



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#30 - June 2013

## Adult Faith Formation Efforts: What Didn't Work

Michael Jordan once said: "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On twenty-six occasions I have been entrusted to take the game's winning shot ... and missed. And I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that's why I succeed."

It is human nature to want to always succeed. Yet, even a few moments of reflection on our lives reveals to us that it is in our "failures," that we learn much.

With that realization in mind, I invited **GEMS** readers to share "what didn't work" as they have persevered in the ministry of adult faith formation.

This issue begins to reflect on some of the experiences that have been shared; **future issues will continue with more examples that many have sent.** *If you have an incident or event to pass along, more are always welcome! (You can remain anonymous if you'd like.)*

As you read about each of these instances or processes, watch for the **new learnings** which surfaced for each person. Many times the wisdom was already present but now deepened because of their reflection on "what didn't work."



"I think the most important failures to share are the ones that have been connected to communication. Over the years I have found that if I am not specific enough in my directions both written and verbal, if I do not ask a question carefully to get the answers I am seeking, if I do not consider all the possible outcomes, then chaos ensues and frustration follows with unhappy parishioners. **I believe good communication, reflected upon and planned, really helps programs to run smoothly.** Participants know exactly what they are attending, what is expected of them, what to expect while in attendance and are not surprised in a frightening or uncomfortable way."

- Michele K. Harris, Coordinator of Liturgy,  
Director of Adult Faith Formation, Saint Francis de Sales  
Parish, Salisbury, MD



"I was the DRE in a large parish with more than four hundred catechists and one hundred volunteers. For our catechetical training event I invited two nationally known presenters from the publishing company of the series we used to conduct our training and give keynote addresses.

I decided that since I had a special relationship with these presenters, it would be a nice idea to share them with our neighboring parishes. So I asked the presenters to prepare for an additional evening workshop for the catechists of five other parishes.

I sent a letter of invitation to the DREs of those parishes including the topics to be presented and I even gave them the announcement to be placed their Sunday bulletins. I left voice mail messages in the DREs' mail boxes. I expected them to respond.

The evening of the event for the neighboring parishes arrived. We were all set up for a sizeable crowd of attendees. The presenters were ready, my pastor was there to welcome our guests and we waited...and we waited and finally one lady arrived. One! How could this possibly have happened? Didn't those people understand what they were missing?

The answer was so obvious. I had **planned something without any thought of involving the DREs from the other parishes.** I had no idea which textbook series they used. I had no idea what they needed or wanted by way of training or even if there was a date conflict. I just assumed that because I was able to offer those two extremely popular and nationally known catechetical speakers, they would be thrilled at the opportunity to attend.

My pastor was disgusted with me. The presenters were even gracious enough to spend time one-on-one with the lady who came. Then they departed for their hotel for some well-deserved rest and I was just angry and humiliated.

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## What I learned and should have known:

- Never plan anything for others without seeking and welcoming their input first
- Never assume your presenters are universally known and appreciated...even if they are
- Never presume that you planned an event so wonderful that others could not turn it down
- Never waste others' time and energy preparing for something that you failed to plan
- Always remember it takes work, planning and prayer
  - *Joyce A. Crider, President/CEO, Visual Dynamics, Inc., Alpharetta, GA*



“We no longer ask people to pair off with one other person that they don't know. (At one point, one of our facilitators thought this method would encourage people to get to know one another, and teach them active listening, and faith-sharing skills.) For many people, especially men, the experience of having to share conversation one-on-one, with a ‘stranger’ is unbearable. Even if the subject is what we consider non-threatening, we have found that people are more liable to ‘open up’ if they are **grouped in clusters of three, or four, participants**, and allowed to stay with a spouse, if they'd like.”

- *Peggy Casing, Parish Catechetical Leader, St. Mary of the Hills Parish, Rochester Hills, MI*

**A Wondering GEM:** An effective process! Since there are diverse types of gatherings as well as participants with varying needs and desires, might there be a time(s) when inviting people to talk with one other whom they do not know could be appropriate and advantageous?



“I look back on the different ministries and adult faith formation programs that I have been involved with during the past

several years. I expect that a number of them did not ‘work,’ or were not ‘successful’ according to my or someone else’s standards or expectations.

I could perhaps attribute these ‘failures’ to setting over-zealous goals; seeking to achieve unrealistic learning and faith-formation outcomes; lack

of adequate planning, publicity and marketing; the failure to adequately assess and offer programs designed to meet the relevant needs, expectations, and time constraints of those adults invited to attend; lack of adequate support and promotion of the program by the pastor or other parish administrator; and failing to engage in effective evaluations of previous programs or events.

However, **the primary failure that I have come to realize** was in seeking to judge success by mine or someone else's standards, rather than trusting in the Spirit, whose ways for evaluating what is, or is not, successful is most likely very different than mine.

I am reminded of an event that I facilitated at our parish to invite and attract new inquirers to attend and participate in our Parish RCIA process, culminating in their initiation into the Catholic faith. Due to responses received from the parish office, I anticipated that around ten people would attend this initial event. For whatever reason, only one person appeared at the appointed time and place.

Being disappointed in the lack of attendance, my initial inclination was to simply introduce myself, obtain some preliminary contact information, advise her when we would next be gathering, and thank her for coming. However, I felt prompted by the Spirit to invite her to sit down. I began to listen to her, to learn from her about her family, her faith journey, and her hopes and dreams for the future.

It was during this encounter that I was again reminded by the Spirit that despite all of the planning, preparation, promotion, assessment, evaluations, tools and other techniques we employ, we are called to minister to one person at a time, and to let God ultimately judge what is successful, and to bring good out of whatever we do.”

- *Rick McCormack, Holy Rosary-St. Richard Catholic Parish, Village of Palmetto Bay, FL*



“Some years ago our RCIA team had somehow gradually grown in size. In one particular year we had a small group of inquirers who were being accompanied by a large team. This just didn't work as a couple of the new inquirers were intimidated by the size of the group and were reluctant to speak or ask questions.”

- *Anonymous*

**Wondering GEMS:** Extremely important consideration!

- What a blessing to have a large, committed team. When this does happen, how do we keep our team members – whom we have formed in this ministry - involved?
- In a year-round RCIA, can some of the team members work with the inquirers, some with the catechuminate, some with the neophytes?
- A consideration **for all gatherings with adults:** when the group is large, do we provide always for small group discussions, rather than expecting everyone to talk within the large group?



“I would like to share a very disappointing effort that didn't work and then offer a similar event that worked marvelously well.

We worked as a parish pastoral staff on an evening of information and conversation for parish members who were not connected any longer. Our criteria was simple: we cross checked every liturgical ministry, Christian Service committee/program, parish census files (envelope participation), etc. to find the registered parish members who were not involved in any way.

A phone committee spent an afternoon in the building calling every one of these identified parishioners (850 households) and invited them to the Evening of Information and Conversation – we called it “Welcome Home Sunday.”

We developed a logo and a letter followed the phone call to the inactive parishioners and the pastor/presiders offered a personal invitation after each liturgy the previous week-end to all parishioners to bring a friend to the welcome home celebration. All parish staff was encouraged to be present. Invitations were also published in the local newspaper.

All in all, it was a massive effort. The purpose was clear: please come and pray with us and join us after the liturgy for some table conversation about faith and parish involvement. It was a dreadful showing. Staff and the usual supporters and one, yes, one inactive parishioner showed up.

This year the Worship commission planned a similar gathering. The focus was “How to strengthen the prayer life of the parish.” The effort was far less than the “Welcome...” event, but did include the usual bulletin articles, post liturgy announcements, posters, and personal invitations.

We had nearly 100 people show up and the evening was filled with lively conversation as we processed three sets of questions at each table (6-7/table). The questions were positive approaches to prayer experiences in the parish:

- What is most beneficial to you when you participate in the Sunday liturgy?
- What other forms of prayer would you like to see?
- What can we do to increase the participation of the assembly?

We generated worksheets and posted them on the walls and each participant voted for 3 ideas. The worship commission will spend the remaining meetings for this year processing the sheets and then make recommendations to the pastor.

I suppose the lesson learned is that non-participating parish members **need God's grace more than our effort.** Participating parish members will step up to the plate when given a **forum that interests them and are assured that there will be results.”**

- *Pat Ernst, Adult Faith Formation Coordinator,  
Our Lady of Sorrows Parish, Farmington Hills, MI*

**A Sparkling GEM:** Pat shared a sparkling example of WIFM: What's In It For Me? As we explored in [GEMS #22-24 and #26-28](#), people respond when something interests them, when something touches their needs and convictions.

As [GEMS #27](#) quoted: “Paying attention to what is going on in the hearts and minds of adults, what is going on in their lives, is crucial and

cannot be overstated. This happens in numerous ways both formally and informally. It is not about what we think they need but rather what they say they need.” (David Riley and Jack McBride in *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation: A National Study*. Washington, DC: NCCL, 2006. #28)



“My experience with the RCIA helped me to look at ‘what doesn’t work.’ There are times that I think I have to give them ALL the information I possibly can. After all, there is such a short span of time to ‘get it all in.’

Then, I realized that I have been Catholic all my life, and I have learned throughout those years. There is no way I can expect them to know all I know before they become Catholic. Besides, I am still learning!!

So, I have learned to tone down on all the ‘information’ and go with some explanations and some life experiences. Then, also, giving them time to absorb this, and then hear what they have to say. It's surprising how ‘in-tune’ they can be. Many times, their questions and insights teach me something - - - make me stop and think. It can be quite challenging, and at the same time, eye-opening and rewarding.

I'm not saying they don't need to know the ‘facts and figures;’ I'm just saying that sometimes less is more. It also challenges me to be able to tell them that I do not know the answer; however, I will look it up and get back to them the next week.”

- *Kathie Carpenti, Adult Faith Formation Coordinator,  
St. Mary Parish, Wayne, MI*

**Wondering GEMS:** Kathie sincerely shares her experience with the RCIA process. Might Kathie’s learnings apply to other adult faith formation gatherings:

- How do we **respect the life experiences of each learner**, e.g. each new parishioner, each new couple baptizing their child, each parishioner asking questions, etc.?
- How do we provide **time for reflection, for assimilation, for integration?**



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 at:

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