

Lifelong Faith Monthly Newsletters

- [Lifelong Faith Newsletter - November 2007](#)
- [Lifelong Faith Newsletter - September 2007](#)

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What Works in Young Adult Faith Formation?

There is good news about practices and strategies that work in young adult faith formation. Mike Hayes (Paulist Young Adult Ministry and BustedHalo.com) and I researched best practices in faith formation with young adults for an article in the Fall/Winter 2007 issue of *Lifelong Faith* . We were fortunate to take advantage a recent research study on congregations that are effective in young adult ministry, "Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation" (*Passing on Faith*, edited by James Heft, Fordham University Press). We also reviewed new pastoral resources on ministry with young adults (see *Googling God* by Mike Hayes, Paulist Press).

Best Practices

We identified eight practices drawn from the research report, *Congregations That Get It* study which studied fifteen Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim congregations who are engaging young adults in congregational life. While they differ organizationally, they share numerous characteristics in terms of approach.

Best Practice 1. Congregations recognize that young adults make an important contribution to congregational life.

Best Practice 2. Congregations engender a sense of ownership by enabling young adult congregants to create and plan their own events, and by making leadership positions—both within their peer group and within the larger congregation—available to young adults.

Best Practice 3. Congregations offer multiple points of entry and numerous arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.

Best Practice 4. Congregations take young adults' differing commitments to religious observance and levels of religious education into account.

Best Practice 5. Congregations engage young adults emotionally and interactively in both peer- and clergy-led worship services.

Best Practice 6. Congregations provide an environment that encourages questioning and provides learning opportunities for young adults who are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives.

Best Practice 7. Congregations encourage young adults to think critically and analytically about religious tradition and to articulate similarities and differences among traditions, so that they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith tradition.

Best Practice 8. Congregational leaders are accessible and engaging, serve as role models for young adults, provide personal and religious guidance to young adults, and show genuine interest in young adults as individuals.

Strategies for Young Adult Faith Formation

Strategy 1. Integrate young adults fully into the ministries and leadership roles of the congregation.

One strategy that every congregation can undertake is to invite young adults into ministry and leadership positions in the congregation, and provide the appropriate formation and training necessary for these roles. It is essential that the invitation is *personal* and matches the interests and talents of young adults with ministry/leadership opportunities. Begin by developing an inventory of possibilities, then a strategy for invitation and involvement. Consider all of the church's ministries—liturgy, education, justice and service/outreach, and so on—as well as the variety of groups, such as support groups, small faith sharing groups, and enrichment groups (marriage, family). In addition to congregational leadership roles, young adults should be encouraged to take on leadership roles in young adult groups and programs.

Make sure that before any involvement with ministry or leadership, there is an opportunity for formation and training. This can provide a study-action model to prepare young adults for their particular ministry or leadership role through study (e.g., workshops, courses, or small group learning) accompanied by actual involvement in their ministry or leadership role. This type of learning involves a continuous cycle of study-action-study-action, as the young adults' involvement in action generates new needs for learning.

2. Offer opportunities specifically designed for young adults to study the Bible and Christian tradition, then apply it to life in an environment that promotes relationship building and encourages questioning.

To reach the diversity of young adults and their learning needs, congregations can offer a variety of learning models, including independent learning, small group learning, and large group learning.

- **Independent Learning.** With the increasing number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning courses and resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to religious education for busy young adults. Congregations can serve as guide to helping adults find the best learning format and content to address their learning needs. Church web sites can provide learning resources, as well as link young adults to other online sources. For examples, check out the audio and video podcasts in iTunes and iTunes university, the e-courses at Spirituality and Practice

(www.spiritualityandpractice.com), and online magazines and learning centers such as BustedHalo.com. (www.bustedhalo.com).

- **Small Group Learning.** Probably the most popular young adult learning process, small group learning formats provide an excellent way to address the diversity of young adult learning needs by organizing a variety of small groups with each one targeted to a particular learning need or topic. Small group learning formats also provide lots of flexibility in schedule and location. Groups can meet at times and places that best fit their lives, such as weekly breakfast at a local restaurant or for coffee at a local Starbucks. Small groups create an accepting environment in which new relationships can be formed. It is not always necessary for the congregation to sponsor small group programs. Congregational leaders can provide resources, support, and training for leaders, thereby enabling adults to organize their own small groups. Small group learning can take many different forms, including:
 1. Discipleship or faith sharing groups: Bible study groups, theological formation study groups, theme or issue-oriented study groups, Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing groups, book study club
 2. Practice-focused groups: prayer and spiritual disciplines, service/faith in action
 3. Special interest groups: support groups (e.g., single women, newly married couples, cancer survivors)
 4. Ministry groups: groups engaged in leadership and ministry within the congregation or to the community of which study is a part of their work

Examples

Small “missional communities,” formed in neighborhoods and apartment complexes, are at the heart of Axis, which is the name of Willowcreek Community Church’s young adult ministry. These groups seek to build community by bringing God’s love, compassion, justice, and service to the world around them. Here, young adults connect with one another and delve deeper into the concept of community at weekly table experiences, where they share a meal with their neighbors, study Scripture, and pray together. Axis groups are also involved in regular service to those in need. Small groups connect monthly at the Axis Experience, worshipping God within community through their own unique expression, especially through the arts. The Axis community sits together at Saturday evening worship and usually hangs out afterwards for a movie, dinner, etc.

The “God Talk” Book Club (Basilica of Saint Mary, Minneapolis) offers an opportunity for learning and discussion about theology and life in a context that is always mindful of who God is. This group allows young adults to engage in dialogue about the topics of the day while asking the question: “Does this reflect our theology of God?” Young adults explore a variety of themes related to their understanding of God and their relationship with God, and the implications of that relationship in their larger life experience. While participants are encouraged to read the books, all are invited to come share some wine and conversation while discussing their thoughts about God and life today.

- **Large Group Learning.** Large group learning formats provide a way to serve a large number of adults around learning needs and topics that appeal to a wide audience. Large group learning programs can be offered jointly with other churches. Large group learning formats include:
 1. Multi-session programs (e.g., offering multi-week courses on theological themes, books of the Bible, youth adult life issues)
 2. One-session program (e.g., offering a monthly session on theological or spiritual formation)
 3. Speaker series (e.g., offering multi-evening or multi-week program focused around a particular theological themes, Christian practices, young adult life issues, or current events)
 4. Round table discussions after Sunday worship (e.g., exploring the Sunday Scripture readings in age groups or intergenerational groups with refreshments)
 5. Workshops (e.g., offering one day programs targeted to specific life issues, such as relationships, work, career, transitions)
 6. Film festivals (e.g., exploring key themes in movies, such as relationships, social issues, and meaning in life, with a Christian perspective)
 7. Conferences (e.g., participating in regional church-sponsored conferences)

Examples

Theology on Tap is one of the most popular young adult faith formation programs in the Catholic Church today. Begun in Chicago and now offered through the country, Theology on Tap is a four-week summer program for young adults—women and men in their 20s and 30s, married or single. It features a speaker and open discussion, and is usually held in an outside venue such as a restaurant or club. The purpose of Theology on Tap is threefold: 1) to find and invite young adults to gather with their peers for a great experience of Catholicism, 2) to share the rich traditions of our faith with this generation, and 3) to create a forum for young adults to address and discuss their issues, questions, and concerns (faith formation, spiritual growth, and community building) . For more information about Theology on Tap, go to: www.yamchicago.org or RENEW International: www.renewintl.org.

Sunday Night Live at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis strives to nourish Catholics in their 20s and 30s by inviting them to seek a meaningful connection with a spiritual community of peers. Monthly gatherings are held after the 6:30 p.m. Sunday Mass and explore in a discussion format various issues regarding faith and everyday life, such as “Materialism and God,” “Making the Invisible Visible: Sacramental Exploration,” “Separated at Birth: A Deeper Look into Islam,” and “This Ain’t No Garden of Eden: Environmental Issues.”

3. Develop faith formation around young adult milestones and life transitions.

Marriage, baptism, moments of sickness (personal, family, friends), the death of a loved one, and life decisions are all important milestones or life transitions that

provide an excellent opportunity for young adult faith formation. Very often these are “moments of return” when young adults who have not been involved in church life for a while return to the church for a ritual experience, family celebration, religious perspective on life’s transitions, encouragement, and/or comfort and support. This is a great opportunity to nurture the faith of young adults *and* welcome them back into the life of the faith community.

Congregations would do well to carefully plan: 1. the preparation for marking a milestone, 2. the experience of the milestone, and 3. follow-up after the milestone. A milestones plan includes congregational activities and individual/home activities. For example, developing a milestones plan for marriage could include the following elements:

1. Education: marriage course or workshop (theology, life skills, faith practices)
2. Ritual: preparation for the marriage ritual
3. Connection to the community: prayers at Sunday worship for the married couple (before and after the ceremony); a “Book of Blessings” from the congregation to the married couple with prayers and words of support and encouragement
4. Continued support: monthly married couples small group meeting; online resources for married couples at the parish web site, a free magazine subscription for the first year of marriage, monthly e-newsletter for married couples
5. Reunion: a reunion breakfast or dinner for newly married couples every six months for the first several years of marriage
6. Anniversary: celebrating marriage anniversaries each month at Sunday worship with a special remembrance and blessing; sending a note of congratulations and a prayer on the anniversary of marriage
7. Resources: Bible readings and reflections for married couples, prayers for a new couple, suggestions for starting a faith-filled home life, ways to be involved in the faith community, ways to be involved in service and justice ministries as a couple

4. Provide a variety of retreat and spiritual formation experiences.

Retreats and/or spiritual formation programs are specialized programs that nurture the spiritual life of young adults. While spiritual formation can utilize individualized, small group, or large group learning models, there are several formats that are particular to spiritual formation, for example:

1. Online spiritual formation (www.sacredspace.ie, www.taize.fr, www.upperroom.org)
2. Mentoring with a spiritual director
3. Prayer group
4. Prayer breakfast
5. Church-based retreats: evenings, one-day, weekend
6. Advent and Lent retreat experiences
7. Retreat programs at local retreat houses.

Retreats are certainly one of the most popular and important formats for faith formation of young adults. Many congregations have weekend retreats for young adults once or twice a year as an integral element of their ministry with young adults. Retreat topics can address a wide range of young adult concerns and issues. Here are three descriptions of retreat programs:

Life in the Balance

(Marble Collegiate Church, New York City)

Do you work too much? Do you eat enough vegetables? How much time do you spend watching TV on the couch compared to praying and expanding your spiritual life? Our annual retreat will be a time to explore how we prioritize our lives and investigate the choices we make. We're going to dedicate time to helping balance every part of our being—mind, body, and soul—through directed activities and discussions.

Prayer in Daily Life Retreat

Many find it difficult to go away for a few days. Taking place amid one's daily activities, this retreat offers participants the chance to reflect, pray, and converse with a spiritual director. The directed prayer experience begins on a Sunday afternoon or evening with a gathering of all the participants. Then, during the week, everyone commits to pray for one half-hour daily (guidance provided!) and to meet with a director for one half-hour daily to talk about this experience of prayer. All the participants gather again on Friday evening to conclude the retreat.

Come to the Quiet Retreat

(Charis Ministries, Chicago)

The Charis silent, individually-directed weekend retreat is for young adults, married or single, seeking to deepen their relationship with God. Young adults meet each other on Friday evening before spending much of Saturday into Sunday in silent reflection. Young adults spend time one-on-one with a spiritual director to listen to where God's Spirit is moving in their prayer and in their life. As a group, they explore new ways to pray in the Ignatian tradition. Solitary and contemplative prayer time includes journaling, reading, scripture, walking the grounds, art, music, listening to your own thoughts and resting in your private room.

Spiritual formation is also available online. Websites like the Irish Jesuit's www.sacredspace.ie provides a quick ten-minute guided meditation based on the Ignatian *Examen* that young adults can do online. BustedHalo.com gives young adults one new article a day and speaks about merging everyday experience with an experience of spirituality.

5. Engage young adults in short-term and long-term social justice and service projects, locally, nationally and globally.

Social justice and service are essential, and very often life transforming, features of young adult faith and spirituality. Justice is an essential element of the Christian tradition that even the least religiously active young adult approves of. Success stories about young adults merging their faith with social action are found in all Christian churches.

Congregations can provide opportunities for young adults to serve others, whether with other young adults or with the whole congregation, as well engaging young adults locally, nationally, and internationally. Many organizations and churches sponsor immersion or extended action projects for young adults, either nationally or internationally. In every young adult service project, it is important to combine service and action with an understanding of social justice so that young adults see the structural dimensions of social issues.

- **Works of service: responding to people in need.** Begin by surveying your community to find local service opportunities, and by identifying places where young adults are already involved. Work with local agencies involved with feeding people, housing people, collecting food and clothing, visiting prisoners, tutoring children, etc. Identify national and international opportunities for service, such as building homes with Habitat for Humanity.
- **Works of justice: addressing the root causes of social problems.** Justice focuses on the rights of individuals, families, and all creation. It engages young adults in analyzing social situations or social structures, working for long-term social change, and addressing the underlying social causes of individual problems. Working for justice includes writing letters to key people about important social issues and legislation, working with groups to change legislation or budget priorities, and supporting organizations that work for justice. Identify organizations that you can partner with to address justice issues, such as Bread for the World (hunger), the Children's Defense Fund (children's issues), and the ONE Campaign (poverty).

6. Develop an online presence.

The Internet is often the first place that young adults look for anything today. Those ministries that have a presence on the Internet not only have the distinct advantage of being more present to young adults who are anonymously searching for a spiritual message or home, but also have the advantage of providing solid informational sound bytes to feed this generation's need for quick information. To establish an online presence, congregations would be wise to engage young adults in developing and maintaining a web site.

- **Internet ministry.** Simply put, if you do not have a parish website, you do not exist in the minds of young adults. What would it be like if a congregation invested time and energy in developing and maintaining its own web site as a center for young adults? A church web site and e-mail can:
 - Post worship times and a listing of events
 - List the faith formation programs and opportunities both in the congregation and in other churches
 - Provide online small groups, courses, and reading groups (e.g., a book-of-the-month club)
 - Link young adults to faith formation offerings on other web sites, such as online courses
 - Deliver timely faith formation resources for young adults on a wide variety of topics and interests that can be targeted to the diversity of the young adult population

- Provide social networking among other young adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning
- Deliver a daily Bible study to every young adult via the web or e-mail
- Provide audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers, and link to other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University)
- Answer questions by providing a place on the web site for people to ask anonymous questions and have theological experts answer them (see the BustedHalo.com "Question Box" for an example.).

Every church can start a simple blog, which can be developed in the course of 15 minutes, that certainly can suffice as a simple parish web page (Blogger or Wordpress are two favorite software packages). On the front page of your site put the address and worship times of your church and at least the pastor's name, along with a picture of the church in some form.

A church web site will not replace face-to-face faith formation, but it can certainly enhance and expand what congregations are doing and provide new approaches for delivering faith formation to involved and not-yet-involved young adults.

- **Podcasting.** The iPod has become a must-have gadget for all young adults, and now they can listen to you on it if you produce a podcast, which is a short-form radio show that is released on the Internet to subscribers. Podcasts are relatively simple to produce and are fairly low budget items as well, unless you want bells and whistles. Fr. Dave Dwyer wrote an easy to read guide to producing a podcast: find it on www.bustedhalo.com/features/HowToPodcast.htm. One church streamed their Sunday worship live for about a month. In doing so they found that many young adults first viewed the service online, then decided that the church was so vibrant and expressive that they wanted to come and experience the worship service in person.

Conclusion

The research that we have examined has pointed to at least three imperatives for young adult faith formation in congregations:

- Successful religious programming for young adults offers community and spirituality in the context of a clearly defined faith tradition.
- Successful religious programming responds to young adults' felt needs for empowerment, leadership opportunities, responsibility, and accountability, as well as authenticity and accessibility.
- A lack of specificity does not facilitate pluralism and understanding for people of other faiths. Individuals who know who they are and what they believe are able to honestly encounter differences and explore areas of mutuality.

The challenges of young adult faith formation are daunting, but the future depends on how we respond today.

Works Cited

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