

# Rethinking adult faith formation

*Make knowledge secondary to nurturing spiritual lives, says writer*

By HEATHER GRENNAN GARY

Tom Zanzig is a Madison, Wis.-based writer, editor, trainer, retreat director, speaker and consultant who has focused on adult faith formation the last few years. In early March he presented a workshop called "Adult Faith Formation: If It Is Broke, Let's Fix It" at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress. *NCR* spoke with him shortly before the congress.

**NCR: You say adult faith formation is broken. Why?**

Zanzig: Here's the dilemma I keep running into: The 1999 bishops' document "Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us" is in many respects a beautiful document with a holistic understanding of adult faith formation. But we're often told that the RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults] is the model of how we should be doing all catechesis. We have such a narrow idea of what adult formation looks like that even when we try to approach it in a new way we consistently fall back into the adult education course model. We keep getting stuck.

**How do we shake ourselves out of that?**

We have to change our paradigm. We think the key to nurturing Catholic identity is to teach people more content. But research suggests knowledge is secondary, not primary, to why people connect to a community and embrace its mission. We don't form adults by just telling them what they should believe or do. We have to nurture their spiritual lives.

**What are some of the strategies and tools you recommend?**

Some exciting new insights are coming from business practices adapted for religious settings. I'm really excited about a strategy called Appreciative Inquiry, or AI. Instead of focusing on

what's wrong within an organization or parish, AI shifts the focus to what's life-giving.

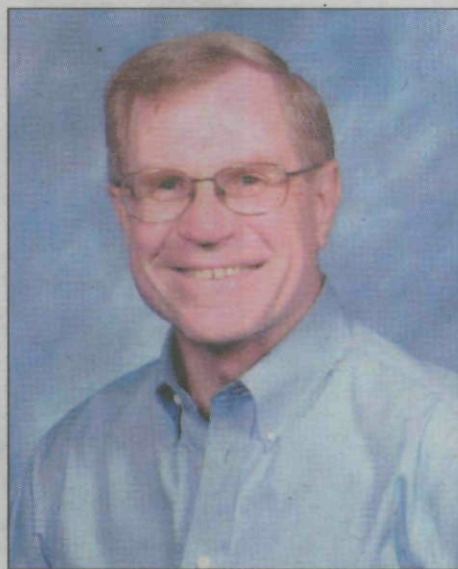
Most parishes operate like other organizations: We identify problems, like why people don't show up for adult education programs, and then focus our energies on trying to fix what's broken. But what if we focused instead on things in the parish that work well and build on those?

There are four phases in AI: In the Discovery phase, trained parishioners do one-on-one interviews with fellow parishioners, asking them to recall and describe in detail their best experience at the parish. In the Dream phase, we ask, "In light of what we have discovered, what is the Gospel calling us to?" Then in the Design phase we figure out what we need to do to move toward our Dream. In the Delivery phase we implement the design. And then the cycle can repeat.

The big shift here is that rather than the pastoral team sitting around and asking itself what programs they should offer, they truly listen to parishioners. They invite them to get in touch with and share their own stories, and consider what they really need and want from the parish. When people are engaged at that level — reflecting on their own spiritual life and interacting with a companion — they develop ears for what God is doing in the community.

**It seems if you focus only on the positive you might be avoiding some real problems that need to be addressed — or some people might have nothing positive to share.**

That can happen. But a lot of ministers spend too much time and energy trying to appease the naysayers, and no matter what they do it's not enough, or it's wrong. The Gallup Organization has identified three different kinds of Catholic parishioners: About 16 per-



Tom Zanzig

cent are fully engaged. These are people who see the church as a core part of their spiritual and family life. About 49 percent are not engaged. They may attend Mass regularly, but the church is not a strong part of their identity. And about 35 percent are actively disengaged. They might show up just once or twice a year, or they might be actively involved with the parish but be against everything the leaders do. Our challenge is to work with those who are engaged and bring them into deeper engagement, as well as work with those who might be unengaged but are open.

**What's another strategy that works well?**

Another resource with a lot of potential power is Gallup's strengths-based research and resources. Gallup found that employee happiness and effectiveness is tied to being able to exercise their own strengths. Their Strengths-Finder tools have been adapted for religious settings. Parishes have members fill out an online inventory that helps

them determine their top five strengths. Afterward, parishioners gather in small groups to talk about their giftedness and reflect prayerfully on how to offer that back to the community. One parish in Cincinnati used this model and their biggest struggle now is people coming out of the workshop, wanting to share their gifts. The levels of engagement are up, and contributions are up.

**In your workshops you suggest parishes need to move from a communal focus to a personal focus. Doesn't this go against conventional wisdom?**

When you nurture a genuine relationship with God within the individual, that person will start looking to bond with other people, and community will come out of that. You can't create community through a top-down approach. Community is a byproduct of more personal interactions, of one-on-one relationships, of feeling that someone knows your name.

**Is there still a place for adult education courses in the parish?**

Absolutely. But those programs have to be a response to a felt need of the community, and we won't know what that is until we listen to parishioners. After going through approaches like AI and StrengthFinders, some parishioners may say, "I need more scripture." Others might say, "I know nothing about church history." It's not the job of the pastoral team to put together a bunch of structured programs hoping that someone might come. It's their job to help discover what God is already and uniquely doing in their community and then equip parishioners with the resources to respond. The more parishioners are themselves involved in planning programs, the more truly engaged they'll become.

## QUINCY UNIVERSITY

**Now accepting applications  
for the Master of Theological  
Studies Summer Institute  
June 16-28, 2008**

This 2-week, 9 credit-hour course schedule includes: Pastoral Ministry, History of Christianity, The Bible for Preaching and Teaching.

Whether your interest is the ordained ministry, youth ministry, continuing spiritual growth, religious instruction or further graduate study and teaching, Quincy University's Master of Theological Studies program will provide you with the tools and avenues for success. Students may pursue the MTS degree through the traditional weeknight program, summer institute, or a combination of both formats.



**Apply today at  
www.quincy.edu**

For more  
information, contact  
Jennifer O'Donnell

**800.688.4295**

odonnje@quincy.edu

1800 College Avenue • Quincy, Illinois 62301

## Oblate School of Theology

*Over one hundred years of quality theological education.*



- Doctor of Ministry
- Master of Divinity
- Master of Arts (Theology)
- Master of Arts (Spirituality)
- Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry
- Undergraduate Pre-Theology

Visit our web site for more information.



285 Oblate Drive • San Antonio, TX 78216 • (210) 341-1366  
www.ost.edu



Copyright of National Catholic Reporter is the property of National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.