



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#211 - April 1, 2024

A Best Practice: Discerning Needs with an Empathy Map

One of the foundational principles for helpful, successful faith formation of adults (from all lifestyles, schedules, and times of life) is our response to their real needs.

In **GEMS** issues #91-96 we explored various ways to continually and constantly do needs discernment with our parishioners.

This issue describes one way that is used in many settings today. An empathy map is a visual tool designed to help individuals or teams gain a deeper understanding of the people they serve by mapping out their thoughts and feelings. It is particularly useful in discerning needs and improving empathy towards the target audience.

Empathy maps, a visual representation of what your parishioners think, help you empathize with their perspective and uncover their hidden assumptions, emotions, and goals. Empathy maps are usually created in a collaborative workshop with your team and selected parishioners, using sticky notes, whiteboards, or online tools.

The empathy map typically consists of four main quadrants:

<i>EMPATHY MAP</i>	
FEELING/THINKING	SEEING
HEARING	SAYING/DOING

Thinking and Feeling:

- What are our parishioners' thoughts and emotions?
- What is going on in their mind? What are they concerned about?
- What are they thinking: their convictions and beliefs?

➤ We can't read parishioners' thoughts, so this requires some general deduction based on context clues. Our adults might not always articulate what they feel, but the other three quadrants might tell us they're feeling annoyed, frustrated, confused, hopeful, searching, etc.

➤ Consider the learners' thoughts and emotions related to the learning experience. What are their motivations for learning? Are there any anxieties or concerns?

Seeing:

- What do our adults see in their environment?
- What are the external factors influencing them?

➤ Explore the learners' environment and the context in which they will be engaging with the learning materials. Consider aspects such as available resources, time constraints, and potential distractions.

Hearing:

- What are our adults hearing from others or from the environment?
- Are there specific messages or conversations that impact them?

➤ Understand the sources of information or influence for the learners. What kind of feedback or guidance are they likely to receive from peers, mentors, or other sources?

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Saying and Doing:

- What expressions, both verbally and non-verbally, do our adults use?
- What are they saying about their lives, faith, and spirituality?
- What actions do they take? How do they behave in certain situations?
- What are they doing or how are they living: their actions and behaviors?

- This can include direct quotes from the participants, from adults in your parish. It also refers to the actions of parishioners that are observable in ordinary life, and/or behaviors exhibited during a practice session of your empathy map process.
- Examine the learners' expressions and actions in the learning context. What are their preferred learning styles? How do they typically approach new information or challenges?

How to create empathy maps

Using an empathy map involves gathering information through direct observations, interviews, or feedback from parishioners. The goal is to fill in each quadrant with insights related to their experience. By doing so, we create a comprehensive picture of their needs, motivations, and pain points.

The Steps of Using an Empathy Map in Adult Faith Formation Planning

Empathy maps, a valuable tool in understanding the needs, experiences, and perspectives of individuals, can be applied to various contexts, including adult faith formation. Here's a step-by-step guide on how to use empathy maps in this context:

Establish goals

Before we start empathy mapping, it's essential to define our goals. What do we want to achieve throughout the empathy mapping session? Are we looking to improve the adult learning experience for our parishioners? Are we trying to solve a problem, or identify new opportunities?

It's easy to get side-tracked and/or go in many different directions during empathy mapping sessions, but understanding our goals will help us keep the session focused and result in a much more refined (and relevant) empathy map.

Define the Audience

Once we've established our goals, it's time to define our audience. Who is our target group? What are their characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes?

We might want to get a general picture of all our adults. Or we might want to focus on a certain demographic group, e.g. older adults; married couples; parents of young children, etc.

- This could be based on demographics, behaviors, or specific characteristics.
- We might want to consider factors such as their age, background, prior knowledge, and learning preferences.

Gather research

With our goals and audience defined, it's time to gather our research. There are various methods for gathering research, including interviews, observations, and surveys. Conducting interviews is an excellent way to gather qualitative data and understand the goals, pain points, and motivations of your parishioners.

Another excellent method is a brainstorming session. Invite and gather a diverse group of "stakeholders," including

- the adult faith formation committee
- program designers
- catechists of adults
- representatives from the target audience

Use open-ended questions or prompts to elicit responses that provide insights into the thoughts, feelings, actions, and environment of your parish's adults. Engage with your audience through interviews, surveys, or other methods to collect qualitative data.

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Seek to understand their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and experiences related to faith and spiritual growth. Encourage participants to share anecdotes, experiences, and preferences related to their everyday life as well as their experiences of adult learning.

Create Empathy Map Sections

Divide your empathy map into key sections that represent different aspects of the individual's experience. Common sections include

- Thinking/Feeling
- Seeing
- Hearing
- Saying/Doing
- Pains/Gains

<i>EMPATHY MAP</i>	
<i>FEELING/THINKING</i>	<i>SEEING</i>
<i>HEARING</i>	<i>SAYING/DOING</i>
<i>PAIN POINTS</i>	<i>GAIN POINTS</i>

Complete Each Section

Based on your gathered information, fill in each section of the empathy map. Use quotes, anecdotes, or specific examples to capture the essence of what participants are expressing.

Populate each quadrant with insights gathered from your research or discussion. Use post-it notes, drawings, or other visual aids to represent specific observations or statements related to each quadrant.

Analysis and Action

Once the empathy map is complete, analyze the information to identify common themes, patterns, trends, and key needs of your audience. Identify shared struggles, or aspirations that emerge from the empathy maps. Use these insights to inform the design, development, or improvement of adult faith formation opportunities, including content, delivery methods, and assessment strategies.

Identify Pain Points and Gains

Pay special attention to the "Pain" and "Gain" sections. Empathy maps typically include both pain points and gain points as crucial components. Pain points and gain points are terms commonly used to understand the negative and positive aspects of a person's experience.

Identify the challenges or pain points your parishioners face in their faith journey, as well as the positive aspects or gains they hope to achieve and grow in.

- Pain points represent the challenges, difficulties, or frustrations that adults may encounter in their experience. These are obstacles that can hinder a smooth and satisfying interaction with their faith or a learning opportunity. Identifying pain points helps designers and catechists address issues and improve the overall faith formation experience.
- Gain points highlight the positive aspects, benefits, or moments of delight that adults may experience. These are the aspects that contribute to a positive experience of faith and/or faith formation, making the interaction more enjoyable, rewarding, or fulfilling.

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Identifying gain points allows designers and catechists to build on strengths and enhance the positive aspects of the experience.

When creating an empathy map, pain points and gain points are often captured in the "Think and Feel" and "Say and Do" quadrants. Explore the verbal and non-verbal expressions, actions, and behaviors associated with both challenges and positive moments. This can include what your parishioners say about their experiences and how they react in certain situations.

By explicitly highlighting pain points and gain points within the empathy map, adult faith formation leaders and parishioners gain a comprehensive understanding of their faith journey. This understanding becomes a foundation for making informed decisions, refining processes and programs and creating learning opportunities that address the people's needs and preferences while minimizing obstacles.

Prioritize Needs and Goals

Based on your analysis, prioritize the needs and goals of your adults – or that target group of adults which you are focusing on. Understand what is most important to them in their faith formation journey.

Develop Customized Programs

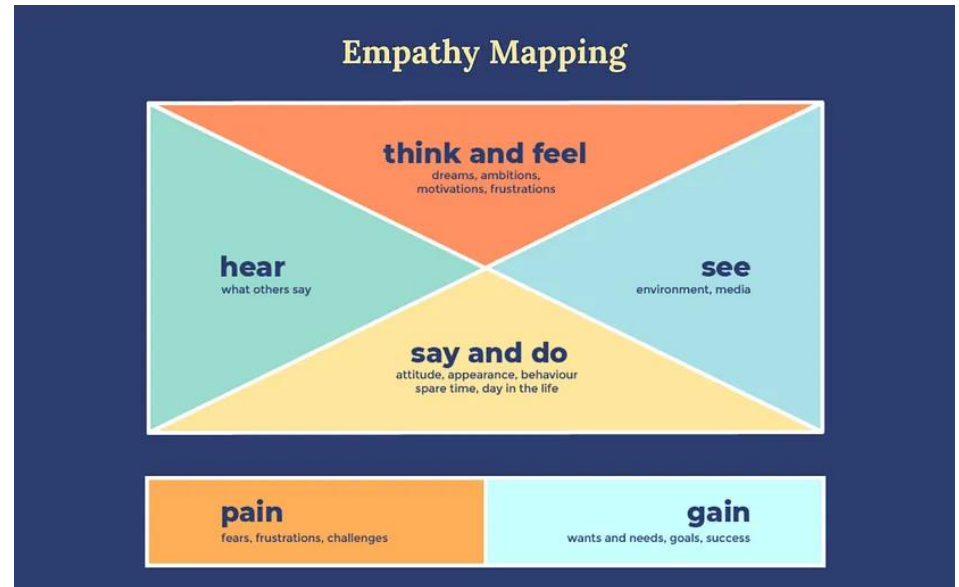
Once you've created and refined your empathy map, all this new information needs to be distilled into action points. With a clearer understanding of your adults and their needs - and how parish life and all its opportunities can support them - you can review and refine your approaches for adult faith formation.

Use the insights gained from the empathy maps to tailor your adult faith formation programs. Create initiatives that address the identified needs and goals, ensuring that your offerings resonate with the experiences of your target audience.

Implement Feedback Loops

As you introduce and implement your adult faith formation programs, incorporate feedback loops to continually assess their effectiveness. This could involve regular check-ins, surveys, or focus groups to gather ongoing insights.

Use this feedback to iterate and refine your adult faith formation offerings, ensuring ongoing alignment with your parishioners' evolving needs.



Adapt and Evolve:

Be flexible and willing to adapt your programs based on ongoing feedback and changing needs. Adult faith formation is a dynamic process, and adjustments may be necessary to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

At the same time, because empathy maps are iterative tools, we may need to update them as we gather more information or as our programs evolve. They can help to create an on-going shared understanding among team members and facilitate a user-centered approach in decision-making.

Why are empathy maps important?

Applying an empathy map in planning adult learning opportunities

- enhances the learner-centric approach
- leads to more engaging, relevant, and effective faith formation experiences

In using empathy maps, we can gain a deeper understanding of the needs and aspirations of our adult parishioners, allowing us to create more meaningful and impactful faith formation experiences.

Empathy maps help us to create a picture of our adult learners that is based on real data and insights, not on stereotypes or assumptions. These “pictures” represent the different types of people who are affected by or involved in our parish and our adult faith formation programs.

They help us

- define our target audience
- prioritize their needs
- design programs and processes that meet their expectations

Empathy maps also help us communicate better with our parishioners, because we can tailor our messages and feedback to their preferences, their gain points and their pain points.



Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com
jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org

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_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf