



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#55 - July 2015

Adult Faith Formation Efforts: What Didn't Work (#3)

Pearl Buck once remarked: "Some of the biggest failures I had were successes." This insightful learning reminds us that we can always learn and grow; often we learn most from "what didn't work."

A while ago I invited **GEMS** readers to share "what didn't work" as they have persevered in the ministry of adult faith formation. Our [June 2013 issue of GEMS](#) and the [October 2013](#) issue were our beginning explorations into "what didn't work."

This issue continues that reflection, sharing some more experiences from you, our readers; **future issues will continue with more examples.** *If you have an incident or event to pass along, more are always welcome! (You can remain anonymous if you'd like.)*

As you reflect on each of the following instances, watch for the **new learnings** which surfaced for each person. Often the wisdom was already within each person but now deepened because of their reflection on "what didn't work."



Neil Parent, past Executive Director of NCCL (National Conference of Catechetical Leadership) and past director of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (a joint endeavor of five Catholic organizations funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc.), shares two of his experiences in *An Adult Educator's Diary: Some Embarrassing Mistakes.*

1. As a Program Provider.

As a parish director of adult education, I hosted a Sunday-evening lecture series that utilized well-regarded experts from local universities as presenters. One summer weekend during the series, my wife and I decided to go to the beach but be back in time for me to host the lecture. The day was glorious, and we stayed longer than advisable. In an effort to make up time, I drove faster than I should have and was soon pulled over at a speed trap. Had I been able to simply receive the ticket, I would have been okay time-wise; but I

was forced to go to court along with the other multiple violators strung along the side of the road.

I placed a call to a committee member and explained the situation. She and others were able to open the doors and take care of most of the program essentials. But other aspects of the program could not be done the way I had planned them because I had not adequately prepared the committee to handle them should I not be present. That possibility never occurred to me.

Lesson: In planning a program, think through backup plans should one or more components not materialize as expected.

2. As a Presenter.

In the 1980s while I was the USCCB Representative for Adult Education, I chaired a combination US/Canadian committee that worked with the Gallup Organization on research into the adult life cycle. Those were in the days before PowerPoint, so I had prepared overheads to use with my presentations on the subject.

During that presentation phase, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles accepted my offer to do a workshop at its annual Religious Education Congress. On the day of the event I stood on the stage before hundreds of people with the overhead projector, podium and microphone, but no screen. I asked my host, "Where's the screen?" He placed a quick call on his VHF phone to the convention center's media office and within minutes a technician arrived with a clipboard. He informed me that on the equipment form I had ordered a projector, microphone, etc., but I had not checked the box for a screen. "What do you mean," I protested, "why would I order a projector if it did not include a screen?" He simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "Sorry, each item has to be checked separately."

I had no choice but to project the data onto a fairly dark-colored sound-wall behind me. Both the audience and I struggled to read the charts. It was a very frustrating and poor learning experience for those who attended.

Lesson: Think through all the details of your presentation, especially when it comes to using equipment. Go back over your plans with

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enough time for changes to be made should you detect some error or oversight.

GEMS Suggestion: You might want to review once again the checklist for planning adult faith formation events: www.janetschaeffler.com. See Best Practices, issue #18.



“When I first arrived at Christ the King Parish, I was challenged to have a workshop for Young Adults. I contacted the few young adults I had encountered and asked them what topic they would be interested in, when to have it, and what time (all from my corporate background). We scheduled an event on Sunday at 7pm (it was immediately after our 6pm Mass). I ordered pizza and waited for the throngs to appear. Four attended and they were the four I had interacted with! No one brought a guest, no one invited friends, and no one extended an invitation to others.

Learnings:

- Don't presume they know to invite others.
- Make sure the core group is individuals who are willing to engage others.
- Food doesn't always bring people (if you feed them, they will come – theory).

The good news: we scheduled an event called 'Fr. Sean Unplugged' (MTV was running a series of concerts of artists who would perform acoustically – therefore, unplugged). Fr. Sean was our Associate Pastor, and a younger priest. The idea was Fr. Sean would answer any question. We had over 30 people attend. Each person was given an index card to write his/her question. I collated them into like categories and facilitated the session. We started with questions like

- 'How much do you bench press,'
- 'How long do you work out' - to
- 'What advice would you give new couples getting married'
- 'How do you handle knowing engaged couples are already living together?'

We learned from the previous event. But, we have a long way to go with this demographic population. It is not a one size fits all model.”

- Suzanne Richards, Director of Parish Faith Formation
Christ the King Parish, Commack



Heidi mentions: “Here are some ‘experiments’ that we tried in Adult Faith Formation at St. Edward’s Parish that did not succeed.

- 1) Parish book clubs. We tried to get parishioners to read the same spiritual or theological book and then gather folks for book discussions, but these never really worked. After doing some market research, there are just too many book clubs out there already, and not many adult Catholics felt comfortable sharing their thoughts about a book in a small-group discussion format.
- 2) Panel discussion on Moral Issues. We tried to gather ‘experts’ from a particular field to talk about some of the more challenging aspects of Church teaching for some folks – but these events didn't seem to end with good adult formation. They would mostly dissolve into bickering and arguments.
- 3) Movie nights. Adults do not want to gather and watch a movie together – at least at church.
- 4) Our Adult Formation program was driven by topic. If the topic was not something that was a ‘burning issue’ for adult Catholics, we would not see a very positive turnout of people. On the other hand, if we responded to topics that people seemed to have genuine passion for, we found great success – no matter the time of day. Interestingly, some of the most interesting topics to those of us who work in the church do not always seem to garner the same interest from the general parish. We learned quickly that it was essential to visit with parishioners to learn their passions and interests, worries and questions so that we could respond to those in our programming.

Relatedly, the most important part of a successful adult formation program is the committee of adult volunteers who help form the program.”

- Heidi Busse, former Director of Faith Formation,
St. Edward Parish, Bloomington, MN
currently Parish Content Manager, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.

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Some GEMS Considerations

- For St. Edward Parish, Book Clubs and Movie Nights did not work. This is a prime example that what works in some places won't work in others and vice versa.
 - To explore some parishes that have successfully used *Movies at the Parish*, see www.janetschaeffler.com; go to Best Practices, issue #38.
 - To hear about *Catholic Night at the Movies* see one of the free bonus ideas which accompanies [Parish Leadership for Improved Adult Catechesis](#).
- Moral Issues will always surface differing opinions. A couple of ideas which might guide your planning:
 - Always include a panel and/or speakers who would help participants look at both sides of the issue.
 - If you know there are people present who might be very vocal and/or monopolize the conversation, ask for written questions so that everyone has a chance to be heard.



Joanie shares three things she has learned:

First, “Before setting dates, check the Events Schedule at the schools, surrounding towns, and professional sports teams. A few years ago I held an afternoon of reflection which many people seemed excited about, but the turnout was low. The schedule did not conflict with our state's professional football team, but it did conflict with the game for the team of the neighboring state. Living in a ‘border city,’ there were just as many fans of the ‘rival team’ as there were our state's team.”

Second, “Some parents are too busy to read what they sign. I sent home a note with the children, asking parents to attend a parent meeting. They parents are asked to sign the note and have the children return it. A number of them did not attend the meeting. They said they customarily sign notes sent home with the children without actually reading them. (They obviously weren't reading the parish bulletin, either.)”

Third, “In-service the AFF Committee and have some general discussions about what constitutes ‘good’ adult faith formation before you start planning

specific programs/processes. I didn't realize when I formed the parish's first Adult Faith Formation Committee that many people have a singular focus on what they think should be done and/or how the best methods for doing adult faith formation. Sharing general information that is grounded in the *General Directory for Catechesis*, the *National Directory for Catechesis*, and *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us* is crucial.”

- Joanie McKeown, parish catechetical leader, Webster, WI



“I tried to sponsor a book club from the Archdiocese. Epic fail. I wanted to create an opportunity for small group sharing, and faith formation, at parishes with no adult faith formation. So I chose the parishes with no adult faith formation programs/processes as the locations, had a facilitator ready. All I needed was people from that geographic area to sign up, read the book, and form a small community. Total bust.

The lesson: Book clubs need to be parish based. They can't be run out of the (arch)diocesan office.”

A GEMS Wondering: Might (arch)dioceses offer this, but encourage/enable the marketing to be done by and through the host parish and surrounding parishes? Would it then be seen as a joint effort between the diocese and the parish(es)?

Cheryl continues: “One of the biggest frustrations for me at the diocesan level was what to do for the parishes that had nothing going on in adult faith formation. Obviously we tried to form leaders from the parish to then take on the ministry, but it is hard to even get in the door of some of those parishes.”

- Cheryl J. Orwig Whapham
former Director of Lay Ministry and Adult Faith Formation,
Archdiocese of Miami, FL



“Recently adult faith formation tried to reach out to college students home for winter break. We do not yet have a young adult ministry at our church although there are some limited efforts being made sporadically on a deanery basis (vicariate, region), such as gatherings hosted in bars or restaurants.

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We were encouraged to be inclusive so we didn't restrict the ages to attend. We were encouraged to keep it light, so we did not stress a topic or speaker in the advertising. However, we did have topics lined up that priests would speak about as well as discussion questions and a prayer to end the evening.

We were successful in engaging six young adults from the parish to contribute to planning the evening event. In addition, older adults prepared and donated the food, but when the night came we had only two new people (college graduates, not college-aged) join the group (some of those involved in planning did not attend for a variety of reasons) for a total of five young adults, two priests and way too much free food and door prizes. The folks who did come were enthusiastic about future offerings for young adults.

I have organized plenty of other events that have been successful. This has been by emphasizing content not social aspects. This might have been a better approach but would have brought in a variety of age groups.

We had planned to do most of advertising by social media but did not have a core of college students who were interested in such an offering and active in social media to serve as the leavening.

Winter break is a tough time for college students since they are in between two worlds, home and college. I have heard from other parishes that Care Packages to them during finals exams may be a better approach.”

- *Anonymous*

GEMS Suggestion: These experiences remind us that all that is offered needs to:

- flow from the audience's needs rather than what we think they need
- respond to the question: WIIFM (What's In It For Me?).



The following experience reiterates/adds to what was shared just above. “Oh my, so many things didn't work over the years! ☺ What did we learn? College students and young adults remain a mystery; they change significantly

in outlook and needs from year to year. Things that work one year, don't necessarily work the next. Sigh...”

- *Lisa Brown, currently Director of Faith Formation, Christ the Redeemer Parish, Lake Orion; formerly Director of Campus/Young Adult Ministry, St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish, Auburn Hills, MI*

A GEMS Consideration

Thanks, Lisa, for sharing this. In reality, this isn't only true for young adults. All adults:

- change in their views and needs as the years go by
- things that work one year might not work the next year
- things that might work in one parish might not work in another



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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://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down for *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*
- <http://store.pastoralplanning.com/iboplbeprfor.html> for *Parish Leadership for Improved Adult Catechesis*