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Top 10 Guidelines & Top 10 Pitfalls for Adult Faith Formation

It is essential that those who direct faith formation programs for adults keep in mind practical considerations to help insure success. The following guidelines offer practical tips for implementing effective faith formation opportunities for adults.

Top Ten Guidelines for Effective Adult Faith Formation: What to do!

1. The most important question we must always ask, "So what?"

Provide time during each session for critical reflection. It is very important for adults to ask, "So what?" So . . . what difference does this teaching of the Church or this message of the Gospel make to the way I live my life?

- Take time at your gatherings to listen to people. Often the time before the gathering starts and after a gathering ends provides excellent opportunities to really connect with people.
- Make sure the questions for small-group discussion are interesting and direct.

2. Lose the lecture.

Too many times those who plan adult faith formation sessions simply bring in a speaker to present a topic. We need to do much better than this! Adults learn and grow in faith through a wide variety of experiences.

- Incorporate prayer, quiet reflection, guided imagery, conversation, service, music, stories, and drama in your faith formation programs for adults.
- If you do bring in a speaker, make sure the speaker's presentation includes real-life stories that help illustrate key points.
- Prepare speakers by telling them important things to know or understand about you parish and your parishioners.

3. Make a commitment.

Adult faith formation won't happen by magic. You have to pay for good programs. If your parish believes that adult faith formation is important and says that life long learning is a priority, then the parish budget and resources need to reflect this.

- Know what resources your parish now uses to support your adult faith formation programs. Include financial resources, paid staff time, volunteer hours.
- If needed, make plans with the pastoral staff and pastoral council to begin to reallocate resources toward adult formation opportunities. If you can't take a giant leap in this direction, at least take small steps.

4. Faith formation is a team sport.

If you want to convey the importance of adult learning, then the entire pastoral team needs to be on deck — planning, evaluating, and leading.

- Find ways for each member of the parish staff to contribute and participate in adult faith formation gatherings.
- If you don't have a large staff, find ways to involve members of the pastoral council or religious education committee.

5. Language: Get real.

Use language that helps people connect faith and the teachings of the Church with the way they live their lives.

- Avoid “churchy” language. Avoid in presentations and written materials. For example, when speaking with adults in your parish, you can be sure that “hermeneutical” is not helpful.
- Resources such as U.S. Catholic magazine can provide ideas on how to use real-life language and stories to explore theological concepts and church teaching.

6. Connect with the Church's liturgical year.

When scheduling programs for adults, pay close attention to the liturgical seasons as an important dimension of parish life and a source of direction for planning.

- Find ways to connect the prayer experiences of a gathering with the liturgical year. For example, use an Advent wreath during Advent or the color purple during Lent.
- When possible, incorporate hymns, songs, and Scripture from a recent Sunday liturgy into the adult gathering.
- Look to Lent as an opportune time to offer a mini-series on a faith-related topic for adults or a special retreat.

7. Creativity is essential.

Find ways to engage the imaginations of the adults. Don't just talk about the message, let adults experience it through art, music, drama, reflection, and shared conversation.

- In prayer experiences for adults, don't be afraid to include wonderful children's stories, guided reflections, or retreat experiences that have been successful with youth.
- Find ways to make good music a part of adult faith formation experiences.

8. Dessert is not optional.

Create an atmosphere of welcome and hospitality. Treat your participants as honored guests. Serve food (good food).

- If your session is in the morning, serving coffee and tea prior to and, where possible, during the session is important.
- Having even the simplest dessert set out on trays adds to the feeling of hospitality. Be sure to have a selection of items for those suffering with allergies or avoiding sweets.
- Have someone responsible for being sure that everyone is served.

9. Timing is everything.

Make a schedule and stick to it. If you start on time and end on time, you'll gain a great deal of respect and you'll keep people coming back.

- Ask others (facilitators or parish staff) to help you keep on schedule.
- Take time to evaluate the flow and timing of an event and learn from it; make adjustments as needed and you will continue to improve and enhance future gatherings.

10. Have fun!

Weave humor and good fun into the flow of the session. Go out of your way to spice up your times together and make them fun.

- Special touches like flowers on a table or lit candles can go a long way to creating an environment that reflects welcome.
- Award a door prize to one of your guests at the end of a gathering. Prizes can be a free ticket to a parish breakfast, a candy bar, or a book.

Top Ten Pitfalls for Adult Faith Formation: What NOT to do!

Whether you are an experienced “pro” or new to the enterprise of adult faith formation, it is important to avoid some key pitfalls that can sabotage a potentially successful program. Here are some important ones to keep in mind.

1. Lack of hospitality.

Much more than the presentation you give or the handouts you create, the way you welcome adult participants is your greatest opportunity for evangelization. Don't miss it! When you welcome adults to a faith formation program, keep in mind that going to Mass on Sunday and participating in parish life may not be part of their life. What a marvelous opportunity to welcome people back with open arms! So, when you gather with adults

- have greeters at the doors.
- light the candles, put out the flowers, play your best music, and serve delicious food.
- ask staff and facilitators to serve as hosts.
- mingle with your guests, talk with them, and listen to their stories!

2. Fear of commitment.

You cannot run a successful program on low provisions. If your parish is making a commitment to adult faith formation, the allocation of parish resources should reflect this commitment.

- Staff Time: The pastoral team needs time for ongoing study, planning, preparation, and evaluation.
- Budget: Be prepared to cover the cost of speakers, resources, handouts, volunteer appreciation, food, and other expenses.
- Volunteer Hours: The result of many people putting in lots of volunteer hours is widespread ownership and commitment.

3. Repeat, repeat, repeat . . .

If you repeat the same program year after year without evaluating or making changes, it is very likely that your program will soon become stale and out of touch with people's lives.

- Take time to evaluate each adult faith formation gathering. Keep notes to help you make improvements throughout the year.
- At the end of the year, invest a substantial amount of time in evaluating the overall effectiveness of the past year's events.
- Seek out the ideas, input, and comments of the adults who participated in this year's programs to improve and enhance programs for next year.
- As you move through a year, pay close attention to the specific needs, interests, and concerns of the group with whom you are working. These will change from year to year, and a successful program will reflect this.

4. The Lone Ranger approach.

One person cannot run a successful program by him or herself. Planning and implementing successful and effective faith formation programs for adults requires a great team of people.

- Involve members of the parish staff, members of the parish faith formation (religious education) committee, people on the facilitator team, or Catholic school faculty and staff in planning and evaluating faith formation opportunities for adults.
- Find ways for the various groups within the parish (musicians, speakers, catechists, facilitators) to give their best talent and creativity to create and implement the sessions.

5. Missing the wisdom of the community.

Beware of speakers who tell you they must have an hour or longer because they cannot cover all that the participants need to know in a time shorter than that. This kind of attitude shows a lack of appreciation for the wisdom of the people.

- Select and invite speakers who explore Church tradition and teaching, as well as tell stories of faith in ways that evoke stories of faith from the participants.
- Spend time with those who are giving the presentation to be sure they understand the focus of the year and the role that they serve.

6. Failure to flow.

Each element of a gathering is important, and it is essential to give time and attention to creating and developing each piece. You

give power to what you pay attention to! To be really effective, be sure that each element of a gathering flows into the next.

- Keep the time for prayer and reflection, presentation, and conversation in balance.
- Remember that it takes time to shift from one activity to the next, and factor that into your session schedule.
- Be sure to begin on time and end on time.

7. Skipping the discussion time.

In the sessions, the conversation is given the same amount of time as the presentation. It is when adults talk with other adults about the significance of the faith for their lives that real growth in faith happens.

- Pay attention to time. If you start late, the discussion is usually where time is made up.
- Make clear in the way you introduce the conversation time that you understand this part of the session to be of key importance.
- Be sure that the groups are small enough for genuine conversation—usually six or seven is a good size.

8. Dismissing the details.

When you plan a gathering with adults, know that the details are important.

- Take time to rehearse parts of the gathering that require special preparation.
- Practice your welcoming statements out loud and in front of a microphone. Write out the transition from one part of the session to the next so that your directions are clear and concise.
- Before the meeting begins, make sure that the sound system works and that your handouts are ready.
- Take time to think about how you will conclude your meeting. Be sure that your gathering ends with good energy and lets the guests know that you and the rest of the parish staff were delighted to have had this time with them.

9. Volunteer void.

Most of your volunteers are accustomed to working with children or youth, not with adults.

- Provide ongoing training and support to help your volunteers (facilitators) learn how to respond to the needs of adults.
- Find creative ways to support your volunteers with affirmation and appreciation. Give thanks and keep giving thanks.
- Throw a great party at the end of the year.

10. And another thing!

One member of the parish staff wants to offer Lenten Bible studies; an involved parishioner thinks that starting up a soup kitchen is the direction to go. Too often, there is a tendency in parishes to add program after program for adults without thinking about what you really want or where you are headed. Be clear about your vision for adult faith formation in your parish and communicate this vision to others.

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