



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#96 – December 2018

A Best Practice: Needs Assessment (Part VI)

For the last five issues we have been reflecting on the necessity of offering adult faith formation flowing from the needs of the people. Countless adult faith formation leaders remind us of this requisite:

- “Contrary to what we might hope, the lives of most Catholics are not deeply influenced by religious social structures that touch their lives. Rather, they are impacted by economic, work-related, and family-focused issues.” (Matthew Hayes in “The Challenge to Be Relevant and Effective: A Response to The Social and Cultural Content of Adult Religious Education”)
- “Within its evangelizing mission, the Church seeks to assist people to integrate their faith in all aspects of their lives and to reach a level of spiritual development that will serve them well no matter what situation or question they may encounter.

Comfort the afflicted,
and afflict the comfortable.

Finley Peter Dunne

...this need for ongoing catechesis becomes clear as a person goes through a transition in life, such as entering into marriage or becoming a parent. At other times, a crisis may become a catalyst for re-examining one's life, such as when a loved one dies suddenly or one is diagnosed with a terminal illness.” (*On Good Soil*, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, #42)

As crucial as responding to the needs of the people is, we also have to ask another question: Is there a time and place for providing opportunities which parishioners haven't requested? Perhaps because:

- they don't know they need it
- they don't want to talk about it
- they don't want to be challenged to view things in a different way

Is it the role of leadership to raise awareness and consciousness, to invite people to go a little deeper, a little broader? Are there times when the church, the parish leadership, in being faithful to the Gospel, realizes that there are issues that need to be explored? Might there be times when our views on God, Scripture, holiness, spirituality, morality and ethics, the common good, etc. need to be expanded, even challenged?

Are there issues which today's Catholic needs to explore – within a faith context – which they might not initially see as relevant to their everyday lives, for instance:

- immigration
- universal health care
- the gap between the rich and poor
- climate change
- racism
- the death penalty

Finley Peter Dunne, a humorist, coined the phrase "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Dunne placed it in the mouth of his character, Mr. Dooley who was talking about the role of newspapers, but it very appropriately describes the role of the parish, the role of adult faith formation.

Thus, the role of adult faith formation – as all realities within our faith – is not either/or but always both/and. Responding to the needs, the everyday lives of our parishioners is imperative; at the same time, the Gospel is always challenging. We need to be faithful to Jesus' call to always be more, to be counter-cultural, to make a significant difference within our society.

During the celebration of the Year of Mercy, after a program in a parish, a gentleman stopped to thank me and then said, “But – as I said to the people at my table – I shouldn't have come. Because now I know that I still have a lot to do, a lot to work on. You know, it's like ‘what you don't know won't challenge you.’”

The role of adult faith formation: to link faith and everyday life as well as to continually stretch and challenge to growth, to new ways of seeing, to committed ways of living as a disciple.

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This lengthy quote from Diana Butler Bass provides much reflection for us as leaders in adult faith formation:

“Part of your job is to navigate between two tensions:

1. *Do you accommodate or challenge the congregation’s views on God, the Bible, holiness, ethics, and spirituality? Is your job to comfort or discomfort them?*

2. *Do you follow what they think they need or what you and the clergy think is needed?*

These are not either-or choices, but represent the poles around which you must make some decisions.

At the parish where I served, for example, I typically accommodated the congregation when it came to style (as a Washington, DC area congregation, my parish had great respect for well-educated experts; I invited many highly qualified guest professors to lead classes), but I always challenged them in terms of theological content or Christian practice. I tried to both comfort and disturb the congregation at the same time.

“Religious education that insulates us from the problems and potential of the global village in which we live does not follow Jesus’ example.”

Linda J. Vogel
*Teaching and Learning in
Communities of Faith:
Empowering Adults through
Religious Education*

Although I listened for what the congregation wanted theologically, I made the decision to usually follow clergy and leadership preference when choosing content. I chose bible study materials or theological works that supported the ministry of the Word as presented in the pulpit.

I always picked materials that pushed people to new understandings of the Bible and theology – or toward embracing new practices of faith. But it all came wrapped in a navy blue Washington suit.

These are self-conscious choices based on issues of congregational development and the theological vision of the clergy staff—choices encouraged by a colleague at another congregation. As we discussed the role of adult formation, my friend, Scott, said, ‘You know, Diana, in privileged churches like ours, our job is NOT to provide spiritual enrichment, to create more privilege. Rather, our job is to challenge and provoke so that the Holy Spirit may transform us.’”

Scott stated it so clearly: enrichment or transformation?

Some parishes, particularly those in minority, disadvantaged, or struggling communities, need enrichment.

Mine, however, was already rich. It needed God’s transforming power. So, I opted to discomfort them with content that the leadership thought necessary for change.

Adult Formation was lively and controversial – and always risky – but it also forwarded the overall mission and vision of the parish. Certainly it is possible – and sometimes desirable – to make less unsettling choices.” (“Process, Not Program: Adult Faith Formation for Vital Churches.” https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/renmod_adultfaith_reader.pdf)

Likewise, in the NCCL document, *Nurturing Adult Faith: A Manual for Parish Leaders*, Kristina Krimm, Jane A. Pierron, David M. Riley state: “In addition to the felt needs of parishioners, the parish leadership also has a responsibility to listen to the call of the Spirit in the community and to challenge parishioners with educational opportunities that further the mission of the church. This ‘mission’ factor constitutes another source of ‘need.’ Ideally the personal needs of individuals and the needs of the church can be blended together into sound programming.

In other words, programming for adult faith formation must not only be ‘market driven’ but must also arise from the parish leadership. The responsibility of parish leadership includes the Gospel mandate to be prophetic and to be in touch with the agenda of the larger church beyond the parish. ...

Planning for adult faith formation, then, is a complex and delicate process that must take into account several areas of ‘need.’”

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Wondering GEMS:

- Does your parish accommodate or challenge, enrich or transform? Both?
- Would you describe your parish as spiritually privileged or disadvantaged?
- Do your parishioners need comfort or discomfort in order to deepen their commitment to God and one another?
- Does your theological vision and spiritual commitment (and that of the pastoral staff) resonate - or differ - with that of the parish?
- What topics/themes are the people not asking for, but are needed to live as disciples in today's world?
- What types of resources would best serve your parishioners? What kinds of resources would be helpful when they are searching for comfort/enrichment? What types of resources could you use when they might need to be gently challenged/transformed?



Adding New Luster to an Old Gem

In the past we have explored welcome and hospitality in [several issues](#). It's an endeavor which we can always deepen and strengthen in our parishes. Some more ideas:

- Easier Hospitality:
<http://www.ecfvp.org/blogs/952/easier-hospitality>
- Your Call is Very Important to Us:
<https://seths.blog/2013/06/your-call-is-very-important-to-us/>
- Living Hospitality:
<http://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/81/living-hospitality>

- Amp Up Your Hospitality:
<http://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/79/amp-up-your-hospitality>
- I'm a Church Greeter ... and an Evangelist:
<https://www.buildfaith.org/church-greeter-evangelist/>
- Radical Welcome: Embracing the Other:
<http://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/138/radical-welcome-embracing-the-other>



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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>