

How to Put Adults at the Center of Formation

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Congratulations! You've just been appointed to the pastoral leadership team of St. Cunigunde Parish, a brand-new community in your diocese. You and your team strongly believe that "adult catechesis [is] the chief form of catechesis" (*Sharing the Light of Faith*, 188). You're well aware that "while most Catholic parishes place a high priority on the faith formation of children and youth, far fewer treat adult faith formation as a priority" (*Our Hearts Were Burning*, 43). But your team is determined that this will not be the case at St. Cunigunde! For one thing, as the new community comes together, there's no one to say "we've never done it that way." Hope and opportunity abound!

So, what will you do?

Before developing any program of faith formation, it might be helpful to ask, why do we do formation anyway? What's our purpose? John Paul II stated it simply: "The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus" ("Catechesi Tradendae," 5). Thus, the first task of formation is *encounter*, wherein the person of Jesus becomes a reality in our lives — not a concept or a tenet of faith, but a real person-in-relationship with us. Until this encounter has occurred, no real spiritual growth can take place.

The second task of formation is *catechesis* — helping people understand their relationship with Christ. This is undoubtedly the task catechists are most familiar and most comfortable with, so a lot of faith formation work is taken up with catechesis. And yet, as many have pointed out (including Pope Francis), we often end up catechizing those who have not yet been evangelized. Catechesis only makes sense to those who have experienced an encounter with Jesus.

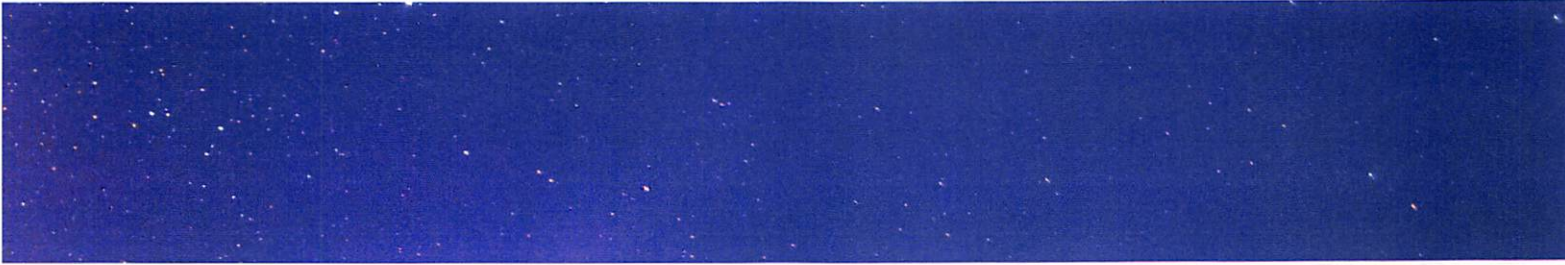
The third task of adult faith formation (AFF) is to help people *grow* and *deepen* their relationship with Christ. This may seem self-evident, but in practice, we often set low expectations for adult faith development. But faith development doesn't end with confirmation; spiritual growth continues into adulthood, as attested to by a long tradition of spiritual writers, beginning with Paul (1 Cor 2:1 — 3:2; 1 Cor 13:11–12). Consider your own faith life as an adult. What was your relationship to God like 10, 15, or 20 years ago? Hasn't it grown and changed in that time? It might be helpful to reflect on those changes. What precipitated that growth? What were the supports and challenges? How might those elements be important to an AFF program?

Admittedly, facilitating spiritual growth in adults can be messy. Development in adults doesn't occur according to a fixed schedule, as with children. Rather, moments of growth are often moments of crisis or transition; such moments may feel like a loss of identity or even a loss of faith — and, in a sense, they are. My favorite image of an adult growing in faith is a trapeze artist flying through the air. The trapeze artist must let go of one bar and trust that the other bar will be there when it's needed. For a few seconds the artist is flying in mid-air, unsupported, risking a fall. Likewise, faith development demands taking a risk: it requires letting go of a way of being that no longer serves our relationship with Christ while not yet fully understanding or being comfortable with the way of being that beckons.

How will you set expectations in this new community?

Our expectations around what adult faith formation is will determine what we develop at St. Cunigunde. The first work, then, of our leadership team might be to draft a manifesto of AFF to lay out how we want to think about faith formation:

1. As a community committed to adult faith formation, we expect adults to grow in faith. We challenge for growth rather than settle for a childlike faith. We encourage adults to "let go" of their comfortable faith when it no longer nourishes and to move to something deeper, and we support them in these transitional moments. We also talk a lot about adult formation, our call to grow, and what that looks like. In the homily, parish media, small groups, and one-on-one encounters, we're constantly discussing how we grow and deepen our faith.
2. We welcome doubt and inquiry. As Pope Francis said, "If one has the answers to all the questions — that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt" (in Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God"). We admit that we don't have all the answers, but we wrestle with the questions together. And all questions are okay, even ones with no answers.
3. We welcome diverse spiritualities. We don't expect everyone to look alike, grow alike, or pray alike. We provide



a lot of different formation opportunities to support adults at different points on their faith journeys and with different needs. We also encourage self-directed formation.

4. We support those in “crises of faith,” recognizing that this is, in fact, how adults grow in faith. We don’t shut down potential growth, trivializing a crisis with “bumper sticker” responses: “If God brings you to it, God will bring you through it.” “God must have a plan; you just can’t see it.” “Just pray harder!” Rather, we support growth by providing a holding environment: We affirm that the crisis being faced is indeed a challenge. We affirm that God is present nonetheless, as is the community. Ultimately, we recognize that the “dark night” is part of spiritual growth.
5. We practice the art of accompaniment. We trust in the slow work of God and know that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate director of adult faith formation. “One who accompanies others has to realize that each person’s situation before God and their

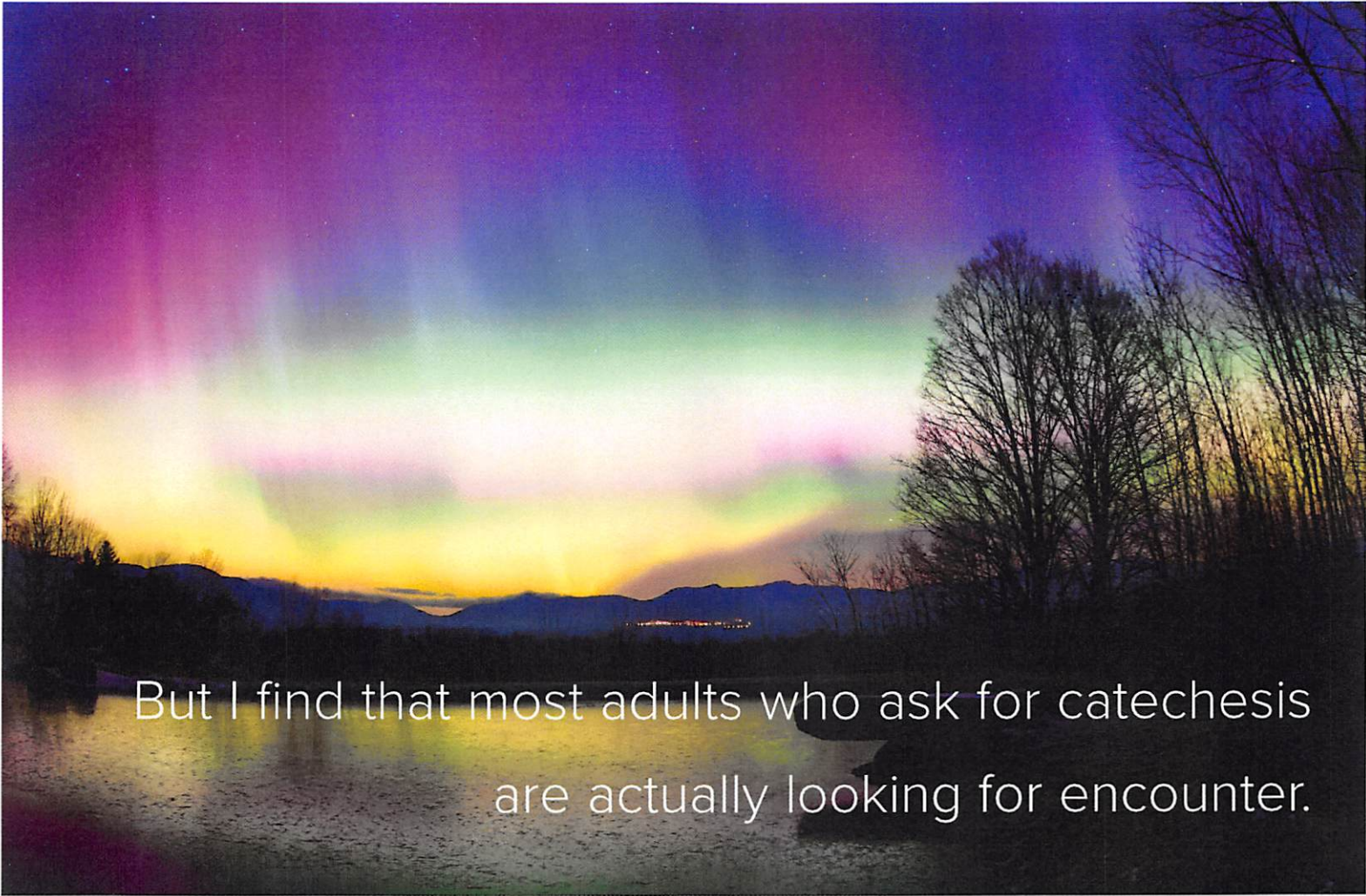
life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*,” 172).

Once our shared expectations are established, we might start to craft an adult faith formation “program.” I use the word *program* tentatively because while we are quite fond of AFF programs and they certainly have their value, we must keep in mind that

the success of such efforts rests very much on the quality and total fabric of parish life. This includes, for example, “the quality of the liturgies, the extent of shared decision making, the priorities in the parish budget, the degree of commitment to social justice, the quality of the other catechetical programs” (“National Catechetical Directory,” no. 189). ... Thus, while the parish may have an adult faith formation program, it is no less true that the parish is an adult faith formation program. (*Our Hearts Were Burning*, 118, 121)

“Programs” of adult formation should serve the three tasks of formation: encounter, catechesis, and deepening. It’s important to

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note that any single program will likely not serve all three tasks! A variety of options is needed for a fully responsive AFF program. Such variety might be beyond a single community's resources to provide, so consider joining with neighboring communities or other places like retreat centers.

What might some of our programs include?

- * Prayer experiences. Adults, and especially young adults, constantly echo the request of the disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). Offering a diversity of prayer opportunities — Liturgy of the Hours, the rosary, lectio divina, centering prayer, meditation, sung prayer, movement prayer, and so on — gives adults a place to try on different approaches and find what works for them.
- * Retreats and days of reflection. Note that "encounter" retreats — which could include preached sessions, witness talks, or a call to conversion — will be different from "deepening" retreats — which might be more silent and individually directed.
- * Small faith communities. "[Adult faith formation] is primarily about providing opportunities, within a faith context, for adults to talk with other adults about things that matter" (Regan).

- * A fully implemented and integrated RCIA program.
- * Spiritual direction. From the window of her anchorage, the mystic Julian of Norwich served as a director-in-residence for her community and beyond. A community serious about AFF might hire one or more spiritual directors to serve the community, or identify community members to be trained in this ministry, or, at the very least, have a list of local directors to refer people to.
- * Thoughtful, engaging homilies. See "Evangelii Gaudium," 135–159.

In designing programs for adults, it makes some sense to ask adults themselves what they want. But results of such a survey must be interpreted carefully. Adults may intuitively sense a longing for something more in their faith lives (their "hearts are restless"), but they may not know how to express what they need. They might ask for catechesis, thinking, "If only I had more *knowledge* about my faith, I'd have a better relationship with God." But I find that most adults who ask for catechesis are actually looking for *encounter*. The Gospels are full of people who seek out Jesus for his knowledge, and he is indeed called "teacher," but those who follow him tend to be those who have an encounter with him; the teaching comes later (Mt 20:34; Lk 9:11; Jn 9:36).

How to implement this in your community

At this point you might think, “This is all well and good for St. Cunigunde, but what about my community?” If AFF is at the periphery or nonexistent in your parish, how do you move it to the center of parish life? Here are some thoughts:

- ✱ Committed leaders — ordained and lay — are essential. “[Leaders of successful churches] share one key attribute: an unrelenting, uncompromising focus and drive to help people grow into disciples of Christ” (Hawkins and Parkinson, 20).
- ✱ Help people understand the need to change and why the status quo is unacceptable. Give specific examples of ways that a community without AFF at its center is not as life-giving or engaging as it could be.
- ✱ Paint a picture of the future. Explain how robust adult formation will enrich all aspects of the parish, including the formation of children. Describe the type of community that will result from a focus on AFF. What will be the benefits to the community and to individuals?
- ✱ Make investments in change. People respond far more to what they see than what you say. Look at calendars — how many events are designed to form adults? Look at staffing — how many people are dedicated to adult formation? And, of course, look at budgets — how much money is spent on AFF, especially when compared to the formation of children and youth?
- ✱ Recognize that the change will not likely please everyone. You must make the choice to “go with those who want to grow, and bless the rest.”
- ✱ Although counterintuitive, radical change can be more successful than incremental change. Making bold moves captures people’s attention and says that something big and important is happening. I know a parish that put their entire youth-focused faith formation program on hold for

one year while they built up an AFF program. You can bet the community took notice!

The emphasis on adults at the center of formation isn’t new, of course. Jesus welcomed and blessed children, but he formed adults. Getting this emphasis right again won’t be easy, but it will be worthwhile. And consider this: the more adults we help to form, the more adults we have to help form other adults — and ultimately to transform the world. If we are serious about fulfilling the great commission (Mt 28:19–20) and working toward the fullness of the reign of God, then we have no choice but to put adults at the center of formation.


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