APPROACHES TO ADULT FAITH FORMATION

OHWB advocates a comprehensive, multi-faceted and coordinated approach to adult faith formation to meet the diverse needs of parishioners. (OHWB, p. 34) A wide range of formats are conducive to meeting those ends. Above all, the liturgy holds pride of place in terms of its formative, and transformative, potential.

“Sunday Eucharist remains the center of the Church’s life. Indeed, active participation in the liturgy is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit and deepen their conversion to God.” (OHWB, p. 35)

It is imperative, therefore, for parish leaders to do everything possible to ensure well-prepared, well-executed liturgies including relevant, meaningful homilies, well-trained liturgical ministers (e.g. lectors, hospitality ministers, servers, extraordinary ministers of communion), a well-prepared physical environment, and music that foster prayer and a lively sense of deep faith.

The following are some additional scenarios for providing faith formation for adults:

- Bible Study
- Book Clubs
- Bulletin Inserts
- Catholic Associations (e.g. Knights of Columbus)
- Catholic Magazines
- Catholic Websites
- Chat Rooms
- Coffee and Donuts after Mass
- Community Projects that include Service Learning
- Couple-to-Couple Ministry
- Diocesan Newspaper
- DVD/Video/Audiotape-based Programs
- Ecclesial Movements (e.g. Catholic Family Movement)
- Ecumenical Programs/Activities
- Faith Sharing Groups
- Family-based Catechetical Sessions
- Family-to-Family Ministry
- Formation for Specific Ministries
- Implementing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
- Lecture Series
- Ministry Training (e.g. finance/pastoral council, ministers to the sick, etc.)
- Newsletters
- On-line Distance Learning
- Parenting Programs
- Parish Library
- Parish Missions
- Parish WebPages with Chat Rooms
- Peace and Justice Committee
- Periodic Mailings
- Prayer Groups
- Programs for Inactive Catholics
- Retreats
- Sacramental Preparation, including Parents
- Seasonal Booklets
Small Christian Communities  
Social Networking  
Spiritual direction  
Study/Discussion Groups  
Support Groups  
Travel/Pilgrimage  
Webinars

The above list is by no means exhaustive. It clearly indicates that formational opportunities may be systematic or occasional, individual or communal, organized or spontaneous. The ideal is for the offerings to be varied enough to meet the diverse needs of today’s adults and flexible enough to accommodate their particular circumstances.

While providing an array of innovative and creative faith formation opportunities is encouraged and commendable, the crux of the matter is not simply to add new programs to the list of what already takes place in the parish. The critical concern is to make the most of existing parish activities and services and viewing all that occurs there within the context of the vision of lifelong faith formation. “In fact, every aspect and event in parish life can be intentionally fashioned as an occasion for adult faith formation.” (OHWB, p. 38) In her book, Toward an Adult Church: A vision of Faith Formation, Jane Regan reiterates this perspective by highlighting an understanding of the faith community as a way of being.

The clear call for adult faith formation and for the creation and strengthening of evangelizing communities is not first and foremost about creating new programs to be added onto existing parish activities. In much the same way that being an evangelizing community is not primarily something a parish does but something a parish is, being a community that fosters adult faith is not primarily specific programs that a parish offers but the understanding of lifelong learning that permeates the entire faith community. What needs to be formed is not merely a parish with more programs but a parish that is a learning community. (Toward an Adult Church, p. 116.)

There are many examples of incorporating or enhancing the potential for adult faith formation by looking at what the parish already does a little differently. For instance, one can include a recent article from a magazine on liturgy along with the schedule that is regularly sent out to liturgical ministers. Time may be set aside at the beginning of a parish council meeting to examine a recently published church document and discuss its implications for the parish. A series of notices may appear in the parish bulletin highlighting components of Catholic social teaching prior to the annual parish food drive. Or the Knights of Columbus can begin their monthly meeting by spending a few minutes reflecting on one of the Sunday scripture readings together. “Whatever approach is used, each parish needs to consider seriously how it will make the lifelong faith formation of its adult members its chief catechetical concern.” (OHWB, p. 38)

To maximize its potential for success, promoting adult faith formation must be central to the overall vision and plan of the parish. After all, the parish is where the vast majority of Catholics experience Church most vividly. “The parish, then, provides the place, persons, and means to summon and sustain adults in lifelong conversion of heart, mind and life. It is, without doubt, the most important locus in which the Christian community is formed and expressed.” (OHWB, p. 40) Parish leadership—the pastor and other pastoral staff, adult faith formation leaders and a core adult faith formation team—must collaborate to effectively coordinate and shape the parish culture in order to nourish a climate in which a vibrant faith and lived discipleship thrive. Such a parish climate will have an impact not only on those within its borders but beyond as well.