

"*Deepening Faith* is a comprehensive, practical, and user-friendly handbook for transforming a parish into a learning community. It includes everything from adult faith formation theory to innovative options. The parish-tested and well-researched advice and the challenging reflection questions are invaluable for parish adult faith formation leaders. Effective parish adult faith formation planning requires this handbook along with *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*."

— Thomas D. Sauline, DMin, Diocesan consultant for religious education

"Sr. Janet challenges us to be more proactive about building a healthy culture of life-long learning. Seasoned by experience and dialogue with adult educators around the country and the world, she guides us through the research, resources, and best practices that grow more healthy learning communities. Whether you are new to the task or have been doing this for some time, read this book! Read it together as a staff and your parish will be enriched by the treasures you find."

— Dr. Harry J. Dudley
Veteran catechist and diocesan director of religious education
Editor of *Forming Disciples for the New Evangelization*, the religion curriculum of the Archdiocese of Washington

"Sr. Janet makes the ongoing journey of adult faith formation come alive for those just beginning and those already in the field forming disciples. What I found most helpful were the Reflection/Conversation Starters as they invited me into the book, as well as to realize I could do this in my community a step at a time."

— Mary Ann Ronan
Longtime parish faith formation director

Deepening Faith

Adult Faith Formation in the Parish

Janet Schaeffler, OP



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Adult faith formation is the tool we have
to help us bring faith and life together;
to answer the questions,
to make sense of what sometimes gets all mixed up.

Then as disciples,
as evangelizers,
we answer the call to bring that Gospel to the world
so that faith and life can come together
for each of us and
for the world we touch.

Contents

Introduction ix

- 1 What Is Adult Faith Formation? 1
Responding to Today's Searching
- 2 None of Us Is as Smart as All of Us 7
The Who of Adult Faith Formation
- 3 Laying the Foundation 16
Before the Programming
- 4 Continuing to Build 28
Before the "New" Programming
- 5 A Royal Welcome 36
Out of the Ordinary Hospitality
- 6 Why Should I? 46
Motivation for Adult Faith Formation
- 7 A Broad Focus of Exploration 53
Some Reflections on the Content of Adult Faith Formation
- 8 Oh! The Differences 63
It's Not Just Your Grown-Up Child
- 9 From Bricks to Clicks 71
Communications Technology and Adult Faith Formation
- 10 Thinking Outside the Box 80
Possible Innovative Options for Adult Faith Formation

Introduction

In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

—Eric Hoffer, *Reflections on the Human Condition*

To learn and never be filled, is wisdom; to teach and never be weary, is love.

—Unknown

Awakened and energized by the Spirit, let us strengthen our commitment and intensify our efforts to help the adults in our communities be touched and transformed by the life-giving message of Jesus, to explore its meaning, experience its power, and live in its light as faithful adult disciples today. Let us do our part with creativity and vigor, our hearts aflame with love to empower adults to know and live the message of Jesus. This is the Lord's work. In the power of the Spirit it will not fail but will bear lasting fruit for the life of the world.

—US bishops, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 183

Adult faith formation, the center of the church's educational mission, is a gift, a necessity, a challenge, and an inspiration for every adult today. For those of us involved in the ministry of adult faith formation, we are called to be continual learners, advocates, collaborators, and witnesses. In order to grow and deepen in this ministry, we need continually to learn fresh ways of thinking and acting.

Fortunately, we have a treasure trove of resources about adult faith formation—from our universal and local church, from researchers, and from people involved in the day-to-day ministry of adult faith formation. This book is one small addition, a support on the journey as we seek to continue to understand, appreciate, and deepen, in ourselves and others, the ways, whys, and hows of adult faith formation within our parishes and (arch)dioceses today.

There are many ways this book can be used—and reused:

- Give a copy to each member of your adult faith formation committee (or education commission, parish pastoral council, parish staff).
- Before coming to each monthly meeting, invite everyone to read one of the chapters. Beginning with chapter 1 and proceeding throughout the book might be the best way, or first choose the chapters that are most pertinent for your parish at the time.
- Begin each monthly meeting with prayer:

As we continue our ministry, our continuing work together, we turn to you, gracious God, for it is your work that we do, the work of your Gospel.

Let us never lose sight of our purpose and rely on our own efforts. But keep your vision before our eyes. Bring to our ministry a living sense that you, Lord, are the ground and the goal, the inspiration and the reason for all that we do.

In this awareness, may we do today's work—our study, our reflection, our conversation—faithfully.

In this awareness, may we do our work—our explorations, our deliberations, our listening to each other—compassionately.

May we pause patiently to listen for your wisdom, to see with your eyes.

May the way in which we carry out our work here this day spill over to all we do and to all to whom we minister, bringing your Good News of healing, peace, and unconditional love. Amen.

- For the first twenty minutes of the meeting, for your own growth and formation, take time for discussion on what you have previously read. The “Reflection/Conversation Starters” at the end of each chapter can be a guide as you apply the ideas and suggestions of the chapter to your unique parish community.
- There is always more to explore! The “Hands-On Helps” at the end of each chapter provide some suggestions for continued learning that can be explored by members on their own or at a subsequent meeting.

The book's layout of ten chapters can take you through one year of meetings. When a new year begins, there might be new members joining your committee (or staff). You might want to begin again. Because of new mem-

bers, because of the experiences of the past year, because of the adult faith formation opportunities recently offered, because of changing needs within the people and the parish, the conversations will always be new, with growing and deepening understandings, plans, and dreams.

Blessings on the journey ahead, an extraordinary one because of God's Spirit working with you, an amazing one because of the gifts and faithfulness of each unique person working together.

What Is Adult Faith Formation?

Responding to Today's Searching

Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them . . . Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"

—Luke 24:13-15, 32

These words of the Gospel continue to ring out today in our parishes; Catholics are calling on the church to quench their thirst for a deepening of their lived faith. They realize that the catechesis they received as children simply isn't enough to continue growing in the faith as adults within today's church and world; they desire a deepened faith.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the church has sought to significantly change the role of the laity from spectators to participants, our commissioned role by baptism. The church is calling upon us to fully live our baptismal calling through participation, committed discipleship, and a deeper knowledge of the faith. Adult faith formation is the root of this participation for all the laity.

Since the close of Vatican II, the church has officially published no fewer than eight major documents calling for adults to be at the center of the church's educational mission. In their 1972 document, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the United States bishops confirmed that adult catechesis is "situated not at the periphery of the Church's educational mission but at its center" (43). The *General Directory for Catechesis*, issued by the Vatican in 1997, also affirms that catechesis for adults "must be considered the chief form of catechesis"

(59). In the same way, our second *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005) continues the strong imperative for the centrality of adult faith formation: “The catechetical formation of adults is essential for the Church to carry out the commission given the apostles by Christ” (48A).

1999 brought the landmark document for the US church. The United States bishops published *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*. Along with its *Leader’s Guide*, this indispensable resource is a vision as well as a strategy for adult faith formation in our parishes and (arch)dioceses. It emphasizes that, through adult faith formation, the baptized consciously grow in the life of Christ through prayer and study, reflection and experience.

What Is Adult Faith Formation?

Even though one definition that might come to mind is “intentional learning experiences that deepen, expand, and make explicit the learning in faith that is, hopefully, already part of the life of the believing community,” adult faith formation goes well beyond that!

Adult faith formation is much more than programs, much more than intentionally planned learning experiences. Even the intentionally planned learning experiences can (should) happen in a myriad of ways; it is also obvious there are other ways that people learn, other ways that faith grows and deepens.

Adult learning is happening all the time: through the media, casual conversations, traveling, etc. Much learning happens in everyday life moments (starting a family, retirement, etc.) or in crisis events (illness, unemployment, etc.). Adult faith formation is happening continually throughout the totality of parish life, such as celebrating weekly liturgy, participating in parish outreach and service activities, joining with others to sign a petition for a justice issue, celebrating the sacramental life of our church, helping build a house with Habitat for Humanity, partaking in prayer groups, and seeking spiritual direction available at the parish.

Adult faith formation is much more than programs: the parish is the curriculum. Community, worship, teaching, proclamation, and outreach are unquestionably formational in our lives as Catholics. Practitioners have been reminding us for years that the entire reality of parish life is the curriculum of adult faith formation. This principle is now boldly proclaimed in the *General Directory for Catechesis*, and also *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*: “While the parish may *have* an adult faith formation program, it is no less true that the parish *is* an adult faith formation program” (121). “The Parish

Is the Curriculum . . . the success of such efforts (intentional efforts) rests very much on . . . ‘the quality of the liturgies, the extent of shared decision making, the priorities in the parish budget, the degree of commitment to social justice’” (118).

Religious educator Maria Harris reminded us in *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*, “The curriculum must take into account three forms: the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum, and the null curriculum.”¹ The explicit curriculum, of course, consists of those adult faith formation offerings that are available in and through the parish: a Scripture study on the resurrection accounts, centering prayer, support groups for various life events, a series exploring the liturgy, and so forth. The implicit or hidden curriculum includes those attitudes or patterns that are part of us, that we might not even be aware of: who is included (or not included) on the parish pastoral council, how the parish budget is determined (and how much money is allocated for outreach to the needy, for instance), and even the design and setup of a room/chapel/church. The null curriculum is that which is absent. Are there thoughts, ideas, suggestions, opinions that are not being raised? Are there viewpoints and perspectives that are not being heard, that are being ignored? Are there methods, techniques for learning/human growth we might be ignoring, that we have not incorporated into our processes?

Everything we do (or do not do) teaches. Adult faith formation is not just about planning six-week programs; it is about the way a parish lives moment by moment. Adult faith formation—since it responds to the various age groups, different learning styles, people with diverse daily schedules—needs to have many forms and methods, but even before that, the entire life of the parish—everything that happens—is educating, is forming people in faith.

Adult faith formation is much more than programs; it can (and does) happen anywhere. Most adults live their faith at church 3 percent of their time; the rest of their time they are living it at home, in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, etc. They live it and deepen it in activities such as these:

- answering a question from a coworker about what they believe
- making Lenten resolutions
- praying with their spouse/family
- struggling with a decision and talking it over with other people of faith
- forgiving at home, forgiving in their neighborhood, forgiving in their community
- responding with care, compassion, and kindness—often on the spur of the moment

Frequently, busy lives today won't allow the time for people to show up for "six-week programs" at the parish. What new models can we develop to infuse adult faith formation into everyday lives at home, in the neighborhood, at work—in the everyday spaces and places of people's lives?

Adult faith formation is much more than programs; learning to be a disciple happens during the living of life. As crucial as it is to have designed, scheduled opportunities for ongoing faith formation in parishes/regions, consider your own life; think about your family's life. When were the life-changing moments? Probably most of them happened outside of "preplanned" workshops or courses. Upon reflection, most people realize that usually their life-changing moments, their deepest faith growth, occurred during the unpredictable situations—and even crises—of normal, everyday life. Growth in faith happens in myriads of ways, especially in the living of life.

This reality underlies adult faith formation ministry, especially if we take seriously Marshall McLuhan's overwhelming reminder that "the medium is the message." Business consultant M. Rex Miller, in *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church*, says, "Discipleship is not a small group or classroom topic. It is a lab project, a choreographed dance, an art taught under the eye of a master. It is apprehended first through demonstration, not intellectually."²

The Goals for Adult Faith Formation

Why do we do it? Why have church documents put so much emphasis on adult faith formation? The goals could be described in various ways; *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* synthesizes them into three categories, reminding us that formation is much more than knowledge:

First, "Ongoing Conversion to Jesus in Holiness of Life" (68–69). The Christian vocation is about ongoing change, transformation, and conversion. God has called us to be holy, to be our best selves; that requires constant change. This is a challenge; usually we resist change. It's been said that the only person who likes change is a wet baby. Adult faith formation—in all its forms—is one of the key ways we have to deepen this ongoing conversion, to deepen our relationship with Jesus.

Second, "Active Membership in the Christian Community" (70–71). A unique reality about the Christian faith is that we are not called by God as individuals. We don't go to God alone; we go to God as a community or we don't go. Our faith is not just a God-and-me religion. Thus, this second goal

of all adult faith formation helps us continually understand and experience this, enabling everyone to accept co-responsibility for the community's mission and internal life.

Third, "Prepare Adults to Act as Disciples in Mission to the World" (72–73). In many ways the first two goals prepare us for this: to renew and transform the face of the earth. The role of the church/parish is to gather and to send. We live this in Eucharist; we live this in the entire life of the parish. We gather (in worship, community, formation) in order to be sent to the world.

Does this third goal scare us because it seems "too big"? We need to think of being missioned to the world as doable. Some people might ask, what can one person ever do? Some people have all they can do to care for their elderly parent(s) and advocate for their rights. Is this not responding to human need, the human need where our life experience currently reveals God's presence? Some people who are homebound might feel they can't be involved in touching the world beyond their home. My mom was very involved in a telephone ministry of calling people weekly, people she did not know (at the beginning), but whose names were given to her so she might check in with them once a week. Letter-writing about important issues of concern is another valuable way to be involved in making a difference in the issues of today.

These three goals are achieved through information and formation for the sake of transformation. First, the lives of the baptized are transformed, growing more and more into the people God created them to be. Through this personal transformation, they are then witnesses of Christ, making a difference in the world. The overarching goal of adult faith formation is a sense of mission rather than just the enhancing of membership.

Reflection/Conversation Starters

-  Do the goals, schedules, budget, Sunday bulletin, website, etc., of our parish reflect the church documents that say that adult faith formation is at the center of the church's educational mission? If not, where do we start?
-  If someone reviewed the opportunities for adult faith formation in our parish, what might he or she see as the reason/goal for adult faith formation?
-  As an adult faith formation committee, education commission, parish pastoral council, are we aware of some of the implicit curriculum that is operative in our parish?

6 Deepening Faith

What might it be teaching?

Do we want this to continue or would we like to change it?

What are the steps/methods needed to change it?



Are we aware of some of the null curriculum that is operative in our parish?

What might it be teaching?

Do we want this to continue or would we like to change it?

What are the steps/methods needed to change it?

Hands-On Helps

 US Catholic bishops, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States* (along with its *Leader's Guide*) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999).

 To explore some of the consequences of not providing adult faith formation within our parishes, see Janet Schaeffler, "Adult Formation: Counting the Consequences," http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Adult_Formation_Counting_the_Consequences.pdf.

Notes

¹ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 68.

² M. Rex Miller, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church* (New York: Wiley, 2004).