



Drink for the Thirsty: Planning for Adult Faith Formation

Pam Coster

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
(Psalm 42:1-2)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus asks the disciples of John the Baptist who have followed him, “*What do you want?*” (John 1:38) We might ask the same of the adults in our faith communities today, many of whom are unsettled in their faith and searching, yearning for a deeper relationship with God. Vibrant churches provide activities, resources and a mission-driven culture which help adults more fully understand and live their faith. Helping adults grow spiritually, giving them opportunities for renewal, faith sharing and learning is not only essential for the health of a faith community, it is a work of mercy – giving *living waters* to those thirsting for God.

A Searching People

In the book, *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches* (Gallup Press, 2002) research showed that “The churches of America, in these opening years of the twenty-first century, face an historic moment of opportunity. Surveys record an unprecedented desire for religious and spiritual growth among people in all walks of life and in every region of the nation. There is an intense searching for spiritual moorings, a hunger for God. It is for churches to seize the moment and to direct this often vague and free-floating spirituality into a solid and lived-out faith.” Adults of all ages are searching. The Pew Forum study of 2007 found that 44% of U.S. adults have switched religious affiliations. People are thirsting for God, and many are actively seeking a spiritual home that best supports them in their faith. They care. Now is a time of tremendous opportunity to engage adults in the evangelizing mission of Jesus Christ.

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What is the “cast of characters” we find in our Christian faith communities today? In Alan Winseman’s influential book, *Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop “Doing Church” and Start Being the Church Again* (Gallup Press, 2007), he presents the results of research into the relationship between spiritual commitment, congregational engagement and the relevant outcomes of life satisfaction—inviting, serving and giving. Three types of church members emerge: the engaged, the not engaged and the actively disengaged. Someone who is *not engaged*, is generally happy with their faith community but has a low level of commitment and involvement. What changes that person into someone who is *engaged*? Of the twelve outcomes exhibited by engaged members, five have to do with their own spiritual growth and development:

- My spiritual needs are being met.
- Someone encourages my spiritual development.
- Other parishioners are committed to spiritual growth.
- In the last six months someone has talked to me about the progress of my spiritual growth.
- I have opportunities to learn and grow in my faith.

For faith communities to thrive and live the mission of Jesus Christ, they must focus on the spiritual development of their adults. If this isn’t done with intentionality, adults may drift, not from a grievance or even unhappiness, but because there is nothing compelling that draws them to choose to spend their time in spiritual pursuits. We would wish it weren’t so, but religion competes with other activities for people’s attention. As Carol Howard Merritt says in her book *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (The Alban Institute, 2007), “The societal expectation to attend worship is gone, ...now children have plenty of sporting and scouting opportunities during those once-sacred hours.” Adults must be changed in some way by their involvement in church in order to make it a priority in their lives. They must be spiritually fed, know that they are growing in faith, and feel that it is making a difference in their lives.

Certainly making our worship services true celebrations that are alive in faith and transformative for our congregations must be at the center of our efforts. Intergenerational activities are also important. They enrich the faith lives of both children and adults

and provide the example of faith that teaches better than any sermon. But adults must also have opportunities to explore the faith in settings and with methods appropriate to their many different learning styles.

Adult formation must be primary within churches and not just in a general way, but in a very personal way. In the early Church, adults experienced conversion through the rich evangelization of community life and the passionate teaching and witness of the apostles. The early Church was an adult church. Believers brought others to faith in a very personal way, just as Jesus had called and taught his disciples.

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers....All who believed were together and had all things in common.... Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Children and youth have a more valued place in our society than in the society of first century Palestine, when they were given no consideration. But our society’s focus on youth has, in many cases, caused our faith communities to emphasize the religious formation of children and youth and to put the bulk of resources there, to the detriment of ministry to adults. It’s so much easier to “raise up a child in the way they should go” than to open up to another adult and witness to our faith. Witness and the invitation into intimacy with Jesus Christ is central to the Christian life.

Ministering to the spiritual needs of adults can be complicated, taxing, and rewarding beyond measure. To see the light of faith go on in an adult’s eyes is to know that a seed has been planted that will bear great fruit. That adult will share his or her faith with family and friends. So it was in the early Church, so it is today.

Dr. Jane Regan, in her book *Toward an Adult Church* (Loyola Press, 2002) sets out four shifts which help put the emphasis where it must be for the health of a faith community:

1. *From children to adults*
2. *From information to formation*
3. *From programs to process*
4. *From membership to mission*

If churches are to have engaged members who, according to Winseman, are satisfied with life, invite others to participate in their church, serve others and give more financially to their church, they must consider how they are facilitating the four shifts to a church which values its adults, helps them reflect theologically on their lives, and gives them opportunities to be in conversation with other believers so that they may go into the world and be on the mission of Jesus Christ.

Vision

In order to respond, in faith, to the moving water in which churches swim, they should frequently re-evaluate their effectiveness in reaching adults of all ages. For every generation, appropriate approaches and methods are needed to reach the faithful and the searching.

The mission of our faith communities is Christ's mission. In Luke 4:16-22, he teaches the assembly why he was sent into the world:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to
the poor,
he has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the
oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*

And in Matthew 28:16-20, we learn how we can best serve that mission:

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
Baptizing them in the name of the Father,
And of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Teaching them to observe all that I have
commanded you.*

Before teaching, there is evangelization and initial conversion, which are best rooted in an approach that is personal and profound. Elements that create a firm foundation for future growth in faith include: 1) personal witness and example, 2) walking with others on the journey of faith, 3) welcoming them warmly

into the broader community, 4) sharing Scripture, 5) ritual and symbol, 6) solid teaching, 7) conversing about the meaning of faith for their daily lives, and 8) being aware of their needs as they grow spiritually. How our churches would thrive if each adult were supported in this way!

While personal attention to the growth in faith of each person is essential, it is also important to have a framework from which staff and volunteers can work to give adults opportunities to engage where and when they feel comfortable, to learn and to be renewed in faith. Without a plan, the "tyranny of the urgent" can derail the best intentioned plans for formation of any kind.

In a September 2009 article on planning, Dan Hotchkiss of the Alban Institute talks about a church's annual vision of ministry calling it "an answer to the question, 'In what new and different ways will we transform lives in the next one to three years?'" All decisions in the life of the faith community should be considered in the context of that question. How do we foster a culture within our faith communities that encourages the transformation brought about by lifelong spiritual development? One of the first steps for leaders is to articulate the goals of adult formation for their church.

Goals

Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us, a document of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, gives us one model. It specifies three goals of adult faith formation:

- Invite and Enable Ongoing Conversion to Jesus in Holiness of Life: "...our faith and life as adult disciples are grounded in developing a personal relationship with Jesus..." This is furthered by reading Scripture and personal prayer.
- Promote and Support Active Membership in the Christian Community: "...a conscious and firm decision to live the gift and choice of faith through membership in the Christian community." This is exhibited by involvement in the community life and mission of the Church.
- Call and Prepare Adults to Act as Disciples in Mission to the World: "...to share the message

of Christ to renew and to transform the social and temporal order.” This is lived out through participation in works of justice and service to the needy.

(Adapted from Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us #68-73)

Before any decision is made, church leadership should be asking how their decision will affect the spiritual lives of their congregants: how it is enabling conversion, promoting involvement in the faith community, or preparing people to bring the Good News into the world. Without this focus on the mission, churches may fall into a consumerist mode—trying to make the “customer” happy—which is not at all the model given to us by the early Church, when leaders wanted only growth into maturity of faith for their people.

The goals coincide with the nature of a mature faith in which the believer...

- *Trusts* in God’s saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus.
- *Integrates faith and life*, and sees work, family, social relationships and political choices as part of religious life.
- *Seeks spiritual growth* through study, reflection, prayer, sacraments and discussion with others.
- Seeks to be part of a *community* of believers in which people witness to their faith and support/nourish one another.
- Holds *life affirming values*, including a commitment to racial and gender *equality*, an affirmation of cultural and religious *diversity*, and a personal sense of *responsibility* for the welfare of others.
- *Advocates* social and global change to bring about *social justice*.
- *Serves humanity* consistently and passionately through acts of love and justice.
- Experiences a sense of personal *well being, security and peace*.

Roles

While all adults of the congregation are involved in supporting each other in their journey to a mature Christian faith, specific roles are played by church leaders. These leaders have the responsibility to give guidance to the community by formulating a plan

which will act as the framework for adult formation activities within the faith community.

- **Pastor(s)**: Sets forth the vision of lifelong growth in faith, and shows commitment to the practice of adult faith formation.
- **Church Leadership**: Places adults at the center of its stated mission and goals and promotes their spiritual development at every opportunity, and gives adult formation priority in the allocation of financial resources, learning space and scheduling.
- **Adult Formation Leader** (staff person or qualified member of the congregation) Develops an effective team, and works with ministries to promote cohesive, effective programming for adults.
- **Adult Formation Core Team**: Formulates and implements the church’s vision and plan for adults, and provides a diverse range of quality programming.
(Adapted from Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us #127-148)

With church leadership committed to and organized for a focus on adults, and with this focus articulated to the congregation, a new image of the church emerges. There is now an *expectation* that adults will actively seek spiritual growth. That is the beginning of something wonderful!

Very important to the success of any plan is the formation of the team itself. Knowledge of effective adult learning methodologies, best practices, and church documents related to adult formation will give team members the foundation they need to be creative in reaching adults. If the team is grounded in this knowledge, and in communal prayer—seeing themselves, and being perceived, as a small community of faith—they will be a trusted resource for adults of the congregation.

Planning: Know Your Congregation

It is important that church leaders work from reality and not perceptions. An outdated understanding of who constitutes the church community can be an obstacle to good planning. A simple mining of the church database can be enlightening. What percentage of the congregation is part of each

generation? Has the congregation moved from being primarily of one ethnicity to another, or to a mix of many ethnicities, or socio-economic groups? Does the church have fewer, or more, members than people perceive? Has the percentage of those who are active changed? How many work outside the home today? How many have computers and the availability of the Internet at home? (The fastest growing group on the Internet is over the age of 70.) All of these questions have a bearing on how church leadership plans for adult formation and the ways in which it will be delivered.

A church formation “check-up” can be very helpful in identifying how the church currently encourages the spiritual development of its various groups. Taking time to consider all groups: young adults, parents at different stages of child-rearing, singles, the elderly, the homebound, the marginalized, people with disabilities, the unchurched in your area; can bear great fruit. Just the discussion of who is “marginalized” in your faith community can be a challenging and healthy exercise. Who are the *poor, captive, blind, or oppressed* in your community? Inviting people from different groups into your discussions keeps the leadership group from becoming insular—a real danger in church leadership.

Planning: Five Year and Annual Plans

Be not afraid of five year plans! It is helpful to have a goal, to know where you are taking the adults of your congregation and why. This is not a plan that is articulated to the congregation, but is a guide for the adult formation leaders. Example A at the end of the article shows a possible five year plan for faith formation. Note that this is not a detailed plan but simply an acknowledgement that there are foundational elements of the faith and every adult should have knowledge of them in order to come to a mature faith. Setting out general topic areas for five years allows the church to provide a systematic formation for its adults. The church’s annual plans flow from this broader framework.

Example B at the end of the article shows a sample annual plan. The annual plan leads to the choice and development of programs. The plans are living, flexible documents. Issues will come up, events will happen that are not on the plan but call for theological reflection and/or clarification for your

church members. For example, *The Da Vinci Code* was an extremely popular book and caused Christians to ask questions about the history and teachings of the Christian faith. It was a golden opportunity to gather people for teaching and conversations about the faith. Those types of occurrences should always be taken advantage of, but not relied upon. Underlying the topic-of-the-moment activity, should be an intentional plan.

A good planning exercise is to ask the team to take a moment to list those ways in which they themselves come to God. They may use words such as *scripture, music, nature, others, prayer, holy places*, etc. Rarely do people list “lectures,” and yet many times in our churches we bring in a speaker and feel as though we have provided formation. People come to Christ in many different ways. It may be poetry or art that gives them an experience of the divine. If we limit offerings to talks and other essentially intellectual activities, we will miss many people. For example, try gathering people for a walk in a garden while reading and reflecting upon scripture passages related to nature. You may be amazed to see people you have not seen in some time! Many will come to a program on “prayer through movement” who cannot sit in a chair on a Tuesday night and listen to a speaker. Vary the activities to reach all people.

At the heart of any adult formation plan should be small groups, which give adults the opportunity to be in conversation about things that matter. Here is the encouragement of and commitment to growth in faith that Winseman tells us is so important to engagement.

Book groups are extremely popular in the secular society for a reason—they bring people together in community where they form relationships of trust. As Stephen Covey says in his recent book *The Speed of Trust* (Free Press, 2006), “...as a global society, we have a crisis of trust on our hands ...only 34% of Americans believe that other people can be trusted.” Within the context of a faith community, that can be very limiting. People are reluctant to share their stories of faith with strangers. The experience of small faith groups breaks down those barriers, challenges people to grow by hearing about the faith journey of others, and opens up avenues for transformative conversation.

Dr. David P. Gallagher in his book *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st Century* (Group, 2002) says, “the focus must move from large lecture groups to smaller, caring fellowships that encourage involvement.” It isn’t only seniors, though, who respond to this

relational approach. All adults are enriched by trusting fellowship.

Planning: Dream the Possible

An exhausted adult formation team helps no one. Ambitious plans are wonderful. Certainly we are ambitious for the Gospel! But steady, sure development is better than a long list of poorly done programs with no follow-up. Churches should know what is possible for their staff and team and plan accordingly. This is why an annual plan is so important. It takes the stress out of seasonal planning, provides sufficient lead time for preparation and marketing, and gives everyone the opportunity for input in a calm and constructive way. Once the plan is agreed upon, the team can execute it with confidence and support.

Every church is already providing some opportunities for adult formation: Bible studies, talks, spiritual book groups, seasonal activities, prayer groups, etc. Without adding any new activities, simply reorganizing those offerings into an intentional plan, and promoting it, can go a long way towards sparking interest among adults within the faith community.

For example, assume the adult formation team has chosen to focus on discipleship during the coming year. Example C at the end of the article shows a sample plan for the fall of the year. The church may already be offering these types of activities, but instead of each group choosing their own materials, the team suggests materials that focus on discipleship and assists the groups by promoting them together as a series on discipleship. Every meeting that takes place at the church during the fall begins with a prayer related to discipleship. Discipleship is emphasized from the pulpit. The conversation within the faith community begins to change. People in the community become aware of the theme. This sort of common focus has been shown to attract people to activities as they feel they want to be part of what is affecting the whole faith community. It lowers barriers to entry into groups, which can sometimes be formidable, especially for new church members.

Once people do decide to become involved, they must find programs to be “as advertised.” Good quality in programs is essential. In today’s culture, people are used to sophisticated media regardless of their socio-economic level, at the very least through television. They expect a good experience. Time is precious and studies show that if you waste their time

once, you very likely will lose them to future programs. Your preparation, communication, and hospitality tell them that you value the content and, especially, their time.

And how can they participate if they have not heard, and heard, and heard again? Substantial staff time and resources are put into developing programs. They shouldn’t be wasted by insufficient promotion. To be effective, advertising has to be repetitive. Personal invitation is best, of course, but churches should use every means of communicating: brochures, podcasts, flyers, posters, the church bulletin, e-mail, social networking sites, web sites, newspaper ads, radio ads, etc. Studies have shown that on average only 15% of churchgoers pick up bulletins at church, others may view them on-line, but obviously other means have to be used to get the message out about upcoming programs. To reach those who are unchurched, churches have to go beyond inside channels of communication.

Evaluation: Simple and Often

When people are used to interactivity in many areas of their lives, they want to know that their experience is valued. After every event or activity, the adult formation team should ask for the evaluation of participants. Three simple questions focus on what is important, gather sufficient input and take only a short time to answer:

- What is one thing you learned that you will be able to bring into your life?
- What questions do you have that could be addressed at future gatherings?
- What would help you further enrich your spiritual life?

Input is only good, however, if it’s acted upon. Let people know how you have used the input they have provided. It will encourage them to funnel information to leaders on an on-going basis, which is invaluable in creating programs that respond to real needs within the community.

Great Challenges – Great Rewards

The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches lays out the reality: “The challenges to churches in deepening the faith of Americans are great.” “Many know little of their own faith traditions, let alone other religions of the world.” The challenge is clear, and so is the opportunity.

There is a thirsting for God in the American population. People have deep questions for which the Christian faith has answers. We are the messengers; we are the ones who can “...direct this often vague and free-floating spirituality into a solid and lived-out faith.”

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?

And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?

And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

(Romans 10:14-15)

Example A

Adult Faith Formation Five Year Plan

Grounded in the Elements of a Mature Faith

- *Trusts* in God’s saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus.
- *Integrates faith and life*, and sees work, family, social relationships and political choices as part of religious life.
- *Seeks spiritual growth* through study, reflection, prayer, sacraments and discussion with others.
- Seeks to be part of a *community* of believers in which people witness to their faith and support/nourish one another.
- Holds *life affirming values*, including a commitment to racial and gender *equality*, an affirmation of cultural and religious *diversity*, and a personal sense of *responsibility* for the welfare of others.

- *Advocates* social and global change to bring about *social justice*.
- *Serves humanity* consistently and passionately through acts of love and justice.
- Experiences a sense of personal *well being, security and peace*.

Themes

- Year One: Discipleship
Year Two: Father, Son, Holy Spirit
Year Three: Worship and Prayer
Year Four: Moral Life
Year Five: Social Teachings

Example B

Adult Faith Formation Annual Plan Year One: Discipleship

Goals

Adult members of the faith community will:

- be able to articulate what it means to be a disciple.
- be able to describe Christ’s mission.
- identify their gifts and how they can be used at the service of Christ’s mission in the faith community and beyond.

Activities for Year One

1. Intergenerational Events
2. Bible Studies
3. Spiritual Book Groups
4. Speakers
5. Morning of Reflection—Advent
6. Busy Person’s Retreat—Lent
7. Small Faith Sharing Groups - Lent
8. Workshop on Gifts Discernment
9. Meeting Prayers
10. Film Discussions
11. Religious Field Trips

Example C

Adult Faith Formation Plan Year One: Discipleship – Fall Activities

Fall Activities

1. Intergenerational Event: Holy People, Models of Faith
2. Bible Studies: *Disciple Bible Study Series* (Cokesbury)
3. Spiritual Book Groups: *My Life with the Saints* (Loyola Press)
4. Speaker: Christ's Mission, My Mission
5. Morning of Reflection: Mary, Model of Discipleship
6. Workshop: Gifts Discernment
7. Meeting Prayers: Scripture Readings for Next Sunday and Discipleship Reflection Question
8. Film Discussion: *A Man for All Seasons*
9. Religious Field Trip: Art Museum—Discipleship in Religious Art