

How do adults grow in their faith while living in a modern world in which people are increasingly detached from religion? How do we pastoral ministers help them do that? In this excellent and basic book, Jane Regan provides a road map to help us examine this and plan ways to succeed. Her chapter on helping adults enter into conversations about faith is alone worth the price of this book.

BILL HUEBSCH, *author of *Dreams and Visions: Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2010)*

As always, Jane Regan challenges as well as affirms, explores theory as well as realistic practice, and names the frustrations and hurdles as well as the vision and hopes for adult faith formation, evangelization, and, in reality, all of parish life.

Rooted in Scripture, in the way Jesus taught, in church documents on adult formation and evangelization, and based in our culture's postmodernity and the actual lives of today's parishioners, Jane takes us on a journey of renewed possibilities for adult faith formation and the very life of today's parish.

It's hard to believe that so much is contained in one short book. Jane pulls together an approach to the actual experiences of people's everyday faith life, the struggles and potentials of our parishes, and the promising opportunities of adult faith formation to help us receive new insights, challenges, and concrete, authentic practices. Unquestionably, this is an indispensable book for every staff member and every person in parish leadership. It provides much to reflect on, and Jane's suggested discussion questions will guide our conversations and make renewed adult faith formation come alive in our communities.

JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP, *author, adult faith formation and retreat facilitator*

W elcome to the new world of adult faith formation! Jane Regan serves as our guide to this new world, blending theory and practice to help leaders bring adult faith formation to life in their parish communities. She examines the postmodern culture of our world today and outlines important implications for adult faith formation. She summarizes the major themes of the church's vision of evangelization and catechesis. She offers practical insights about building formal, structured programs that are informed by adult learning characteristics. And she shows how informal models of adult faith formation offer a variety of ways for a parish to develop or enhance their adult faith formation efforts. Jane has given us the vision and tools—now let's get moving and develop adult faith formation for this new world!

JOHN ROBERTO, *author, Faith Formation 2020 and Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century*

FORMING A
COMMUNITY
OF

Faith

A guide to success in
adult faith formation today

JANE E. REGAN

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Welcome!

MY OWN INTEREST IN ADULT FAITH FORMATION CAN BE traced back to my earliest involvement in religious education. From the first parish I worked in as a DRE in the mid-1970s, I've recognized the importance of engaging adults as the primary participants in parish faith formation. As I continued to be involved in adult faith formation at the parish and diocesan level along the East Coast and in the Midwest, my conviction continued to grow that the religious education of children and youth, always essential to the life of the parish, is best understood and most effectively implemented in a context where priority is given to the faith formation of the adults. It is in light of that belief that this book was written.

This book is addressed to those whose interests and ministry

focus on the faith formation of adults. Central themes of adult faith formation—evangelization, catechesis, conversation, community—are woven throughout the text, interspersed with lots of examples and practical suggestions. The “Keep in Mind” at the end of each chapter provides a summary of some of the core ideas and concepts explored in the chapter.

While it can certainly be read on your own, it is also helpful to use with a group of people—adult educators from neighboring parishes, religious education advisory boards, or an adult education team. There are questions at various points in each chapter that are helpful for reflection and conversation; they are designed to both enhance your understanding of the text and foster your own growth in faith—because that is, in fact, where our interests lie—strengthening our own faith and the faith of those around us. I wish you all the best in that!

Context for Forming an Adult Community

WHICH ARE YOUR FAVORITE STORIES ABOUT JESUS, YOUR favorite pericopes or sections from the gospels that speak to you about who Jesus was? Perhaps it is one of the stories he told, or an account of a miracle event. Or maybe it is a description of how he responded to people's questions or to the challenges from the religious leaders. Take a moment and think of your top three or four. Looking at these accounts from Jesus' life gives us a sense of *how* Jesus taught and *what* he taught to those who followed him.

At the heart of this book is the question of how adults grow in their faith. From the perspective of the religious educator, we can ask it this way: how do we form adults within the Christian faith? We can set out the parameters of our response to that question by asking, "What would it mean to teach as Jesus did?" We are not the first to pose this question. In fact, in the 1980s, a church document that addressed catechesis was entitled "To Teach as Jesus Did." Although this document was addressed primarily to

the needs of adolescent catechesis, it seems to me that the title is an apt one and points to a good place to begin thinking about how we form adults within the Christian faith.

In this chapter, we examine two significant themes. The first one involves looking back to the gospels and to the life of the early church and examining the models of teaching that Jesus embodied and the way that was understood by his followers. The second theme is a “yes, but” response to the first: yes, we want Jesus’ example to inspire our work, but our cultural context is very different from first-century Judaism. So we ask about the challenges and gifts that elements of twenty-first-century American culture bring to the way in which we give expression to Jesus’ example. And we conclude this chapter by setting out the key moves that make up the remainder of the book.

To Teach as Jesus Did...

It is a bit glib and somewhat too simplistic to repeat the oft-made comparison: Jesus welcomed the children but taught the adults, and the church has been doing just the opposite for years. But there is a truth to that. If we examine most parishes’ investment of time, talent, and financial resources in service to faith formation, we would generally see that a good deal of emphasis is placed on children and youth, with little attention given to adults. And often the segment that is addressed to adults is primarily designed to help them be more effective ministers or catechists or parents and is only secondarily addressed to their own faith formation as adult believers. But we see in Jesus’ life, as we come to know it through the gospels, that the calling and forming of adult followers was at the heart of his ministry.

At the beginning of his ministry, as told in Matthew’s gos-

pel, for example, Jesus called Simon and Andrew to leave their nets and follow him, that he would make them “fishers of men” (4:18–19).¹ He then set about teaching those who followed him, “proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people” (4:23). And the Gospel of Matthew concludes with Jesus sending the disciples out to teach others: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (28:19–20). So Jesus’ actions of calling and sending bracket the whole of Matthew’s gospel; between these two actions, Jesus taught through word and deed both the substance of a new world view and the way of life that flowed from it.

If we look at the *way* Jesus taught, it is clear what Jesus *didn’t* do; he didn’t lecture or outline abstract concepts. He taught in parable—the kingdom of God is like a king who planned a great feast, or a farmer who planted a field, or a woman who lost a coin.² And he taught in story—there once was a man with two sons, or a shepherd with a hundred sheep, or a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thieves.³ Jesus answered questions—“What must I do to attain eternal life?” or “Which is the greatest commandment?” or “How many times must I forgive my brother?” And he addressed people in the midst of their lives—Zaccheus, as he climbed a tree to get a better view, the Samaritan woman who had gone to the well to draw water, and the woman who wished to be healed by merely touching the hem of his cloak.

At the same time, if we look at *what* Jesus taught, we recognize that he *didn’t* teach propositions or discrete doctrines. Jesus

taught most effectively by example—by gathering his disciples for meals, by welcoming the sinners, and by healing those who were brought to him. He taught a way of life by challenging the status quo and by taking time away by himself for prayer or with his disciples in order to explain to them more deeply the truth that he was living and the consequence of that truth.

Ultimately, the disciples learned by entering into an apprenticeship with Jesus. They travelled with him, listened to him as he taught, and watched as he healed people. At some point they were sent out in pairs to do the same, reporting back to Jesus about their success and questions.⁴ They grew in their understanding of, and capacity for, being a disciple of Jesus by following his example, by doing what he did.

So to “teach as Jesus did” is to set out a vision and a way of life. Through story and conversation, through example and shared interactions, we convey to others the meaning of the reign of God and we witness to a life shaped by gospel values. In sum, to use the words of Peter in his first letter, we are called to “always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Peter 3:15).

Let me propose that this gives an overall sense of what we are about in adult faith formation. Certainly we want to teach about the faith, but more importantly, we want to foster faith in ourselves and in those with and for whom we minister. This is what the early followers of Jesus did; this is what they understood by the injunction to make disciples and teach what Jesus had commanded. The vision of the community set out in the Acts of the Apostles points to that type of teaching and witnessing:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the

prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. [ACTS 2:42-46]

We know from reading the rest of the New Testament that there were challenges to this description. There were debates over the reception of the Gentiles; there were problems with people not sharing things in common; there were even debates about who taught what to whom. But through all that, the lasting challenge to live in love and hope allowed the early followers of Jesus and the nascent church to survive and thrive against all odds.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

- ★ *Reflect back on one of the gospel pericopes you named at the beginning of the chapter. What aspect of the story points to how and what Jesus taught? What implications does this have for your own teaching?*

- ★ *When you hear the phrase “to teach as Jesus did,” what image or experience or approach comes to mind? In what ways is this a helpful way to think about your own teaching?*

- ★ *What do you see as some of the challenges to responding to the call “to teach as Jesus did”?*

...In the Twenty-First Century

Yes, to teach as Jesus did is an important and helpful vision, *but* how do we translate that into our twenty-first-century context? Even describing our contemporary culture and getting a handle on the social, political, economic, and religious dynamics that shape the way in which we approach adult faith formation is a task that far exceeds the scope of this book or any one text. The most we can do is pick up one lens as a way of looking at our contemporary context, one lens that sheds light on our work as religious educators of adults.

The lens I want to pick up is that of “postmodernity.” Whether or not you are familiar with that term, you’ll recognize some of the examples that mark a postmodern context:

- The number of people who say that they are “spiritual but not religious.”
- The plethora of books designated “spirituality” with no coherent way to sort them out. One of the big chains labels this section: “Spirituality/New Age: Arranged Alphabetically by Author.”
- The popularity of “reality TV” with its emphasis on the life of a particular person or group of people.
- The recognition that irreducible pluralism is not only a reality, but may in fact be a benefit to culture and society.

While cultural postmodernity is a complex and multifaceted reality, it is possible to propose some key characteristics that permeate the concept.⁵

The first characteristic of postmodernity is the self-conscious

recognition that human knowing is defined in space and time. The way we perceive reality and come to understand ourselves and the world around us is shaped by our place in history and society. I see and understand the world as a Catholic woman living in the eastern United States in the first decades of the twenty-first century. My “situatedness”—my past history and my present experience—shapes how I perceive everything from the mundane to the deeply philosophical, from what I understand to be appropriate clothes for work to how I construe the meaning of freedom or independence.

An example: when my children were growing up, my older daughter went to school in a neighboring town that was about 65% Jewish. Many of the kids she spent time with, and a high number of the teachers and staff at her school, were Jewish. At the same time, the neighborhood where we lived had the look of a meeting of the UN. The young couple who lived next door to us was from India; we regularly profited from their traditional cooking around their holidays. And on the other side was a family who emigrated from Russia. Across the way were a couple of Muslim families with women and older girls wearing head coverings. The pluralism of my daughters’ world and how they see and define the other is particularly evident when I reflect on my own growing up. The “other” for me was the Polish Catholic who went to St. Stanislaus while we, the Irish Catholics, went to St. Thomas. Or at most, it was the Presbyterians, who had a small church at the end of our street. There seemed to be clear, communally held lines between us and others, lines that have not been as clear for my daughters. They have grown up surrounded by people with different values and beliefs than they have; that is part of how they see reality today. For me, I came to the recognition of this

pluralism as an adult and so experience it differently: I know of a time when diversity and pluralism did not define my world. My daughters have only known a world marked by pluralism—they think that that is the way it should be, the way it has always been. We each define and make meaning of the world in light of our own experience, our own situatedness.

What does this characteristic of cultural postmodernity say about how we think about adult faith formation as we strive to teach as Jesus did? One of the most important implications is the recognition that human experience serves as the starting point of adult catechesis. Effective adult catechesis draws on the experience of being a believer, shaped by the specific time and place, and sees those experiences as revelatory. The postmodern awareness of the way in which our human knowing is constructed within a specific time and place necessitates this renewed attention to methodology rooted in human experience.

Adult faith formation within a postmodern context means taking seriously the present reality of lived adult faith and providing people with the opportunity to reflect on that and talk about it with other adults. With this comes the recognition that people's experiences and views of the world vary considerably. When we take seriously human experience as the beginning point of adult catechesis, we recognize the irreducible pluralism within and outside our community. Our faith is enhanced when we engage this diversity and learn from it.

A second characteristic of postmodernity centers on the attitude toward "metanarratives." Metanarratives are the overarching stories we tell ourselves that help us make sense of the world. They can be rooted in family or community life—"That is not what Regans do," my father would remind us kids from time to

time. They can also be socially or culturally formed. For example, in the United States, we put an emphasis on “rugged individualism” and the notion that if you work hard you will get ahead. Or we speak about the “American dream” of owning your own home as a sign of accomplishment and stability. For the person operating from a postmodern perspective, these metanarratives are looked upon with suspicion. This is particularly true when they are applied to large groups of people. The problem with metanarratives, from a postmodern perspective, is that they put forth overarching stories that ignore or even suppress alternative understandings or dissenting stories. At times metanarratives give stories of the collective to the loss of the individual’s experience. And they can serve to sustain the status quo and the influence of large institutions. From a postmodern perspective, metanarratives are viewed with suspicion and with a sense that they should not be the starting point for how we make meaning in our lives. In the end it is not the metanarrative that will explain who we are and how we are to be: it is the individual’s struggle to make meaning of his or her life.

Take, for example, a parish in a small farming community that was founded by European Catholics. The stories they tell about themselves and their parish highlight the sacrifice and dedication of the early members — the present parishioners’ grandparents and great-grandparents. They have festivals and celebrations that mark feast days or special events. Early December, for example, is the time for the big Christmas bazaar that involves a significant number of the parishioners and takes a good deal of the parish’s time and energy. These stories and events make up the metanarratives and rituals that define the community and provide a source of meaning for people’s lives.

Now imagine that because of some light industry coming into the area, there is an influx of Latino/a Catholics into the parish. For them the prevailing metanarrative is foreign, even oppressive. For them early December is not time for a Christmas bazaar but the opportunity to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a central image to their own stories and sense of meaning. For this parish to become a parish of the descendants of original settlers and of the Latino/a community, the stories of the individuals involved need to take precedence over the dominant metanarrative in order to fashion a new, common story of what this community is about.

What are the implications of this for how we engage in adult faith formation? To be effective in forming an adult community, people need to be invited to tell their own stories and—in the telling, as well as in listening to the stories of others—to recognize the common themes that gather us as Christians. To tell one's story and to listen with an open heart to the story of others are skills that only come with practice. And yet it is only within these stories that we can trace out the common story—the Christian Story—that serves to give meaning to all of our individual narratives. In the final analysis we understand the paschal mystery as the source of meaning in our lives when we have gotten in touch with how new life comes from difficult or death-filled experiences in our own lives.

The third characteristic of a postmodern mindset is a tendency to be distrustful of large institutions. Large institutions are really the beneficiaries of the power of metanarratives to give meaning to a person's life. For example, if we believe in the metanarrative that modern (Western) medicine can heal all that ails us, then we are more likely to accept unquestioningly the doctor's ad-

vice and prescription and to undergo more willingly any tests and procedures that he or she recommends. The metanarrative keeps the medical industry flourishing. From a postmodern perspective, as with the metanarrative itself, the large institutions are looked at with some level of suspicion. They are recognized as human constructions and not the repository of omnipotent powers.

For us engaged in adult faith formation, it is important to grapple with the way in which the suspicion of large institutions applies to the church. Even for those of us whose affiliation with the church and involvement within its structures are perceived as “givens,” we can have a questioning, critical, or suspicious stance toward elements of the institution. How much more so for those on the periphery of church life? In that context, it seems essential that the work we do in adult faith formation be always directed beyond the church boundaries. Our work with adults is to be oriented toward mission rather than simply toward membership or maintenance. To be an effective faith community in this postmodern context, deliberate attention needs to be given to mission over membership. We are rightly suspicious of charities where 40-50% of funds collected go to administrative costs rather than the charity’s mission; administration is needed but must always be in service to mission. That same suspicion can be applied to a Christian community where most of its energy in faith formation of adults goes to enhance membership. We will look at this in more detail in the next chapter, but put simply, this means striving to be an evangelizing church, one that is always proclaiming the gospel in action and words, one that is always teaching as Jesus taught.

The fourth characteristic that marks a postmodern perspective is the heightened awareness of the place of power in social interactions. The recognition that knowledge and meaning are

socially constructed and are rooted in an individual's (or group's) definition of their own situatedness, not in a metanarrative, leads to another recognition: those who define knowledge and meaning have social power. History is told by the winners. Those who tell the history, who decide what is important, are the ones with power. Power is not inherently good or bad, but it is power.

An example: the leadership of a moderate-size parish offered the opportunity for adults to gather in small groups for three sessions to discuss the place of liturgy in their lives. The organization was very good, with trained facilitators for each group of adults. The conversation for the first session went well, drawing on the experience of those present as well as liturgical documents for insight and direction. By the beginning of the second session, it became clear that the leadership had an agenda—building up support for the renovation of the church building—that had not been made clear at the start. Those in leadership had the power to set the agenda for these meetings. They also had the power to be transparent or not in their approach. But the participants had power as well: they could simply refuse to follow the set agenda. Power is present in all facets of our lives. The use of it in a faith-formation context needs to be carefully considered.

Effective adult catechesis in this postmodern setting engages in a model of catechesis that sees all of us as learners, all of us as apprentices to Jesus Christ. In this context, the stance of the teacher is key. How participants understand the role of teacher, the degree to which they see themselves as co-learners, the extent to which they recognize that there is wisdom already present in the community of faith, and the way in which hospitality and humility permeate the adult formation context: all of these contribute to a sense of the shared power of the group.

Within the postmodern context, people are looking to institutions like the church less as a source of answers and more as a place to give expression to their questions. Our role as religious educators is to provide the hospitable space where such inquiry can take place. It is enough that we invite the questions and then join with other adults to seek the responses.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

- ★ *Where in your life have you encountered the currents of emerging postmodernity? How do you respond to these currents?*

- ★ *What are some of the signs of postmodernity present in the adults with whom you work? How do you respond to them?*

- ★ *What do you see as the challenges and promises for the church's response to this cultural shift?*

Map for the Journey

These two big themes—the challenge to teach as Jesus did and the reality of postmodernity—serve as framing elements to the rest of this book as we examine some of the essential components to the process of adult faith formation. To bring this chapter to conclusion, let me outline here the moves made in the remainder of the book.

Beginning with the General Catechetical Directory (GCD),⁶ which was published in 1971, most ecclesial documents that discussed catechesis included the general sentiment reflected in this quote: “catechesis for adults, since it deals with persons who are

capable of an adherence that is fully responsible, must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All the other forms, which are indeed always necessary, are in some way oriented to it” (GCD 20). So throughout the 1970s and beyond, the theme of the centrality of adult faith formation was regularly affirmed in official church documents. At the same time, ecclesial texts were being published that called for recognition of the centrality of evangelization to the mission of the church. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), The Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization,⁷ published by Pope Paul VI in 1975, states that the church “exists in order to evangelize” (EN 14). The essential role of evangelization in the nature and mission of the church can be found in church documents ever since.

My contention is that these two topics are linked, that there is a vital connection between the call to evangelization and the recognition of the necessity of the faith formation of adults. We explore this in chapter two. After examining the evolution of the understanding of evangelization from Vatican Council II to the present, as well as developing an understanding of “new evangelization,” our attention turns to the essential link between evangelization and adult faith formation.

Given the central role of evangelization in the life of the church and to the work of catechesis, chapter three begins with a description of the interrelationship of evangelization, catechesis, and adult faith formation. It then proceeds to a discussion of what adult faith looks like. According to *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, mature faith is living, explicit, and fruitful. In light of that understanding of faith, the goals of adult faith formation are examined and their implications for adult catechesis are explored.

Two major threads are considered as we look at faith formation of adults: the part played by various models of intentional

programming and the role of the life of the community. On the one hand, intentional gatherings of adults specifically for formation, whether in peer groups or as part of multigenerational sessions, are an important part of the ongoing endeavor of adult catechesis. On the other hand, the very life of the parish is formative through its liturgy, service, and sense of community. Looking at these components, their contribution, challenges, and the interrelationship between them, is the focus of chapters four and five.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the opportunity for adults to be in conversation with other adults about things that matter is at the heart of how adults grow in their faith. Hearing alternative views, listening to the faith stories of other people, articulating one's own understanding as clearly as possible: all of these are at the heart of the essential dynamic of adult faith formation—conversation. Chapter four looks at the nature of conversation, its role in adult catechesis, and the process of facilitating effective conversation. The last part of the chapter examines the important task of preparing and asking evocative and engaging questions, a skill that requires much practice.

Catechists meet to receive training, as do lectors; parish council members meet with the pastor to help him think through and make decisions about the pastoral life of the parish; the building committee meets to discuss repairs for the church building. Each of these groups meets for a specific task and agenda. But could these meetings be more? In the final chapter, we return to the role of the community as formative of faith, this time looking at the ways in which adults gather within a faith community and asking how these can be faith formative. We look at this through the lens of “communities of practice,” proposing that the parish is a community of communities and that it is through our affilia-

tion with these communities that our identity is formed and our faith fostered.

Keep in Mind

- In striving to teach as Jesus did, we look at both *how* Jesus taught (through stories and examples and addressing people's questions) and *what* he taught (a way of life).
- "Postmodernity" is one term used to describe our present complex, multidimensional cultural and social context.
- Postmodernity is characterized by recognition that human knowing is situated in time and place, that metanarratives are not the best way to explain a contemporary perspective or belief, that large institutions should be looked at with suspicion, and that power is present in all our social interactions.
- As we look at the theme of fostering adult faith, the concept of evangelization plays a significant role in understanding what we do and how we do it.