



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

109 - February 2020

A View from the Community:

Today's Best Practices, Today's Challenges

Seven months ago, our **GEMS #103** (July 2019) issue wondered about the question: Are there consequences from not making adult faith formation a priority in our parishes? Having received many grateful responses for that issue, I continue to wonder and ponder: are we really convinced of the primacy and necessity of faith formation for today's adults?

- What is the real hopeful picture of adult faith formation in our parishes?
- Are there challenges still ahead of us?

As we begin a new reflection (here and for the next three issues), enjoy and mull over the following quotes:

- "In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists." (Eric Hoffer)
- "Modern man (and woman) listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he(she) does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #41)
- "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do." (Johann Wolfgang vonGoethe)

"In order to teach it is enough to know something.
But to educate we must 'be' something.
True education consists of giving oneself
as a living model, an authentic lesson."

Alberto Hurtado, SJ

- "We need a new apologetic, geared to the needs of today, which keeps in mind that our task is not to win arguments but to win souls... Such an apologetic will need to breathe a spirit of humanity, that humility and compassion which understand the anxieties and questions of people." (St. John Paul II)
- "Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise is exploration into God.
Where are you making for? It takes
So many thousand years to wake,
But will you wake for pity's sake?" (Christopher Frye)
- "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." (Benjamin Franklin)
- "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." (William Butler Yeats)
- "I learned most not from those who taught me but from those who talked with me." (St. Augustine)
- "Sometimes when you don't know the answer to a question that keeps playing over and over again in your mind, it's because you're messing with the wrong question." (Anonymous)

This might seem like a list of unconnected or disjointed quotes from various people throughout the ages. Rather than being unrelated, they all say some significant things about who we are, where we are today, and the challenge and wonder of adult faith formation in our church. They remind us of our successes and triumphs; they prompt us forward to work for and live "for the more."

Our next few issues are a pause in our newsletters which look at best practices and substantial methods for and in adult faith formation. Let's pause to review where we are today:

- Reflecting on some signs of growth, some foundational practices, in our ministry of adult faith formation over the last several years

- Exploring some continuing challenges for areas of development and progression for the years ahead

GEMS Suggestion

In the days ahead, you might want to use some of these quotes - yourself and with your adult faith formation committees/teams – and ask: what does this call us to in our ministry within our adult-centered communities?

Signs of Growth in our understanding and practice of adult faith formation

Hopefully, you witness – and live – the following signs of growth in the ministry of adult faith formation. As I've been privileged to observe and work with many parishes and dioceses throughout the country, Canada, Santo Domingo and the Philippines, I see them. As I've worked with two best practices studies (one in the archdiocese of Detroit and this one which encompasses parishes and (arch)dioceses in Canada, Australia, England, Ireland and Scotland), I see them. As I've facilitated numerous online courses in adult faith formation, I see them.



Best Practice 1: Leadership

Adult faith formation doesn't just happen. Wherever there is a thriving community, committed to ongoing growth in the faith journey, you will find leaders who are specifically designated for adult formation, leaders who are dedicated and formed.

For years, many practioners have advocated for the profession of adult faith formation ministry. "Giving focus to adults through provision of a specialist can mean more significant ministry to all adults and increased quality of educational efforts with them.

...The Director of Adult Religious Education is more than a promoter of denominational programs for adults or an 'activities director' for adults.

... The Director of Adult Religious Education must be an educator in the truest sense, establishing philosophy, cooperatively setting program objectives, assessing needs, and facilitating adult learning through the widest possible

array of learning avenues."

- (R. Michael Wharton in "Working with Educators of Adults," in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, ed. Nancy T. Foltz. Religious Education Press, 1986)

While adult faith formation is the responsibility of the entire parish, it nonetheless needs to be the specific responsibility of one staff member (and some parishioners serving on teams/committees) to lead this ministry.

The various best practices (in the two studies) usually have come from parishes in which there was a dedicated staff person, and a parish committee/team, working with them. One comment from a committee member: "I thought we were doing a great deal to provide resources and opportunities for adult faith growth. It has just multiplied a thousand-fold since we have added a staff person who is dedicated to adult faith formation – in all its possibilities."

"If the designated leader is the parish director of religious education or another staff person, adjustments may be needed in job descriptions so as not to shortchange the amount and quality of time and energy they can devote to adult faith formation.

Otherwise their many responsibilities may prevent them from devoting sufficient time to this essential priority."

- *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*, #136

Yet, the challenge is that more and more anecdotal accounts as well as comments in the best practices studies, are telling us that less and less church staff are taking on more and more responsibilities (at a time when the needs of

today's Catholics are increasing). If someone becomes a "jack/jill of all trades, are they a master of none"? Will the catechetical vision of our parishes suffer, in particular the vision of the centrality of adult faith formation?

This key staff person needs the credentials and the time to devote to the ministry of adult faith formation. It's not just about planning a program here or there; or bringing in three speakers a year! Adult faith formation is the way a parish lives. This individual will advocate for the primacy of adult faith formation, helping everyone to view all dimensions of parish life through the lens of adult faith formation. This takes time and energy.



Best Practice 2: Involve participants in the planning

One of the key principles of adult learning reminds us: Adults learn best when they have input into the what, why, and how of what they will learn. They are motivated to participate when they have been part of the planning.

One of the ways to be attentive to this is to commit to continual needs assessment, using various methods. The most successful best practices (in the two studies) are ones in which the needs of the people determined what was planned/offered.

Often we immediately think of using a written survey to determine needs. This method has advantages but also disadvantages. (See [GEMS #94](#).) In addition to surveys, there are diverse substantial ways to ascertain the needs of the people. (See [GEMS #91 - 96](#).)

Involvement in the planning by the participants, of course, goes beyond needs assessment. In the words of Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton (*The Religious Education of Adults* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing):

“Prospective participants should be brought into the decision-making process regarding the total educational program.

Adults should be invited to help the religious educator implement and administer the educational program.

Adults should be invited not only to provide evaluations of the educational program but should also be involved, as is feasible, in the planning of program evaluation.”



Best Practice 3: An environment of welcome and hospitality

More and more books, articles, websites and blogs are discussing the importance of and providing suggestions for parishes to nurture an atmosphere of belonging for all.

Research has shown that people will engage in the life of the parish (e.g. respond to calls to minister, participate in adult faith formation) because of the atmosphere/environment of the parish. One of the key features of this environment is being welcomed/a feeling of belonging.

In most instances, belief does not lead to belonging, but rather, belonging leads to belief, according to current research by the Gallup Organization (*Growing an Engaged Church* by Albert J. Winseman, Gallup Press, 2007).

Hospitality (in all its ramifications) is a key ingredient *of* adult faith formation, but the atmosphere of the parish, its theology of welcome, precedes adult faith formation. Without a welcoming, hospitable environment, very few parishioners – and visitors - will be interested in or motivated to participate in adult faith formation.

In addition to the many articles, websites and books that explore this, visit [GEMS #3-9, #15-18, #46-48, #56-58](#).



Best Practice 4: Adult ways of learning

It is obvious today, especially where best practices are happening, that ministers and committees understand and appreciate that adults learn differently than children.

We understand andragogy. Originally used by Alexander Kapp (a German educator) in 1833, andragogy was developed into a theory of adult education by the American educator Malcolm Knowles. Knowles asserted that andragogy (Greek: "man-leading") should be distinguished from the more

commonly used pedagogy (Greek: "child-leading") when working with adult education. Knowles' theory can be stated with six assumptions related to motivation for adult learning:

- Adults need to know why they need to learn something before learning it.
- The self-concept of adult is heavily dependent upon a move toward self-direction.
- Prior experiences of the learner provide a rich resource for learning.
- Adults typically become ready to learn when they experience a need to cope with a life situation or perform a task.
- Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; education is a process of developing increased competency levels to achieve their full potential.
- The motivation for the adult learner is internal rather than external.

These assumptions have led to much reflection and best practices regarding the principles of adult learning:

http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Adult_Learning_Principles_2_.pdf

“Lecturing is the process whereby
the notes of the teacher
become the notes of the student
without passing through the mind of either.”

- *Mortimer Adler*

“There should be less talk.
A preaching point is not a meeting point.

- *Mother Teresa*



Best Practice 5: Involvement – participation

One of the significant signs of growth in the practice of adult faith formation today is the tendency to “ban the lecture” as a method for adult faith learning.

Even though many “programs” still revolve around guest speakers, workshops, various courses, etc., there is a growing realization that “adults learn best when they are in conversation with other adults about things that matter.”

- (Jane Regan in *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation*, Loyola Press)

Significant time for conversation and exploration, as well as varied activities and all types of interaction, is the centerpiece of adult faith formation in thriving communities.



Best Practice 6: Responding to the needs of communities of like interest

Nearly a century ago Henry Ford invented the famous assembly line that is credited with putting Detroit, and the world, in the “Mass Production” business. When he introduced the Model T, the marketing message was essentially, “You can have any color you want as long as it is black.”

Donald Tapscott, the author of several books on today’s digital world, uses a different term to describe what drives business today: “Mass Customization.” In effect, “you can have whatever you want customized to your wishes.”

What does this mean for adult faith formation? We can no longer approach adult faith formation with a “one-size-fits-all” mentality. “...adults will be interested in (and need) different aspects of the religious according to their personal faith development and expression. An approach of ‘corned beef and hash for everyone’ (which is tantamount to ‘We don’t care what you need, this is what you get because this is what we’ve got’) and programs based simply on what the religious educator or pastor wants to teach are too

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capricious.”

- (Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton in *The Religious Education of Adults*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing)

All we have to do is look at our parishes to easily realize the diversity and, therefore the reality, that different groups need different things, for instance:

- Parents of young children need something different than empty nesters
- Those who have just lost a job have unique needs
- People who are new in the faith need something different than those who have been deeply practicing the faith for years

Certainly, there are times when having “mixed groups” together are important; we learn from the wisdom and experiences of each other. At the same time, many parishes will say they have better responses to offerings when the offerings are for specific groups, for communities of like interest.

- Scripture study programs for men, often at times convenient for their work schedules, seem to attract more men than a generic Scripture program.
- A program exploring various forms of prayer can be offered for couples, for those in grief, for new parents, for baby boomers, etc.
- Would specific groups be attracted to offerings, such as:
 - Effective Grandparenting
 - Relating in a new way to your Adult Children
 - Balancing Love, Work and Life
 - Support Group for Adult Children of Aging Parents
 - Juggling the Rhythms of Family
 - Planning to Age Gracefully (and Have Fun Doing It)?

Seth Godin, a prolific author and the past Director of Direct Marketing for Yahoo could be talking to adult faith formation directors and parish leaders when he says:

“A product for everyone rarely reaches anyone.”

- *Seth Godin in Small is the New Big: and 183 Other Riffs, Rants and Remarkable Business Ideas*



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

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html and <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>