



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

# 177 - November 2022

## A View from the Community: Today's Best Practices, Today's Challenges (Part III)

A few years ago, [GEMS #103](#) (July 2019) 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 continued to wonder and ponder: are we really convinced of the primacy and necessity of faith formation for today's adults?

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

Thus, immediately before Covid spread throughout the world, we began a series of issues exploring those questions. [GEMS #109](#) and [#110](#) were published.

- [#109](#) reflected on some signs of growth, some general best practices, in our ministry over the last several years.
- [#110](#) began an exploration of some continuing challenges for areas of development and progression which lie before us for the years ahead.

The third and fourth issues were not published at that time because issues about Covid took precedence. We continue with these two issues now (and next month), knowing, too, that the last three years have presented more challenges (and exciting possibilities).



### Challenge 3: Content, Opportunities, and Delivery Systems Need to be Comprehensive

People's needs are many. Our parishes are, naturally, filled with people at various stages of faith development, people with various life needs, people engaged with the Christian community in differing ways.

Adults today learn in multiple ways. There was a large body of

research conducted during the 1980's about adult learning. The consensus was that roughly 85% of what adults learned at that time was not in a formal setting, classroom, or lecture hall.

That was ten-fifteen years before the Internet. There certainly has been a significant paradigm shift with adult learning today driven by the Internet and since 2007 by the Wiki world (peer to peer sharing). If 85% was the informal percentage in the 1980's, just think what it would be today. What it will be tomorrow?

Part of pastoral planning and programming needs to ensure that in every instance everyone is thinking outside the box and is planning comprehensively. This includes content, opportunities, locations and schedules, and delivery systems, etc. What we've done and the way we've always done it, is not adequate today.

One tool (among many) to help parishes evaluate their present processes and programs, as well as creatively plan for the future is [What Are We Providing for Adult Faith Growth?](#)

As the directions for this process state, looking at the delivery systems is as important as the content. Not every need has to be responded to with a "three-week program" or "a lecture series." There are multiple delivery systems available today. Are we expanding our understanding and conviction of the many ways, places, methods which enable adult learning today?



### Challenge 4: Motivation to learn when facing life's transitions

As crucial as it is to have designed, scheduled opportunities for ongoing adult faith formation in parishes, it is also necessary to be open to the fast-changing reality of life.

For instance, think about your own life and the life of your family. When were the life-changing moments?

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Probably most of them happened outside of “pre-planned” self or family improvement sessions or adult faith formation sessions on various church themes. Upon reflection, most people realize that usually their deepest faith growth occurred during the unpredictable situations – and even crises – of normal, everyday life.

Diane Tickton Schuster (“Placing Adult Jewish Learning at the Center,” *Agenda: Jewish Education JESNA*, Issue #16 Summer 2003), names our reality: “Adulthood is filled with transitions:

- geographic relocations
- family formation and re-formation
- career changes
- empty nests
- unanticipated illness
- divorce
- and the loss of loved ones

In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to ‘finish unfinished business’ or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive educational institutions as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help regain ‘order and stability’ in their lives.”

This reality is also affirmed by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson in *The Adult Learner*, sixth edition. Elsevier, 2005) as they summarize the research which constitutes the foundation of adult learning theory:

- The orientation of adults “to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.
- Experience is the richest resource for adults’ learning; therefore the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.”

As crucial as congregations are at these times of transitions, Rex Miller (*The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church* Jossey-

Bass, 2004) reminds us that our response, our walking with people during transitions, takes many forms; it’s not only “information.”

Thus, the task for parishes is to be aware of all the transitions which are touching the lives of people today. Since adult faith formation is all-encompassing, what are the

- programs
- processes
- support
- resources
- and even challenges

which people need during the various transition times?

“Discipleship is not a small group or classroom project.  
It is a lab project,  
a choreographed dance,  
an art taught under the eye of a master.”

- Rex Miller



## Challenge 5: The quest for spirituality, for a living faith

All we need do is listen to today’s adults for five minutes and it becomes obvious that they are searching for ways to:

- connect faith and life
- experience God
- live spiritually and faithfully in their everyday world
- probe for ways to answer – and live – the questions of the day.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

People are searching for life, for living – not simply knowing.

In *The Future of Faith: The Rise and Fall of Belief and the Coming Age of the Spirit* (HarperOne, 2009), Harvey Cox divides church history into three ages: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and the Age of the Spirit.

- The Age of Faith (the time of Jesus to 400): Christianity was a way of life based upon faith (trust *in* Jesus)
- The Age of Belief (400 – 1900): A period of emphasis on creeds and beliefs (belief *about* Jesus)
- The Age of the Spirit (1900 – today): A Christianity based on an experience *of* Jesus. This time is also concerned about *practicing* the faith, rather than simply *knowing about* it.

The findings related in the book, *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Churches* (Gallup Press, 2002), reiterate this: “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 all 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.”

In *Christianity After Religion* (HarperOne, 2012), Diana Butler Bass reminds us: “Belief is not going to disappear, and it will not become a relic of the religious past. Rather, as religion gives way to spirituality, the question of belief shifts from *what* to *how*. ... *What* is not the issue – the world of religion is full of *what*. Instead, they have asked *how*. Belief questions have become

- ‘How do you believe?’
- ‘How could I ever believe?’
- ‘How does this make sense?’
- ‘How would believing this make my life different?’
- ‘How would this change the world?’

... *How* moves us around in the question. Instead of being above the information, giving an expert opinion about something, *how* weaves our lives with the information as we receive, renew, reflect, and act upon what we sought. *How* provides actionable information... *How* is a question of meaning and purpose that pushes people into a deeper engagement in the world, rather than memorizing facts.”

**What does all this mean for parish life and for adult faith formation?**

Many things! A few:

- When we plan for adult faith formation, where do we begin: with church questions or life questions?
- Does every opportunity of adult faith formation help or challenge people to ask the “so what” question? What does this have to do with my everyday life? What am I going to do about it?
- The quest for spirituality, for living what I know, is the search today. Do all our opportunities engage people in that quest?



Janet Schaeffler, OP  
[www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com)  
[jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org](mailto:jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org)

Past issues of **GEMS**  
are archived at [www.janetschaeffler.com](http://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>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Studio: <https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com/>
- Seasons of Adult Faith website: <https://www.seasonsofadultfaith.com>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
  - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
  - [https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons\\_of\\_faith\\_journal\\_special\\_issue.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_faith_journal_special_issue.pdf)