



Adult Faith Formation: Will It Catch On This Time?

BY [JANE REGAN](#) | SEPTEMBER 22, 2003



With growing clarity and insistence, voices within the church—both official and unofficial—speak repeatedly of the importance of the faith formation of adults to the life and vitality of the church. Of course, adult faith formation is not a new concern. Most of the ecclesial documents that currently address the topic cite the *General Catechetical Directory* of 1971, which states that “catechesis for adults must be considered the chief form of catechesis” (No. 20). Most recently, the bishops of the United States approved and published *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*, in which they affirm that adult faith formation must be seen as “the central task in the catechetical enterprise” (No. 5).

So if we have been talking about this for over 30 years, why does the vision of vibrant parishes with adult faith formation at the center of community life still seem so far away? It is the rare parish that sees the faith formation of adults as an essential component of the faith formation of children and youth. Rarer still is the parish that places the faith of adults at the center of the work of catechesis.

Religious educators and pastoral ministers generally recognize the necessity and importance of adult faith formation. So why is there such a general mismatch between our convictions and our actions? I believe it is due to a failure to recognize the significant shifts in attitudes that this new focus requires. Surveying the adults in the parish concerning their needs and interests and then adding more programs or inviting in more speakers does not suffice, or at least will not serve as a firm foundation for placing adult formation at the center of the work of catechesis.

To add yet more programs to an already overextended parish calendar and parish staff does little to shift the focus from children and youth to adults. It is more likely to place added stress on families who are already juggling multiple commitments. In addition, periodic programs unconnected to the life of the parish or the parish vision can easily reinforce the already well-established belief that adult catechesis is something on the side, to be addressed when there is time and energy to do it. Or, even worse, if the program is poorly attended or unenthusiastically received, it can be discouraging to all involved. Soon the attitude becomes: “We’ve tried that before—it doesn’t work. The adults in our parish just aren’t interested.”

What is needed are not more programs but the genuine investment of focused energy and resources to make fundamental shifts in how we think about parish life, adult faith formation and the mission of the church. I propose four central shifts.

From Children to Adults

This shift from children to adults is the most obvious and the one that is essential for moving adult faith formation to the center of parish life. But it does not mean that children and youth are set aside. Rather than minimizing the faith life of children, shifting the focus to adults provides a broader and more vibrant context

within which to welcome children and youth into a life of faith.

Instead of having programs for children and youth to which adults are invited, consider the implications of having a program for adults to which children are welcomed as cherished guests.

First, it would affirm the fundamentally adult demands of the Christian faith. Adults have the responsibility both to know their faith and to consider critically how the local parish or the wider church is true to that faith. Adults are not merely recipients of a tradition; they are to be responsible and judicious participants in the ongoing shaping of the living tradition for the present time and context.

Second, it recognizes the faith-building potential of the family, or “domestic church.” When religious educators and catechetical documents proclaim that parents are the primary educators of their children in the faith, the expectation is that the adults in the family will give expression to their faith in the day-to-day realities of family life and that they are able to talk with their children about the presence of God in their lives, including God’s action within the family. Making these faith and family connections with any degree of ease is possible only when the adults are comfortable talking about their faith with other adults.

Third, it requires all of us—members of pastoral staff, parents and other adults within the Christian community—to take seriously the claim of the Second Vatican Council that we are the church. As members of the church, all adults have both the right and responsibility to be active participants in forming and transforming parish life. To be actively engaged in giving expression to the Christian life both within the faith community and outside it, adults must have opportunities to articulate their faith, examine the implications for Christian living and join with others in giving confident expression to their faith in the world.

From Information to Transformation

The fundamental focus of adult religious education is not remedial; it is not about instructing adults in propositions of the tradition that they did not receive or have forgotten from their last experiences of formal religious education. In other dimensions of their lives, adults gain the information they need to function effectively: how to use a computer, how to negotiate the best interest rate for a home loan, how to read a quarterly retirement statement. The same is true of faith and church membership.

But the information is not enough—it is not information for its own sake, but information that is in service of formation and transformation. By the way adult faith formation is structured, we can invite adults to look beyond the “what” of our tradition to the “so what?” What difference does this make to how I live my life, raise my children, spend my money and engage in the political dynamics of my town and state?

From Programs to Process

The call for a new focus on adult faith formation is often interpreted as a call for more programs, more lectures or more Lenten series. While religious educators consistently speak against a “schooling model,” we often return to that model as we begin our planning for adults. We ask about available resources and programs that can be used effectively, whether we are in South Boston, Hillsborough, N.D., or Santa Monica, Calif.

But again, adult faith formation is not exclusively about information; it is primarily about providing opportunities, within a faith context, for adults to talk with other adults about things that matter. As such, the best process for adult faith formation is not lecture but conversation.

Sustained, critical conversation is an essential component of the faith formation of adults. It is sustained in that it takes place regularly over an extended period of time, and each conversation is long enough to allow for a genuine interchange of experience, insights and commitments. It is critical in that the conversation is directed so that participants are invited to examine and talk about their beliefs and experiences of faith, consider the source of those beliefs and discuss what it means to live a Christian life.

The parish provides the context by working to create a space where conversation can be freely conducted. We can

speak of the space needed for sustained critical conversation among adults as having three dimensions. The first is the physical space. Attention to comfort, aesthetics and details are all in service to the creation of a space where adults can gather to talk with other adults about things that matter. Next there is a psychic space, where hospitality is of the essence. It is to be a safe space where telling stories is welcome and recalled faith experiences are heard as just that, a person's experience. Finally, there needs to be temporal space, that is, time marked off in the rhythm of the parish that allows for the continuing conversation.

From Membership to Mission

The final shift, from membership to mission, is the most significant one for understanding in a new way the place of adult faith formation in the life of the church. Why have few heeded the 30-year-old call for adult faith formation? At least part of the reason is that no one has been too sure why adult formation is so important. Bible study, prayer groups, Lenten lecture series all have been included under the general heading of adult education. Not as often included as adult education, but nonetheless part of the life of many parishes, are the various forms of formation for liturgical ministries and catechist meetings. Each in its own way has contributed to the faith of adults and enhanced the participants' sense of membership in the local faith community. But adult faith formation invites the believing community to look beyond their own community to the wider mission of the church.

I propose that the renewed call to attend with care and diligence to the church's mission of evangelization is a strong mandate and clear rationale for the work of adult faith formation. The goal of adult faith formation is not only to enrich the faith life of the participants and strengthen the parish community. It does these things in response to the church's primary task and reason for being: to evangelize. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *On Evangelization* (1975) spoke clearly of this: "Evangelization is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize" (No. 14). Adult catechesis has as its central goal forming, strengthening and challenging the adult faith community to be active participants in this task.

In November four years will have passed since *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* was approved by the bishops of the United States and published for use in the dioceses and parishes across the country. In that document the bishops state: "We are well aware that placing ongoing adult faith formation at the forefront of our catechetical planning and activity will mean real change in emphasis and priorities" (No. 14). As we move forward in shaping parishes that are ever more clear signs of God's reign, we will do well to embrace this insight and begin the sometimes difficult but always promising work of change.

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