



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: A Lenten Conversion Experience – No Complaining

St. Mary Parish, Port Huron, MI, wanted to offer a Lenten process that would help people respond to the challenge of on-going conversion: becoming more Christ-like. There are innumerable ways of doing that, individually and as a community. What was the practical way that the parishioners of St. Mary's chose?

How did it all come about?

The parish staff was becoming more and more aware that the reality of people's lives, especially parents, is such that it is over-scheduled and extremely busy. For some people, adult faith formation can become "one more thing to do," and often is on the bottom of the list of priorities.

They were searching for something that would "fit into" the many schedules of the parishioners' everyday lives – something that would touch their lives, that would help them be aware of their own growth, without coming to the parish for a structured program.

A few weeks before Lent, during a retreat for catechists of the area, the staff heard a book mentioned with a challenge: *A Complaint Free World: How to Stop Complaining and Start Enjoying the Life You Always Wanted* by Will Bowen (Harmony; Reprint edition; February 5, 2013).

That ignited an idea for the staff.

"If you don't like something, change it.
If you can't change it, change your attitude.
Don't complain.
~ Maya Angelou

The Basic Challenge

Pastor Will Bowen of Kansas City, MO, believes that there are two things

upon which most people would agree:

- There is too much complaining in the world.
- The state of the world is not the way we would like it.

In response, Bowen challenged himself and his congregation to become complaint-free: to go 21 days without complaining. To help everyone do it, he handed out purple bracelets, inviting people to switch the bracelet from one wrist to the other every time they caught themselves complaining, criticizing, or gossiping.

The directions that accompanied the bracelets were:

1. Begin to wear the bracelet on either wrist.
2. When you catch yourself complaining, gossiping, or criticizing, move the bracelet to the other wrist and begin again.
3. If you hear someone else who is wearing a purple bracelet complain, it's okay to point out their need to switch the bracelet to the other arm, BUT if you're going to do this, you must move your bracelet first!
4. Stay with it. It may take many months to reach 21 consecutive days. The average is 4 to 8 months.

A particularly distressing form of murmuring is speaking ill of others, with or without cause.

Such action, whether gossip or libel, allows us to focus our energy and attention on the inadequacies of others rather than upon our own needs for forgiveness and growth.

~ Norvene Vest in *Desiring Life*

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Why bracelets? Why 21 days?

It's important to focus on what we want in our lives rather than putting attention on what we don't want. The physical reminder of moving the bracelet can help ingrain that positive change into a person's mind.

Scientists/psychologists believe it takes at least 21 days to form a new habit.

"That which we persist in doing becomes easier,
not that the task itself has become easier,
but that our ability to perform it has improved."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Placed in our Lenten Context

Reading Bowen's book, you will discover that his challenge has touched the lives of millions of people in 80 countries, with requests for 1,000 bracelets a day.

How did St. Mary Parish incorporate this practice into the Lenten season? The parishioners were reminded and invited to respond to the meaning of Lent: personal and communal renewal and conversion, bringing about a permanent change of heart. Each parishioner was given a booklet, providing a step-by-step procedure to decide on what change of heart would be best for their Easter journey: *What Am I Doing for Lent This Year?* (Liturgy Training Publications).

Parishioners were invited to adopt the no-complaining challenge as one of their resolutions because it "fit" Lent perfectly:

- Our resolutions aren't just "to give up," but to put something in its place. This can happen with no complaining. Not complaining, gossiping or criticizing turns one's life into gratitude, appreciation, seeing things in new ways, etc.
- Our resolutions aren't only just for us, but should affect others.

- Our resolutions should have changed our lives and continue when Lent is over.

In his book, Will Bowen comments, "One grape ripens another. In a vineyard, one grape will begin to ripen and in so doing will send out a vibration, an enzyme, a fragrance...that is picked up by the other grapes. This one grape signals the other grapes that it is time to change, to ripen. As you become a person who holds only the highest and best for yourself and others in your words and thoughts, you will signal to all around you simply by who you are that it is time for a change. Without even trying, you will raise the consciousness of those around you."

The Beginning Generated Interest!

Bracelets were made available to all parishioners at all the Ash Wednesday liturgies and prayer services at the parish and the Newman Center (which resulted in an article in the local Port Huron newspaper). They quickly disappeared! (More were immediately ordered.)

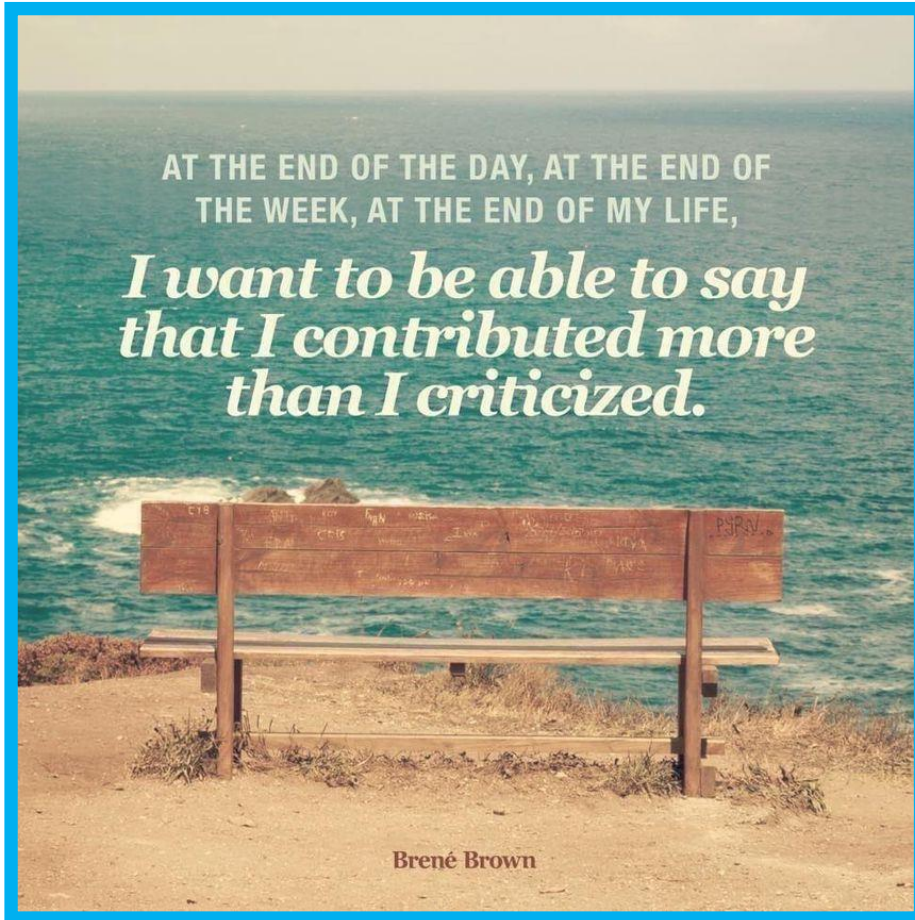
- One mom commented, "What a nice thing for the kids!" She was quickly invited to go and take one for herself.
- Many people asked for additional ones: "We're taking them to work..."
- Entire families worked on the challenge together.

"Complaining about something
without taking any action to correct it
is irresponsible.

If a condition deserves criticism,
it deserves an honest attempt to change it."

~ John Renesch

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Reminders from St. Mary Parish:

Keeping the needs of their parishioners in mind, St. Mary Parish personalized and complemented the directions offered by Will Bowen's four directions (page 1 of this [GEMS](#)):

- The definition of criticizing is: you are saying something about someone else that you would not say to her/his face.
- You can think any criticism or complaint that you want, but if you say it, you have to move your bracelet to your other arm.

- This does not alleviate you from handling problems that may arise. It means that you will have to think about how to say something before you say it and say it to the person that it pertains to instead of talking behind their back.
- If you cannot do this, then it probably wasn't important enough to talk about in the first place.
- Anytime you switch the bracelet from one arm to the other, you have to begin the count again.

A GEMS Reflection:

Some people are chronic complainers. How do we as pastoral ministers let them know they are being heard but move them beyond? As those engaged in adult faith formation (all of us) it would be good to read the book for ideas.

“Do everything without complaining.”

~ Philippians 2:14

Some comments from parishioners:

- It was exciting to see the community all working on the same thing.
- It was challenging, life-changing, but fun.
- Why did you have to do this right now – when I have teen-agers? It's too hard.
- I've stopped associating with some people; I'm critical and complaining when I'm with them.

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Reflections from the parish staff:

- It was surprising – and humbling – how willing people were to share with us what was going on within their lives because of wearing the bracelets.
- Even though many people may never have reached 21 days, no matter how long they tried, each person learned something about themselves ... how to be more Christ-like.

Maybe one day we'll grow weary of whining and
celebrate the rain, the manna,
the half-filled glass of water,
the little gifts from heaven
that make each day bearable.

Instead of cloaking ourselves in the armor
of pessimism,
maybe we'll concede that we are who we are:
capricious, wonderful, delicate, alive. Forgiven.

~ Mark Collins in *On the Road to Emmaus*



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

To order bracelets:

- The bracelets which accompany this 21-day challenge and the book: www.acomplaintfreeworld.org
- Other types of bracelets (Inspirational Sayings Bracelets with words such as *strength, courage, believe*, etc. or jelly bracelets with no writing) can be found at www.OrientalTrading.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*
 - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
 - https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf