

Ten Tried and True – or Relatively New – Adult Faith Formation Ideas

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One of the exhilarating (as well as challenging) realities about adult faith formation is that it can (and should) take many different forms. In reality, all that we do – within parish/(arch)diocesan life - has the potential to be formative, to “teach” something about who we are, who we are called to be. Within that reality, of course, we are called to be intentional about providing – in various ways – opportunities for the continued growth of faith for today’s adults, to walk with them as they continually strive to connect faith and life.

Listed here are ten (in reality, eleven) suggestions, eleven suggestions among the many opportunities which today’s parishes are creatively, enthusiastically, and faithfully offering.

- 1) Some people might miss scheduled parish adult formation events because they are busy with other parish meetings. The archdiocese of Detroit, since the early 1990’s -- following the leadership of Cardinal John Dearden and Jane Wolford Hughes in the 1960’s and 1970’s -- has realized and encouraged the necessity of ongoing formation for everyone. Thus, the *Vision Statement for Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Detroit* states: “All gatherings of adults, whether those gatherings be meetings or catechetical sessions, will include prayer and reflection, study, business and evaluation.”

Therefore, just think of the numbers of parishioners who are participating in 15-20 minutes of formation and study every time they gather for a meeting, whether it be Parish Pastoral Council, Finance Council, commissions, RCIA Team, catechists, ushers, women’s and men’s groups; liturgical ministers, St. Vincent DePaul, evangelization committee, etc.!

The study piece can be a short video, presentation, reading an article before the meeting – always accompanied by time for conversation. The topic or theme might relate to the ministry of the group (“The Goals of Adult Faith Formation” for the adult faith formation committee), might share the church’s wisdom on a current cultural or religious question (What Catholics believe about the end of the world), or explore a faith topic touching the needs and questions of the parishioners (Questions about Annulments).

Some parishes choose one theme each year (e.g. the social justice teaching of the Church, still living the reality of Vatican II, the journey of RCIA for the entire parish) and all groups use the same formation articles or videos each month.

- 2) It has been said that if you give workshop participants a set of handouts, the workshop is a success. What about those, then, who aren’t able to participate in the parish (or diocesan) workshops, discussion groups, Scripture study, etc? Can we still make use of the

potential of hand-outs? They might be short: a phrase from Scripture, a line from a social justice teaching, a word of wisdom from someone from the Communion of Saints – on a bookmark, a bumper sticker, a billboard. They might be longer: a thought for each day of the week, a practical idea for Christian living at home and at work, background information and reflection questions on the Sunday readings – on a page inserted in the week-end bulletin and/or on your parish website, or shared with parishioners (and others) through Facebook or Twitter.

- 3) This practical procedure of hand-outs could also be expanded to include a series of hand-outs and other resources as well as personal support that is made available to various parishioners through the myriad communications we have available to us today (mail, cable, print, audio, video, email, social media, etc.) Thus, we have distance education! Given our rural communities, homebound individuals, people with busy schedules but long commutes – all with CD players, MP3, Apps, and laptops -- we have many opportunities that are ripe with new ways for learning.
- 4) Are we in cyberspace? A recent search through just one search engine for “spirituality on the internet” produced 1,200,000 websites. That was just “spirituality;” it did not include “church” and all its variations: prayer, sacraments, Creed, morality, social justice and peace and a myriad of other topics which certainly touch our Catholic life.

If people are on the web searching for and/or in dialogue on matters of concern to them concerning spirituality, current events, human values, the meaning of faith in everyday life, relationships, social doctrine, family life, workplace morality, the common good, prayer, peace and war, or whatever else may delight, concern or bother them, are we – as a parish, as a diocese, as the church - there?

Who is offering today’s adults the wisdom of the Gospel and the rich tradition of the Church on the internet? What are our parish websites offering? Do we invite discussion, interaction and engagement through our websites? Do we provide ways people can easily reach us? In addition to the offerings on our own (parish or diocesan) websites, can we help adults easily find the helpful websites for prayer, spirituality, Catholic information, continued learning about the richness of the faith that are available today?

- 5) Internet chatrooms are popular, but what about the face-to-face chats or the over-the-phone chats that are part of our ministerial lives? Catechists are aware of the catechetical method of shared praxis in which faith formation opportunities begin with reflection on the person’s life experience, then the study of the Gospel and/or the Church’s story and tradition.

These two experiences-stories are then brought together for a new meaning for the person’s life with a decision which will change that life as a disciple/follower of Jesus. Our everyday conversations, in which we gently and simply include these three realities/approaches, helping adults to explore the questions or concerns that are of

significance to them, are certainly formational – and transformational - for their faith growth.

- 6) There are many reasons why people are not able to come to scheduled programs in parishes and vicariates/deaneries. Is it possible to go to where the people are; for example, to a workplace where several parishioners might be employed for a pre-work or lunch hour discussion? Are there several parishioners living in a senior citizen apartment complex? What about a mall or shopping area where people gather? Are there public meeting spaces available there where we could offer times for prayer and conversation? Could several parishes, a vicariate or deanery or an ecumenical grouping of parishes, join together to rent a space in a mall and provide resources and services for the many people (searchers and dwellers) who come and go daily in this mall?
- 7) Some people – for various reasons – are not attracted to participating in an adult formation program that is offered in the parish, but are very willing to volunteer to be of help and to get things done. They will work on the Christmas Giving Tree, volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, drive people to week-end liturgies, join a parish ministerial committee, take Communion to the sick, work with Meals on Wheels, etc. Being involved in doing it – discipleship – of course, is the best form of adult faith formation there is!

To enhance and deepen these experiences for people, pastoral staff members and adult faith formation facilitators can “sandwich” these opportunities with “formation” - time and suggestions for prayer, reflection and study. Before the activity: provide a time for orientation with a connection of the opportunity to Scripture and the church’s tradition. Following their participation, time and opportunities (individually, within their families, or small groups) can be offered to “debrief” their experience: what happened to me because of my participation? Where did I find God? How will I be different because of my participation? John Dewey reminded us that “We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience.”

- 8) Many parishes organize visits to their parishioners on a regular basis. These can be done by the pastoral team, pastor, and/or parishioners on a visitation committee. When the visit takes place can things be done to intentionally help ongoing faith development? Are parishioners asked about their interests so that materials can be sent or opportunities shared that might answer their questions or connect them to groups that can help deepen their faith? CDs/videos of various talks, reflections, and the Sunday liturgies can be taken to the shut-ins. The visitors can spend some time talking to them about the resource on their next visit.
- 9) Parishioners can be invited to share their faith experiences; in this process of reflecting on and sharing their faith, growth certainly deepens. During Lent, invite fourteen adults to give a personal reflection on the meaning of one of the Stations in their lives. (Doing this each week will involve even more people.) These can be posted on the parish website and/or published in the Sunday bulletin.

Publish your own parish booklet of Advent, Lent, and/or Easter reflections for each day of the season – inviting different adults to each write a page. Have a weekly column in the Sunday bulletin entitled, “My Favorite Scripture passage,” “A Quotation that Has Helped Me,” or “The Best Book I’ve Read this Year” and invite adults to write their personal reflections on how these insightful helps have inspired their lives.

- 10) One of the key realities that *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us (US Bishops’ Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation)* reminds us of is that all ministry, all formation, begins by listening to the everyday lives of the people, their questions and wonderings, their joys and sorrows, their doubts and hopes. People are looking to connect with – and learn from - others who are (or have) experiencing the same realities they are: raising teenagers, caring for aging parents, experiencing the death of their spouse, etc. Parishes can be welcoming homes for support groups of listening and conversation.
- 11) (A baker’s dozen has one more than twelve, so this list of ten has eleven!) Capitalize on the phenomenon of today’s coffee shops and set up a coffee café that is open at appropriate times for your parish (e.g. during faith formation programs for children; the drive time after work; in between week-end liturgies; Sunday afternoons or early evenings). A facilitator can begin a topic and then invite questions, comments and conversations from those who stop by, keeping the environment and process informal and participatory.

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