



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#20 - June/July 2012

A Best Practice: A Retreat by Parishioners for Parishioners

- ❖ A young man with a broken heart...
- ❖ A murder takes on new meaning...
- ❖ Life keeps throwing curves for a couple...

Does that sound similar to your life?

Come hear stories, share, pray, reflect, heal, celebrate...

Begin this new year, by renewing
and strengthening your relationship with Jesus.



This parish knew that it is in the everyday lives of people, especially:

- **transition times**
- **life-changing events**
- **times of questions and doubt**
- **journeys of suffering and healing**

that people are in need, that people are ready for growth.

St. Paul Parish, Phoenix, Arizona, knew that what is supportive and healing for people is

- the companionship of community
- the stories of others
- their relationship with Jesus.

This month's best practice describes the wisdom and experience of St. Paul Parish shining forth, especially in this one best practice: **a Retreat for Parishioners by Parishioners.**

Where did the idea originate?

Mary Ann Ronan, Director of Faith Formation and Coordinator of Adult Education at St. Paul Parish, and the Adult Faith Formation Committee had heard and read about several other parishes doing retreats at the parish for families, for adults. Usually these took place over the course of a week-end.

Understanding the schedules and commitments of their parishioners, Mary Ann and the committee knew this would not work for them, so they went about adapting and creating a format to meet the needs of their parishioners.

What was the purpose/goal of the retreat?

Knowing that, at times, life can be chaotic, there are questions facing each and everyone, and the support and “answers” are found in community and faith, this retreat experience was planned as a respite, a time away – yet immersed within their supportive parish family – for parishioners to experience the healing love and strength of Jesus and the Body of Christ.

Are times of transition simply chaotic periods
that we have to survive as best we can,
or might they mean more
- much more – than that?

Might they actually be times when something
radically new is gestating within us and
painfully coming to birth?

- Margaret Silf in
*The Other Side of Chaos: Breaking
Through When Life is Breaking Down*

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What was the time frame and schedule of the retreat?

The retreat took place on a Saturday morning from 7:45 am until 12:15 pm. A continental breakfast was available at 7:45, with the first session beginning at 8:15 am.

In their inaugural year, St. Paul Parish offered its first retreat in January (with sixty-two participants) and the second retreat in February (with sixty-nine parishioners). For the following year, two retreats are planned for the fall and two for January/February.

The schedule for the retreat included:

7:45: Continental Breakfast

8:15: Welcome/Prayer

8:20: First Presentation: Journey of Faith

8:45: Group Sharing in Triads

- Share a turning point in your life.
- What or who has influenced you in your journey?

9:15: Break

9:25: Second Presentation: Dying in Christ

9:45: Group Sharing in Triads

- Share a time you most needed Christ's mercy.

10:00: Reconciliation Service (Five priests were present to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the service.)

10:40: Third Presentation: Living Christ

10:50: Group Sharing in Triads

- As you reflect on your life, what needs to change?
- What will you do to live Christ now?

11:10: Evaluation

11:20: Celebration of the Eucharist

Listening to each other's stories opens us up to the possibility of encountering God in our midst through "the other."

God can stretch us and teach us something new.

- Scott Hackman

What were the themes of the three presentations?

The morning began with "**Journey of Faith**," a sharing of a twenty-one year old's life journey which included:

- being born with a congenital heart problem and having a procedure, "the transposition of the great vessels"
- having an arterial switch at eleven days old
- at three months old having a double bypass (having had a heart attack between eleven days and three months)
- discovering a leaky valve at age 16
- at age 17 having a heart transplant

Throughout his twenty-minute presentation, what came through continually and constantly was Stephen's and his family's reliance on the support of the people and staff of St. Paul Parish and his/their awareness of the presence of God throughout all the ups and downs of his life.

"**Dying in Christ**," the theme of the second presentation, shared a story of loss and grief. Ann Marie told how her grandmother, mother and sister left her when she was small, and the story of her mother coming back into her life in her adult years.

Her loss and grief continued, though, because of divorce and the murder of her son. Through her unfolding story, Ann Marie shared how her relationship with God sustained her in the midst of loss/death. Her new life today, built on a journey of suffering to faith, is one of deep and committed discipleship.

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The third and concluding session, “**Life in Christ,**” was presented by a couple as they shared their life stories, dedicated to service for others. Mike shared that from his earliest days as a paper boy, he saw the face of Christ in all the people he met.

When he came to St. Paul Parish, he knew right away that he wanted to be engaged in youth and outreach. He has participated in mission trips, Justice Walking with teens, JustFaith Ministries, etc. Service has always been a part of his life.

Mike was diagnosed with cancer ten years ago and knew – even more – that he had to dedicate his life to living as Christ for the world. Linda picked up from him that living as Christ for the world, and doing this together would always mean a deeper connection to Christ. For them, every minute and hour count to being Christ for the world. The more service in their lives draw themselves, their children and the parish together and make them strong in faith to face an uncertain time left. Mike is facing more surgery and radiation.

These were the three shared presentations for the first two retreats. This “team of three” was the presenters for both retreats. Next year’s retreats will have different teams of presenters, thus the themes/content of the presentations will change – because they will be **people’s life stories**.

We have been destined
from all eternity to bring one another
closer to God by our love, by our patience,
by our forbearance
and our efforts at mutual understanding.

- Thomas Merton

A Note about the Third Group Sharing

In addition to the discussion questions for the triads:

- Worksheets were provided for each participant, if they found them to be helpful.

These worksheets listed the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, providing room for the participants to:

- write their own definitions for each work of mercy
- write a plan for loving – an idea of something they might incorporate into their lives, based on each work of mercy

THE CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

The work of love	My own definition	My plan for loving
<i>Feed the hungry</i>		
<i>Give drink to the thirsty</i>		
<i>Clothe the naked</i>		
<i>Shelter the homeless</i>		
<i>Visit the sick</i>		
<i>Visit those in prison</i>		
<i>Bury the dead</i>		

THE SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY

The work of love	My own definition	My plan for loving
<i>Convert the sinner</i>		
<i>Instruct the ignorant</i>		
<i>Counsel the doubtful</i>		
<i>Comfort the sorrowful</i>		
<i>Bear wrongs patiently</i>		
<i>Forgive injuries</i>		
<i>Pray for the living and dead</i>		

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- Commitment cards were also given to each person. When they were ready, they were invited to write down what they were going to do as a result of the day and the journey that lay ahead for them.

After they had time for reflection and writing, they were invited to share something of their commitment with their triad group.

MY COMMITMENT

___ I will pray with more intention.

___ I will pray with the Scriptures.

___ I will do my St. Paul ministry with new heart and spirit.

___ I will commit to this spiritual work of mercy:

___ I will commit to this corporal work of mercy: _____

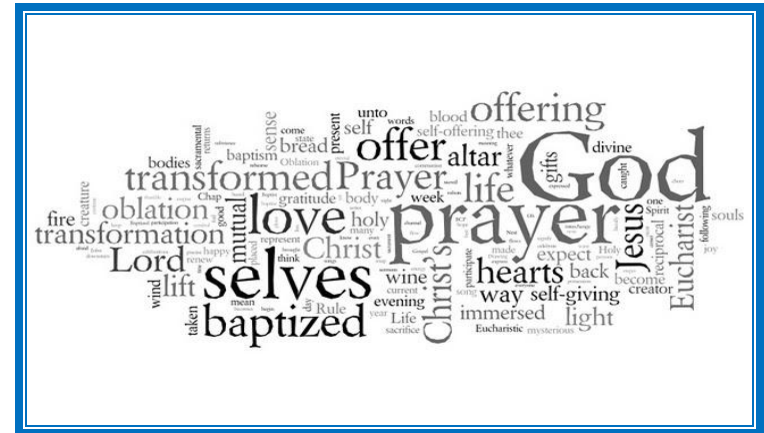
___ I will _____

These commitment cards were placed in baskets during the Preparation of the Gifts at the celebration of the Eucharist which concluded the retreat morning.

Wordles

After the three Triad sharing times, each group was invited to think of and share one word or phrase that best described their group's reflection/discussion/experience.

One of the committee members immediately took these words/phrases and created a *Wordle*. (See <http://www.wordle.net/>)



These *Wordles* brought each session to a close as well as enabling the facilitators and presenters to use them in building on the following talks.

The participants loved and appreciated them because it was their words showing the fruit of their discussions.

During the week following the retreat, the committee sent to the participants:

- all the *Wordles* from the retreat
- including a final one
- as well as questions for reflection which they could use with the *Wordles* for Lent

Evaluation

Prior to celebrating liturgy, the participants were asked for their thoughts and suggestions to help the committee as planning continued for future retreats. They were asked to complete:

- What captured your imagination?
- What did you like most?
- What needs changing?
- I would also like to say....

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What Motivated People to Participate in the Retreats?

In asking Mary Ann and the committee this question, their feelings – from knowing their people – are:

- It touched real life
- The advertising was creative in reaching out to different groups, ages, needs; in using many ways to help get people there: website, bulletin, pulpit announcements, bring friends, etc.
- The picture of Christ used in the publicity (inviting, compassionate)
- No cost (donations accepted)
- Child care was provided for those who needed it
- Their own parishioners giving the retreat
- Many people participated in the second retreat because they were touched/encouraged by the stories of those from the first retreat

Who did attend?

There were all ages from young adults, middle age, seniors, married couples, and singles.

What did the participants say about their experience?

- I am in awe of members of my community.
- These journeys of faith, give me strength in my journey; I am never alone.
- Meeting new people and sharing stories helped me feel closer to my parish.
- The fact that four people from all walks of life were willing to share their stories lifts me up.
- Mike's line: "I saw Christ in them even though they are different from me." Such a great example to me of how not to judge but live open to all who Christ sends me.
- We have a blessed community of faith – YES.
- Sharing at our tables was profound, as the stories told.

- I have not been to confession in 17 years!
- I am free and humbled to have this community.
- Open, engaging and insightful – I am blessed to go out and bless others.
- The Penance Service was so helpful: Have you ever blown out someone's light?
- Sharing at the table and realizing we all have a story to tell that has led us to deeper faith.

God wants to reach out to others
through your hands.
God wants to speak to others through your lips,
and God wants others to look
into your eyes and see Him

... give God permission.

- John Cardinal O'Connor

As a staff, what did you think made this opportunity meaningful/successful?

- This retreat connected everyday lives to faith.
- This opportunity illustrated how the life of Christ is in people's lives and in the life of the parish.
- This communal gathering touched the hearts of parishioners to reach out and touch others.

As staff, what do you think some of the effects of this offering were/have been?

- People are still talking about it.
- The parishioners who presented say that every Sunday they have

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someone approach them with a “thank you” or a story from their own lives.

- Participation in this Saturday retreat has fostered increased interest and participation in other parish activities: Scripture Study, Stations of the Cross, etc.
- In other groups you hear people talking about it and saying, “Don’t forget to go next year, it was the best thing I did for myself this year.”

A Reflecting/Reflective GEM

As with any/all adult faith formation opportunities, there are no “one size fits all” approaches. This retreat morning might not appeal to every adult; it might not fit the pastoral plan and goals for every parish.

Why did it work for St. Paul Parish; why might it work for your parish? Perhaps, many reasons; let’s just reflect on a few.

C. S. Lewis once said, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, ‘What! You, too? I thought I was the only one.’”

Perhaps the same is true of our faith journey. Do we, at times, think that we might be the only ones experiencing questions, doubts, difficult times, sufferings, worries, losses, disappointments, grief?

- Does a whole world open when we hear another person speak of something similar to what we might have experienced/are experiencing?
- Does our understanding of God, our experience of God, expand and deepen, become enriched when we listen to other people’s experiences of God?

In listening to, in sharing faith stories with one another:

- the journeys we have traveled
- the times of “death”
- the experiences of resurrection

- the living of all the times: the struggles as well as the joys

we understand and recognize that we live the fullness of the Paschal Mystery, all of it.

No one believes purely on his own. ...
We do not “have” faith, in the sense that
it is primarily God who gives it to us.

Nor do we “have” it either, in the sense that
it must be invented by us.
We must let ourselves fall, so to speak,
into the communion of faith,
of the Church.

- Pope Benedict XVI

This appreciation – of the full journey of life - often comes in sharing our stories together. Alone we often get stuck in the “dying” parts, the difficulties, the questions, the losses. Together we understand, experience and live death and resurrection.

There is an ancient proverb which says, “It is in the shelter of each other that people live.”

- The lives shared during the St. Paul Parish retreat had been lives sheltered by faith-companions, strengthened by God’s constant presence.
- Their three stories – and the stories of each person present – continued to shelter and call forth for one another a deepening sense of life, a growing faith, a developing commitment to living discipleship.

The power of community, of belonging to the communion of faith!



Golden Nuggets From You

“When properly done, program evaluations, ([GEMS #17](#)) while really a part of quality assurance, are even more a part of hospitality for two reasons.

First, we are asking each participant for his/her feedback on key aspects of the course, event, or program. In doing so, we are telling the participant that her or his experience with and input matter.

Second, hospitality demands that we do something with the evaluation data. This year, our Catholic Educators’ Faith Conference has several new features, all of which came from feedback provided in the evaluations. In sharing the new format, I made sure to include the fact that the changes came from requests from the “consumers.” As a result there is a lot of interest and energy surrounding the program.

Sometimes, perhaps often, we may not be able to make changes. Hospitality would require that the feedback, in those cases, at least be acknowledged and that, if possible, some explanation as to why some things are not changing should be offered.”

- *Lawrence F. Duffany, Jr., Director of School Support Services and Teacher Faith Formation, Office of Catholic Schools, Archdiocese of Hartford*

“Thank you for the wonderful work you do. I really enjoy your newsletters, especially the ones on hospitality. My wife, Jackie, was the director of evangelization for the diocese of Green Bay from 1992 until 2001 and she has really impressed on me the idea of hospitality -- a constant theme in presentations she made to parishes and at diocesan conferences when she was with the diocese.”

- *Tony Staley, Resurrection Parish, Allouez, WI; former editor of The Compass, diocese of Green Bay newspaper*

“Thank you for taking the time to put together the wonderful resources on your website. I’m working with my small Episcopal Church in Delaware to help it not only survive but thrive.

I was hunting down some best practices on welcoming new parishioners, and I came across your website. I like the information because it gives us enough specifics that we can put a plan together, but it also gives examples and enough thoughts and questions to customize the plan for our church.”

- *Tracy Morgan, Managing Partner, North Star Strategies*

(We welcome your comments, thoughts, suggestions, ideas, etc. Your views and practices continually support and encourage others. Email them to jansch@juno.com any time.)



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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 at:

- <http://ecatechist.com>. Click on ebooks for: *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*.
- www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.