GEMS

GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

25 - January 2013

A Best Practice: A Lenten Evening of Prayer

Sometimes it is a surprise to us how often people make comments such as these:

- "I'm not sure I know how to pray."
- "I feel like I'm praying like I did when I was in fourth grade. Should it be different now?"
- "Is there more than one way to pray?"
- "How do I know I'm praying in the right way?"

People today are searching for helps, ideas, support for their prayer life. Our adult faith formation programs/processes – in all kinds of ways – can be one of the answers for their search.

One of the ways to respond: **There's nothing like doing it!** We can "teach" about something, tell about it, but the best way to *learn* something, of course, is by doing it.

> What we have to learn to do,
> we learn by doing.
>
> -Aristotle

The best practice we look at this month is not just a session *about* prayer, an evening of *explanations and study*, but a *time of reflection and prayer*. A time of "doing prayer." The best way to learn about prayer is to pray.

When does this occur?

This particular best practice, "Walk with Me: Praying with Jesus" has been planned for the Lenten season. St. Fabian Parish, Farmington Hills, Michigan offers their usual parish Stations of the Cross on an evening at the beginning of Lent. This "Lenten Evening of Prayer" is planned to immediately follow Stations. It was originally created for the RCIA elect and candidates, but opened to all parishioners three years ago. Each year it continues to grow. A different theme for the evening is planned for each year.

What takes place?

As we explore this best practice, we'll look at it through the lens and theme of this past year, "Walk with Me: Praying with Jesus."

(**GEMS** #23 explored, among other themes, the question of whether we teach about Jesus {and the Trinity} or lead people to know Jesus, to form a relationship. This best practice is an example of going beyond facts, of setting an environment which helps people to deepen an intimate relationship, which then affects their whole lives.)

The life of Jesus was the background for the evening as various times in Scripture were identified, citing Jesus at prayer, describing some of the kinds/ways/places of prayer He experienced:

- intercessory
- forgiveness
- in community
- in solitude
- in the synagogue
- in nature

Coupled with these Scripture passages and reflections, the journals which the people received contained reflection questions. The questions linked Jesus' prayer life to the prayer life of the participants, to their everyday lives.

Frequently the participants were invited to prayerfully journal their answers/their reflections. At the very beginning they were told that these reflections were theirs; there was not going to be group discussions about them. Thus, they could write whatever was in their hearts. This evening was

intended to offer a personal encounter between the individual and Christ.

The full "Lenten Evening of Prayer" - the copy for the leader/readers, and the questions and prayers that were in the journals for the participants - can be found at: www.janetschaeffler.com. Go to "AFF Helps."

A sampling of some of the reflection questions were:

- Why do i pray?
- Take a few moments and list some of the blessings in your life that you perhaps take for granted, things that you should be giving praise and thanks to God for blessing you with.
- When asked by friends to pray with them, how do I support them? Or do I put my own desires first and ignore their spiritual needs?
- When someone hurts me, how do I respond?
- What are the prayers in my heart for others?

How else are the participants involved?

In looking at the responses to this question, keep in mind the reality that people "learn" in different ways. Therefore, adult faith formation (and also prayer) incorporates **many methods** to engage active participation.

In addition to the journaling, throughout the evening, there was:

- proclamation of Scripture
- interactive prayer
- common prayer and individual prayer
- song
- an experience of *Lectio Divina*
- a reflective meditation on creation using a video
- writing of intercessions which were then burned with incense

What attracts/motivates the parishioners to participate?

- People's deepening need for prayer/spirituality
- A different way of exploring prayer – not just "a talk about prayer" but an *experience of prayer*
- Word of mouth! Comments and invitations from past participants
- Creative and extensive publicity (Sunday bulletin, parish and vicariate website, announcements and email)

All Christians need
a half hour of prayer each day,
except when they are busy.

Then they need an hour.

- St. Francis deSales

What makes this event successful?

As Celia St. Charles, Pastoral Associate/Adult Faith Formation Coordinator, has reflected on the event over the last three years, she attributes its success to:

- the advertising and publicity leading up to it
- because of the liturgical season of Lent, people's desire to look at and grow in their prayer life
- the preparation and planning that went into the evening
- the reality that – in this instance – sharing of responses and journal entries was not a part of the evening. For many participants this allowed a more powerful experience because they could answer their reflection questions without being concerned with having to share their feelings and responses with others

How do the participants feel about their participation? How did this evening affect their lives?

This is just a sampling of their responses:

- It helped me get back in touch with *my prayerful self*.
- I felt Jesus with me in conversation and prayer.

- It helped me with *different ways of finding methods* of prayer and reflection.
- It brought out the spirit of Lent and *touched my heart*, giving me much to think about.

- Meaningful; you were walking me through how I am using my life.
- I felt very close to God.

- It was very thought provoking and deep.
- Yes, it was helpful; prayer is something I struggle with daily.

- It forced me (thoughtfully) to *spend time with God and my friends* in prayer.
- It was so good for me; I need "extra" time to reflect during Lent.

- It penetrated where I seldom go alone.
- The evening was very good. It has *relevance in my* life right now. It's another way that I can come to hear God's voice right now.

- I'm having difficulties, this allowed me to take time out and be inspired by God.

Some of the participants commented on the use of journals:

- The journal was helpful; helps you to "see" better.

- The journal will help me to continue my reflection at home.
- This method was helpful, because it gave specifics about the topics.
- I will look at mine every day!

- The journal was an easy guide to follow and an opportunity to express/reflect understanding.
- The one on forgiveness was the most useful. It is one of my big weaknesses. I need reminding and encouragement.

- I appreciated the journal because I could write my thoughts and reflections down instead of keeping them bottled up inside
- The journal pages gave me so much to reflect on. I will use many of the ideas with my children.

> The only way
> you can fail at prayer
> is to not show up.
>
> *- Fr. Thomas Keating*

Many of the participants had thoughts about sharing or not sharing their responses with others: (The evening, as mentioned previously, is designed for private reflection, rather than including some time for sharing.)

- I prefer to keep it personal: some of my answers are my prayers to God.
- I liked the time for quiet reflection, but a little dialogue is good, too.

- Keep it personal; allow those who wish to discuss to meet at the end.
- I would have liked time for conversation; I love to share.

- Perhaps, include time for discussion just to keep it more lively. Others' insights are sometimes very worthwhile.

- I would prefer right now to keep it personal because I still have to grow too much.
- I do not like to share; I find it distracting when others do. It becomes a performance.

- Yes, I would like to share some answers but not all. So I can get advice.
- I prefer to keep the experiences personal because a lot of this is between oneself and the good Lord. Sometimes requiring people to share will keep people from coming.

Some Wondering GEMS

- Sometimes people wonder which is better, which is more important: personal (not private) prayer or communal prayer. As in all things Catholic, it is not a question of either/or, but always both/and. This evening provided both: time for communal prayer and time for personal prayer and reflection.

- Thinking about "both/and" calls to mind the importance of time for conversation in adult learning. This evening, and the comments from the participants, causes us to ask:

    - Are there times that call for quiet personal reflection, rather than conversation?
    - When we take time for prayerful reflection, does that prepare us for future conversations about our faith?

- Does providing time for quiet reflection, as well as time for conversation (in all our adult faith formation offerings), provide for
    - different styles of learning
    - diverse temperaments
    - various approaches to spirituality?

Have the participants suggested changes and/or additions for future "Evenings of Prayer?"

- Schedule these evenings more often.
- Incorporate more *Lectio Divina* in our gathering.
- Involve guest speakers.
- Plan some type of prayer service with a focus on a topic, i.e. dealing with anger.

- Do a prayer session concerning the preservation/conservation of God's creation and earth.
- Have a prayer service devoted to "Walking with Jesus through the Eyes of Peter."
- I would like other series on prayer.

More Wondering GEMS

- One participant suggested a prayer service focusing on anger. What other emotions might be helpful to explore in prayer for today's parishioners?

- Another participant suggested "Walking with Jesus through the Eyes of Peter." Who else might provide a focus for an evening of prayer: Mary, Mary Magdalene, the Good Samaritan, Zaccheus, etc.?

- Could this Evening of Prayer be offered within other seasons of the year?
    - Might it be adapted during Advent with Los Posadas which leads up to National Migration Week?

    - Could an Emmaus Walk be done during the Easter season?

    - Would evenings (or days) centered on the themes of creation, leisure, etc. bring deepened reflection and prayer to the days of summer?

Golden Nuggets from You

"Thanks, as usual, for sharing **GEMS** with Adult Faith Formation people and others.

As I enjoyed **GEMS** #20, some thoughts/impressions that came to me:

- While such serious life circumstances occur, I wonder if a few less serious, but concerning, life circumstances could be included (e.g. a family move, a rebellious teen, etc.).
- It was great that such thought and concern went into the motivating factors to influence attendance.
- Many non-Catholic Christians seem to go as a whole congregation to programs. I like the idea of varied groups being in attendance at the retreat.
- While a Saturday morning for religious activity is liked by some Catholics, a retreat such as St. Paul Parish provided would be good to be accessible to the whole parish. A Sunday morning retreat might be offered for those who would choose to participate. If this Sunday retreat received positive response, a brief feedback – during a subsequent Sunday liturgy - might be the pot-stirrer to attract others to future mornings."

- *Art Lombardo,*
Parish of St. Maximilian Kolbe, Marmora, New Jersey

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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com.

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- http://ecatechist.com. Click on e-books for: *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation.*
- www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation.*