

In the Process is the Growth

Janet Schaeffler, OP

The greatest learning and growth often takes place, not in actual programs, but in what happens before and after them. Yet, as we plan for adult faith formation, our emphasis is generally on the content of the program. We may fail to see the tremendous potential for growth in the “process” of planning.

During a year of parish study and renewal, we learned to understand the value of process. Based upon comments and written surveys from parishioners as well as our own perception of needs, the pastoral staff instituted this year-long process as an opportunity for all adults of the parish to look at some of the important questions of Christian life in our contemporary world.

After Vatican II, much was done in our archdiocese to help Catholics absorb the spirit and meaning of the documents. Now, years later, it seemed an appropriate time to look again at some of the key areas of Catholic life. This would also provide an opportunity to continue our parish evangelization process, for we saw the program as being not only for parishioners, but also for catechumens, inactive Catholics, and for non-Catholic friends, neighbors, and relatives.

During the summer months the pastoral staff developed some ideas for the “bare bones” of the program. We envisioned once-a-month sessions at the parish, with each session geared to a different topic or question. These evenings would include a presentation, time for sharing and integration, and prayer.

For the specific content of the year-long program, we wanted the questions and ideas to come directly from the parishioners. We felt that this would serve several purposes:

- The content matter would then directly address the questions and concerns of the parishioners.
- The many people involved in this planning would feel ownership of the program.
- The publicity for the program would start with the word-of-mouth testimony from those participating in this planning process.

Thus, in early September we held a parish assembly. Every person in the parish was invited to this assembly through pulpit announcements and the Sunday bulletin. Letters of invitation were sent to everyone in the parish who served in leadership or ministerial roles. This amounted to over 300 people from 22 organized groups in the parish. These lay ministers received a specific letter because their roles of service placed them in a position of listening and caring. Their insights about the needs of parishioners from their active involvement in the parish community would be invaluable.

A Productive Meeting

The enthusiastic planning meeting that resulted from this invitation - a planning meeting to prepare for adult faith formation -- was, perhaps one of the most significant experiences of adult learning that many of these parishioners had ever participated in. (It was for the staff.) It included the following:

I. Welcome and overview of the evening

II. Written questions and answers. Participants were asked to answer the following question on newsprint: "What, in your experience, is unique about St. _____ Parish; what do we have to offer?" The answers were then placed around the room. (Perhaps the best way to begin to work with a group is to help them look at the positive!)

III. A short presentation called "We are Church." This presentation focused on one of the reasons for hope in our church today -- a return to the feeling that was prevalent in the early church -- that the church is a we rather than an it. The presentation also described the three major images of church that most parishioners have experienced:

- The Bark of Peter viewed the Church as a great vessel with the Pope at the helm, the clergy as crew, and laity as the precious cargo. That was an institution that offered salvation.
- The Body of Christ, an image that appeared in an encyclical by Pope Pius XII in 1943, viewed the laity, not as cargo, but as partners. The Church was seen as community.
- The Vatican II view of church differed from the approach of all previous Councils, which had been mainly concerned with doctrine and crises. Vatican II was concerned with the dignity of the individual and with discovering who we are as church. The answer was the People of God, an image which is more than institution and community.

IV. Small Group Work. The broad topics touching today's Catholic life, those which people had most often indicated in adult faith formation surveys, were assigned for small group study. Participants in the assembly were invited to choose a topic which interested them, and join the appropriate small group.

The two tasks of the small groups were to

- formulate questions parishioners and inactive Catholics might have about the particular topic
- to come up with a catchy title for the presentation, one that would attract people to the evening

It was in these small groups, in particular, that genuine listening, sharing, probing, and therefore, growth took place. (At the end of this article, the topics, the suggested titles, and some of the questions which were generated by the small groups.)

V. Synthesis. Each small group then gave a report to the full assembly of their hopes and dreams for the topic they had discussed.

VI. Mission. All participants were encouraged to be messengers, to invite others (especially inactive Catholics and non-Catholics) to the coming events. Forms were given to this evening's participants so that they could submit names and addresses of inactive Catholics and non-Catholics in order that letters of invitation could be sent from the pastoral staff in addition to the personal invitations that these parishioners would do.

VII. Closing prayer, followed by refreshments.

At the time of this planning assembly, the organized year-long program of adult formation and renewal had yet to start. Yet, the growth had already begun. The enthusiasm of these early planners had assured the success of a program in which a great number of parishioners already had a vested interest.

Topics for the year-long series, *We Are the Church*

Church

Suggested title: *Do We Go to Church, or Are We Church?*

Possible questions:

- Why is the church always changing?
- Why should I belong to the church today?

Prayer/Worship

Suggested title: *New Ways and Whys to Pray*

Possible questions:

- Why pray anymore?
- Does God really answer prayer, or is it all fate?

Scripture

Suggested title: *Scripture: Fact or Fiction?*

Possible questions:

- How can I know what the Scripture stories really mean?
- Who really wrote the Bible?

Morality/Conscience

Suggested title: *How Do We Know What's Right and Wrong?*

Possible questions:

- Why doesn't the church tell us exactly what's right and wrong?
- Is there sin anymore?
- Is my conscience too lax or too guilty?

Social Justice

Suggested title: *Social Justice: What's It to Me?*

Possible questions:

- What “is” social justice?
- What does it have to do with being Christian?
- What can one person do in the face of the world’s problems?

Evil/Suffering

Suggested title: *Where’s God When It Hurts?*

Possible questions:

- Why does God send suffering?
- Why does God allow suffering?
- How can God be good when the world is in such a mess?

Sexuality

Suggested title: *Why Have We Made Sexx a four-letter word?*

Possible questions:

- What does sexuality mean for the unmarried?
- Can sex be part of my religious life?
- What does the church really say today about sexuality?

Copyright © 2003 (Janet Schaeffler). All Rights Reserved.

www.janetschaeffler.com