



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#14 - December 2011

A Best Practice: A Process for Gathering Parishioners for a Parish Book Study

Book clubs, as a form of adult faith formation, are popular in many parishes (as well as throughout our culture). The following unique best practice describes **a process which invited all parishioners to become engaged** in a book study this past Lent (2011).

Something to Consider as You Read...

- How might you use the following process in your parish?
- Which book(s) might your parish be ready to explore in this way?

It does not matter
how many books you have,
but how good the books are **which** you have.

-Lucius Annaeus Seneca

The Setting

The Catholic Community of St. Francis Xavier, Hunt Valley, MD, formerly a mass station for a neighboring large parish, was incorporated as a mission in 1992. In 1998, the community, a collection of 400 families, built and moved into a new permanent church home.

Prior to this move, the parishioners had been worshipping in the basement of an office building where they had all grown to understand and experience that **Church is the people**, rather than the building. The pastor led this community in their continuing faith-growth, encouraging them in their responsibility to each other.

Within two years of moving into the church building, the parish grew to 1200 families, with a median age of forty-five.

RENEW small groups had been well received in the growing parish. Thus, when *Disciples in Mission* (a parish-wide experience of evangelization fostering spiritual renewal) was offered by the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association (now Paulist Evangelization Ministries), the Catholic Community of St. Francis Xavier embraced it wholeheartedly. Over four hundred parishioners participated in small groups for three years.

Then the parish found itself in the midst of a pastoral change so the staff decided not to embark on *Why Catholic*, another small group opportunity, offered by RENEW, until the newly assigned pastor could have some input on his vision for the parish.

Through this transition and change, an opportunity for small group faith sharing never resurfaced.

In April 2010, Pat Allshouse, the Director of Faith Formation, assembled a group of parishioners, inviting them to brainstorm ways to jump start Adult Faith Formation at the parish.

This group met several times throughout the summer and into the fall. Shortly before Christmas, Pat was given a copy of a newly-published book. After reading it, she thought it might be worth looking into for the parish, so Pat:

- purchased copies of the book
- gave them to the team
- asked each person to read a specific chapter
- and be ready to discuss it at their January meeting

Reading surrounds us, labels us,
defines us.

-Anonymous

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Pat also encouraged every member of the team (ten people) to invite someone new into the group. One person brought a fellow teacher from a local Catholic school for girls. She had shared her book with him and he, in turn, shared his ideas which turned out to be the inspiration for the process.

The team's goal was to have something in place for Lent 2011. No small task given it was already January 2011!

The Process

The "process" was to invite people to take part in small faith-sharing groups: reading, reflecting and sharing on a book during the season of Lent, the entire parish reading the same book.

(Note: "the" book needs to be right for your parish; there are many to choose from! This newsletter is focusing on the process, rather than the one book chosen by St. Francis Xavier. Several books used by various parishes can be found at the end of this newsletter.)

To spark interest, the team decided to kick off this endeavor with a *Pass It On* campaign beginning the first week of February (five weeks before the beginning of Lent). At each of the Masses that weekend, a member of the Adult Faith Formation team spoke after communion explaining what was about to happen. During the presentation, the presider passed out books to random individuals. (The parish purchased two hundred copies of the book, passing out 40 copies at each of the four weekend Masses.)

The process was explained and the community was encouraged to keep it going by bringing the books back each week to "*Pass it On*."

Those having a book were asked to:

- take it home for a week
- read any section
- write comments in the book
- sign his/her name anywhere in the book
- return the book back the following week to "*pass it on*"

Directions were printed on self-adhesive paper and inserted into each book for those who might have forgotten what they were to do.

Sunday pulpit and bulletin announcements along with parish wide email reminders at the end of each week helped to keep the momentum going.

After communion, on each of the next four weeks, parishioners were given time to "*Pass It On*."

Before the final blessing, all those who had already had the book were invited to stand. Then those who currently had the book were asked to stand and then they were instructed to hand their book to someone else, preferably someone who had not yet been given the book and who they did not already know.

Many people wholeheartedly responded to this, even moving across the church to get to people they'd never met or talked with previously.

- Some folks refused the book
- Others begged for it

No two persons
ever read the same book.

-Edmund Wilson

On the fourth weekend, all those possessing a book were asked to return it the following weekend, and the books were brought up as part of the closing prayer at each Mass. About 70 of the original 160 books were returned.

On this same weekend, which was two weeks before Lent, anyone who wanted to enter into further reflection and discussion on the book was invited to sign up to be part of a small faith-sharing group, which would meet for five weeks during Lent.

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An additional 250 copies of the book were purchased and sold to those who either signed up for a group or just desired their own copies. Parishioners bought multiple copies for their adult children, neighbors, friends, etc. The parish sold out the first Sunday and ordered another 100 books for the following weekend.

Sign-up for the study groups took place during the two weekends prior to Ash Wednesday and groups began meeting after the first Sunday in Lent. Some groups met in homes; some at the parish. One hundred twenty parishioners signed up for twelve small groups.

- Several groups continued to meet throughout the summer
- Over 350 books were sold plus the original 90 that never made it back to the parish
- Much conversation took place
- A renewed interest and participation in small groups flourished

Group Facilitators

Because of the short span of time in organizing this project, there was no time to train facilitators. Yet, because of the history of the parish, there were many trained facilitators from the *Disciples in Mission* process who were interested and able to be a part of this Lenten program. Thus, every group was led by a trained facilitator.

A truly good book
teaches me better than to read it.

I must soon lay it down, and commence
living its hint.

What I began by reading,
I must finish by acting.

-Henry David Thoreau

Discussion Guide

Pat Allshouse felt that it was extremely important to give unified guidance to the groups for their discussions which the leaders could then use or adapt it to their needs.

Searching the web brought to light three different discussion guides that others had used for this book. After some reflection, Pat developed her own discussion guide using some of these for ideas and inspiration:

- a short section from the Sunday Gospel for reflection
- delving into a specific section of the book for discussion
- closing with an action plan and prayer

Groups were also encouraged to plan for a short social/refreshment time after each session.

What do you think motivated people to be a part of it?

Pat's immediate responses to this question were:

- Parishioners were looking for this: they wanted something to bring back the sense of closeness and unity as parish
- Newcomers were looking for a way to get to know others
- Most people wanted something to help 'switch it up' during Lent

What were some of the factors that made this successful?

Some of Pat's and the committee's reflections consisted of:

- The book was inexpensive.
- The groups met mornings, afternoons, evenings, weekdays and weekends; at the parish and in homes: many options were available for people's various schedules.
- The book, having been reviewed by several parishioners, was chosen **by** the parishioners, **for** the parishioners, and was determined to be a resource that could meet the needs of all ages, those at various stages of faith, a variety of spiritualities
- Everyone learned from each other.

From the staff's vantage point, why did this work?

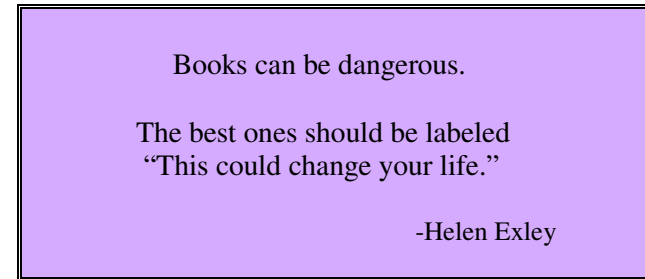
Because the entire staff was involved in various ways, their thoughts as they watched and experienced the process included:

- Everything about it captured people's interest
- The "Pass It On" strategy was pure genius ... or the intervention of the Holy Spirit
- The process built enthusiasm
- It was fairly simple
- The resource was easy to read
- Plenty of room for discussion was provided, in respectful environments
- One staff member was worried that the book would elicit complaints about the church. To the contrary, parishioners seemed to become more positive.

What did the participants comment/do?

- Parishioners were universally thrilled with the opportunity for small group discussion
- Two groups met throughout the summer and fall
 - One group continued with the same book for ongoing discussions
 - Another expanded their agenda, meeting once a month with a parish group to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for a local soup kitchen then adjourning to discuss Pope Benedict's book, *Jesus of Nazareth: From Baptism to the Transfiguration*
- One leader asked to repeat this process with another book for Lent 2012
- There was some clamoring to re-start groups for fall 2011, but once serious plans were begun, people decided they

couldn't do it due to scheduling conflicts. Two speakers were planned for the fall; a small group experience is being planned for Lent 2012



What have been some of the effects of this process?

- A renewed interest in small groups
- Growing sense of community in the parish
- Continuing interest, especially from young families, in the traditions of the Church
- Increased Mass attendance, especially among families
- It got people to talk about Catholicism; to talk to others about our Catholic faith

Was there anything that surprised you (the parish staff)?

- The "Pass It On" piece. Parishioners really got into passing their book on to someone they had never met, making it a point to even move across the church to find a new face. We found that pretty remarkable since Catholics tend to stay in the same pew every week.
- In other parishes, some people remarked that this book appealed more to women. With us, interestingly, both women and men found reading this book valuable.
- Some folks read parts of it as a family to their children.

If you were to do it again, what might/would you do differently?

Pat's initial thought and reflections to this question were: "Provide more time for planning and growing our team - both of which we are doing for this coming Lent (Lent 2012)."

From real experience, Pat says, "As the DRE, I got stuck with a lot of the detail work ... and again because we were on such a short time table, I did it because it had to be done. Then, it surprised our team afterwards how much organizational work this really did take; no one was clued into this except me."

Some GEMS for you to ponder:

- How might you use this process in your parish?
- Which book(s) might your parish be ready to explore in this way?
- What kind of preparation time would your parish need for a process/program like this?

I have always imagined that
paradise will be some kind of library.

-Jorge Luis Borges

Some books...

The following are a few of the many other books which parishes have used or are considering using for parish book studies. The choice depends upon the needs of each parish, the goals with the parish's adult formation pastoral plan, and the parish's goal/purpose for this particular book study.

- *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* by John L. Allen, Jr.
- *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* by Fr. Robert Barron
- *Invitation to Catholicism* by Alice Camille

- *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully* by Joan Chittister
- *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for All That Is* by Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams
- *How Big is Your God?* by Paul Coutinho
- *A New Set of Eyes: Encountering the Hidden God* by Paula D'Arcy
- *Sacred Threshold: Crossing the Inner Barrier to a Deeper Love* by Paula D'Arcy
- *Reclaiming Catholicism* edited by Thomas H. Groome and Michael J. Daley
- *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* by Edward P. Hahnenberg
- *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism* by Michael Himes
- *God of Surprises* by Gerard W. Hughes
- *Rediscover Catholicism* by Matthew Kelly
- *Why Stay Catholic?* by Michael Leach
- *Where the Hell is God?* by Richard Leonard, SJ
- *Heroic Living* by Chris Lowney
- *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life* by James Martin, SJ
- *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything* by James Martin, SJ
- *What Happened at Vatican II* by John O'Malley, SJ
- *The WOW Factor: Bringing the Catholic Faith to Life* by William J. O'Malley, SJ
- *We Live Inside a Story* by Megan McKenna
- *The Mass is Never Ended: Rediscovering our Mission to Transform the World* by Gregory F. A. Pierce
- *Jesus, the Apostles and the Early Church* by Pope Benedict XVI
- *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* by Pope Benedict XVI
- *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* by Pope Benedict XVI

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- *Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction* by Gerald O'Collins
- *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* by Timothy Radcliffe, OP
- *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* by Richard Rohr
- *The Holy Longing* by Ronald Rolheiser
- *Our One Great Act of Fidelity* by Ronald Rolheiser
- *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino* by Joyce Rupp
- *Close to the Heart* by Margaret Silf
- *Wise Choices: A Spiritual Guide to Making Life's Decisions* by Margaret Silf
- *The Road to Vatican II: Key Changes in Theology* by Maureen Sullivan, OP
- *Prayerfulness* by Robert J. Wicks
- *Riding the Dragon: 10 Lessons for Inner Strength in Challenging Times* by Robert J. Wicks

The following are some books which are accompanied by discussion guides:

- *My Life with the Saints* by James Martin, SJ:
<http://www.loyolapress.com/my-life-with-the-saints-book-extras.htm?cId=402516>
- *Catholic Spirituality for Adults Series*: A series of ten books from RCL Benziger and Orbis Books. Some of the topics include: Listening to God's Word, Mary, Eucharist, Holiness, Jesus, Prayer, Reconciliation, Spirituality and Community. Faith sharing and discussion guides are available at
<http://rclweb.com/resources/catholic-spirituality-for-adults/>
- *The World as it Should be: Living Authentically in the Here-and-Now Kingdom of God* by Gregory F. A. Pierce:
<http://www.loyolapress.com/the-world-as-it-should-be.htm>

- *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace* by William A. Barry, SJ: <http://www.loyolapress.com/a-friendship-like-no-other-william-barry-sj.htm>
- *Facing Forgiveness: A Catholic's Guide to Letting Go of Anger and Welcoming Reconciliation* by Loughlan Sofield, ST, Carroll Juliano, SHCJ, and Bishop Gregory M. Aymond. Suggestions for small groups are found in the book.
- *Spirituality at Work: 10 Ways to Balance Your Life on the Job* by Gregory F. A. Pierce: <http://www.loyolapress.com/spirituality-at-work-discussion-guide.htm>

Helps for Book Clubs

These websites provide ideas and resources for book clubs and book studies:

- How to start a Catholic book club:
http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10160
- A Guide to Book Clubs: <http://www.book-clubs-resource.com/>
- For Facilitators: Some Ways to Lead a Book Club discussion:
http://bestsellers.about.com/od/bookclubresources/ht/how_lead_talk.htm
- How to start a reading group:
<http://www.bkconnection.com/static/start.asp>
- 10 tips for success:
<http://www.bkconnection.com/static/tentips.asp>
- Discussion guides for some books that might be used:
<http://www.bkconnection.com/static/discussion.asp>
- Moderating Meetings:
http://www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice/index.cfm/fuseaction/moderating_meetings

- Difficult Meetings: http://www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice/index.cfm/fuseaction/difficult_meetings
- Guide to Starting a Book Club: <http://www.suite101.com/content/guide-to-starting-a-book-club-a275871>
- Book Club Questions: www.ezinearticles.com/?Book-Club-Questions&id=222106
- General Book Club Questions: http://classiclit.about.com/od/bookclubs/a/aa_bcquestions.html

Two Book Clubs ... and Two Resources:

- *America magazine* Book Club: <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/catholic-book-club.cfm>
- *US Catholic* Book Club: <http://www.uscatholic.org/bookclub>
- Book club resources from Loyola Press: <http://www.loyolapress.com/book-clubs.htm>
- [Circles of Change](#) is an interesting article that may be helpful for you as you work with a book club (or scripture study, committee or board, etc.).

One of the statements of the author, Tracy A. Thompson, is:

“In a well-functioning Circle, members experience a strong sense of belonging, a compelling commitment to shared goals, a high level of accountability to themselves and to the group, a robust climate of joint problem solving and learning among peers, an intense feeling of involvement, and high trust relationships.”



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

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