



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: A Theme that Grows and Grows

At first glance, this best practice might look very similar to many things which we do in parishes and (arch)dioceses: a one evening lecture, a six-week series (or four weeks, or eight weeks...).

Yet, at second glance, watch for a few things:

- Is this topic one that we address within our adult faith formation offerings as well as within our practices as a parish?
- This was not a one-time event which then was forgotten about. Note how many gatherings and activities continued to flow from the original event.
- As you enjoy the story of this ever-growing and ever-developing endeavor, note its rootedness and its success because of key adult faith formation principles and realities.

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The Spark that Began It: Rooted in Adult Faith Formation

This journey began when Eileen Charbonneau, a member of the Faith in Action Committee (FIA) of St. George Parish in Worcester, MA, was working on a Master's Degree in Pastoral Ministry with a concentration in Adult Faith Formation. Eileen's great interest and involvement in Adult Faith Formation, combined with her strong passion for social and environmental justice, came together in several ways.

When you have people with a background in adult faith formation as envisioned in *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, it is possible to create gatherings and endeavors such as this that are successful, ongoing and transformative.



A One-Evening Program

For several years, Calvary Retreat Center in Shrewsbury, MA hosted a yearly retreat by [Dennis Patrick O'Hara, Ph.D.](#)

from the University of St. Michael's at the University of Toronto. A few years ago he was also the keynote speaker for a conference on eco-theology at Anna Maria College, Paxton, MA, organized by Eileen.

At that time, Eileen also spearheaded and invited Dr. O'Hara to give a presentation, "Theology and Ecology: Natural Partners," at St. George Parish. The evening was open to the diocese and was well received by all who participated. For many it was their first encounter with eco-theology.

The Faith in Action Committee (of the parish) was instrumental in arranging and facilitating Dennis' presentation. Following his presentation, the participants engaged in small group discussions led by the pastor of St. George Parish.

Each group brainstormed ways to care for creation. As each group shared their ideas, the suggestions were placed throughout the hall on newsprint.

The family needs a home,
a fit environment in which to develop
its proper relationships.

For the human family, this home is the Earth –
the environment that God the Creator
has given us to inhabit with creativity
and responsibility.

We need to care for the environment;
it has been entrusted to men and women
to be protected and cultivated
with responsible freedom, with the good of all
as a constant guiding criterion.

- Pope Benedict XVI,
World Day of Peace Message, 2008

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The Idea Continued

That evening set the spark for the Faith in Action Committee (FIA) to do more work in the area of eco-theology (or “Caring for Creation” as the committee prefers since it seems more accessible, less intimidating).

Thus began a wide and diverse collaboration of many people: e.g., various parish committees and parishioners (Women’s Guild, Men’s Club, Spiritual Life Committee, St. Vincent DePaul Society), staff members from the diocesan office, especially LaVerne Bertin, associate director of the Office of Religious Education, and the publicity efforts of the Diocesan Commission for Women.

Eileen and Tom O’Shea, another member of the FIA Committee (and presently Director of Field Operations at the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts) coordinated the efforts of these many people and began to plan a six-week series.

With the Faith in Action Committee beginning the process, the many people formed subcommittees, such as:

- the Steering Committee
- the Resources and Session Content Subcommittee

The booklet, [Catholics Going Green: A Small-Group Guide for Learning and Living Environmental Justice](#), was perused as a possible guide in helping the parishioners to follow-up and make practical the challenges in Dennis’ presentation.

In studying the book, the Session Content Subcommittee decided to use the book as a guide, but not follow its outline directly. One sentence in the book struck a chord in them. It was only a tangential reference to the sacraments, but it was enough to inspire what became the six-session series they created.



Many Gifts Contribute to Adult Faith Formation

One of the key principles of adult faith formation (and all ministry) is to never go it alone for many gifts working together enhances the project, as well as calling forth the

talents of many. Many of the people on the various committees were not deeply-versed on eco-theology prior to their involvement in this project, but had other areas of expertise, such as publicity, that led them to volunteer their time and gifts.

As they worked on the creation of this project, each learned about caring for creation and how it intricately connects with faith; their interest and learning grew. A real witness to the reality of the parish as the curriculum and parishioners learning from each other!



The Six-Week Series

The series combined ecological science with faith, most specifically the sacraments. This learning opportunity illustrated how science and theology work together.

For each session one natural element was connected to a sacrament or a biblical reference; the sessions were built around:

- an exploration of the scientific/ecological aspects
- the theological/spiritual reflections

After opening prayer, each gathering began with these two presentations. Each session also featured a guest speaker from the community, speaking on a topic related to the evening's theme. For instance:

- a representative from a company that installed solar panels
- a volunteer from the local watershed
- a volunteer who works with disadvantaged youth helping them create community gardens in the city

The participants then gathered into small groups with provided conversation questions. After a sharing within the large group, the session ended with a closing prayer. Handouts were provided for home use with:

- additional reflections
- practical things to do



Intentional Adult Faith Formation

An important aspect of the CGG series was that the planners were very intentional about this being an adult faith formation endeavor. They didn’t envision it to be a

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series of lectures and reflections without a connection. The mantra that the CGG series should “bring life to faith and faith to life” was very much in play. This could be seen in the time taken to create the take-home activities. The aim was to have people leave each session not only thinking about what they’d seen and heard, but also with something specific to actually do to make it real for them. The desire was to provide an understanding of why and how caring for creation is a genuine part of the discipleship experience and not just theoretical or philosophical.



An Example of a Session

The first session, “We Walk on Holy Ground,” focused on water and Baptism, beginning with a PowerPoint presentation on water as a building block of life and how dependent all life is upon it.

After concrete examples of how we use and/or mistreat water, an environmental video of rivers and streams was shown with a reflection composed by a member of the planning committee. (For a copy of the reflection, see www.janetschaeffler.com; click on AFF Helps.)

The guest presenter for this evening on Water-Baptism was a representative from the [Indian Lake Watershed Association](http://www.IndianLakeWatershedAssociation.org) (Indian Lake is just down the street from the parish) who spoke about:

- their actions and projects to preserve and care for the lake and its environs
- how people can get involved/volunteer for the twice yearly clean-up

Small group discussions followed, generating realistic insights and practical ideas of things to do. Take-home handouts included information on the Indian Lake Watershed and suggestions of things to do to conserve water, etc.



Topics for the Other Five Sessions

The explorations for the remaining five sessions included:

- *We Honor the Dignity of the Human Person*
- *We Stand in Solidarity*
- *We Share the Goods of the Earth*
- *We Champion the Cause of Global Human Development*

• *We Answer the Call to Conversion of Life*

For a short description of the content and process of each of these sessions, see www.janetschaeffler.com; click on AFF Helps.)

In every act, or any act,
look at the wonder of God’s creation, and say,
‘Oh, wow!’

Make that your goal for this year –
say ‘Oh wow!’
and mean it, at least once a day.

–Terry Bookman in *The Busy Soul*

And ... the Idea Continued to Grow

A couple of years ago this entire region had an infestation of Asian Long horned beetles, which resulted in the removal of thousands of trees. In a large tract of woodland behind the parish (owned by the parish), the state removed over 900 trees from the property. While that thinned it out considerably, it still left a lot of woodland.

One evening Eileen Charbonneau and Tom and Sarah O'Shea were conversing about the removal of the trees and what might be done with the property. They considered an outdoor stations of the cross, a labyrinth, a community garden, etc. The idea surfaced: "why don't we build something like an outdoor stations of the cross, but utilize the ideas from the *Catholics Going Green* series as the stations?"

The idea was born: a prayer trail focusing on the call to care for creation. The Faith in Action Committee, with Tom and Eileen, is spearheading the project which is in the process of being developed.

Using GPS and [Google Earth](http://www.google.com/earth/), Tom mapped out a trail which had been left by the machines that had removed the trees, an almost perfect loop trail.

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In determining the placement of the stations:

- The first station is at a stream: perfect for the water/baptism station.
- Then the trail head begins: the beginning and end of the loop, which is the site for Eucharist (beginning and end, source and summit, Alpha and Omega).
- An area with a wide variety of native vegetation is then reached: a place for the biodiversity/holy oils station.
- The trail heads up an incline and eventually comes to a point with an old stone wall. Stone walls are ubiquitous in New England and denote areas that were once pasture land: a good place for the "seed" station as it alludes to a time in the past where what is now woods was once farm or pasture land.
- A little further down the trail the tree canopy opens up into a clearing: ideal for the "air/light" station.
- The last station is reached just before returning to the head of the trail: this coincides with the final session in which fire (Pentecost) was a theme. It reflects the hope that walking the trail provides a new appreciation for creation and a desire to make changes in our lives for the good of the earth and others.

Each station will have a sign briefly explaining the station, weaving the scientific with the spiritual. Hikers/walkers will be encouraged to reflectively stop and pause as they walk the trail. Benches will be placed along the way so that people can rest and reflect. (For a look at the signage, see www.janetschaeffler.com; click on AFF Helps.)

The hope is that many parishioners will be involved in the continuing work to finish this project: clearing the trail, creating and installing the signage, benches, and the kiosk at the entrance. The team work is continuing to build and strengthen community within the parish.

Once the trail is completed, it has the potential to be utilized in many ways:

- Parishioners and all community members will be encouraged to walk the trail, stopping to reflect and pray. It will be a place of beauty

where people can reflect on God's creation and our obligation to care for it.

- Catechists from the faith formation program will also be invited to take their groups to the trail as they learn about creation and the sacraments.
- Adult faith formation and inter-generational formation programs can use it in various ways.
- The trail can be used by individuals as well as guided group hikes.
- It also will be evangelizing as it will be open to everyone, not just parishioners. It could attract a wide variety of people who might, in turn, become interested (or more interested) in the Catholic faith.
- The co-chairs of the Faith and Formation Team are envisioning a cookout on the day the official work on the trail begins: a great opportunity to build community. Catechists for high school have plans to get the teens involved both in using it and helping with its upkeep.



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These Efforts for Caring for Creation Have Changed Things

Parishioners have spoken of changes in their attitudes and behaviors because of what happened during the series. One woman commented, "I never thought of taking my garbage out to the compost pile as a holy action, but now I see it that way and I will feel differently whenever I do it."

Upon reflection, the planning committee realized that lectures and/or reflections alone did not create that kind of conversion. All the various approaches encouraged people to become informed, formed and transformed.

The reality that parishioners are extremely interested in continuing and deepening this venture through the Prayer Trail illustrates the level of conversion and commitment that it created. Adult faith formation at its best! All of this would not have been possible without the shared collaboration of so many people, both in and outside the parish.

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It wasn't just individuals who were affected. Because of these formation efforts and the plans for the prayer trail, the parish also has made some changes:

- Toxic pesticides are no longer used on the church grounds; only organic lawn products are used.
- When the sanctuary floor needed to be replaced, the pastor and Finance Council made sure that only sustainable wood, non-toxic varnishes and materials were used.
- Everyone has become more vigilant about recycling, renewing and reusing. The pastor became known throughout the diocese as the "green pastor" and St. George's as the "green church."



"Caring for Creation" Pervades other Opportunities

As many other parishes do, St. George Parish hosts a Blessing of the Animals ceremony each October, celebrating the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi.

The awareness of the challenge of care for creation manifests itself in this opportunity. The ceremony has grown over the past few years from a short blessing ceremony to include staff members from the [Worcester Animal Rescue League](#) (a neighbor of the parish) and people from a local dairy farm.

Both the WARL staff and one of the farmers give short presentations.

- The Rescue League staff person talks about their work.
- The farmer tells interesting stories of life on the farm as well as the importance of supporting local farmers.

Both presentations include some aspect of faith in their talks. In addition to these presentations, the ceremonies include

- Prayer
- Scripture reading
- A short homily on St. Francis
- The blessing of the animals with holy water.

A collection of pet food and other necessities is taken up for the Rescue League. One year the farmers brought one of their calves. She was a huge hit especially since participants were allowed to bottle feed her.

The interest in this feast day celebration continues to grow with the number of participants increasing each year. The social justice teaching of caring for creation continues to touch people's lives through this, and many opportunities, in the parish.

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Some other resources for eco-theology/ecology:

- [EcoSpirituality Resources](#)
- [Earth as Our Home](#)
- [Carbon Footprint Calculator](#)
- [25 Steps Under \\$25](#)
- [Water Footprint Calculator](#)
- [GreenFaith Leadership Programs](#)
- [Catholic Climate Covenant](#)
- [A Resource for Developing Faith-Based Community Gardens](#)
- [Interfaith Power & Light](#)
- [National Religious Partnership for the Environment](#)
- [Environmental Justice Program](#)
- [The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology](#)
- [Creation Justice Ministries](#)



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down for *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*
- <http://store.pastoralplanning.com/iboplbeprfor.html> for *Parish Leadership for Improved Adult Catechesis*