

We are getting older; those in their later years are now becoming a larger segment of the population than the youth. “Nearly every industry in society, from health care to entertainment, is scrambling to respond to this age wave that is crashing on our shores.” (Roberto, 35)

Within this growth is a phenomenon we have never experienced before. Previously we had mid-life adults and older adults. With longevity drastically increasing, we now have “mature adults” (55-75 years) as a distinct group with specific needs and interests.

You’ve probably taken time to explore the research about the characteristics and needs of this age group. With those realities in mind, let us look at a few (of the many) possibilities for adult faith formation we might offer them.

Learning in the virtual world. We begin with this so that we might view all of the subsequent approaches and practices through this lens. A question to always keep in mind: in whatever topic/theme/program, process and/or resource that is going to be available for adults in mature adulthood, is there a way to offer it virtually as well as in a face-to-face opportunity? For instance:

- Learning opportunities: Scripture study via a closed Facebook account: http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems_11.pdf
- The Internet is brimming with possibilities which people can use on their own and/or which can supplement real-time gatherings. As curators, we can help others to find the resources, for instance: LifeTree Café (<http://lifetreecafe.com/>); The Five Loaves (<http://www.thefiveoaves.com/>).
- Combine real-time and the virtual world: During a workshop in the fall of 2009 at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Rev. James Shopshire, Sr., professor of Sociology of Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary, observed: “One method of adult Christian education many like, is to receive by e-mail a news story, text and questions, which they see ahead of time then can meet on Monday to discuss, ‘God’s views on the news.’”

Another example is seen at The Episcopal Church of the Annunciation, Cordova, TN in their linking of Bible study with an ongoing blog: <http://www.buildfaith.org/2014/10/15/a-church-reinvents-adult-education-with-a-bible-and-a-blog/>

- Learning about technology: Even though the research shows that the Boomer generation (and older) are becoming more and more proficient in the use of technology, many still have questions and want to learn more. Often libraries and community education programs provide learning opportunities; might our parishes do the same? Can we have a tech room where people can learn, where people can use computers (if theirs is currently creating problems, etc.)? What about a Digital Sunday (http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_77.pdf)?

- Partnering with Existing Programs. Much of the online opportunities that we can provide involve linking to resources already created. (This is also easy to do with face-to-face opportunities. Our surrounding community services, educational institutions, cultural opportunities provide much that we can link to and/or partner with.) Of course, the online opportunities abound:
 - The Open University on iTunes U: <http://www.open.edu/itunes/>
 - C21 Online: <http://www.bc.edu/schools/stm/c21online/courses.html>
 - Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation: <https://vlc.udayton.edu/>
 - STEP: <https://step.nd.edu/about/>

Conversation. The pervading approach in all adult faith formation is the necessity for active participation of each and every person through ongoing and spirited conversation. “Adults grow in their faith best when they have the opportunity to engage in conversation with other adults about things that matter.” (Regan, 71)

Regan explains how and why “sustained, engaged and critical” conversations are an “important dynamic in enhancing a faith that is living, explicit, and fruitful:

- enhances our ability to express our faith
- gives us the opportunity to come to clarity about what we think and believe
- provides a context for seeing connection between faith and life
- strengthens our faith as we hear about the faith of others” (Regan, 72-73)

In a recent discussion on LinkedIn, within the Adult Faith Formation Professionals group, I asked: “Some of you have mentioned that some people (especially older learners) prefer lecture. Knowing what we know about adult learning (e.g. people learn better and remember more if they are engaged), are there things that you do to supplement “lecturing?” One gentleman responded, “My past experience regarding mature adults’ preferred way of learning was to sit and listen has changed. For the past seven years in my present parish, most attempts at ‘teaching’ were not well received; maybe us older folks are beginning to realize that we can learn more from each other . . . Go figure!”

Our task is to create learning environments that invite mature adults to participate in transformative learning that leads to deepened faithful living. This involves open and dialogical experiences where deep listening, on-going reflection and mutual respect are practiced. Being free to raise hard questions and to explore “what if” possibilities can help mature adults grow in faith and in discipleship that offers compassion and works for justice.

No matter what the gathering or occasion – whether face-to-face or virtual – opportunities for conversation are crucial.

Book clubs. Even though many today garner a great deal of information through the internet and the media, there exists a core desire among many (especially the maturing adult) to feed a longing of mind and spirit that can’t be satisfied by technology. For many this need is met through what the younger generations call the “antiquity” of the written word, namely books.

Book clubs, of course, run the gamut, encompassing all types of books. Some devote themselves to one kind, one theme, but many are eclectic. In a September 2001 article in *U.S. Catholic*, Patrick White, professor of English at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, commented, "You can't get people together to talk about literature in a serious way over time without touching on spiritual matters." He adds, "Let's face it, no one is going to say to each other, 'Hey, let's get together....and promise that we'll grow together as spiritual beings.' It's too terrifying. So we say, 'Do you want to get together and read some books? Oh yeah.... And it will also be fun and interesting.'"

Book clubs can happen face-to-face (at churches, homes, coffee shops, etc.) or virtually. The diverse timing and formats of book clubs lend themselves to the schedules and life situations of the maturing adult. Wanting to be involved in the parish but unable to do something at night, a 74-year old woman began a daytime book club at St. Regis Church, Bloomfield Hills, MI, inviting all parishioners. At another church, a woman, realizing that many mid-50 – mid-70s adults are caring for aging parents, making time away from home a challenge, began an online book club.

See also http://www.janetschaeffler.com/Gems_14.pdf for a unique process of inviting and gathering adults for a parish book study.

Support groups. Support groups – of various kinds – can be a powerful opportunity for the ongoing formation which maturing adults are often craving, support for the day-to-day, real life challenges and events.

Support groups come in a variety of formats, including in person, on the Internet or by telephone. They may be led by professional facilitators or by group members. Just a few of the many life issues which support groups – for those in their mid-50s – mid-70s - may be centered on:

- married life
- empty nest syndrome
- young adults returning home
- divorce and separation
- death of a spouse
- death of a child
- depression
- living with cancer or other diseases
- addictions
- family members in the military
- grandparents raising children
- caregivers
- adults of aging parents

Gift discovery.

God calls each of us to be who we are, who we uniquely are created to be, with our gifts and strengths. More and more parishes are seeing this as one of the goals of adult faith formation: to encourage and support each person – in the maturing and deepening of their strengths and gifts as they grow to be who God created them to be.

As adults in their mid-50 – mid-70s discover new journeys in life, the uniqueness of their gifts and strengths can be a crucial support for the new ventures. The helpful reality is that many parishes are not simply providing tools for people to discover their strengths, but continuing to walk with them as they understand more deeply, using them in many areas of their lives and directing them toward new adventures. See “Empowering the Living of Gifts” at http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_19.pdf for several ideas.

Programming for communities of like interest.

Henry Ford invented the famous assembly line that is credited with putting Detroit, and the world, in the “Mass Production” business. When he introduced the Model T, the marketing message was essentially, “You can have any color you want as long as it is black.” Donald Tapscott, the author of several books on today’s digital world, uses a different term to describe what drives business today: “Mass Customization.” In effect, “you can have whatever you want customized to your wishes.”

What does this mean for adult faith formation? We can no longer approach adult faith formation with a “one-size-fits-all” mentality. “...adults will be interested in (and need) different aspects of the religious according to their personal faith development and expression. An approach of ‘corned beef and hash for everyone’ (which is tantamount to ‘We don’t care what you need, this is what you get because this is what we’ve got’) and programs based simply on what the religious educator or pastor wants to teach are too capricious.” (McKenzie and Horton, 120)

“Use lifestyles, not age, as the determining factor for ministry. Chronological age is not important in ministry with persons at midlife and beyond. Rather, lifestyle issues are more important. For example, grandparenting concerns are not just for people who are retired. ... the question becomes: ‘what are the common concerns that all grandparents, of whatever age, may experience?’” Create small groups around common interests, concerns, or careers.” (Gentzler, 53)

Certainly, there are times when “mixed groups” are extremely important; we learn from the wisdom and experiences of each other (we’ll look at that more closely just below). Yet, many parishes tell us that they have better responses to offerings when the opportunities are for specific groups, for communities of like interest.

- Scripture study programs for men, often at times convenient for their work schedules, seem to attract more men than a generic Scripture program.
- A program exploring various forms of prayer can be offered for couples, for those in grief, for baby boomers, for those just retiring, etc.
- Would specific groups in your parish be attracted to offerings, such as: Effective Grandparenting; Relating Effectively to your Adult Children; Balancing Love, Work and Life; The Loneliness of the Empty-Nest; Support Group for Adult Children of Aging Parents; Planning to Age Gracefully (and Have Fun Doing It)?

Intergenerational Opportunities. We just explored communities-of-like-interest. Since our reality is always both-and rather than either-or, intergenerationality is crucial in our ministry to all, especially those adults in their mid-50s – mid-70s.

“People who age well often have growing relationships with younger people and are involved in learning and growth opportunities.” (Gentzler, 54)

During a workshop in the fall of 2009 at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Rev. Ramonia Lee, chaplain of the Interfaith Center at Leisure World, recounted that age-segregated ministries often do not appeal to Boomers; "...they will take advantage of every possible opportunity to mix with the generations," Lee said. "They want partnerships with other groups in the church and the community, including mission groups, choirs, coffee conversation groups, even confirmation classes with older members studying with the children."

Churches respond to intergenerationality in numerous ways: small groups, faith formation opportunities, prayer and worship, service and outreach. One example of bringing the generations together in service is exemplified at Grace Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX where they participate in Church Apartment Ministry (<http://www.churchapartmentministry.org/apartment/home.php>), in which Grace Presbyterian maintains an apartment for families of patients coming for cancer treatment at the Texas Medical Center. The Encore 50+ Ministry coordinates this outreach; the young adults of the congregation do most of the cleaning and maintenance as well as helping the families move in. The older adults visit the families and patient, offering to bring them to church, and provide meals.

Another activity employed by many parishes for enjoyment as well as learning is movie afternoons or evenings. Some host these events only for adults, or only for teens, or only for children, but many bring all generations together. "Movies at the Parish," at http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_38.pdf provide a variety of ideas.

One way to connect with and build on intergenerational programming, especially in faith formation, is to shape all offerings of the parish – intergenerationally as well as with specific age groups - around one specific theme. If the year's theme is prayer – in addition to the intergenerational learning opportunities – events and offerings can continue that theme for those mid-50's – mid-70s:

- A day of reflection on prayer styles and methods for mature adulthood
- A trip to a retreat center
- Connections to websites of prayer for those in retirement, empty-nesters, etc.

For an illustration of how three different churches have incorporated the themed-approach, see http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_44.pdf.

Personal and Communal Practices. Many mid-50s – mid-70s grew up when their identity flowed from a life of spiritual practices. In recent years, more and more people have advocated for the return of spiritual practices, with an enlargement of the possibilities (e.g. hospitality, Sabbath moments, living gratefully, seasonal celebrations and rituals, service/justice, savoring beauty, nature, pilgrimages, forgiveness, suffering, art, mindfulness, journaling, simplicity, wonder, quiet). This return to spiritual practices especially appeals to maturing adults because there is a link to the past coupled with broader opportunities. Effective and valuable adult formation within our parishes would include not only a study/reflection on the meaning and understanding of each practice, but various occasions to experience and live the practices.

Some helpful resources:

- Huston, Paula. *A Season of Mystery: 10 Spiritual Practices for Embracing a Happier Second Half of Life*. Loyola Press, 2012.

- Jones, Tony. *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*. Zondervan, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian. *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Thomas Nelson, 2010.
- Richmond, Lewis. *Aging as a Spiritual Practice: A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser*. Gotham, 2012.
- Yamasaki, April. *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal*. Herald Press, 2013.

Life Reviews.

Inviting and equipping people in mature adulthood to purposefully reflect on their lives is a constructive approach to cherish life, to deepen meaning, and to share legacies. Keeping in mind the varying learning styles and people's different preferences, there are numerous ways to invite people to participate in this: writing memoirs, previewing and assembling photo albums, taping memories and stories, expressing life moments and history through art, creating memory gardens, giving away mementos/distributing possessions to others, developing family histories or genealogies, making trips to family homes or pilgrimages to locations of family/spiritual significance and autobiographies or life histories. See http://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_77.pdf for the experience of one parish.

Incorporated into these life histories, adults in their maturing years might also be invited to reflect on their legacy. What are they passing on to the 7th generation (a Native American tradition)? A reflective time to think about the following questions, and perhaps write them down for their families, can be very affirming:

- What are four of the spiritual gifts God has given you?
- To whom would you like to give these gifts?
- What are four of the talents God has given you?
- To whom would you like to leave these talents?

Service.

Service is perhaps the most formative experience. Many experts challenge parishes to create compelling opportunities for service and outreach, for as a researcher at Peter Hart Associates commented: "For this generation of older Americans, volunteerism is about something much more substantial and real than taking up time in their day ... it is about filling a need, their need to both make a difference and be involved." (Hart, 3)

"...not only do outreach program stimulate individuals, they motivate and galvanize your entire ministry around an identifiable purpose that is clearly visible. This needs to be seen as a vocation, not simply volunteer activities." (Johnson, 55)

The variety of opportunities for the mature adult planned and offered throughout parishes include service within the parish as well as outreach to the community and beyond: e.g. Meals-on-Wheels, providing transportation, mentoring programs, serving in homeless shelters and soup kitchens, coaches or companions to people in need, sharing their job skills and expertise with community projects and organizations, nursing home and home shut-in visitation, phone calls to shut-ins, choir concerts, choirs for funerals, lunches for Habitat for Humanity, and home repair for single moms and widows.

A comprehensive program for four groups of older adults is planned at Ascension Lutheran Church, Thousand Oaks, CA: active seniors; transitional seniors; frail seniors; and caregivers. A view of the possibilities for service are: Stephen Ministry, teaching in the Sunday School program and/or VBS, prayer buddies, prayer shawl ministry, SAM's Tram, Telecare, videotaping faith stories, Project Response, and their Peru mission. <http://www.alcto.org/pdfs/SAMChartJuly2012.pdf>

As parishes plan for service and outreach opportunities for their 55+, they also are cognizant of the reality that an ideal adult faith formation process is to invite/help people to reflection *after* the service: e.g.:

- Has my worldview changed?
- How did I encounter Jesus?
- What happened to me because of this service?
- How will my life be different because I participated in this opportunity?

As we conclude, remembering the reality that everything is formative, McIntosh's recommendations challenge us in a vivid way:

1. "Build a ministry for Boomers that is **adventurous**. Rather than mall walking, consider hiking in the mountains, cross-country skiing, or snowshoeing. Remember: Boomers have always seen themselves as a youthful generation, and they still do!
2. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **fun**. Rather than potluck luncheons, consider catered parties, fishing trips, paint ball competitions, and team-building camps. Remember: Boomers are not looking for a seniors' ministry; they are seeking an older youth ministry.
3. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **significant**. Rather than being served, consider serving others by building a home for Habitat for Humanity, assisting missionaries, helping out-of-work people to find a job, or tutoring children. Remember: Boomers desire to make a difference in the world by taking on great causes.
4. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **educational**. Along with Bible studies, consider CPR, basic first aid, personal health, managing finances, and public speaking classes. Remember: Boomers are an educated generation, and they wish to continue learning to the end of their days.
5. Building a ministry for Boomers that is **spiritual**. Rather than offering simplistic formulas, consider prayer walks in the neighborhood, intercession teams, and a variety of small group sharing. Remember: Boomers are a mosaic of sub-groups, and it will take a multi-dimensional approach to spiritual formation to reach them." (McIntosh, 300-303)

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Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL): www.nccl.org. On January 23, 2018, Janet will present a webinar on mature adult faith hosted by Ave Maria Press (<https://www.avemariapress.com/webinars/parish/>) in partnership with the NCCL Adult Faith Formation Committee.

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