



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#11 - September 2011

## A Best Practice: Online Scripture Study

The June-July **GEMS** newsletter featured a creative approach to Scripture Study predominantly because of the place in which it occurred.

This month we look at **another best practice** which also highlights **Scripture Study and faith sharing**. At the same time, it is an example of many of the characteristics of successful, meaningful adult faith formation in today's parishes:

- Organizing and leading ongoing faith formation within their parishes by enthusiastic parishioners on fire for the faith
- Meeting the needs of today's adults
- Building relationships
- Forming and responding to communities of like interest
- Reaching people where they are
- Working with people's busy schedules
- Responding to the reality that all people can't "come to us"
- Experimenting with what works

## What led to this best practice?

In 2005 Diana L'Herueux celebrated the Sacraments of Initiation through the RCIA at St. Therese of Lisieux Parish, Sanford, Maine. After the completion of *Disciples in Mission* in the parish in 2010, there was a need for more ongoing faith growth opportunities for adults in the parish. Diana and another parishioner, Kevin Neely – through a chance meeting – began sharing ideas, fashioning a plan, and invited others to join them to form an Adult Faith Formation Committee for their parish!

The group began meeting monthly, forming themselves as well as beginning to respond to the needs of the parish. They were guided by much of what Kevin had learned in his courses in the LIMEX program (*Loyola Institute of Ministry Extension*) and Diana's experiences through the Certificate in Adult Formation Leadership from VLCFF (*Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation*) at the University of Dayton <http://vlc.udayton.edu>.

The first venture of this Adult Faith Formation Committee was to plan and offer an Advent Scripture Study which saw five groups, some meeting at the parish (living room/dining room/kitchen setting) and some meeting in homes. There was a morning group, an afternoon group and the other three groups gathered in the evening.

Because this Advent offering was meaningful for all the participants and word of its success spread throughout the parish, the committee planned a similar process for the season of Lent, adding a sixth group, meeting on Sunday morning after the 9:00 am liturgy.

Thanks to the new communications media,  
the Lord can walk the streets of our cities,  
and stopping before the threshold of our homes  
and our hearts, say once more:  
"Behold, I stand at the door and knock..." (Rev 3:20)  
-Pope Benedict XVI,  
World Communications Day Message, 2010

## What gave birth to this best practice?

Shortly before the Lenten Scripture Study was to begin, Diana was involved in course seven of VLCFF's Certificate in Adult Formation Leadership. One of the topics introduced in this course is technology in adult faith formation. The ideas shared in this online course sparked questions and ideas for Diana:

- What could be done at St. Therese of Lisieux Parish?
- Could technology be used with Scripture study?
- Were there parishioners who weren't able to make it to the "face-to-face" groups, but were desirous of adult faith formation?
- Were there ways to make Scripture Study available beyond the "face-to-face" groups?

With these promptings, Diana and the committee investigated the possibilities and an online Scripture Study for Lent was born.

## What was the process?

The Little Rock Scripture Study ([www.littlerockscripture.org](http://www.littlerockscripture.org)) session of "The Passion and Resurrection Narratives of Jesus" was used by both the face-to-face groups and the online Scripture groups.

For this initial endeavor, Diana created a "closed group" on her Facebook page which could only be accessed by those registered for this Scripture study.

Participants used this Facebook page, then, to post their responses to the questions posed in the discussion booklet, as well as respond to the postings of each other, each day, every other day, or whatever fit with their schedule.

At the end of each week, they used the Facebook online Chat to talk to each other "live" if they wished.

We do not read the Bible  
the way it is;  
we read it the way we are.  
– Evelyn Uyemura

## Who participated?

In Diana's words: "I thought this group would be mostly made-up of young adults but to my surprise, we had people in just about every age group from 20 to 70 (the oldest one in a local nursing home was the one who participated the most!)."

There were fifteen group members; three had participated in the Advent "face-to-face" study. The rest were all newcomers who were interested because of the online opportunity. They included a few young moms and one young dad, one woman in her 70's, and some middle-aged career people.

## What Did the Participants Say?

This sampling of the comments from the participants gives a glimpse into the impact, not only of the ongoing importance of Scripture study, but of the vitality of online learning in adult faith formation today:

- "I've learned so much about Scripture, about my faith."
- "This group became a family to me, especially because of the death of my dad to cancer."
- "This was so much better than once a week. I could go online several times a week and respond to others' postings. It provided time for reflection, pondering, prayer."
- "I feel so encouraged to continue learning, to continue growing in my faith, walking in my faith journey."
- "This surprised me – how comfortable I felt sharing with a 'cyber-group' about my faith. It was fantastic."
- "I felt very safe here. It was a wonderful experience."
- "I felt uncomfortable at first because I felt everyone else knew so much more about Scripture than I did; but everyone was so wonderful. They were so affirming. They told me I was a breath of fresh air! They encouraged me so much. I felt so accepted and feel like I have grown so much."
- "I don't feel like there was any lack of personal feeling and care because of it being online. Unbelievable! Amazing!"
- "I am so grateful for this opportunity. I could have never done it if I had to come to the parish every week."

## What are some of the effects of this initiative?

In addition to the obvious effects (evident in the people's comments above) of increased understanding and appreciation of Scripture, Diana and the Adult Faith Formation Committee point out that the participants:

- were able to realize the value of the "group" as a place to share faith with others and be enriched by the sharing of others. Most of these participants would not have been able to be part of a group, without the online opportunity
- felt a heightened sense of belonging to the parish
- are now curious about other group learning/sharing experiences, especially those that could be done online

Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.  
-Mark Twain

## Two Sparkling GEM Suggestions-Wonderings

The beauty of adult faith formation is “one-size-doesn’t-fit-all.” There are so many ways to imaginatively do things. Little Rock Scripture Study, of course, provides recorded materials (DVDs and CDs) for each of their studies. A blended offering might be provided: a chance to take advantage of these resources in a live setting and then participate in the online discussion.

### **In what other ways could the recorded materials be used/available to an online group?**

Be sure to subscribe to the online newsletter for Little Rock Scripture Study to stay up-to-date with on-going formation as well as fascinating ideas of what others are doing: [www.littlerockscripture.org](http://www.littlerockscripture.org).

We’re all aware of how all adult faith formation, especially Scripture study, needs to be rooted in prayer. **What are the innovative ways you would do that during an online experience?** Diana provided a prayer at the beginning of each week for the participants to use before they began their postings. She also shared with them the *Lectio Divina* process so they might use that themselves with their daily readings. When the participants gathered each Sunday for their “live chat,” they began with prayer together.

## Some Suggested Nuggets for Planning and Process

Just as the process of our “live, face-to-face” events need to be planned well, so, too, online formational opportunities need careful planning and processes to ensure faith-filled and faithful opportunities for learning, faith-sharing, and growth.

Here are **a few things to consider** (with some things that St. Therese of Lisieux Parish did for this best practice). As in all adult faith formation endeavors, “one size never fits all.” Depending upon the offering, depending upon the group, **you will need to decide** the best approaches, the most conducive methods, the most helpful guidelines to ensure a respectful and comfortable atmosphere, a successful offering, a learning and faith-filled experience for your participants.

- **Will the facilitator regularly oversee/monitor the comments that are posted by the participants to be sure they are appropriate, to be sure they are theologically accurate?**

Diana recounts for us that her first message to the group reminded them of the rules for their time together:

- show respect for each other (no negative humor, criticism, or judgment)
- what is shared in the group stays in the group
- there is no such thing as a dumb question

Diana’s experience was: “I did not run into any inappropriate comments but was prepared to handle them in a loving and non-judgmental way while at the same time correcting the problem (first by personal e-mail, and if needed by a follow-up phone call). If the problem persisted, I would have to (as the very last solution) take the person out of the secure group.”

- **How will the facilitator answer the participants’ questions that might arise?**

Diana’s experience will certainly resonate with many facilitators: “I did indeed get some very interesting and challenging questions and was mostly able to fall back on my own knowledge or by looking up the answer(s) in Catholic study materials and books I have. When the answer was still not understandable to them or I wasn’t sure how to answer it completely correctly myself, I suggested to them to either ask the pastor or I could ask

him for them. A few questions were answered accurately and in-depth as a team-effort - which I think, is the most conducive for the learning process of everyone involved.”

- **Will the facilitator use techniques to keep the discussion flowing, to keep it on track, to help the participants go deeper?**

Again, just as in face-to-face small groups, the facilitator needs to be competent in facilitation skills, the person monitoring an online group must be especially proficient in keeping the group a community, helping them stay connected to the message and their purpose. They need to be able to “read body language” without seeing the bodies.

Diana said, “I often used follow-up questions and/or additional interesting connections/facts/teachings. Some of them I came up with as I was reflecting on the readings and commentary from the *Little Rock Bible Study* material or on the responses from group members. Some of them I also thought of or found after reading the same material in other Bible commentaries. It really helped to keep the discussion flowing and on track, and helped the members to go deeper.”

## What are the factors that made this initiative successful?

Diana feels that the key factor is providing parishioners with another alternative to be part of an adult faith learning/sharing experience. Many people today are so limited in how much time they can spare throughout the day or week and this gives them an opportunity to take part according to their schedule and at their convenience.

One sign of the success can be seen in Diana’s comments: “I have actually started another online group which ‘spawned’ from this Bible Study group. We are doing a weekly study on the upcoming Sunday liturgy in which I use material from *Breaking Open the Word* (by Mary Birmingham available at [www.pastoralplanning.com](http://www.pastoralplanning.com); can be downloaded for \$8 a month) and inject *Lectio Divina* meditation/reflection into it.

People post (again on my Facebook in a closed group) throughout the week and then on Sunday after Mass, we share some more about our experience/insights from the liturgy, homily, or anything else that touched us during liturgy.”

Because this material changes weekly, this type of group is very flexible, allowing people to join anytime, not having to participate every single week. The same material is also posted on the parish website for individual’s on their own: [www.stthereseeparishmaine.org](http://www.stthereseeparishmaine.org) (click on faith formation).

Reading the Bible  
without meditating on it  
is like trying to eat  
without swallowing.  
- anonymous

## Some Suggested Nuggets for the Future

Diana indicated that there were some “quirks” in using Facebook which she and the group found cumbersome:

- the posting sequence became a little confusing as posts got moved when people commented on them
- the visibility of the posts got shortened
- one has to be fairly familiar with Facebook to be able to figure out things

Therefore, Diana’s plans are to look into other possibilities for the future. Here are some that parishes around the country, around the world, might consider:

For those who are just beginning Scripture Study and are member dioceses with VLCFF (*Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation*) at the University of Dayton <http://vlc.udayton.edu>, you might begin with a closed group session through VLCFF of:

- *Introduction to the Old Testament*
- *Introduction to the New Testament*

Simply request that those registering from your parish be placed in the same section together (you provide VLCFF with the list). If you chose, your parishioners would also have the option for “blended learning” – the online experience combined with a weekly face-to-face session.

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Perhaps the ideal option for an online group would be if your parish website has the capability to set up a closed message board. Check with your webmaster.

Google (and Yahoo) Groups are another easy-to-use possibility for parishes. The group facilitator would post a "lesson" or begin the discussion; the participants would leave their comments in the same area. Members could respond to individual comments, and on and on, all threaded by topic of the first post.

Once a group is established, everyone can simply use email along with or instead of the web based group area. Threads are followed by simply clicking "reply" and keeping the subject intact. The email address is provided upon creation of the group (e.g. a "BibleStudy" Group would be [biblestudy@googlegroups.com](mailto:biblestudy@googlegroups.com)).

With the constant proliferation of new Google tools (including chat, video chat, group texting, etc.), Google Groups (and Yahoo) bear learning and watching it grow.

For parishes that have a tech person available, you might want to check out MOODLE (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment). This has a chat and forum capability built right into it. It is free, but you need a Linux server on which to install it, and someone who can do the installation.

The new environment  
in which Christian faith formation operates  
requires new thinking,  
and new models, practices, resources,  
and technologies  
to address the spiritual needs of all generations.  
-Faith Formation2020.net

## One way

This best practice is **one example** of using technology in adult faith formation today.

For three helps – among many – which will assist us to continue looking at technology and its role in faith formation today:

- Visit and sign up to be on the mailing list for *Catholic Web Solutions*: <http://www.catholicwebsolutions.com/>. The goal of *Catholic Web Solutions* is to help faith communities think strategically about integrating the Internet and Social Media into their mission; to develop a plan and then implement it.
- Visit and/or subscribe to Sr. Caroline Cervený's blog, *A Cyberpilgrim's Blog*: <http://acyberpilgrim.org/> (Often many of the examples relate to faith formation for children and youth; how can the important ideas about technology be "translated" and used in adult faith formation?)
- Drop by and visit or become a member of *Digital Catechesis*: <http://digitalcatechesis.ning.com/>. If you have a question, go to the Forum, post it, and gain the wisdom and experience of people throughout the country.



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

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Best Practices can be found at [www.pastoralplanning.com](http://www.pastoralplanning.com). Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.