



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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Best Practices: Some Things These Pandemic Times Have Taught Us (Part III)

Our last two issues explored some new things we have learned; new methods we have used; this issue continues that exploration. In the midst of many challenges, we have discovered new insights, new practices. These realities are not only true for these times but for the days, months, and years ahead.

9- It's a time of change. Might that include our buildings and our budgets?

This time, of course, is unprecedented. Might it provide a time for us to really look at all we're doing, especially scrutinizing each budget line.

As we look at going forward, as we look at re-opening and returning to what we did, what if we asked these questions:

- What does this enable us to do?
- Does this help us accomplish our mission? How?
- How can we measure the success of this program/endeavor?
- What should this program look like if we want to respond to the needs of both our physical and digital communities?
- Is our parish/(arch)diocese the best one to create or own this program, or should we curate/partner with the work of another organization?

Every dollar we free up from programs that are no longer meeting today's needs is a dollar we can now invest in reaching people in ways that are relevant, measurable, and effective for our new world.

10- It's a time of change. Might that also include how we think.

The pandemic has managed to kill off some mindsets that no longer served the church. Many of these shifts, decades in the making, happened seemingly overnight.

- Pre-pandemic mindset: We've never done it that way before. We've all joked about the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before." These words of resistance have slowed or stopped

many needed changes in parish life. Those seven words were a sign that tradition had once again triumphed over risk.

With the rapid onset of the coronavirus, however, and the changes it necessitated parish and (arch)dioceses quickly became aware that the pre-pandemic mindset simply wouldn't do. To continue resisting change would mean nothing less than abandoning the church.

- Mid-pandemic mindset: Whatever it takes to stay together. As church doors shut to slow contagion, parishes took on practices they had resisted for years. Most parishes never dreamed they would launch online liturgies, Facebook Live or Zoom Scripture studies in a matter of hours or days.

Yet, fueled by a deep desire to maintain the parish family, parishes adopted a new mindset, "We'll do whatever it takes to stay together." As parishes quickly moved online, they found something rather surprising. Liturgy attendance has grown. The frail and infirm can now worship without having to brave weather, roads or inaccessible buildings. Visitors can pop in and out at will, fairly anonymously.



**It is when we are the end of our own resources
that we can enter into the riches of God's resources.**

(Smith Wigglesworth)



11- The time is now.

Eighteen years ago D. Michael Lindsay and George Gallup Jr., in *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches*, said: “The churches of America, in these opening years of the twenty-first century, face an historic moment of opportunity. Surveys record an unprecedented desire for religious and spiritual growth among people in all walks of life and in every region of the nation. There is an intense searching for spiritual moorings, a hunger for God. It is for churches to seize the moment and to direct this often vague and free-floating spirituality into a solid and lived-out faith.”

Eighteen years later we find ourselves in a world we would never have imagined. Is the world hurting right now? Is your community in need of gospel-centered love, hospitality and welcome, connection to one another and to God?

Likewise, research and experience tells us that adults are open to learning, change and growth when they are in transition times in their lives. Not only are individuals at transition times, the entire world, the church is at a transition time ... and we're not sure what the future will look like.

As we are hearing and experiencing the cries of a suffering world, as we experience change and transition all around us, the gospel message is needed now more than ever. And we've found that people are searching and responding – often today online.

A key question for us is: are we using our online presence only as a content delivery channel for existing parishioners? Or, are we looking for creative ways to support, connect and walk with our parishioners ... as well as providing care, welcome, formation and outreach for all in our neighborhood/town and city?

12- People may not be explicitly looking for church, but they are looking for answers.

As we think about five core areas of life and human flourishing, for most people during these days, disruptions have happened in all of them:

- Spirituality
- Relationships
- Finances

- Vocation
- Health

Research on Google Trends illustrates that each of these topics has experienced spikes in traffic since March 2020.

Because we, within our parishes/(arch)dioceses, are preaching and living from a Scripture orientation, we have something to offer in all of these areas. Reaching people through an aspect of their lives which has acute needs can lead to gospel conversations, spirituality formation and deeper opportunities for discipleship.

A key question for us is how can we do this in new ways? This is our moment to think about how we can be a church focused on the real-life needs of the people.

Some simple – but significant – endeavors from parishes who are taking the real-life needs of people into account are:

- Ana Olaso Stanham, Adult Faith Formation Director at St Louis Parish, Pincrest, FL recounts that within their Spanish community, they have a ministry called “Salud y deportes” (wellness, health and sports). They gather monthly to reflect on a health issue and its impact on our wholeness. Recently they did a circle on COVID-19 and coping strategies to overcome depression, loneliness, and fear.

Ana dreams, “I would like to see reflections on social justice and inequality. I'm going to look into JustFaith adaptations for virtual gatherings.

- At St. Kateri Tekakwitha Parish in Schenectady, NY – during the times prior to March 2020 – the pastor, as many parishes, hosted “Laughter and Libations” three or four times a year at a local restaurant.

Since the pandemic, it has been a Happy Hour on Zoom with a thoughtful reflection from Fr. Bob with time for questions and answers. Kris Rooney, the director of adult faith formation, managed the technology which included the Zoom call as well as streaming it on Facebook Live so there would be two platforms. Questions were

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fielded through both platforms so that the audience – and the questions – would be broader and deeper.

- For many parishes, one of the markers of the beginning of the fall program year is the “Blessing of the Backpacks.” It is a rite that helps our faith communities bless children and youth as they return back to school, assures both children and adults that God is with them wherever they go, and reminds us that everything inside that backpack can be a means by which we can serve and bless our neighbors.

In these times, as school, faith formation and work become more digitally-integrated, parishes may also want to add a “Blessing of the Devices” to their fall rites of passage. Just as we bless the physical symbols and tools of our learning, we can also bless and mark the digital devices through which all ages – children through older adults – are learning, working, and growing in faith.

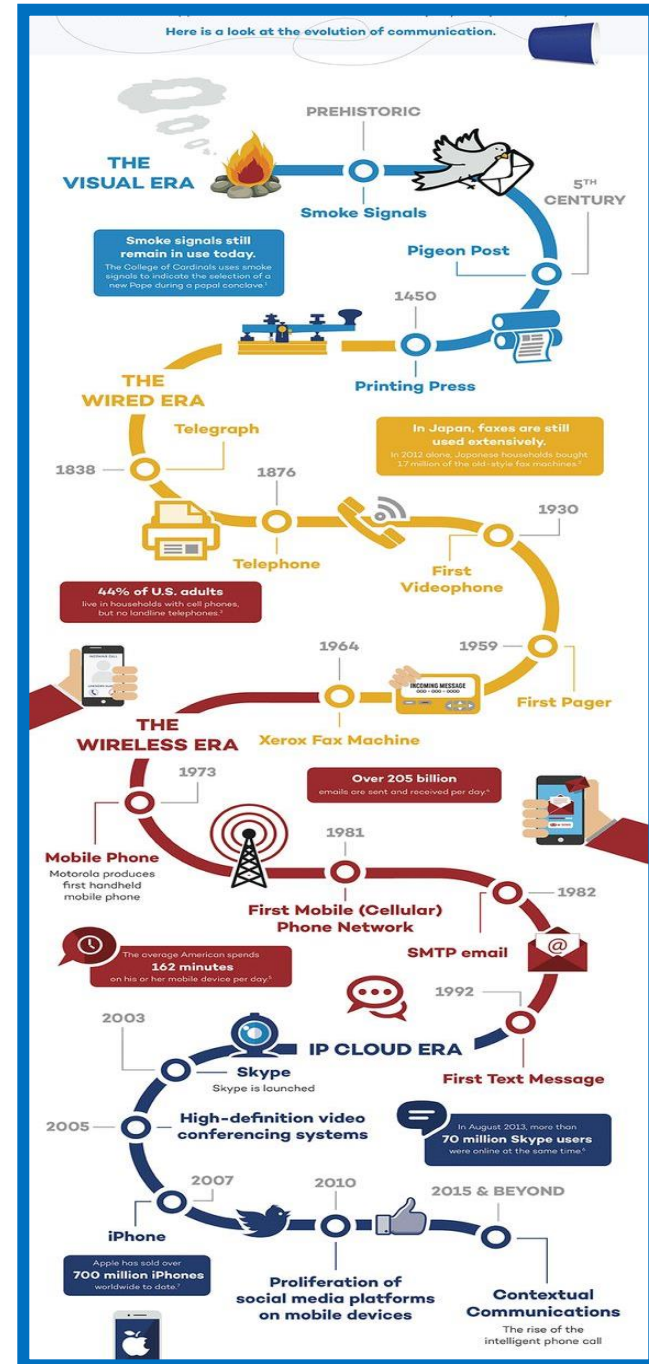
One suggested blessing can be found here:

<https://buildfaith.org/blessing-of-the-devices/>

13- The reality in which we find ourselves is really about change, not technology.

Think of the history of change – because of new technologies – within the church (and society). In many ways, Christianity owes its growth throughout the world to the work of people powered by technology. In fact, a sense of curiosity among pioneers of the past led us to adopt innovative technology for the ministry of the church. The implications were often positive, though often not fully anticipated.

- The printing press enabled not just easy access to and the distribution of Scripture, but also increased literacy rates and changing roles in the church.
- Broadcast technology has allowed the Good News to transcend borders, even into closed countries.
- The combination of streaming media, video conferencing, and data-informed ministry made ministry possible during the Covid-19 pandemic. Quite literally, it was the lifeline that kept churches connected and, in some cases, made the decision between survival or closure.



These videos and articles might provide more insight into the Infographic on page 3:

- [Medieval Help Desk](#)
- [Did You Know?](#)
- [A Brief History of Communication and Innovations that Changed the Game](#)
- [The Evolution Of Communication From 30,000 B.C.](#)
- [The History of Communication Technology](#)

From the Infographic (and the above links to articles), it is easy to see that we have always had communication technologies (although, by today's standards, many would not call them "technology;" yet they were the technologies of the time). Leaders who recognize the possibility of the moment are the ones who can effectively utilize new technology in their ministry.

14- Our digital technologies eliminate barriers; they are diverse in every way.

A large budget is not needed to use digital tools. In fact, parishes from rural areas, to inner cities, to the suburbs are finding creative ways to reach more people than ever before.

What is working? It doesn't have to be not professional productions, fancy lights or multi-camera setups. Those are nice-to-haves.

What is working and what reaches people is authenticity. A pastor recording a three-minute personal and caring comment on a smartphone has the potential to touch people in places where a thirty-minute homily might not.

Digital pathways also provide the ways for any parish/(arch)diocese) to reach any individual, eliminating the boundaries crossing of ethnicity, community and social status.



“The digital platform is multi-ethnic. It’s not like there are groups left behind. It’s multi-ethnic, multi-generational, and it becomes our primary faucet for disseminating the Gospel.

(Samuel Rodriguez)



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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>