

Congregations Need Multiple Adult Education Options

Gone are the days when the "Rector's Forum" could be the sole adult education offering in a congregation of any size. Today's adults have increasingly complex needs which cannot be met by any one program, no matter how excellent. So the average congregation with 150 people attending worship each week needs at least six adult education opportunities. Even a church with 50 people attending worship needs at least three options.

The first thing congregational leaders need to readjust is their expectation of group size. It is quite acceptable and even preferable to have more groups of smaller size rather than just one larger group. The ideal small group size is eight participants; 12 participants is about the maximum. With more than that, there isn't enough time for each participant to fully engage in the discussion or activities. Some people aren't heard, they begin to feel left out and often drift away. The most effective small groups ensure the full participation of each group member while honoring the differences between those who wish to limit their participation to just a few comments and those who participate more actively.

The second thing congregational leaders often need to readjust is their understanding of what constitutes adult education. Most of us think of a formal class—an event that has a specific curriculum and leader. But education happens at all times and in many places. So, one way to expand the adult education opportunities is to look beyond the traditional Sunday morning adult education time-slot. Integrate adult education into existing congregational activities and look around your building. The way your furniture is arranged, what you have on your walls and bulletin boards, in your bulletins and bulletin inserts, what you do before and after the service, all are education opportunities.

When planning an adult education program, one option can and probably needs to be an ongoing group. A large group lecture or video and discussion group that meets for about 45 minutes on Sunday morning is a standard in many congregations. Its consistency and the fact that it generally does not require regular attendance or preparation make this a useful option that people can easily attend. The difficulty is that its regular attenders may find that the presentations stay at a more superficial level and that this format fails to build community (especially if the group is large).

On-going programs that engage material at a significant level is another option. Usually this will appeal to those who have experienced, enjoy and are committed to adult education. These groups often meet for an hour and a half either on Sunday mornings or on Sunday or weekday evening hours. *Education for Ministry* is a popular, albeit intensive, example of this type of group. The *Adult Journey* series (*Story, Community and Eucharist*) is an example of a more experiential program that moves from introductory to more in depth material. Many congregations use *Journey as Story* on Sunday mornings to invite more casual attenders into a deeper engagement with education and each other.

Each congregation needs a series of short programs on Sunday morning—each four to eight weeks in length. Many of today's adults, especially those with little experience with adult education, are reluctant to commit to more than a few weeks at a time. These programs can be topical (stress, parenting, money) or spiritual/biblical (gifts discernment, how to pray, reconciliation in the Scriptures). Often these are developed around a book or the interest/expertise of an individual in the congregation or community. It is also possible to take a longer

Adult Learners

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program and divide it into smaller segments. For example, *Teach Us to Pray* is a series of 20+ lessons of different ways to pray that can be done as a year-long program, as four shorter programs or as individual lessons.

Another important form of adult education are “planned spontaneous groups.” These are started by laity with a gift for and training in how to engage people in a conversation. They hang around the back of the church or at coffee hour and engage anyone they see in conversation. If and when it is comfortable to do so, they invite that person or couple into a conversation about the day’s sermon or anything else about the service that caught their attention. Eventually the little group of two or three sit down and engage in a dialogue about the sermon, scriptures, hymns or liturgy. Keeping a stack of the day’s lessons and copies of Scripture study methods from *In Dialogue With Scripture* nearby allows the leader to use them if and when appropriate (usually not the first week). This little group is likely to draw the attention of a couple of others. Before long, six or seven people are having a “coffee hour” discussion group. This is a great way to gradually engage newcomers and marginalized people. There is no set agenda, no curriculum, nothing to accomplish except the building of relationships and responding to people where they are. It provides a valuable entry point for people who are not likely to go to a “class.” Of course, some of these groups grow and eventually become a group with a curriculum. But then you just start over with another small group.

Finally, an important arena for adult education is anywhere and anytime the congregation meets to work or pray together. So, for example, the altar guild might meet early on one Sunday morning a month to read and discuss a book on prayer or liturgy and talk about how their ministry is a ministry of prayer. The Vestry or Search Committee might read and discuss *The Anglican Way* as a way to help them do their work as well as learn more about the church. The choir might take 15 minutes in the middle of rehearsal to read and reflect on the Scriptures for the next Sunday and pray together. The outreach ministry group might read and discuss a chapter and have a time of prayer together before or after they begin their project. Any and every aspect of congregational life can become a place where adult education occurs.

Six adult education opportunities a week sounds like a lot for 150 people. The primary concern is “How will we get that many leaders?” One answer is, many of these experiences don’t need leaders. The planned, spontaneous groups will soon take on a life of their own if the starter is trained and able to help the group members take responsibility for facilitating their own discussion. The work groups already have leaders and the learning portion of their meeting can rotate leadership.

Identify and nurture those who can provide leadership without making them “permanent leaders.” Insist that all leaders rotate off every two years or so—even if they love leading. Failure to rotate leaders burns out good leaders and prevents new leaders from emerging. Create a culture of shared leadership and a culture in which leaders move in and out of leadership roles. This will foster a healthy leadership corps that minimizes burdening the few and maximizes using the gifts of many.

The Rev. Linda L. Grenz
Executive Director of LeaderResources

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LeaderResources

38 Mulberry Street, Box 302
Leeds, MA 01053-0302

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