



Reclaiming the Adult Church

by Pam Coster

"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers....All who believed were together and had all things in common.... Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

(Acts 2:42-47)

Pope Benedict XVI, in his meeting with priests of northern Italy on August 6th of this year spoke about evangelization in its most simple, but effective, form. He might have been speaking of the loving community described in Acts. "Honesty, joy, openness to listening to one's neighbor, the capacity to forgive, generosity, goodness, [and] cordiality....are indicative of the fact that faith is truly present.....A light will radiate out from us, without our having to think about it too much, without adopting a way of acting that's -- to put it this way -- 'propagandistic.' It will happen on its own, because it reflects our soul."

In the early church, adults experienced conversion through the rich evangelization of community life and the passionate teaching and witness of the apostles. They brought that light of faith to their family life. If the Church is to thrive in the future, we must reclaim this adult church. Bringing adults to Christian maturity is the central task of our faith communities. It is our turn, in salvation history, to pass on the faith adult-to-adult. Research gives us the good news that adults not only *need* formation, they *want* it.

The Gallup Organization in 2001 noted that, in the United States today, "There is an intense searching for spiritual moorings, a hunger for God.....We are a searching, praying population, perhaps as we haven't been for many years." (*Reality Check for 21st Century Churches*, Gallup Press, 2001). Their statement echoes the words of Pope John Paul II ten years earlier in *Redemptoris Missio*: "God is opening before the Church the horizons of a humanity more fully prepared for the sowing of the Gospel." Now, as in the days of the early Church, is a time of tremendous opportunity for those who would further the evangelizing mission of Jesus Christ. People are open and searching. As the Gallup study concluded, "It is for churches to seize the moment and to direct this often vague and free-floating spirituality into a solid and lived-out faith."

Can we look at adult formation with new eyes, not as just another ministerial task, but as though we are bringing food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty? When someone is hungry we assume they want food; when thirsty, we assume they want drink. Research shows that people in the U.S. today have a hunger for God and yet it seems that we too often assume adults in our parishes do not want formation. “They don’t come to our programs” is a frequent complaint. But that is a judgment on the programs, not the spiritual needs of the parishioners. Past ways of thinking are difficult to change and some may resort, for example, to “getting to the adults through their children” as someone once said when speaking about sacramental programs. There is nothing wrong with using the occasions of children’s religious milestones as opportunities to re-evangelize or form their parents in faith, but what follows? One-time programs are not enough.

The adult-focused parish has a plan to become involved in the spiritual development of their people on an on-going basis. If we don’t do this with intentionality, adults may drift, not from a grievance or even unhappiness but because there is nothing compelling, nothing they will miss if they spend their time somewhere else on Sunday morning. No one has demonstrated to them that they care about their spiritual development. When we focus on numbers instead of people, when we become “propagandistic” instead of caring, we have lost our way.

In Albert Winseman’s book *Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop Doing Church and Start Being Church Again* (Gallup Press, 2006), he lists twelve indicators of engaged church members found in recent research. Of those, half pertain to spiritual development: 1) In my parish, my spiritual needs are met. 2) There is someone in my parish who encourages my spiritual development. 3) The mission or purpose of my parish makes me feel my participation is important. 4) The other members of my parish are committed to spiritual growth. 5) In the last six months, someone in my parish has talked to me about the progress of my spiritual growth. 6) In my parish, I have opportunities to learn and grow. Parishes that do not focus on the spiritual development of their adults in an intentional way may be busy, but not effective. They may be attractive communities, but not communities of deep faith.

The early church provided a model for passing on the faith adult-to-adult. The bishops recognized this when, in the General Directory for Catechesis, they called the RCIA the “inspirational model” for all catechesis. The beauty of the RCIA process comes from its roots in personal interaction – the method Jesus used to form his disciples. As Jane Regan says in her book *Toward an Adult Church* (Loyola Press, 2002) “Adults learn best when they are in conversation with other adults about things that matter.” Walking with others on the journey of faith, welcoming them warmly into the broader community; sharing scripture, ritual and symbol; providing them with solid teaching; conversing about the meaning of faith for their daily lives; being aware of their needs as they grow spiritually – all of these elements of the RCIA create a firm foundation for future growth in faith. How enlivened the Church would be if each adult were supported in this way!

We cannot bring people into deeper communion with Jesus Christ if we do not know them and respect the context in which they come to faith. It is encouraging that a number of parishes have created the position of Time and Talent Coordinator and are helping

adult parishioners discern their gifts in order to better serve the mission. This allows the kind of personal interaction that leads to a growth in faith. It shows a concern for the individual and helps them use their time and talent in a way that will deepen their communion with Jesus Christ and other believers. At the same time, parish leaders come to know what next step might be appropriate for a particular adult on their spiritual journey and they can suggest appropriate programs, practices, retreats or prayer experiences. According to Winseman, those who experience this in the parish volunteer more of their time, give more of their treasure, have greater life satisfaction and invite others to the parish – living into the mission of Christ to evangelize.

The community described in Acts attracted others by its witness. It is the same today. Faith communities that are known to be welcoming and caring; which provide beautiful liturgies and opportunities for meaningful growth in faith, become “destination” or “magnet” parishes. Fr. Robert Hater in his book *The Catholic Parish: Hope for a Changing World* (Paulist Press, 2004) says “Most cities have one or more of these [magnet] parishes. They affirm, nurture and encourage people’s desire for spiritual nourishment, wholeness, personal relationships, service and global awareness.” Many books have been written about what makes a parish great, but most have this common thread - focus on the development of adults. The fruits of this spill generously over into service, outreach and evangelization. Great parishes have reclaimed the adult church of the apostles.

Bishop Blase Cupich, in his foreword to the book *Shaping Catholic Parishes* (Loyola Press, 2008), which was written in conjunction with the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, likens the stories of today’s pastoral leaders in this “time of unparalleled transition” to the Acts of the Apostles. This is a new day in the evolution of the Church, but one that mirrors, in fundamental ways, the challenges and opportunities of the time following the Resurrection of the Lord. The adult-to-adult models of evangelization and formation that existed then, still compel us now. It was difficult for the apostles to begin their ministry. They even went into hiding until the Holy Spirit filled them with courage and purpose. The same Spirit is with us today as we look for better ways to support the spiritual development of the adults in our care.

In the Church today, as in the early church, we have “praying, searching” people, attracted to solid and passionate teaching, needing community in which to thrive, longing for an intimate relationship with God, willing to do their part to further the mission of Jesus Christ. May we call them by name and walk with them on their journey. And may the Lord add to their number every day!

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