

The changing landscape of adult faith formation

By Julianne Donlon-Stanz

"I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish that it were already kindled"

Luke 12:49

The world is changing rapidly in response to global trends such as the increasing use of technology, global mobility and instant communication and the religious landscape of the United States is being reconfigured by long-term, fundamental changes. The Pew Forum Study of 2007 for example, noted marked differences between the generations; in how young adults and adults wish to be involved in their religion and the means by which they seek answers to their spiritual questions. The 2009 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) reported that the number of American adults identified as Christians has declined from 86% in 1990 to 76% in 2008. As a result of such changes, our understanding of adult faith formation should evolve to meet the needs of adults in a changing world. While it is tempting to view demographic studies and surveys as alarmist, they can be a critical tool in shaping adult faith formation methodologies.

Seize the Opportunity!

In an age of uncertainty and increasing cynicism we must seize the opportunity to reach out to the marginalized, the searching and the hungry and to renew the commitment to catechizing, evangelizing and engaging adults at all stages of the life cycle in fresh ways. Studies from Gallup and the Pew Forum indicate that there is a widespread spiritual hunger in our society – a quest for meaning and for a deeply personal experience of God and of community. For some, these trends will be alarming as we scramble to come up with dynamic programs. However, these studies should enkindle in us the fervent desire to minister with energy and vibrancy, as we confront the problems of living in a world where the landscape of adult faith formation changes so rapidly. Clearly for those ministering in adult faith formation this is a time of unparalleled opportunity and possibility.

The Religious “Marketplace” and the Phenomenon of “Parish Migration”

Unlike their parents’ generations, many of whom enjoyed the cultural support of Irish, Polish, and Italian Catholic neighborhood enclaves, today’s adults (particularly those in their 30’s) inhabit locales that are far more socially and religiously diverse than ever before. The United States is an intensely religious society and therefore a highly competitive religious “marketplace”. If a church neglects the opportunity to provide service to their adult community then someone else will be happy to do it for them. As Ethan Watters reported in his 2004 book *Urban Tribes* college-educated young adults

often draw support from close-knit communities of friends—from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds—that form during the ever-increasing years between college and married life. Adults often live, work, share meals, and vacation with these groups and naturally are influenced by their friends' worship habits. If your parish does not offer diverse and vibrant programming for its parishioners don't be too surprised if your adults "migrate" to another parish and take their friends with them! To stem the tide of "church shopping" amongst adults it is important to empower and equip them with the tools to talk to other adults about their faith. The good news from studies such as the Pew Forum is that the majority of Catholics surveyed, including young Catholics, continue to identify with the Church. According to the study, the majority of Catholics are in the in the category of medium-commitment to Church and will remain so. Moving our Catholics from medium commitment to active and full commitment in the Church will be a continual challenge for us but is sure to pay rich dividends.

The Challenge of the "Multi-Parishional"

A recent friend of mine when asked to name the parish that she was a member of described herself as "*multi-parishional*". This was a term that I had never heard before and I asked her why and how she exhibited membership of the Catholic Church through multiple parish memberships. She explained that one particular parish offered a monthly get together for adults so she often went there for social activities such as meals and game nights. Across the city, another parish offered evenings of reflection that she enjoyed so much that she joined the parish to avail of these opportunities. At what she called her "home parish" she is active as a catechist and engaged with the youth of the parish through the religious education program. When I inquired as to how this impacted her tithing habits, she stated that she gave a little bit to each parish depending on which one she attended. To her this was a natural and carefree decision- she did not feel bound by tradition to a particular worship community but preferred to avail herself of experiences at a multiplicity of parishes. In terms of planning and executing ministry at the parish or Diocesan level this "multi-parishional" status presents some obstacles but it also presents opportunities for parishes to work collaboratively and regionally to reach adults.

Our Habits Are Changing:

We can no longer assume certain presuppositions about our adult communities as adults themselves are changing their habits in response to the demands of living in a hurried and fast paced world. Those responsible for adult faith formation can no longer assume for example, that technology is important *only* to young adults. Recent studies reinforce the fact that the fastest growing demographic on the internet are adults in their 40s and 50s. As a result of our world changing so rapidly, the manner in which we conduct our ministries will change also. The fastest growing user group on Facebook is women between the ages of 55-65. This puts a whole new perspective on our traditional understanding of the "woman's club" so prevalent in many of our parishes! Adult faith formation is no longer an isolated ministry within the parish or Diocese but is connected to the national and global Church community as never before.

What happens at your parish doesn't always stay in your parish!

The explosion of social networking presents tremendous opportunities as we seek to reach out in creative ways to adults but it does also present challenges. At the heart of social networking is a desire to foster the kinds of deep connections that occur when common pursuits are shared and discussed. Social networking offers ease of connection-allowing people to connect from their desktop, cell phone, laptop, or any other electronic device to people all over the world. At the touch of a button adults can preview a pastor's homily, watch a live feed of a mass or download a pod cast of an interesting lecture or class. Emerging studies suggest that adults now place less of an emphasis on traditional advertising and more faith in the opinion of peer reviews. Advertising your parish event online is much more likely to be successful than posting it in the traditional print media. We live in a "World of Mouth" where adults share with each other their thoughts on particular parishes and many of them will openly blog about their experiences online. I have found several references to my friends worship experiences on Facebook and My Space, openly posted for the world to see and discuss. Two key questions to consider in relation to social networking are the following- are you aware of what people are saying about your parish and how can you influence what people are saying and telling others about your parish?

The Myth of the "Hatch, Match & Dispatch" Church

We have to overcome some misconceptions and myths regarding service and ministry to adults. I overheard a conversation where someone described the Catholic Church as the "Hatch, Match and Dispatch Church"! The key moments being identified as baptism, weddings and funerals. Adult faith formation clearly goes beyond providing programs and opportunities for adults to learn about their faith at such key moments. It points to a process whereby the adult who has been evangelized becomes the evangelizer- those who love and live their faith will witness to others. Through adult faith formation our communities should be transformed into evangelizing communities of lifelong discipleship. Unless the Church offers active opportunities for adults to understand what Catholics believe and how to integrate the teachings of the Church into their lives, adults will go elsewhere to feed their spiritual hunger.

Journey into the Heart of God

The Bishops in the document *"Our Hearts Were Burning"* reflect that "in Jesus the disciples caught a glimpse into the heart of God". For those who bear responsibility for adult faith formation we too are called to bring adults into the heart of God. All adult faith formation efforts should be Christo-centric. We are called to walk side by side with the adults of our parishes as they speak of their joys, hopes, sufferings and doubts. We are called to minister in new and unexpected ways, to assess our local culture and to find ways to reach out as never before. A creative example of this is the outreach that two priests in the Diocese of Green Bay conduct to men. They lead a "Bowhunter's Retreat" prior to the hunting season in Wisconsin capitalizing on the fact that in Northeast Wisconsin hunting is incredibly popular and weaving spirituality and catechesis subtly into the retreat.

As Church we are called to nurture one another in our faith journeys by worshipping together, learning together, serving together in love and life within a community of faith. Faith formation of adults always begins and ends with Christ- the alpha and the omega. It is to and through Christ that we will renew our commitment to each other and to the Church. Let the light of Christ in our hearts radiate love to our community of adults!

“Let us do our part with creativity and vigor, our hearts aflame with love to empower adults to know and live the message of Jesus.” OHWB #183

A note about the author:

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