

## Ideas Mushroom in a Think Tank

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On an airplane what do the attendants tell us to do first? Answer: Put on our oxygen first; secure that in place and then help the child(ren) with theirs. Does that tell us something about our efforts for adult faith formation? Does it remind us that if we attend to our own continuing formation in the faith (as adults), then, that will enable us to provide the best atmosphere for catechesis/faith formation for our children and youth?

Adult formation is at the center of who we are and what we want to/need to do today. All of our Church documents proclaim this.

How does your parish assess needs and plan for ongoing adult faith formation? There are many ways to do it; we probably need to use all of them at different times throughout our parish's history.

There is a difference between needs and interests. Very often what is termed a needs assessment is really a survey of interests in the program topics that adults would like to see offered by the parish. This type of assessment might be built on two erroneous assumptions:

- 1) People know and will honestly say what programs they are interested in
- 2) People will actually come to programs they say they are interested in

Our endeavors need to go much deeper than a survey of interests, a list of topics to be checked off.

There are many tools and methods to help discern the real needs of today's adult Catholic: to find out who is in your parish, what is important to them, and what their concerns are.

The following describes one process which might be used in a parish to provide a vehicle for new ideas based upon how people understand their lives.

Have a THINK TANK.

This would be a one-time gathering. (People tend to participate in a one-time event -- when they know they aren't scheduled in for the next three years.)

Invite a cross section of your parish: all ages, all stages of life and family situations, those who usually come to adult formation opportunities and those who do not.

Provide refreshments, letting the participants know that will be part of the evening before they come. Make it a festive and relaxed gathering.

You might want to ask your invitees to bring one other person with them. Offer prizes for those who do!

A sample agenda for the evening might be:

- 1) Welcome and an IceBreaker (to let people know with whom they are spending the evening)
- 2) Prayer (one that is filled with hope and enthusiasm for the faith journey to which we are all committed)
- 3) Small group discussions: In the last ten years, think of a situation/a time in which you learned something.
  - What did you learn?
  - What was the time frame involved in the learning process: one instance; something that was ongoing for quite a while, etc.?
  - What was the learning context: a class; your own reading; talking with others; the result of an experience/a life situation, etc.?
- 4) Large group feedback: In listening to one another, what did you discover about adult learning?
- 5) A short presentation on the principles of adult learning
- 6) Small group discussions: Completion of this sentence: "To continue to grow as Christians, adults in our parish need \_\_\_\_\_."

Invite each small group to list their responses on newsprint and post them around the room. Take a few minutes to look at and share reflections about the responses.

- 7) Small group discussions: What trends are happening today (in our society, in family life, in the Church, etc.) that impact our daily lives?

Invite each small group to list their answers on newsprint and post them around the room. Take a few minutes to look at and share reflections about the responses.

- 8) Small group discussions: What is there about Catholic Christian living, about the Church that you wish you knew more about?

Invite each small group to list their answers on newsprint and post them around the room. Take a few minutes to look at and share reflections about the responses.

9) Small group discussions: Invite the table groups to look at the three lists and then dream about: What can \_\_\_\_\_ Parish do in the area of adult faith formation to help with these needs, questions, and today's life situations?

10) After small group table discussions, invite each table to give a report to the whole assembly. It would be best if the ideas were written down as they were mentioned (as well as asking each table to turn in at the end of the meeting the notes of all that they said). These ideas will be invaluable as the adult faith formation committee uses them to plan for the future.

11) Call attention to the reality that adult learning and formation happens in all kinds of settings, not just in the "programs" that parishes offer. Ask the groups to recall other things that are going on in your parish life in which faith development/ formation occurs. What other things could be happening at the parish that would facilitate adult formation?

The results of this brainstorming will also give much food for thought to the adult faith formation committee, the pastoral staff, and the parish pastoral council.

End your evening together with much gratitude, warmth and hospitality for these people who shared their ideas, energy and enthusiasm - because they believe in lifelong learning and ongoing deepening of our faith commitment. Bring out the wine and hors d'oeuvres!

This is only one venture. The questions could be phrased in many different ways. There are also numerous other methods to discern the needs (and dreams and challenges) of today's faith-filled, and searching and growing, adults in our parishes. The following year (or two), you could try another approach, because the needs are always there, always changing.

The important thing is that you listened to the people. A program wasn't created for your parish because it worked in another parish. You will be able to create something unique for your people that flows from their ideas expressed during the Think Tank. And - the people who participated will be your best publicity persons for whatever you decide to do!

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