

# Adult Education — The New Thrust in Parish Life

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SINCE VATICAN II, Roman Catholic parishes have been re-evaluating their function and mission in the community which they serve. The American Roman Catholic parish has long been identified as the place for sacramental celebrations, religious education for children in parochial schools and catechetical programs, and a gathering place for members of the parish community for social purposes.

Many post-conciliar parishes have consistently evaluated their mission as a local Church. In their appraisal of present and past performance, they recognize that they have responded well to the challenges of the present age in many respects. But at the same time, parishes recognize that they must expand their horizons beyond the parameters of past expectations. The horizon which beckons with the most force today is the increasing awareness of the need for adult education.

Among the reasons for the great-

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er emphasis on adult education today is the realization that adult faith is essential for so much of what is the functional role of the parish in sacramental celebration and the education of children. An adult milieu is essential if sacramental celebrations are to be meaningful grace encounters with the Lord and if the Christian education of children is to be truly successful.

Parishes today confront the issue of adult education with dreams, hopes and programs — but parishes are often disappointed in the response in reality to what seems so important in theory. Therefore, it would be well to examine the elements involved in adult education today in parish life so that parishes might respond to this challenge of a post-Conciliar Church.

The elements of importance are two-fold in adult education. The first is people themselves who are defined as the Church. The second is the Gospel message which is strengthened by the teaching of the Church as an institution. Only after an awareness of these two separate elements can we raise the questions

of how they relate to each other in the practical order.

## I. The Church as People of God

An awareness of what the Church is as the people of God is most essential to any approach towards adult education. As people of God within a certain homogeneous or heterogeneous economic, educational, and cultural/ethnic community, the Church must recognize that its component element of people come in varying sizes, shapes, and backgrounds not only physically, but also in their view and vision of the Church. The differences between people within the same community — no matter how homogeneous it might be from a sociological or psychological point of view — must be recognized. Consequently, the first principle involved in adult education comes forth.

**Principle One:** Within the same parish, there are differences among people. Thus it is impossible to program for all the same way. Response to programs will vary depending on the needs and sector of the parish to which it appeals.

A recognition of where people are from an intellectual and religious point of view is essential to programming in adult education. This recognition is not to be presumed, but it should be the result of inquiry, study and evaluation through questionnaires, surveys, etc. When such study and evaluation

takes place, results should be disseminated as quickly as possible with concrete proposals given in response to the information obtained. Thus, areas of interest for programming will not be the decision of a few who presume the interest of all, but rather a decision reached hopefully by consensus.

**Principle Two:** Areas of concern for adult education programming should be the result of inquiry of all involved with concrete programs formulated as a consequence to the inquiry.

Once areas of concern have been formulated, programs which respond to these concerns should involve theory, application and challenge. Objective principles stated through lecture, background material, audio-visual presentations may be of high priority, but they could remain sterile unless related to areas of practical concern. Most importantly, however, adult education programs should be a challenge to take a step forward in growth and maturity as a human person and as a Christian.

**Principle Three:** Programming in adult education should be theoretical, practical and challenging.

With full awareness of the differences among people in regard to interest, involvement and commitment to a growth process as an adult, adult education programming within the Church should ask the realistic questions of where, when

and how the people of God come together, and what motivates them to do such.

The largest number of adults in a parish community are gathered in one place each week for the celebration of the liturgy. The opportunities for adult education within the framework of the Sunday homily as the springboard for further study in various ways during the following week are countless. When the homily is envisioned not only as a reflection on the Scriptural readings but also as a time for adults to grow in a mature understanding of their faith, the priests, deacons and ministers of a parish would have the opportunity to be directly involved themselves. Topics for the homily on the various Sundays of the month could be announced in advance; reading material for background information would be printed in the parish bulletin or through additional publications. The use of the Sunday homily as a vehicle of adult education places a tremendous privilege and responsibility on the leaders of the parish.

For many, exposure to a growth process through the Sunday homily and private reading is the most commitment they are ready to make. But others will want more. Every possible avenue for providing more growth and maturity should be explored from large group meetings to small home gatherings to awareness of audio-visual or TV programming which might widen and expand the area of concern and interest begun through the Sunday homily.

**Principle Four:** Adult education in a parish must face the issue of asking where, when and how members of the parish community come together. It should take advantage of natural groupings such as liturgical celebrations and structure other gatherings to deepen what was begun in general terms.

Realistically, the response of the Church, the people of God, to adult educational programming will depend on its relational value to what is important to them, and the importance the parish structure or adult education committees give to the whole concept of adult education. Our priorities as human beings and Christians depend on our values and our relationship to these values. For parents, children and the raising of children in a confusing world is a high priority. Young couples will be interested in the multi-faceted dimensions of adjustment in married life. Teen-agers could well be concerned about their own identity and their goals and purpose in life. Sexual morality and ethics in government as well as countless other contemporary issues could have a high degree of relational value priority. Thus, such issues as justice and peace, poverty and hunger, changes in the Church and new approaches to morality are high priority relational values to a great majority of people. A successful adult education program must face these issues.

At the same time that we become aware of relational values to the

people of God, we must be aware of the impression and reality given of how important adult education is to the parish structure itself. It would seem that priorities should be enuniated as part of the goals of the parish. Proof for this priority is evident in concrete terms of finances, time consumption, personnel, etc.

**Principle Five:** Response to adult education programming will depend on the priority which the parish structure itself gives to the program and the proximity to which the program appeals to high relational values of the people of God themselves.

The whole concept of adult education should be broad enough within the context of the Church to see areas of concern not only oriented primarily to religious issues of faith and morals, but also in the whole humanity of people themselves — their culture, their political and economic world, themselves as psychological composites of body and soul. Thus, a broad view of content for values to the people of God should be recognized.

**Principle Six:** Recognition of all possible values to the Christian as a religious and human person should be the framework in which programming for adult education of the people of God takes place.

The means by which adult education is presented to the people of God must be seen in the context of communication in the world to-

day. People today are approached through every possible sense in order to change their minds, to induce them to purchase a prescribed item, to entertain them. The best in communication media through persons and resources of word, sound and sight should be an inherent part of any adult education program.

**Principle Seven:** Communication of the program for adult maturity should come as close as possible to the professional use of the best resources in speakers and techniques.

## II. The Gospel Message

The second element involved in adult education is the awareness of the Gospel message itself. The Gospel message must be seen in its full context of Church teaching and tradition which amplifies the initial announcement of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel message is at the heart of adult education in a parish. But the Gospel message must be seen in its incarnational reality of facing human problems here and now and the human person existing in the world today. At the same time, the eschatological dimension of the Gospel message, its relevance to eternal values, should always be kept in mind, but the concrete incarnational reality of this message should be emphasized.

Adult education in a parish will recognize that the bond of union between the people of God is the faith which unites them. This faith

is rooted in the Gospel message which should be the springboard for the growth and maturity of the parish community. This basis of unity can embrace any and all programs which respond to the values and needs of the People of God in the incarnational reality of the present era.

### III. Practical Implementation

The practical consequences of incarnating these two elements of adult education into the lived experience of a parish demands a clear outline of necessary concrete practical steps. Five steps would serve as a model to begin the implementation or continuation of an adult education program in a parish community.

First, a committee should be formed which would be representative of different levels of the total parochial community. A shared wisdom from many sources will contribute to the total parish's sense of ownership of the program.

Secondly, through surveys or questionnaires or dialogue in some fashion, information should be gathered to discover where people within the parish community are at in relationship to the Church and what is of value to them. This basic assessment of needs is essential.

Thirdly, the response to the results from the surveys and dialogue with people in the parish community should take concrete form in various ways so that choice and option might be exercised. The ac-

ceptance of this approach will recognize the differences and individuality of people.

Fourthly, once values for a parish community are discerned and options for growth and education are offered in different ways, the work must begin to search out the best means possible to communicate and articulate the theory, practically, and challenge inherent in these issues which serve as the basis for adult education programming. This would also involve opportunities to schedule programs which will have different time, length, and depth parameters as well as different goals.

Fifthly, all programs should be evaluated to determine whether they achieved a purpose which had hopefully been clearly articulated when initiated. Evaluations of programs could well help a great deal the next time that programs are offered for the parish community.

If a parish adult education program were to follow the above five steps, there would still remain a host of other practical considerations. For instance, an adult education program should avoid the pre-set structure where a full year's program is planned for Fall, Winter and Spring, during which time great activity goes on for a period of four or five weeks, which is followed by absolute quiet. Adult education is an ongoing process which could well include many factors.

Newsletters inserted in parish bulletins on a regular basis could include short excerpts from articles of importance with reference to

books, movies and television. Special editions of the newsletter could be published when the adult community is confronted with an issue of major importance and be the source of information and background reading. In recent years, such special newsletters on issues ranging from abortion to the revised ritual for the Sacraments could have been a great help in educating adults in a parish community.

Moreover, adult education programs should be able to depend on the resource of competently trained discussion leaders, facilitators and publicity personnel, etc. Parishes should make the development of these people-resources a high priority so that programs might be implemented immediately at any time, especially when issues of importance confront the community at a local, diocesan or national level. Unfortunately, when crisis issues occur, we are tempted to avoid them for one reason or other. But if such resources of personnel were available, then the program would be assured of having a greater degree of flexibility and effectiveness.

Finally, an essential element for

any adult education program is a resource committee which would become acquainted with journals, periodicals and references of importance which could be shared with others. Joint sharing of such resources in addition to audio-visual materials and other components of adult education programs might also be done with neighboring parishes.

It is obvious that a serious consideration of adult education in a parish community will have many common elements, but there is the absolute requirement of concern for the individuality of each parish community. Parish communities in the Roman Catholic Church today have much in common — a shared faith, a shared worship, a shared past, a shared vision and hope. These shared values become concrete in the individual lived experience of each parish community. The response through adult education offers the Church today at the parish level a new opportunity for the People of God to respond in a mature faith to the Gospel message. To miss such an opportunity would be tragedy for the Church of today and tomorrow. ▲

### "ANYTIME YOU'RE READY"

▶ A middle-aged woman in an upstate Pennsylvania parish was departing from her place of birth. The congregation she was leaving happened to have a cemetery where most of the woman's immediate ancestors had been buried. Before leaving town the woman stopped in at the rectory and asked the pastor, "Will it be all right for me to come back here to be buried?"

The pastor replied, "Anytime you're ready."