Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation

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Over the past 25 years we have become a society of lifelong learners. At many American universities, the largest program is the school of continuing education. Twenty years ago Elderhostel was a small program for older adults; today it is an international program involving millions of older adults in a wide variety of activities and learning programs. The practice of adult education has expanded considerably in the past several decades. No longer is adult learning limited to courses or guest speakers. Adults today continue their learning, professionally and personally, through courses, workshops, retreats, volunteerism, reading, books on cassette, films and DVDs, online learning courses and resources, to name a few popular formats. Adult education is a growth industry across North America.

Many factors have influenced the growth and importance of adult education today; these factors also provide a positive environment for congregational adult faith formation.

1. People are living longer and healthier lives.
2. Because of a rapidly changing social climate, adults today are expected—even encouraged—to see the adult years as a time when change is both acceptable and beneficial.
3. In terms of cognitive capacity, researchers have found that, barring health problems, an individual's ability to learn and retain new ideas and information continues throughout the adult years.
4. America is a "learning society" in which education is considered beneficial and desirable for every age group.…As adults engage more in new learning activities, they begin to see themselves as lifelong learners. Moreover it has been found that the more adults learn, the more they want to learn.
5. Adults who are in the process of ongoing change and learning tend to broaden their sense of purpose and diversify the sources of meaning in their lives.…Although adults continue to do much of their generative work in occupational and family settings, there is new evidence that people find many ways to "leave their mark" often through creative, altruistic, or spiritual pursuits.
6. In recent years, a new appreciation has emerged with respect to the diversity of adult experience within every segment of the population.…(However) many adults seek a "sense of tribe" and look for homogeneous group experiences in which they can reaffirm personal values, find support, and develop a sense of community. (Schuster 1999, 17-18)

We know that involvement in adult faith formation has tremendous benefits for the faith growth of the individual adult and for the whole congregation. The *Effective Christian Education Study* (Search Institute) found that "the amount of involvement in Christian education is strongly tried to greater faith maturity" (Benson and Eklin, 38). *Effective adult Christian education programs are associated not only with greater faith maturity, but also with greater loyalty to congregation and denomination* (Benson and Eklin, 54).

We know that congregational life is critical to effective adult faith formation. Adults learn in structured educational settings *and* in the very life and rhythm of the parish. The *Effective Christian Education Study*

found "Growth in faith maturity seems to correlate positively with the kind of congregation in which education is planned for, cared about, valued as seen in its climate, its work, and its worship. (Christian education) cannot stand alone. It is an integral part of the total life of the congregation. A caring, serving congregation promotes growth in faith.…For adult respondents, a "thinking" climate contributes even more to faith maturity and denominational loyalty that does "warmth" (Little, 101).

Yet, many (if not most) congregations find it difficult to provide quality adult faith formation that engages and involves adults. Congregations have made adult faith formation a priority for their community, but find it difficult to implement in practice. Despite the explosion of programs and resources to nurture adult faith growth—courses, workshops, small faith sharing groups, Bible study programs, books and study groups, video and audio programs, and online learning—adult faith formation is often the weakest link in a congregation's faith formation offerings.

What have we learned from research and pastoral practice over the last two decades that can help churches develop adult faith formation that nurtures adult faith and engages and involves adults? This article draws on a number of studies and sources to identify nine practices that contribute to effectiveness in adult faith formation, and how these practices can be used to design and implement adult faith formation in congregations. There is no a definitive list of best practices. This essay seeks to identify and clarify what we do know.

As we begin this survey of best practices, it is important to remember than adult faith formation is more than a program to attend, even though a congregational best practice is offering a variety of programs tailored to the diversity of adult life situations. As Diana Butler Bass writes, churches "are communities of transformation—places where people come to encounter God and know God more deeply.…Adult formation is the gathering and strengthening place for learning to be a Christian, for mentoring others in faith, and for practicing faith corporately. It is the heartbeat of churchgoing in the twenty-first century" (Bass, 15).

Best Practice 1. Adult faith formation pays attention to what is going on in the lives of adults and listens very carefully to what adults are talking about.

In the *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study* (BPAFF) this was the number one factor responsible for success of adult faith formation efforts. "Paying attention to what is on the hearts and minds of adults, what is going on in their lives, is crucial and cannot be overstated. This happens in numerous ways both formally and informally. It is not about what we think they need but rather what they say they need" (BPAFF, 28).

Listening carefully means tuning into the predictable learning needs in the lives of adults that we draw from adult developmental research, as well as the transitions and milestones in adult lives, such as becoming an empty nest household, retirement, and geographic relocation. It also means being aware of current events and important social, political, religious, and moral issues affecting the lives of adults.

The *Effective Christian Education Study* found that "effective content blends biblical knowledge and insight with significant engagement in the major life issues each age group faces. To a certain extent, these life issues have a value component in which one is called upon to make decisions. For adults, they include global, political, and social issues, and issues related to cultural diversity." (Benson and Eklin, 54) The study found that effective adult Christian education "emphasizes life experiences as occasion for spiritual insight" and "the natural unfolding of faith and recognizes each person's faith journey as unique" (Benson and Eklin, 55).

It is important that congregations use multiple methods of discovering the needs and interests of adults, such as surveys, interest finders, focus groups, and interviews. "It is important to listen carefully to adults' concerns, heartaches, and joys. Where is their energy? What puzzles them and leads them to ask ultimate questions of meaning? This is data that simply cannot be gathered in any objective way. It comes out of the shared matrix of relationships." (BPAFF 24)

Best Practice 2. Adult faith formation targets the times of transitions and change in the lives of adults.

The field of adult development provides important insights into the kinds of transitions, developmental tasks, and changes in personal meaning that mark the journey of adulthood. Understanding the many ways adults change and grow alerts adult educators to the dynamics of adult Christian growth. As Diane Tickton Schuster observes,

Adulthood is filled with transitions: geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, unanticipated illness, divorce, and the loss of loved ones. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to "finish unfinished business" or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive educational institutions as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help them regain "order and stability" in their lives. (Schuster 2003b, 10)

Addressing the needs of people in transition provides important opportunities for adult faith formation by bringing a faith perspective to the transitions adults are experiencing. "Recognize that these transitions may prompt a hunger for learning and provide study opportunities that are responsive to immediate concerns. As adults begin to study, their new learning may lead them to new questioning and unanticipated changes in the views of self and world. Offer to sustain people through these times of upheaval by provide a steady presence in the lives" (Schuster 2003a, 37).

A challenge for congregations and adult religious educators is to be on the lookout for adults who are experiencing transition and change and offer to help them chart a course of learning that can help them find meaning in their lives. This means helping learners assess what they want and need to know, and showing them where to find programs, support, and resources for their Christian growth.

Best Practice 3. Adult faith formation is centered on spiritual growth processes in the lives of adults.

Spiritual growth is at the heart of effective adult faith formation. Adult faith formation utilizes life experiences as occasions for spiritual insight. The *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study* reports that

> (Adults) want to see and feel God active in their lives. If we focus our efforts to help adults grow in their spiritual lives they will participate. While learning about the faith tradition plays a role in this process, it is not the most fundamental reason that adults are part of church. They will learn about the tradition to

the extent that it helps them in their journey with God. Adults seem to want to look *through* the tradition as a lens for seeing their life, more that to look *at* it. (BPAFF, 27)

Adults respond to faith formation offerings that nurture their spiritual lives and increase their understanding of their faith. Adults are hungry to grow in their relationship with God and that, given the right setting and topic, they will participate in these kinds of programming efforts. Programs in spirituality were the most frequently mentioned and presumably the most desired by adults. (BPAFF, 18)

Some of the most popular adult faith formation programs focus on spiritual growth, including small faith sharing groups, Bible study, retreats, and spiritual reflection opportunities.

Best Practice 4. Adult faith formation connects with the motivations and interests of adults.

Research studies on adult learning and adult faith formation point to motivation as a key factor in determining whether or not adults will participate in an adult faith formation offering. The research tells us to be aware of the variety of adult motivations and design programs that recognize these motivational factors.

1. Adults are motivated to learn when facing life transitions. They seek learning and support to cope with changes in their lives that give rise to new developmental tasks, e.g., raising children, aging parents, financial matters, job changes, divorce, etc.
2. Adults are motivated by appealing to personal and spiritual growth and/or personal benefits.
3. Adults are motivated to learn when they feel the need to learn and have input into what, why, and how they will learn. Pre-program assessment is important.
4. Adults are motivated to learn when the benefits of a learning experience outweigh their resistance.
5. Adults are motivated to attend adult learning programs that are enjoyable and enriching.
6. Adults are motivated to learn when they have the opportunity to do something they could not do before.
7. Adults are motivated to learn by settings that have a natural, interactive, communal feel. They

want to be treated and seated as adults in the physical settings where they gather. (BPAFF)

8. Adults are motivated to learn when programs are sensitive to their time constraints by keeping commitments short in terms of duration and offering choices of times for participation. (BPAFF)

The *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study* found that churches created *synergy* among a number of factors that motivated adults to participate. "Planners need to find ways to orchestrate some of these factors in their planning and marketing efforts. Fun, food, teacher, topic, timing all must work together to capture the interest of today's busy adults." (BPAFF, 28)

Best Practice 5. Adult faith formation programs are guided by learning goals and measure the outcomes of programs.

The congregations most successful in adult faith formation articulate what they hope to accomplish by their efforts, what difference adult faith formation will make in the lives of adults. These congregations have a clear set of expectations and criteria for success. They develop learning outcomes that incorporate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains—engaging the head, heart, and lifestyle of adults. Effective adult faith formation empowers people to live the Gospel and to call others to do the same. (BPAFF, 21)

Effective adult faith formation programs design concrete empirical methods by which to measure the stated outcomes, so that leaders know if they have accomplished what they set out to do. Congregations measure learning outcomes as well as satisfaction outcomes, discovering how people enjoyed the program and what they learned from it. They also use a variety of written and verbal methods to gather feedback on a program's effectiveness. (BPAFF, 21)

Best Practice 6. Adult faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to address the diversity of adult backgrounds, faith maturity, interests, and learning needs.

Adult faith formation in each congregation is highly contextual. It takes into account the societal and economic situations that surround it, and the diversity of the adult population. There is no one program model or resource that can address the diversity of the adult members of a congregation. And no program model or resource will be effective if it is not customized to the congregational culture as well as the life situations and needs of adults. Adult learners will chose a program that best fits their learning needs, preferred mode of learning, and time constraints.

Adult faith formation offerings can be aimed at the *entire adult population* in a congregation or *targeted to particular adults*. In the *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study* the vast majority of programs were designed for the entire adult population. Yet there are numerous examples and opportunities for congregations to design programs that meet the needs of a segment of the adult population, such as an adult life stage, a life transition (e.g., retirement), a common learning need (e.g., a contemporary social issue), or a time schedule (e.g., an early morning Bible study group).

As important as the variety of program models is, the *quantity* of programming is not a key factor in effectiveness. The *Effective Christian Education Study* found "that effective Christian education can be transmitted through a small number of programs and events, as long as, in combination, they have effective leadership, processes, and content. Accordingly, what matters is how things are done rather than numbers of range of programs. This finding should be especially encouraging to the small congregation" (Benson and Eklin, 54).

The variety of congregational adult faith formation programs can be categorized into five families of program models. Congregations with effective adult faith formation offer adults multiple models for learning. (In addition to these models be sure to review the models suggested in this issue's articles on best practices in parent education, family faith formation, and intergenerational faith formation, all of which involve adults in learning settings.)

- **Independent Learning**: Independent learning provides maximum flexibility for the learner—when to learn, how to learn, where to learn, and what to learn. With the increasing number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning courses and resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to religious learning for busy adults. Congregations can serve as guide to helping adults find the best learning format

and content to address their learning needs. Examples of independent learning include:

1. Reading
   - book-of-the-month or book club
   - article or insert in the church bulletin
   - topical booklets
2. Magazine subscriptions
3. Podcasts/audio learning
   - audio presentations from conferences, workshops, speaker series
   - Sunday sermons
   - audiobooks on tape/CD or at iTunes
   - Bible on CD (e.g., *The Bible Experience* from Zondervan)
   - podcasts on iTunes and religious web sites
   - iTunes University: audio presentations of university courses
4. Video podcasts and video-based learning
   - feature films and documentaries
   - iTunes University: video presentations of university courses
5. Online Courses
   - learning sites
   - online courses (e.g., C21 Online at Boston College: www.bc.edu/sites/c21online; STEP Online Theology at University of Notre Dame: http://step.nd.edu)
   - e-courses (e.g., spirituality courses at www.spiritualityandpractice.com)
6. Online Learning Centers
   - religious resource websites with articles, practices, activities, etc. (e.g., www.myjewishlearning.com)

- **Small Group Learning**: Small group learning formats provide an excellent way to address the diversity of adult learning needs by organizing a variety of small groups with each one targeted to a particular learning need or topic. Small group learning formats also provide lots of flexibility in schedule and location. Groups can meet at times and places that best fit their lives, such as group that meets for breakfast weekly at the local restaurant or for coffee at a local Starbucks. Small groups create an accepting environment in which new relationships can be formed. It is not always necessary for the congregation to sponsor small group programs. Congregational leaders can provide resources, support, and training for leaders, thereby enabling adults to organize their own small groups. Small group learning

can take many different forms. Examples of small learning include:

1. Discipleship or faith sharing groups or study groups (utilizing print, audio, video, and/or online resources)
   - Bible study groups
   - theological formation study groups
   - theme or issue oriented study groups
   - Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing groups
   - book study club
2. Practice-focused groups
   - prayer
   - service/faith in action
   - parenting
3. Special interest groups
   - support groups e.g., for mothers with young children, cancer survivors)
4. Ministry groups
   - groups engaged in leadership and ministry within the congregation or to the community of which study is a part of their work

- **Large Group Learning**: Large group learning formats provide a way to serve a large number of adults with learning needs and topics that appeal to a wide audience. Large group learning programs can be offered jointly with other churches. Here is a sampling of large group learning formats:

1. Multi-session programs (e.g., offering multi-week courses on theological themes, books of the Bible, parenting at particular stages of family life, adult life issues)
2. One-session program (e.g., offering a monthly session on theological or spiritual formation)
3. Speaker series (e.g., offering multi-evening or multi-week program focused around a particular theological themes, Christian practices, current events, or the time of the church year)
4. Roundtable discussions after Sunday worship (e.g., exploring the Sunday Scripture readings in age groups or intergenerational groups with refreshments)
5. Parent parallel learning program (e.g., offering parent sessions at the same time as their children's sessions)
6. Workshops (e.g., offering one day programs targeted to specific life issues,

such as parenting, mid-life issues, and aging)

7. Film festivals (e.g., exploring key themes in movies, such as relationships, social issues, and meaning in life, with a Christian perspective)
8. Conferences (e.g., participating in regional church-sponsored conferences)
9. Field trips (e.g., visiting an art museum or attending a musical or theatrical performance, and exploring faith themes in art or music or drama)
10. Intergenerational programs
11. Dinner with a speaker.

■ **Spiritual Formation:** Retreats and/or spiritual formation programs are specialized programs that nurture the spiritual life of adults. While spiritual formation can utilize individualized, small group, or large group learning models, there are several formats that are particular to spiritual formation, for example:

1. Online spiritual formation (www.sacredspace.ie, www.taize.fr, www.upperroom.org)
2. Mentoring with a spiritual director
3. Prayer group
4. Prayer breakfast
5. Church-based retreats: evenings, one-day, weekend
6. Advent and Lent retreat experiences
7. Retreat programs at local retreat houses

■ **Study-Action Projects**: Combining study with an experiential hands-on action project provides another model for adult learning. One type of study-action model focuses on engaging adults in the ministry of justice and service. An excellent example of a program that weaves study, small group learning, retreat experiences, and action projects is *JustFaith* (www.justfaith.org). *JustFaith* is a thirty-week justice formation process with a focus on poverty. Meeting weekly, small groups employ books, videos, lecture, discussion, prayer, retreats and hands-on service experiences.

A second type of study-action model involves church ministry/leadership groups that prepare for their particular ministry or leadership role through study (e.g., workshops, courses, or small group learning) accompanied by actual involvement in their ministry or leadership role. This type of

learning involves a continuous cycle of study-action-study-action, as the adults' involvement in action generates new learning needs.

■ **Online Learning**: Online learning has already been identified as an example within the other learning models, but over the past several years it has taken on increased importance as its own learning model. Online learning is an integral component of a congregation's adult faith formation and provides vast resources for congregations to utilize. The April 2007 report *Faith Online* (Pew Internet and American Life Project), reported on the widespread use of the Internet for religious purposes.

• 64% of the nation's 128 million Internet users have done things online that relate to religious or spiritual matters.
• Those who use the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes are more likely to be women, white, middle-aged, college educated, and relatively well-to-do.
• The "online faithful" are devout, and they use the Internet for *personal* spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions or work related to their churches. But their faith-activity online seems to augment their already strong commitments to their congregations.
• The majority of online faithful describe themselves as "spiritual and religious."
• Evangelicals are among the most fervent Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes. (*Faith Online*)

At the center of its online strategy is the congregation's own web site. What would it be like if a congregation invested time and energy in developing and maintaining their own web site as a center for adult learning? A church web site and e-mail can:

• list the adult faith formation programs and opportunities in the congregation and ecumenically in other churches;
• provide a setting for online small groups, courses, and/or reading groups (e.g., a book of the month club);
• link adults to faith formation offerings on other web sites, such as online course offerings;

- deliver timely faith formation resources to adults on a wide variety of topics and interests that can be targeted to the diversity of the adult population;
- provide social networking among adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning;
- deliver a daily Bible study to every member of the congregation;
- provide audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers and link to other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University).

A church web site will not replace face-to-face faith formation, but it can certainly enhance and expand what congregations are doing and provide new approaches for delivering faith formation to involved and "not yet involved" adults.

Best Practice 7. Adult faith formation is designed using a variety of learning methods that respect the diversity of learning styles of adults.

The literature on the characteristics of adult learners provides rich insight to what matters to adults when they engage in learning activities. As learners, adults strive to become independent, self-directing, and competent; they thrive in learning environments that help them to transform their perspective and feel empowered to effect change in their lives. Adult learners are diverse and require learning programs that accommodate the full spectrum of learning needs, styles, and preferences.

1. Utilize adults' experience and prior knowledge. Adults learn best from their own experiences. Adults bring relevant religious knowledge and life experiences to a learning program. They need the opportunity to build on their knowledge, as well as to learn from each other. Adults use their knowledge from years of experience as a filter for new information that can function as a catalyst or barrier to learning something new.
2. Respect the variety of learning styles among adult participants with a diversity of learning experiences, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices. (For further information see: *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, by David Kolb. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.)
3. Recognize the multiple intelligences (linguistic, spatial, musical, logical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist) among the adult participants, and design learning methods and activities that address the variety of intelligences in the group. (For further information see the work of Howard Gardner and the book 7 *Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Many Intelligences*, revised edition, by Thomas Armstrong New York: Plume Books, 1999.)
4. Incorporate learning activities that are realistic and that involve, stimulate thinking, and challenge the adults.
5. Incorporate real-life application of learning. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it. Providing ways for adults to practice what they are learning promotes the transfer of learning from the session to their daily lives.
6. Incorporate a variety of features into the learning experience. Adults enjoy learning experiences that combine eating, praying, sharing, discussion, and receiving new information about their faith. They like sessions that allow them to physically move and even change rooms. (BPAFF)

One of the central conclusions on adult faith maturing in the *Effective Christian Education Study* affirms these insights: "The importance of educational process, in tandem with educational content, suggests that the effective program not only teaches in the classical sense of transmitting insight and knowledge, but also allows insight to emerge from the crucible of experience. (Experience can be fostered either by reflection and interpretation of personal religious experience, or by involvement in the faith stories of others.) Both ways of learning are powerful, and the two combinations produce stronger growth in faith than either one alone." (Benson and Eklin, 54)

Best Practice 8. Adult faith formation programs create hospitable learning environments and build relationships among adults.

Adults are more willing to share their faith with one another in settings that are friendly, hospitable, and conducive to building relationships. The *Effective Christian Education Study* affirms the most effective adult faith formation created sense of community in which people help each other develop faith and values.

Adults learn best in a safe and comfortable environment, characterized by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences. Adults learn best when they are in conversation with other adults about things that matter. Effective adult faith formation "creates learning environments that are friendly, flexible, and informal. Adults are motivated by settings that have a natural, interactive, communal feel" (BPAFF). They want to be together in natural, comfortable, inviting settings.

Effective congregations provide "opportunities for adults to build relationships with one another. Adults want to be part of a community of caring and that those relationships with others are part of their relationships with God. They like to learn in settings where they can share their experiences. Eating is an important way that adults gather. Thus having food available and even a meal is an attractive component of adult formation venues. Hospitality and a welcoming spirit ranked very high among critical success factors. The power of the group also helps to bring people together. The more people associate with one another, and feel a sense of belonging, the more compelling the group is in their lives" (BPAFF).

Best Practice 9. Adult faith formation requires effective leadership in a variety of roles: pastors, a faith formation leadership team, and teachers.

1. Pastors are committed and involved.

The *Effective Christian Education Study* found three ways the pastor positively influenced the effectiveness of adult faith formation:

- The pastor has high commitment to educational programs for adults.
- The pastor devotes significant hours to adult Christian education programs.
- The pastor knows educational theory and practice of Christian education for adults.

Mary Hughes and Diane Hymans, in a study of adult faith formation programs in congregations, found that each pastor had a high commitment to adult education and is a teacher and educator. The role of each pastor differs, however. Some do almost all the teaching themselves; some are engaged in teaching and planning, and others empowering laity to respond. Each pastor found effective ways to be a leader in adult education, however, and that commitment showed (Hughes and Hymans, 167).

2. Congregations have a coordinator and leadership team that plans, implements, and coordinates adult faith formation.

A coordinator and a leadership team are essential for the effectiveness of a congregation's faith formation efforts. The *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation* study found:

- Having a paid staff member responsible for coordinating, planning, and implementing adult faith formation is more likely to yield successful efforts. Most coordinators have other responsibilities, as well. It seems crucial that there be someone who is accountable for adult faith formation in a permanent role.
- Parishes that are successful in adult faith formation have an adult faith formation team that 1) listens to the needs, concerns, interests, and issues of adults in the congregation; 2) engages in planning and implementing adult faith formation opportunities; and 3) promotes adult programs and opportunities through a multi-faceted plan that generates enthusiasm and excitement.

The *Effective Christian Education Study* found that it was essential that adult faith formation have both a clear mission statement and clear learning objectives for each program.

3. Teachers of adults are people of mature faith who serve as "facilitators of learning."

The *Effective Christian Education Study* summarizes the role of the teacher in two characteristics: 1) they are people who are high in mature faith; and 2) they

know educational theory and methods for adults (Benson and Eklin, 55).

First, a solid (mature) faith lies at the foundation of all good teaching of adults. Teachers are models for adult learners. They manifest the presence of God in their lives. Their continuing growth in faith and active discipleship offer living examples for other adults. They share their own faith story as they transmit the faith story of the Christian tradition.

Based on her research into congregational adult learning, Diane Tickton Shuster recommends that teachers of adults decrease "distance" from the learners by sharing "real" experiences from their personal life. She says that, "learners appreciate understanding how the teacher's own faith journey has shaped current thinking or values." The more teachers disclose how they have arrived at their current faith understanding, the more they help the learners to reflect on their own growth and change. (Shuster 2003a)

Second, the teacher of adults functions as a facilitator of learning, shifting from the "teacher-as-expert" to the "teacher-as-resource-for-learning." While transmitting knowledge is important, it is not the primary role of the teacher of adults. Teachers create space for adults to find their own voice as Christian learners and Christian knowers. In keeping with the nature of adult learning, we can identify several characteristics of effective teachers of adults. Teachers

- create intimacy in the program by asking learners about their experiences, needs, and perceived barriers to learning
- build relationships among the adult participants
- utilize diverse teaching strategies
- demonstrate the relevance and meaning of material being taught
- provide for learners' needs for physical comfort (e.g., food, lighting, seating)
- manage time well; begin and end on time; build in breaks
- seek to reduce learners' tension, anxiety, and emotional dependency
- guide the learners in transferring their learning into daily life.

Conclusion

This article has identified nine best practices in adult faith formation, drawn from research and pastoral practice. It is not a definitive list, but hopefully a helpful description that will assist congregations as they develop adult faith formation. Unfortunately there is limited research on the best practices, the kinds of programs now being offered, the experiences of people attending these programs, the characteristics or approaches of teachers, the long-term impact of the content being taught, and the factors that contribution to an ongoing commitment to Christian adult learning. There is a need for more information on best practices and the kinds of programs that effectively "grow" communities of educated adults.

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Planning for Adult Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with adults in your congregation.

Best Practice 1. Adult faith formation pays attention to what is going on in the lives of adults and listens very carefully to what adults are talking about.

■ What are the needs and interests of adults that your congregation is addressing through your current adult faith formation programming?

■ How does your congregation systematically listen to the needs and interests of adults using a variety of methods, such as surveys, interest finders, focus groups, and interviews?

Best Practice 2. Adult faith formation targets the times of transitions and change in the lives of adults.

■ What transitions and changes in the lives of adults does your congregation currently address in adult faith formation (e.g., family changes, loss of a loved one, unanticipated illness, career transitions)?

■ What are several transitions and changes in the lives of adults in your congregation that can be addressed through adult faith formation? How will your church address these transitions? (See milestones faith formation in the "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" for ideas.)

Best Practice 3. Adult faith formation is centered on spiritual growth processes in the lives of adults.

■ What types of retreats and spiritual formation experiences does your congregation currently offer adults?

❑ Online spiritual formation
❑ Mentoring with a spiritual director
❑ Prayer group or prayer breakfast

❑ Church-based retreats: evenings, one-day, weekend, Advent, Lent
❑ Retreat programs at local retreat houses

■ How can your congregation strengthen the spiritual formation opportunities for adults? What are one or two new retreat or spiritual formation experiences that your congregation can offer young adults?

Best Practice 4. Adult faith formation connects with the motivations and interests of adults.

■ How does your congregation's adult faith formation programming connect with the motivation of adults (e.g., input into the program design, enjoyable and enriching programs, ability to do something, relationship-building, time constraints)?

■ How can your congregation more effectively build on the motivations of adult learners in adult faith formation programming?

Best Practice 5. Adult faith formation programs are guided by learning goals and measure the outcomes of programs.

■ What are the outcomes your congregation has established for adult faith formation? What are the expectations and criteria for success?

■ Does your congregation develop learning outcomes (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) for each adult faith formation program? How is each program evaluated?

Best Practice 6. Adult faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to address the diversity of adult backgrounds, faith maturity, interests, and learning needs.

■ Which of the following learning models is your congregation currently using in adult faith formation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your current models?

❏ **Independent Learning Opportunities** (e.g., reading, magazines, podcasts and audio learning, video podcasts and video-based learning, online courses, online learning centers)

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_____
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_____

❏ **Small Group Learning Opportunities** (e.g., discipleship or faith sharing groups, Bible study groups, topical study groups, practice-focused groups, special interest groups, ministry groups)

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❏ **Large Group Learning Opportunities** (e.g., multi-session courses, one-session program, speaker series, round table discussions, parent parallel learning, field trips, intergenerational programs, workshops, film festivals, conferences)

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❏ **Study-Action Projects** (e.g., justice and service projects, church ministry/leadership group)

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❏ **Online Learning / Church Web Site**
  ■ Does your church have a web site with a special section targeted to adults?
  ■ What features does your congregation incorporate on the web site? For example:
    ❏ adult programs and opportunities in the congregation and in other churches
    ❏ online learning courses and activities
    ❏ online small groups, courses, and reading groups
    ❏ formation resources for adults on a wide variety of topics and interests
    ❏ social networking among other adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning
    ❏ daily Bible study (on the web or e-mailed to young adults)
    ❏ audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers, and link to other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University)
    ❏ question and answer box
  ■ Does your church web site provide podcasts directed at adults (e.g., Sunday worship service, sermons, and presentations by guest speakers)?
  ■ Does your congregation utilize e-mail to communicate and stay in-touch with adults? Does your congregation send an e-newsletter to adults?

■ What <u>new</u> opportunities for adult learning can your congregation introduce to engage more adults in religious learning?

Best Practice 7. Adult faith formation is designed using a variety of learning methods that respect the diversity of learning styles of adults.

■ Examine each of your congregation's adult faith formation programs and resources for adults to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of adult learning.

❏ Utilize adults' experience and prior knowledge in a learning program.
❏ Respecting the variety of learning styles among adults by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience.

- ❐ Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of adults.
  - verbal-linguistic
  - logical-mathematical
  - visual-spatial
  - bodily-kinesthetic
  - musical-rhythmic
  - naturalist
  - interpersonal
  - intrapersonal
- ❐ Incorporate learning activities that are realistic and that involve, stimulate thinking, and challenge the adults.
- ❐ Incorporate real-life application of learning. Providing ways for adults to practice what they are learning promotes the transfer of learning from the session to their daily lives.
- ❐ Incorporate a variety of features into the learning experience. Adults enjoy learning experiences that combine eating, praying, sharing, discussion, and receiving new information about their faith. They like sessions that allow them to physically move and even change rooms.

- ■ How can adult programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to more effectively address the characteristics of adult learning?

Best Practice 8. Adult faith formation programs create hospitable learning environments and build relationships among adults.

- ■ How do adult faith formation programs create a safe and comfortable environment for adults, characterized by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences?

- ■ How do adult faith formation programs create opportunities for adults to build relationships with one another in a caring community of learners?

- ■ How can your congregation's adult faith formation programs strengthen the community and relational dimensions of adult learning?

Best Practice 9. Adult faith formation requires effective leadership in a variety of roles: pastors, a faith formation leadership team, and teachers.

1. Pastors are committed and involved.

- ■ How is the pastor currently involved in adult faith formation?

- ■ What additional ways can the pastor be involved in adult faith formation?

2. Congregations have a coordinator and leadership team that plans, implements, and coordinates adult faith formation.

- ■ What is the current leadership structure for adult faith formation? Does your congregation have a coordinator and adult faith formation leadership team?

- ■ How can you strengthen leadership for adult faith formation?

3. Teachers of adults are people of mature faith who serve as "facilitators of learning."

- ■ Who is currently involved in teaching adults?

- ■ How are teachers of adults invited/recruited into their leadership role in adult faith formation?

- ■ How are teachers of adults prepared for teaching as facilitators of learning?

- ■ What new sources of teachers can your congregation identify—within the church and in the community?

Action Strategies
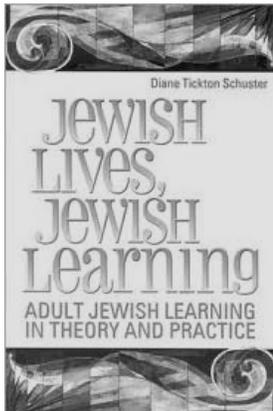
Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice

Diane Tickton Schuster (New York: UAHC Press, 2003) [$15.95]

Diane Tickton Schuster has written a well-research, practical guide to adult learning that uses stories of learners and teachers, as well as research into adult development and education. Each chapter identifies practices for effective adult learning in congregations. The book covers a wide variety of topics, including principles and practices of adult learning, understanding the different kinds of learning, creating learning-centered education, and practical strategies and models for adult learning. Written for Jewish educators, the insights and wisdom in this book apply to all congregations and the efforts to promote adult learning.

> ➢ **JESNA** (The Jewish Education Service of North America) has an excellent web site, **www.jesna.org**, with research, articles, and resources for Jewish learning that all congregations will find helpful. See especially the issues of the journal, *Agenda: Jewish Education*, and the "Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st Century Report."
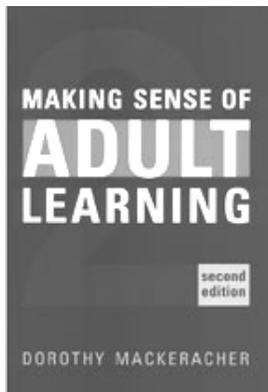
Making Sense of Adult Learning (Second Edition)

**Dorothy Mackeracher** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) [$35.95]

One of the finest books on adult learning available, *Making Sense of Adult Learning* covers the characteristics of adult learners—emotional, cognitive, social, physical, and spiritual—blending research and practice. Mackeracher includes chapters on the cycles and styles of learning and strategies and models in facilitating adult learner. Concepts are presented from learning-centered and learner-centered perspectives. Each chapter has learning and teaching principles that provide practical ideas about facilitating adult learning more effectively.
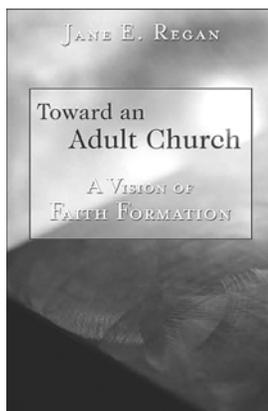
Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation

**Jane E. Regan** (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002) [$15.95]

Jane Regan explores the current structure of parish faith formation. Basing her ideas on contemporary theory and traditional practice, Regan sets forth an intriguing argument: the vitality of the Church depends on establishing a new educational paradigm—one that is focused on adults. How can parishes design a framework for adult faith formation? Will such programs be accepted by local church communities? Where does children's faith formation fit into the new structure? Regan answers these questions and offers ideas for developing a balanced approach to faith formation—one that addresses the ongoing faith life of adults. Chapters include: Toward an Adult Church, The Adult as Person of Faith, Transformative Learning, Forming a Learning Community, Adult Formation: From Vision to Presumptions to Structures, and Leadership for Change.
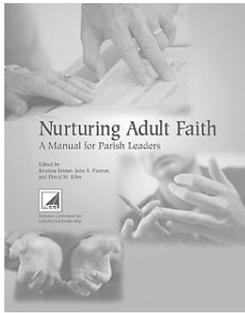
Nurturing Adult Faith: A Manual for Parish Leaders
**Kristina Krimm, Jane Pierron, and David Riley.** (Washington, DC: NCCL, 2003)

Nurturing Adult Faith is a handbook that provides theoretical models, practical helps and essential information for organizing adult faith formation programs. The manual includes ways to understand the parish a formative community of adults, descriptions of adult development and faith growth, processes for organizing and planning adult faith formation, and a compendium of concrete approaches for adult faith formation.
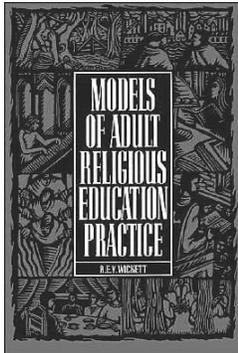
Models of Adult Religious Education Practice
R. E.Y. Wickett (Birmingham, AL; Religious Education Press, 1991) [$21.95]

This is one of the only books available that presents theoretical perspectives on religious education practice and descriptions of proven models and procedures for successful adult religious education. It groups these models and procedures into categories: traditional models, individual learner models, group learning models, community models of learning, and distance education models. Unfortunately the book was written before the internet era and the advent of online learning models.
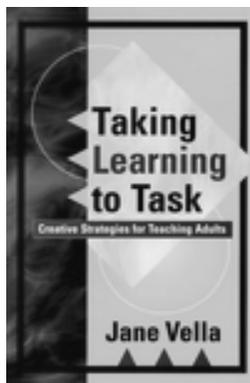
Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults
Jane Vella (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) [$35]

In *Taking Learning to Task*, Jane Vella shifts the spotlight from teaching tasks to learning tasks. Unlike traditional teaching methods, learning tasks are open questions leading to open dialogue between teacher and learner. She provides seven steps to planning learning-centered courses, four types of learning tasks, a checklist of principles and practices, critical questions for instructional design, key components for evaluation, and other tools. She also shares real-world examples of successful learning programs, including online and distance-learning courses. *Taking Learning to Task* is a hands-on, practical guide to designing effective learning tasks for diverse learners and diverse content. (See also *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach—The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* by Jane Vella, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.)
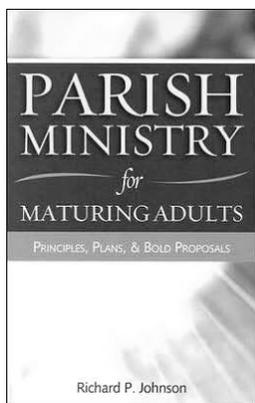
Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults: Principles, Plans, & Bold Proposals
Richard P. Johnson (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007) [$12.95]

Richard Johnson wants churches to become more active, more assertive, and more focused on the fundamentals of ministering to those in their maturing years. This includes a greater appreciation that this time of life has immense spiritual purpose when people draw closer both to God and their true selves. He calls for a new vision of ministry with maturing adults that moves beyond social activities to a new model of spiritual growth and personal development. Maturing adults need the nurturance of the church's care and compassion; the understanding of their real needs as they are now; the necessary help in discerning the call of God today; encouragement to continue their spiritual pilgrimage; and direction to reach out to others in new ways.