

13 Ideas for Adult Faith Formation: Send the Faithful Out On Mission to the World

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There's a church in my area which has a one-way driveway for entry and exit to its property. The posted signs on this driveway say: "Enter to Worship" and "Exit to Serve."

That is our Baptismal call. One of the results of our increased concentration on adult faith formation is, hopefully, the deepening of people's awareness, desire, abilities and skills to be missioned for their role in the world.

The document from the U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, reminds us of this so well in its third of its major goals for adult faith formation: "call and prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world. The church and its adult faithful have a *mission in and to the world*: to share the message of Christ to renew and to transform the social and temporal order. This dual calling to evangelization and justice is integral to the identity of the lay faithful; all are called to it in baptism.

Accordingly, faith formation seeks to help each adult believer become more willing and able to be a *Christian disciple in the world*. "As salt of the earth and light for the world (Mt 5:13-16), adult disciples give witness to God's love and caring will so that, in the power of the Spirit, they renew the face of the earth" (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* #72-73).

I have been (and continue to be) involved in research on best practices in adult faith formation. One of the questions I often ask is: "Describe the effects of this initiative (the initiative they identified as their best practice). How were the participants or the congregation/parish changed by this event or process?"

In analyzing the responses, I've realized that this was not the easiest question for the respondents (adult faith formation coordinators, directors of religious education, pastors, pastoral ministers) to answer. Perhaps it was asked the wrong way. Perhaps it was too broad; not clear; not measurable. One person responded: "How does one even begin to evaluate this?" The majority answered with responses such as:

- more involvement in the parish/new leadership has emerged
- enhanced their personal prayer life
- adults are excited about lifelong formation
- more awareness of Scripture during liturgy
- acknowledge the value of the "group" as a place to share faith with others and to be enriched by the sharing of others
- new sense of openness

- men were surprised they were able to share so much
- hunger for more
- sense of belonging is heightened among participants/within the congregation
- helped them connect their faith with everyday situations and decision making
- broadened understanding of their faith

These are all very admirable results. Many of them, of course, would be dependent upon the type of program that was offered. What was the purpose/goal of the program? Was that achieved?

Of all the responses received (in one of the surveys), there were three which said:

- greater consciousness with regards to social justice issues; talking about what they can do
- drawn closer together in unity of mission; increased outreach to those in need within and beyond parish boundaries; more global vision
- many are looking for concrete ways to encounter the poor

There were no responses which indicated:

- getting involved in or making a difference in the community (even though they mentioned getting involved in the church, which is a very important thing!)
- empowered people to become involved with others to seek solutions to poverty, racism, violence, environmental pollution in the community

It is very possible that many of these things happened, and the survey responders weren't aware of it. These results also might not be a natural outcome of each adult faith formation opportunity. Should they be? The Second Vatican Council stated that "the laity, by their vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs, and by ordering them according to the plan of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, #31). The third of the major goals for adult faith formation is to "call and prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world" (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, #72). And adult faith formation calls us to live what we celebrate. We need to call each other to community and mission, to being the Body of Christ. When we celebrate Eucharist each week, it is not just the bread and wine that are changed. We are changed into the Body of Christ, to leave our Eucharistic assembly and be Christ's Body throughout the week.

What can we do to ensure that adult faith formation leads to being disciples in mission to the world?

1. **So What?** Whatever we do, whatever the program or process (in whatever format or media we're employing) include the "so what?" question. What does this have to with my life? And not just my life, but how does this impact the common good?
2. **Stories.** Invite and encourage people to tell stories. Listening to others' experiences we become aware of the needs of the world.

3. **Signs of the Times.** Is your church environment and your program/processes filled with the signs of the times? Do you listen to what people are talking about—their questions, needs, and concerns? Do the weekend prayers at worship reflect today's needs (or were they written by someone else four months ago)? Are the adult faith formation programs that are offered a result of what the learners have asked for and a reflection of what is happening in their life circumstances?
4. **Environment.** Become a place where people gather to talk about their questions, their feelings, explore how faith relates to the challenges of the day. When something happens in the life of the congregation, community, church, nation or world, do people first look to the church as a hospitable place to gather to explore with others their wonderings, their questions, and their range of emotions? When something happens in the world (terrorism, war, violence) does the church respond by inviting people to gather for coffee and brownies, wine and cheese, soup and bread (whatever is comforting food) and a chance to talk about how they are feeling. People don't need a class on the theology of these events. People need, first, to talk about their feelings, their concerns, their worries. Then, the question can be asked: What is there in our tradition that will help us through these events, these incomprehensible challenges to our lives today? It does not stop there: What does this mean for the way I'm called to live my life as a disciple? What can I do? What can we do together?
5. **Gatherings.** To invite people together when an event occurs is one possibility. What if there was a hospitable gathering every week or twice a month for people to come together for prayer and reflective discussion on whatever was on their minds? Depending upon the topic of discussion, the facilitator (or any participant) could always be encouraged to mention needs in the community and world where people could respond. Some people might come all the time; others might come whenever they felt a need. When an extreme need surfaced in the community or world, a welcoming place would already be there.
6. **Raise Questions.** Use all opportunities for adult formation—speaker series, parent meetings, church bulletins, blogs, websites, online learning, e-newsletters, 30-second public service announcements—to raise questions about things in the community or world that aren't proceeding according to Gospel values.
7. **Connections.** During reflections on Scripture, connect the call to serve, the call to be a person-for-others, to Baptism and the Sunday Scripture readings.
8. **Trips.** Use “convoy learning” (field trips!). Go to where the people, the needs, are. We learn best by experience. Put the learners in vans and go to visit, be with, and experience various needs and situations that are different from what people's daily lives might usually hold.
9. **Do-Able.** Invite people to do the do-able. When we talk about being sent on mission to the world and think about some of the world issues and/or begin to study some of the justice and peace issues of today, it can be daunting. Some people's responses could easily be: What can one person 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 to check in on 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.

10. **Outreach Fair.** Many churches today often have ministry fairs, highlighting all the church ministries in which members are invited to become involved. What if the church sponsored a service and outreach fairs at which various groups or agencies can provide information about issues and the ways people can be involved.
11. **Acknowledge.** Congregations also do a wonderful job of highlighting, commissioning, and/or thanking the various members involved in the ministry life of the church. Can we acknowledge also that church members have taken seriously their call to be of service in the world?
12. **Transformation.** Adult faith formation is about much more than imparting knowledge. It's about formation and transformation. One of the ways to do that is to enable the person to develop skills: for ministry, for listening, for advocacy, for service, for outreach, and more. Incorporate this practical skills-building into your programs. Don't presume that everyone has the skills.
13. **Action.** Don't let your adult faith formation programs or processes end without opportunities for action. Give people ideas of ways to be involved with others, of ways to be of service. Link people with individuals and groups who have similar interests with theirs.