



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Approaches that Have Worked

The late religious educator Maria Harris wrote in her 1989 (and still used) book *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*: “the church doesn’t have an educational program; it is an educational program. ... The parish is the curriculum for faith formation.”

The U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter on adult faith formation, *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*, continue to remind us of that reality: “The parish is the curriculum.” (#122)

What does that mean? Curriculum can mean “course of study,” or it can mean, in a broader sense, “the sum total of learning experiences in the local situation.”

When the average person in the pew thinks of “everything I have done in my life/I have experienced as a Catholic parishioner has helped my faith to grow and deepen” what comes to mind? Hopefully, their reflections surface multiple and varied ways they learned about and experienced God, the meaning of church, and ways to live the Gospel values today.

Everything we do teaches! The “curriculum” for our faith is the whole of our church’s life. Today we continue to learn the way the church has always learned for the past twenty centuries through:

- Koinonia (community)
- Lieturgia (prayer and worship)
- Didache (teaching)
- Keyyigma (proclamation)
- Diakonia (outreach)

Everything about parish life is formative; everything we do teaches. People learn something about who we are, about what we believe about God, about church and living as a disciple in our world today through all parish life: all that we do; the ways that we pray, all that we say.



Gerd Altmann/Pixabay

At a recent gathering of adult faith formation coordinators, pastors and parish pastoral staff, we brainstormed “things that are working.” Several of them are listed below (in no particular order or grouping). Many of them are simple practices but can make a significant difference in the lives of people.

- Which ones are working for your parish?
 - Are there some new ones which you might implement?
 - Which group(s) in the parish might help you discern which ones are best for your parishioners?
- Make relationships and cultivating community the priority. Small ways make significant impact.
 - For parishioners who have experienced the death of a family member: create a list, make personal phone calls to each parishioner. There is not a need to say a great deal; ask how they are doing and if there is any support that the parish can provide. Listen.
 - Reach out and do simple and kind things for people who are struggling. One example: A “spiritual bouquet” of cards/letters for someone who is ill.

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- Help people recognize where God is working in their lives. Share stories of faith/witness with others. Give people the opportunity to reflect and make connections in their own life. Use one-on-one conversations, small groups, and faith-sharing time during larger “programs.”
- Be present to people. It helps diminish the isolation, fatigue, and loss that many experience (often quietly).
- Create a list of trusted resources to share with people seeking or needing help (e.g., mental health professionals, career counseling, food bank information).
- Call or send notes to young couples recently engaged to congratulate them.
- Invite young people together for fun socials and/or experiences that engage them and teach them about life in a parish community. One example: Sundaes on Sunday.
- Be deliberate about and plan how to help people at different stages/places in their faith journey. No one-size-fits-all strategy. Think of the stages/places – and how you can care for/invite each group.
- Don't think of the parish as a campus/building. Think about it as a territory. Identify neighborhoods. Choose a leader for each neighborhood. Encourage leaders to invite people from the parish to their home or to a small social. Plan neighborhood gatherings.
- Solicit and discern feedback on people's “parish experiences” (e.g., what does someone who comes to Mass for the first-time experience?).

- Involve and support parents in the faith formation of their children, recognizing that parents are the primary teacher.
- Continue the “Faith in a Box” program which many parishes initiated during the pandemic. Provide a kit with materials parents need to share faith at home. Create a weekly video for them to reference/use. Include age-appropriate materials for each family. Some samples:
 - [Advent in a Box](#)
 - [Lent in a Bag](#)
 - [Lent-in-a-Bag](#)
 - [Holy Week in a Box](#)
 - [Live-It Kits](#)



Buildfaith.org/ Pinterest

- Remember the power of prayer in healing, support, and building community. Set up a weekly prayer session by Zoom for the parish and beyond.

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- In my parish, cards were sent out to any bereaved family just before November, acknowledging their loss and assuring families of Mass/prayer being offered during the month and listing their names in a sacred space.
- Follow up with graduating seniors. What are they up to now? Using just a couple of paragraphs, share with the parish.
- We launched an outreach that was a phone call mission centered around a parish holy hour, calling it “Mission of the HEART.” It was to call to every parishioner asking for prayer intentions. These intentions are then brought to a parish Holy Hour.



Photo by Đức Trinh on Unsplash

- On our parish website we have a link to submit prayer requests. At the end of the day, at around 8:55, our pastor does a one-way video chat with us to pray together, including the requests.
- Invite people celebrating anniversaries or significant birthdays to the altar for a blessing.
- Invite people to the rectory for a meal - “Dine with 9” (or maybe Wine and Cheese). Pastor hosts nine parishioners for dinner in the rectory (paying attention to different age groups, marital status, etc.).

- Acknowledge sacramental anniversaries with a note from the parish.
- Provide training and formation for all leaders. Have written expectations for staff and volunteer leaders on what hospitality is, what their role is in it.
- Plan for hospitality in every parish event or initiative (e.g., use greeters).
- Create a centralized location for information and signups.
- Use a Parish Welcome Team/Phone-Tree to check in with and make invitations to newly registered parishioners/prospective parishioners (the caller can serve as an anchor/mentor for the new parishioner).
- Schedule pastoral follow-up to check in with parishioners after important life events (e.g. in the weeks following a funeral).
- Use social media to put Sunday’s readings in front of parishioners and to reinforce the Sunday message on Monday and Tuesday.
- Create Wiggle Cards for children attending Mass (faith-themed coloring cards and colored pencils) that also have information for parents on faith formation resources.

Previous GEMS issues

You might want to check these past issues of GEMS for other ideas, practices, and success stories:

- ❖ [A Royal Welcome: Secrets of Belonging](#) (GEMS #3–9, 46–48, 56-58)
- ❖ [The Sunday-Monday Connection](#)
- ❖ [A Process for Gathering Parishioners for a Parish Book Study](#)

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- ❖ [Empowering the Living of Gifts](#)
- ❖ [Do-It-Yourself Evening of Reflection](#)
- ❖ [One Word](#)
- ❖ [It Happens at Home](#)
- ❖ [A Digital Lent and Device Sunday](#)
- ❖ [A Busy Person's Retreat](#)
- ❖ [The Parish Bulletin as Adult Faith Formation](#)
- ❖ [Reaching Out to Empty-Nesters](#)
- ❖ [Advent by Candlelight \(In-person and virtual\)](#)
- ❖ [A Lenten Conversion Experience – No Complaining](#)
- ❖ [Becoming a Trauma-Informed Parish](#)



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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>
- 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