planners for this year-long focus?

The parish has a design team which meets every Tuesday morning from 9:30 to noon to plan the LIFE events. The team is composed of nine staff members and three volunteers. Fr Kent, pastor of the parish, is part of the team. Gayle L Beuke, parish facilitator of faith formation, leads the effort but it has always been a team effort with much of the work and preparation taking place in addition to these weekly meetings.

What are some of the planned events and opportunities for the year?

May: Announce Year of Jesus to parishioners: *A Walk with Jesus*

August:

- [Sarah Hart](#) Concert following Mass and picnic dinner
- Women's Retreat on the Beatitudes with [Sarah Hart](#)
- Soft Opening for LIFE participants: Preview of Jesus art
- Portraits of Jesus displayed in Gathering Space and Daily Chapel
- Ministry Meetings: prayers focused on Jesus distributed to parish groups to help them unite their particular ministry to the ministry of Jesus

September:

- Announce Jesus Christmas Tree invitation to parish to help craft Jesus ornaments to decorate the huge Christmas tree in the gathering space

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- 10th Anniversary of LIFE Promotion
- Parish Stewardship will include Jesus theme

October:

- LIFE Event: Humanity of Jesus
- Pastoral Council/Staff retreat: *Leading Like Jesus*
- Teens Encounter Christ

November:

- LIFE Event: Divinity of Jesus
- Men's Retreat focused on Jesus

December:

- LIFE Event: Compassion of Jesus - God with us
- Decorate Jesus Tree with Christ ornaments made by parishioners and explanations of symbols booklet

January:

- Presentations on the Shroud
- LIFE Event: Vision of Jesus - Eucharist

February:

- Begin eight- week Ignatian Prayer Adventure: Saturday mornings with continental breakfast

March:

- LIFE Event: The Passion of Jesus
- Continue Ignatian Prayer Adventure

April:

- Conclude Ignatian Prayer Adventure
- LIFE Event: The Resurrection of Jesus

Ongoing Throughout Year:

- Breakfast of Champions, for 3rd – 5th graders and their families will focus on Jesus through the use of videos
- The choir will include hymns to Jesus throughout year

- Harvest House, Good Wine, 20-30 Group, Forty+ Group, Flourish: will schedule a presentation on Jesus for one of their programs
- Adoration: New books on Jesus will be available in the chapel with short description on cover (e.g. Nouwen, Vanier)
- Book Club: will chose a book on Jesus
- Bible Study Groups: will choose studies focused on one of the Gospels
- Groups who meet regularly (staff, design team, pastoral council, etc.) to begin their meetings by lighting a candle to remind them of the presence of Jesus as they begin their prayer together
- The Flourish group will focus on Jesus in praying with art

Some Further Details about some of the events/groups

Preview of Jesus art: Each summer preview exhibits of the theme for the coming year are done. People can visit the exhibits anytime during the month they are displayed. They are independent and somewhat interactive learning which people can do on their own time.

Usually head phones are provided to share information about each exhibit (similar to museums). For the year focused on Jesus, it will be an exhibit of different artistic renderings of Jesus. The images will be displayed in groupings which reflect each the year's LIFE events (the humanity of Jesus, divinity of Jesus, Compassion of Jesus: God with Us, Vision of Jesus: Eucharist, the Passion of Jesus, and the Resurrection of Jesus).

Each year there is a soft opening for the exhibit to which all LIFE participants are invited. With wine and cheese, they have an opportunity for the first look. This year, Sr. Kathy Vasselli, SSND, staff member and spiritual director, will lead a tour of the art instead of using the headphones.

Harvest House is a diocesan wide program for seniors 55+ in which St. Vincent DePaul Parish participates. They meet monthly for Mass, Anointing of the Sick, lunch and a program they choose, sometimes field trips.

Good Wine is a parish program for the elderly 70+. They come for a presentation by the pastor and dinner with wine each month. The name, *Good Wine*, is used because the waiter said, "You have saved the best wine for last." These programs initially dealt with life review and books by [Dr. Richard P. Johnson](#). However, it has now branched out into various topics.

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

The Twenty-Thirty Group is primarily young married couples although singles also participate. They have a monthly dinner with guest speakers that they arrange. **The Forty+ Group** is also 70% social - 30% spiritual.

The Flourish Group encompasses several opportunities for spiritual enrichment:

- A group of people participate in activities centered on the arts and prayer each Monday afternoon for activities centered on the arts and prayer.
- A group of parishioners meet regularly to make prayer shawls to give to the sick and homebound of the parish.
- Another group meets monthly to watch a movie and discuss the spiritual insights.
- Spiritual direction and days of reflection are also provided throughout the year by Sr. Kathy Vasselli, SSND.

The Ignatian Prayer Adventure will be facilitated by Fr. Kent, the pastor and spiritual director who has been trained in the spiritual exercises. This opportunity will be something people can access on-line and pray on their own. There will also be a weekly group support and direction.



Golden Nuggets from You

“I just want to take a moment to thank you for the excellent ideas and thought provoking endeavors that you curate and share with us each month. It is truly appreciated. Our diocesan staff plans to bring **GEMS** to the attention of the parish catechetical leaders once again, as we continue to encourage them to work with other parish leadership to invite, engage and empower more of our adult Catholics. Evangelization takes place in many ways - and the **GEMS** that you mine, so to speak, can be a wonderful resource for that.

- Catherine Cornue, Diocesan Director of Faith Formation, Syracuse, NY

“Hi Janet,

This **GEMS** ([GEMS #33](#)) is really good. I don't mind the 16 pages. I think I will give it to the members of the Education Commission for discussion off and on throughout the year.”

- Diane Bucko, Director of Adult Faith Formation, St. Isidore Parish, Macomb, MI

“This issue [GEMS #13](#) came at the most opportune moment. I'm working with a parish interested in establishing a bereavement ministry. The work includes facilitating organizational and discernment sessions, as well as guiding informal assessments of their parish needs.

- Stephanie McNeill, Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee



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

- <http://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down 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*