GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#2 - October 2010

A Best Practice: A Year of Renewal

Many parishes throughout the country (and internationally) spend significant time in proving renewal opportunities to enrich their parishioners as individuals and the parish as a community:

- year-long programs that have been prepared nationally
- week-long parish missions/retreats
- week-end retreats that are prepared/led by parish leaders or are part of an established program
- small faith community opportunities within the parish
- (arch)diocesan-prepared renewal programs
- programs which are specifically designed by the parish itself

The best practice for this issue of **GEMS** is just that: a process which was created and totally **designed by the parish for themselves**.

Who? Where?

St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish, located in Auburn Hills, Michigan is a vibrant, ever-growing parish with diverse demographics: families with children, a full university campus community (Oakland University), and a significant eldering population.

Throughout its history – from a Newman Center for the university (1957) to its status as a canonical parish to meet the needs of all in the area as well as the university (1989) – the pastor and pastoral team have **encouraged and enabled lay leadership**, always aware that of the need for continual opportunities

- for people to grow and deepen their faith journey
- to share their faith stories in a welcoming and accepting "home"
- to discern the signs of the times to facilitate planning for the future

Why?

Outstanding programs are provided by our publishers and various organizations for parish renewal today. At this time in their history, St. John Fisher made the decision that they could best reach their goals and have the maximum involvement of their parishioners, if they created the program and process for themselves.

The mission (or goals) for their Year of Renewal were:

- to provide opportunities for significant adult faith formation
- to provide opportunities for the community to gather and share their faith stories
- to experience growth and relevancy of our Catholic faith as individuals and as a community
- to provide opportunities for people to "speak up" about their needs and experiences as Church
- to build and celebrate community
- to gather feedback about a future direction or vision (thereby, laying the groundwork for a five-year plan for the parish)

A Stunning GEM: The grounding of all these goals, the prime mission of St. John Fisher's Year of Renewal, was to deepen who they were as a **welcoming parish of belonging**, a home of God's radical hospitality.

A Year of Renewal 2009-2010
St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish

The Vision: Finding Deeper Meaning …
in our Relationships
in our Catholic Faith

The Values: Personal & Community Growth
Relevancy of faith in our daily lives
Relationships to God and one another

What?

The Year of Renewal had a "Kick-Off Rally," similar to a revival. Four parishioners spoke about significant moments or events in their lives that were times of deep faith growth. In the words of participants: *"It was a sharing of stories, they were brief but powerful."*

During this evening, facilitated by one of the committee members, the Year of Renewal Prayer, the song (especially composed) and the time line of

events were presented. The pastor shared encouraging remarks about his hopes for the year.

The youth group and campus groups were involved and babysitting was provided. Followed by a social hour with snacks, balloons and time for further sharing, the entire evening had the flavor of a pep rally, which added to the enthusiasm and desire: *"I need to be a part of this very good thing."*

After the presentations from the four parishioners, all were asked to share an insight on what they heard; some:

As individuals we cannot find God alone. Deeper connections to others lead to a deeper experience of God.

We cannot just believe…it is making the lives of others better that truly matters.

God impacts our lives always and everywhere – God is present in us.

The pivotal part of the Year of Renewal process revolved around six topics (six weeks); **small groups** were an integral portion of the program but it was also designed to meet everyone's diverse needs.

There was a major **speaker or event planned for each topic**. The topic was introduced through the Sunday readings on the weekend, followed by a Tuesday event with a guest speaker(s) and a bulletin insert for families to break open the topic at home.

For the following two weeks the small groups met in homes, with the parish-prepared booklets as the source for discussions. Parishioners signed up for home groups dependent upon the location and meeting time. Groups were generally about eight people, some smaller.

How?

There were, of course, many *how's* to be attended to in order to achieve a process of this magnitude.

- A Year of Renewal **Steering Committee** was composed of the Adult Faith Formation Coordinator, two Parish Council members, the website manager, representatives from communications ministry, justice and peace, ecumenical awareness, evangelization, campus ministry and the pastor. The committee met bi-weekly to choose the themes and topics to be covered, review the materials that were produced, insure proper communication among different groups in the parish, and manage the details.

- Another team of people, working with the Steering Committee, coordinated the management, operational model and the writing and organization of the materials.

- Two members of the Steering Committee set up the groups and **trained the facilitators**. They were encouraged to help their group members become comfortable with one another and their diverse experiences and opinions. In the words of the Steering Committee: *"Hospitality was key to this process. The ongoing goal was to provide an environment where people could get to know one another better and share their stories and experiences as well as their hopes and dreams. Prayer, companionship and snacks were key elements."*

A quick look at Methodology

Remembering that Multiple Intelligences/different learning styles are crucial in planning for adult faith formation, what did St. John Fisher include in their process? Music, reading materials, worship and prayer aides, visual images, discussion groups, family activity ideas, lesson plans for faith formation program, youth ministry activities, video recording, speakers, panel discussions, podcasts, personal witnessing, Facebook discussions, socials, a rally, attention to hospitality and belonging.

What Happened?

Numerous things; probably too many to count; some impossible to put into words.

See the "Signs of Success" below – in the participants' own words … and this only scratches the surface!

The process concluded on Pentecost Weekend 2010 with a pastoral letter **from the community to the community** – with the results of the Year of Renewal - proclaiming who they are and who they want to become.

The letter summarized - that during the Year of Renewal - three major areas were identified by the parishioners that St. John Fisher Parish committed itself to address:

- **The call to live our "Faith into Action**: This call is addressed to individuals and the community as a whole. It requires works of charity as well as a more prophetic role of the community, i.e. to establish justice in our communities, our country, and our world.

- **The call to deepen our understanding of what it means to be Church today**: The Church is facing a crisis in its own institutional identity and in trying to define its relationship to the world. The demographics of the Church are changing, and while many are questioning the institutional structure, we face the danger of isolation and losing the identity of what it means to be the Catholic Church in the world today.

- **The call to find a new paradigm of relationship with our young adults** (18 to 35 year olds - both singles and young families): to be a more inclusive and welcoming community with them. Some members in this age group find themselves alienated from the Church. Rather than asking, "Where are they?" we ask, "How can we be with them wherever they are?"

Currently, each commission and ministry is committed to finding ways to address these goals in the coming year**.** Based on all the input from the sessions throughout the Year of Renewal, the Parish Leadership Council and Pastoral Team will outline a five-year plan of action.

One of the first steps, which has already begun, is a revision of the current mission, vision and values statements.

Signs of "Success"

- Many participants asked if – or began to make plans for - the small groups to continue after the Year of Renewal was over.
- "New" realizations:
  - "This is not us (church members) versus them (guests). Rather, this is about all of US together."
  - "Most of us are very willing to volunteer at soup kitchens, etc, but very few are willing to take a stand or get involved politically to make changes that could improve the plight of those in need."
  - "We need to emphasize the role of parish in our lives. It can become a personal force, which takes away the impersonal settings that our world provides."
  - "When we offer to help people, for example, the people of Haiti, we should inquire about the help they want rather than forcing our assumptions on them."

For more information: Visit the section of the St. John Fisher Parish website which is devoted to the Year of Renewal:
http://www.stjohnfisherparish.org/yearofrenew/index.htm

Wondering Nuggets:

- What, in your parish, can you create that might better serve your local needs rather than a pre-packaged program (although at times, nationally, pre-prepared programs are certainly just what you need)?

- When looking at pre-packaged programs for your parish, do you evaluate them in terms of:
  - The passing on of our rich heritage in Scripture and our tradition
  - The infusion of Catholic Social Teaching in and throughout the teaching materials
  - The content that is needed for your parish at this time
  - Their inclusion of informational, formational and transformational elements

- The design of the program to foster the goals of ongoing conversion to Jesus, active membership in the Christian community, action as disciples in mission to the world
- The ability of the program/process to foster critical thinking, moral development, and a deepening spirituality

- Materials that are culturally sensitive (ethnically, economically, learning abilities, age groups, etc.)
- Materials that are designed for the specific age group and community-of-like-interest for which they are intended

- A program/process that takes into account the vast differences in learning styles and preferences of today's adults
- A program/process that provides multiple opportunities for process and participation for the learner

- A program/process that is built on the premise of building/strengthening relationships, of radical hospitality, of encouraging people to tell their stories, so that the welcoming community of God's people, the Body of Christ, is supported, encouraged and enabled for mission

- Just as St. John Fisher did, in any program/process that is offered, are you providing for more than one learning style/one Multiple Intelligence?

- Is there follow-up to all programs? When something ends, does it open the door for something else, a continuation, a new chapter, on-going faith deepening and outreach?

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The first issue of **GEMS** is archived at www.janetschaeffler.com.

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Best Practices can be found at www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation.*