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June 2021

In addition to our deep gratitude to the six practitioners in adult faith education/accompaniment who joined our research team for Phase II, we would like to express our appreciation to the 20 leaders in adult faith education/accompaniment who along with our Phase II research team participated in semi-structured interviews about what we are learning about accompanying adults in faith during this time of pandemic. These conversation partners who are leaders from across the country working as national and diocesan directors, chairs of religious education associations, spiritual directors, and pastors and pastoral associates in a variety of leadership positions added richness and depth to our conversations and opened valuable new perspectives and questions for ongoing exploration.

Dr. Carol Kuzmochka, lead researcher, and Dr. Miriam K. Martin, pbvm, co-researcher

With thanks to graphic artist Clint Porritt for the cover design.

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I. Where Faith and Life Meet While We're Two Metres Apart: Sharing the Wisdom as a Community of Practice

Welcome!

Welcome to this resource, which explores the wisdom we are gaining from practising adult faith education/accompaniment ¹ during a time of global pandemic. One of our research team members has captured the spirit of this resource very well:

I always knew that I was strengthened and supported by the wisdom of other leaders in faith education – I crave opportunities for enriching conversations that form and strengthen us for our work – but this pandemic has shone a bright spotlight on our deep need to gather and share our wisdom as a community of practice.

Our sense is that not only *spirit* but also *the Spirit* resides in these wise words, since we can trust that “Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am with you” (Matt. 18:20), and also that “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). Where we gather and share our lives – perhaps especially in times of crises – the Spirit is with us. As we explore the many insights that have surfaced from accompanying adult faith during this time of pandemic, key among the learnings is that a community of practice is *essential* for effective adult faith education/accompaniment.

The findings from the first phase of our research suggest that effective adult faith accompaniment meets people where they are. In other words, it holds the profound coherence of faith and life by bridging the gaps we've created between them. As one of our research team members – a busy parish pastor – expressed so well, “I've begun to shape all of my ministry by asking, ‘How can I meet these people where they are – help faith and life to come together for them?’ It's when the gap between faith and life is bridged that we find meaning, and can learn and grow in faith.”

We want to share our eleven key findings about the wisdom that is surfacing in our research so it can enrich and support all of us who engage in adult faith education/accompaniment. We present our findings in the two forms in which they have surfaced in our research: insight about our practice and important questions for further consideration. You'll find these numbered sequentially from 1. to 11. as they are presented and discussed in this resource. It is our hope that this exploration of what we are learning from accompanying adult faith during this global pandemic will open a broader discussion among all of us who engage in this important work: **What are *you* learning about where faith and life meet**

¹ As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “Quite early on, the name *catechesis* was given to the totality of the Church's efforts to make disciples...” (CCC, no. 4). We have chosen to hold this wide view of the Church's educating ministry to include all that it means to learn and grow together in faith as mature Christians.

while we're two metres apart? Through these pages and by engaging in subsequent learning and sharing opportunities we can – together – continue to add to our wisdom and strengthen our practice. Please join us!

II. Little Did We Know... Phase II Takes an Unexpected Turn

We gathered our new research team members – practitioners in adult faith education/accompaniment from across the country -- to begin Phase II of our Awareness-Based Action Research ² project with an onsite session in February 2020 at Saint Paul University. We were building on the findings of Phase I published in the Fall 2019 document *Five Promising Practices and Other Practical Wisdom: A Resource for All Who Accompany Adult Faith*. ³ This marked the beginning of a new process in action research of *observing, reflecting, planning, and acting* ⁴ in our particular contexts of adult faith education/accompaniment. We continued with the principles for practice in mind that surfaced in our Phase I findings as a focal point (see “Five Promising Practices” in Figure 1 below). *Little did we know*, as we gathered in Ottawa from across the country, how privileged we were to be together in the same room to do this beginning work. This intensive on-site research session in February 2020 was the last time we would be able to meet in person for Phase II.



Phase II Research Team (back row, l-r): Ms. Catherine Potter, CREC Assistant; Ms. Debbie Aker, Catechetical Co-ordinator, Diocese of Antigonish, NS; Dr. Carol Kuzmochka, lead researcher; Dr. Miriam K. Martin, pbvm, co-researcher; Fr. Daryold Winkler, Pastor/ Parish Priest, Archdiocese of Ottawa, ON; Ms. Lucie Leduc, Director, Star of the North Retreat Centre, St. Albert, AB; Ms. Wendy Aitken, Faith Formation Team, Archdiocese of Montreal, QC; Ms Gabrielle Dupuis, Program Coordinator. (front row, l-r): Ms. Karen deKoninck, Pastoral Associate for Faith Formation, Diocese of St. Jean Longueuil, QC; Ms. Koreen Hrizai, Catechetical Leader, Archdiocese of Saint Boniface, MB, and current chair, Western Conference of Catholic Religious Educators.

“The best laid plans...,” ⁵ Robert Burns’ famous 18th-century poem reminds us, often go awry. March 2020 found our research team experiencing exactly that as – along with the whole planet – life and plans as we knew them were fundamentally changed by the arrival of a global pandemic.

² Awareness-Based Action Research combines Otto Scharmer’s Theory U with action research. This methodology engages Theory U listening as a method for a community of practice – the researcher(s) – to overcome blind spots by being truly present and engaged. The generative conversation, and the process steps that accompany it, allows wisdom to surface that can lead to transformative change. To learn more about this research methodology, see <http://methods.sagepub.com/book/the-sage-handbook-of-action-research-3e/i1535.xml>.

³ The digital copy of this resource is available at <http://bit.ly/CRECResource2019>

⁴ These are the four steps of the learning spirals that underpin all action research methodology.

⁵ An allusion to Robert Burns’ poem “To a Mouse,” 1785.



FIVE PROMISING PRACTICES

1. THERE IS AN ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE COMPETENT FRAMEWORKS AND LEADERSHIP FOR ADULT FAITH EDUCATION.
2. ADULT FAITH EDUCATION IS FOR HUMAN FREEDOM AND AGENCY.
3. SUCCESSFUL ADULT FAITH EDUCATION DEPENDS UPON THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS CREATED.
4. ADULT FAITH EDUCATION MUST HOLD TOGETHER MIND, BODY, SPIRIT AND WILL. FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT ARE INEXTRICABLY CONNECTED.
5. ADULT FAITH EDUCATORS ARE TRANSFORMATIVE LEAD LEARNERS ABLE TO DESIGN AND HOLD SPACES WHERE ADULTS CAN MAKE MEANING OF THEIR FAITH AND LIFE.

Figure 1

III. Pivoting for the Pandemic, a Key Learning and an Important Question from the Start of Phase II

Within a few short weeks of our on-site gathering, the pandemic was upon us. Our team of eight gathered for a Zoom meeting to discuss what we ought to do in the face of the lockdown. Perhaps we should step away from the project for a time until the worst was over?

In the midst of our uncertainty, one of our research team members offered a wise, clarifying perspective that touched us all and reframed our context: “If this is not a time to meet people where they are and help them find meaning in the midst of this crisis, then I don’t know when that time is.”

“If this is not a time to meet people where they are and help them find meaning in the midst of this crisis, then I don’t know when that time is.”

This perspective instantly shifted our relationship to our work and was the first wisdom we gained from accompanying adult faith during the pandemic. The statement to follow captures this learning and clearly articulates an essential insight that had been slowly taking shape over the course of our research project as we gathered data and

reflected on our findings. It builds on the five promising practices, listed above:

1. *Effective adult faith education maintains the profound coherence between faith and life (and helps to bridge the gaps between faith and life when they occur) by being intentionally present to accompany adults and help them make meaning in all experiences of their faith and life, perhaps especially in times of crises.*

With this insight as an essential reference point for Phase II, we were compelled to resist the temptation to pull back from our exploration and – instead – to recognize that accompanying adult faith in all of life’s experiences, especially during times of crises, is at the heart of the Church’s educating/faith formation ministry. We wonder if this holds a perspective that might challenge some assumptions that seem prevalent in many local churches’ understandings and practices of adult catechesis/faith education and accompaniment.

It bears noting that during the early months of the pandemic and into the Summer 2020 lockdown, many dioceses across the country eliminated adult faith education positions – or rolled several jobs into one – leaving no position specifically designated for adult faith education. The financial pressures involved in these decisions notwithstanding, we wonder if this points to a blind spot about the role of adult faith education that needs to be recognized and addressed. Engaging in generative conversation about these observations led us to a second insight – a question to be explored – arising from accompanying adult faith in a time of global pandemic:

2. *Might some of us – pastoral leaders, practitioners of adult faith education and other members of the Church – hold assumptions about adult catechesis/faith education that contribute to the gap between faith and life by failing to recognize the nature and role it plays to intentionally meet people where they are and help them make meaning in all of their life experiences?*

Shutting down adult faith education offices during a time of crisis may, it seems to us, contribute to the gap between faith and life that needs to be bridged. What are the assumptions about faith education that underlie these actions? We think it is an emerging question asking for further study.

For Your Reflection:

1. In what ways is the adult faith education happening in your context maintaining the profound coherence between faith and life by helping adults make meaning of their faith and life during the global pandemic?
2. What assumptions/understandings about the role of adult faith education/accompaniment do you recognise in your context? Which of these assumptions encourage practice that meets people where they are? Are there assumptions at work that might be contributing to the gap between faith and life in your context?

IV. The Pivot Continues: Our Common Intention for the Project Remains the Same, Another Research Question Is Added and Three Additional Findings Emerge

While our common intention for the project – to deepen and expand our understanding of the effective adult faith education that meets people where they are and bridges faith and life – remained the same, we realized that our context had changed dramatically. We were facing a heretofore unknown landscape of lockdown, physical distancing and isolation, closed or reduced capacity gathering spaces, online worship and meetings. This was intensified by all of the restrictions, fears, dangers and threats to life and health brought on by the spread of a deadly virus across the globe. We couldn't even imagine the parameters of all that was beginning to unfold. A diocesan bishop captured a sense of the potential ramifications when he suggested, "A year from now, we will be having *very* different conversations about how we accompany one another in faith after all we will have lived."

We introduced an additional research question to widen our research scope to take in this new context:

"What is practising adult faith education/accompaniment during a global pandemic teaching us about effective practice where faith and life meet?"

In keeping with our methodology of Awareness-Based Action Research, we began to see more clearly that Phase II was inviting us to immerse ourselves fully in our work and allow the insights from doing so to surface and teach us about effective practice that meets people where they are. With this realization, we introduced an additional research question to widen our research scope to take in

this new context: **"What is practising adult faith education/accompaniment during a global pandemic teaching us about effective practice where faith and life meet?"**



Convinced and energized, we embraced Zoom and moved our entire project online. Our research team met regularly online over the ensuing months, and an intensive three-day research session – intended to be in-person on campus – became two days of intensive online meetings.

Awareness-Based Action Research invites research teams to hold a common intention that moves the team from a "me" to "we" stance while listening with an open mind, open heart

and open will to the observations and experiences happening in the field of study.⁶ Being present in this way sheds light, allowing blind spots to be identified. This way of perceiving opens the path for insight to emerge, leading the way forward.

We discovered in Phase I, and again as we moved through these months of Phase II, that engaging in this generative listening and speaking with a common intention/focus as a research team builds a formative community of practice that is essential for effective adult faith education practice. Simply put, our findings point to the fact that when practitioners – especially those who are passionate and committed to effective faith education – engage together with the questions, challenges and wisdom that arise as they observe and reflect on their own experiences, it is enriching and formative. The urgency of the pandemic intensified this realization for us, as one of our research team members expressed very well:

I need our meetings to help me find my way through this pandemic. I am learning so much from the wisdom we are sharing in our conversations about effective adult faith education/accompaniment in this extraordinary and challenging time.

This illustrates a third learning from accompanying adults in faith during a global pandemic. It was mentioned at the start of this resource:

3. *A community of practice is formative and essential for effective adult faith education*

One of the most gratifying aspects of this project is the transformative experience this Awareness-Based Action Research has brought to our research team members. Just as our team for Phase I concluded, our Phase II research team members recognized that – collectively – we were able to identify and articulate things about effective practice that we never could have learned on our own. One of our team members expressed this very well, saying, “I am soaking all of this up like a sponge. I am learning so much for my ministry as a pastor by being part of this research.” *We sense that intentionally forming communities of practice for adult faith education/accompaniment is essential for the way forward in this ministry.*

Further to this, several of our research team members observed a deepening of relationships with others in their places of ministry as the result of their practice of generative listening and speaking. One research team member described a marked difference in her teamwork with other catechists in her diocese: “Our time together is so much more meaningful since we’ve been practising Theory U listening,” she commented. “We have deeper conversations and a sense of working through the challenges together. Our relationships are much

⁶ Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, “Awareness-Based Action Research: Catching Social Reality Creation in Flight,” in Hilary Bradbury, ed., *The Sage Handbook of Action Research* (Sage Publications, 2015), chapter 19, 199–210.

stronger now.” Experiences and observations such as these helped us to identify a fourth insight:

4. *Generative listening and speaking itself is a process for effective adult faith education that meets people where they are*

Phase II confirmed our findings from Phase I and allowed us to observe more experiences where the practice of Theory U Levels of Listening develops an open mind, an open heart and an open will. ⁷ These three dimensions are needed to be able to learn, change and grow. It also allowed us to see the effects of letting go of fear and engaging courage to listen to the Spirit. This opens the way for transformative change to emerge within ourselves and our communities. ⁸



For Your Reflection:

1. What community(ies) of practice are supporting you in adult faith education/accompaniment?
2. What processes do you find effective for supporting a practice that bridges faith and life and allows transformative meaning and wisdom to emerge?

Our sense is that it is important for all of us who lead in adult faith education to continue to explore how to integrate these processes more fully into our practice.

Some of us have effectively developed theological reflection processes that focus on bringing faith and life into conversation to this end. All members of our team are discovering that engaging in Theory U listening and speaking provides an excellent framework for these processes – facilitating the discovery of the Spirit’s call to transformation that lies at the heart of our human experience. It is becoming clearer to us that:

⁷ This brief video outlines the Levels of Listening: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLfXpRkVZal&t=117s>. And this link leads to a visual overview of Theory U: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Theory-U-One-Process-Six-Leadership-Capacities-Source-Scharmer-2009_fig1_327319559.

⁸ Scharmer and Kaufer, “Awareness-Based Action Research,” 199–210.

5. *Our faith education processes must themselves embody and promote the profound coherence between faith and life that we are trying to facilitate for those we accompany.*

The spiral we designed in Phase I (pictured here in Figure 2)⁹ is an example of this kind of process.¹⁰ One way we would like to learn more about effective process-based practice is by studying this spiral in action in faith education events that use it.

All of us – as members of a community of practice – have rich experiences to draw upon and so much more to discover, together, about how to strengthen our practices in adult faith work, especially those encounters that encourage the strong links between meaning-making and lived faith through their very practices. These are practices and approaches that help people make faith-sense of their lives.¹¹

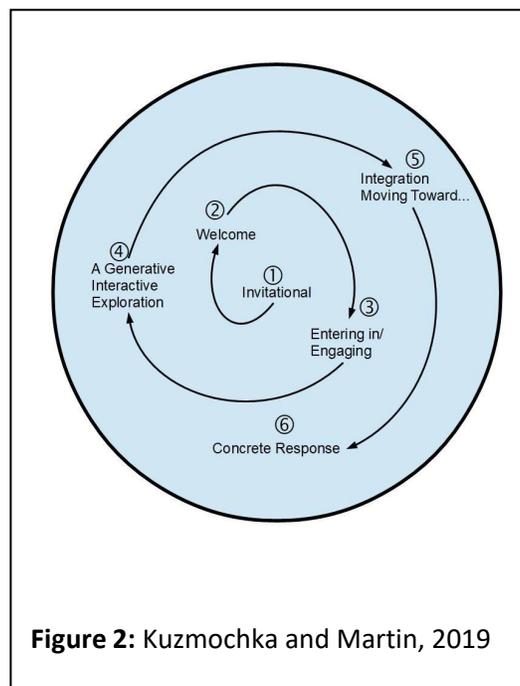


Figure 2: Kuzmochka and Martin, 2019

V. **Twenty practitioners: Expanding the community of practice and deepening the wisdom**

As we widened the scope of our research by exploring the question “What is practising adult faith education/accompaniment during a global pandemic teaching us about effective practice where faith and life meet?” we realized that we also needed to add another method to our research. We decided to add some semi-structured interviews with other practitioners in adult faith/accompaniment from across the country. This would allow us to do two things: expand our community of practice to include others; and extend our exploration of what practising adult faith education/accompaniment during a global pandemic means. To

⁹ Carol Kuzmochka and Miriam Martin, *An Action Research Project in Adult Faith Education in Canada: Five Promising Practices and Other Practical Wisdom* (Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 2019), 28.

¹⁰ The essential nature of catechesis as a “process” is echoed in the new *Directory for Catechesis* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), which was published during this phase of our project. It notes that one reason that the catechumenate is a model for all catechesis is “the progressive character of the formative experience” (no. 64.f).

¹¹ The new *Directory for Catechesis* emphasizes the importance of “overcoming any opposition between content and method, between faith and life” (no. 4). Furthermore, the Directory emphasizes that “catechesis is an authentic ‘laboratory’ of dialogue” (no. 54), highlighting the importance of relationships and communication that Jesus always practised – such as in his encounter with the woman at the well – as the primary way to facilitate growing and maturing in faith. During recent workshops on the *Directory for Catechesis* presented by the National Office for Catechesis and Evangelization of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, theological reflection was discussed as an effective method to teach adults to connect faith and life. The researchers for this project have developed a process of theological reflection for adults that engages Theory U to help bring faith and life together. It is a method built on good communication and relationship and holding faith and life together to lead to growth and transformation.

this end, three 90-minute *semi-structured interviews* with 20 practitioners in adult faith education/accompaniment from across the country were held during July and August 2020.

Semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate for a process like this because while they have clearly defined questions and themes for investigation, they also allow for a group to follow the direction the conversation takes and pursue emerging themes and insights as they arise.

These discussions were rich and helped spark new themes and questions while offering insight about accompanying adult faith during this extraordinary time. Some of the key findings are presented below.



Two of the semi-structured interviews with practitioners from across the country.

Many practitioners identified a great hunger for connection and a desire to find meaning together among the people they were meeting. Some observed that this was particularly intense at the beginning of the pandemic, as people experienced disorientation and anxiety in the midst of the first lockdown. These were people who turned to one another and to their faith leaders to help find grounding and meaning in the midst of upheaval. Several leaders have noticed that even with the rise of what is becoming known as “Zoom fatigue,” the desire to connect and make meaning continues to be very strong.

Many examples were shared. A spiritual director has been receiving more requests for events than usual and finds that when people gather – even virtually – they are very engaged, and the events are meaningful. She’s noticed a desire for more follow-up than usual. She noted that she is seeing “a real spiritual hunger and desire to go deeper in faith.” A diocesan director described how her bishop decided to continue creating online educational videos because the demand for them was so strong. She noted, as have many of our team members, that in the current context, when most people cannot attend Mass, there is an opportunity to underscore God’s presence in the Word and perhaps offer virtual gatherings of prayer and reflection with Scripture that are helping people practise their faith

in this time. Several practitioners noted that people are searching for meaning and trying to make sense of the pandemic by asking questions from a faith perspective, such as “What is a Christian response?” “Why is God allowing this?” “What are we to learn from this?” “How do we continue to be a Christian community in the midst of these challenges?”

A diocesan pastoral leader noticed that the priests in his diocese want to gather more often, even if virtually. He was surprised by the many elder pastoral leaders who have learned how to use online platforms so they can join in. They eagerly continue to engage in deanery meetings in a way that both the diocesan pastoral leader and his colleague describe as “unusual.”

These consistent observations across the country point to another important insight arising from accompanying adult faith while we’re two metres apart:

6. *The pandemic allows us to see – with even greater clarity than usual – that hunger for connection and meaning-making is always at the heart of adult faith education/ accompaniment.*

A finding during Phase I was that the quality of relationships determines the effectiveness of faith education. We extrapolated that since faith education is first about deepening intimacy with Christ, it makes perfect sense that the process itself must be marked by relationality. Our understanding of this insight is broadened by the wisdom arising during the pandemic: hunger for connection and meaning-making are always the heart of the matter. And these can only be answered within the fullness of relationships.¹²

In keeping with the nature of relationships, we feel that accompanying faith education during the pandemic is also underscoring another dimension of relationality that invites us to explore it further:

7. *The leader of faith education is not apart from but rather a member of the learning community*

We have chosen the term “lead learner” for the faith educator because – as one of our team members articulated so well, “Whenever we open learning spaces with others, the space becomes, in fact, something of the making of all who participate in it. And we all learn and grow in that shared space.”

¹² The new *Directory for Catechesis* also underscores the importance of relationships for effective faith education. See, for example, nos. 50, 65 and 75. We find strong complementarity with our research and believe our findings support this practice.

A pastor on our research team expanded this insight for us. As we began Phase II, he decided to explore what it means for a pastor to intentionally engage in promising practice 1: *There is an ethical responsibility to provide competent frameworks and leadership for adult faith education.* The first thing he discovered was that he could not even begin to meaningfully respond to this practice without collaboration with his parishioners. He captured his realization in these words: “The first thing I did was to invite some parishioners to form a group with me to study this together. I am learning that, as I invite my parishioners into leadership roles with me, we are all learning together. The learning spaces we generate are new ones – uniquely created and shared by all of us.”

“Whenever we open learning spaces with others, the space becomes, in fact, something of the making of all who participate in it. And we all learn and grow in that shared space.”

Our sense is that what it means for the leader in faith education to be a “lead learner” opens vital new perspectives that are asking for further exploration.

Our sense is that what it means for the leader in faith education to be a “lead learner” opens vital new perspectives that are asking for further exploration.

Furthermore, continued discussions and observations along these lines are adding weight to our conviction about the importance of formation for catechists who accompany adults in faith. As we have continued to discuss and observe this while accompanying adults in faith during the pandemic, an essential related learning has taken shape:

8. *The pivoting that the pandemic is asking of us as practitioners – to be able to meet people where they are in this time of crisis – is the pivoting practitioners always need to be equipped for when accompanying adults in faith*

We are noticing that accompanying adults during the pandemic not only highlights the relationality of faith education but also shines a bright light on the practitioners’ need to be equipped for the fluid, dynamic and complex realities adults are always living. Effective faith education opens spaces for the actual questions, needs and experiences that require exploration in the light of faith. In short, “pivoting” is necessary for meeting people where they are.

- i) *Pivoting requires skill*

A member of our research team continues to underscore how she can see the need for lead learners who have the skills and the spirit to listen deeply and to adapt their approaches. It is through those perceptive skills of deep listening and speaking and appropriately adapting

their approaches that people are met in their search for meaning and making faith sense in these challenging times: “We must be ready and responsive to the different needs, contexts and people as they present themselves. Where someone was at the beginning of the pandemic is not where they are now,” she asserts. “It’s all about the quality of the lead learner and the quality of the relationships.”

Creating and holding these learning and growing spaces is complex. The new *Directory for Catechesis* identifies the need – in addition to biblical-theological formation¹³ – for catechist formation for “(b)eing and ‘knowing-how to be with,’¹⁴ with an emphasis on catechesis as “educational, communicative, and relational.”¹⁵

Our growing sense is that the vital and complex role of the lead learner and the learning spaces that are effective invite further research that can lend insight and inspiration to catechist formation.

For Your Reflection:

1. How are you experiencing the hunger for connection and meaning-making in your context?
2. In what ways might considering yourself a “lead learner” impact your understanding of your role?
3. What pivoting are you experiencing in your practice of adult faith education/accompaniment?
4. What are you learning about what lead learners need to be able to meet people where they are and accompany them effectively?

ii) *Pivoting is necessary to meet diverse adults in complex contexts*

Our semi-structured interviews also led us to a deeper appreciation of the diversity of adults, their contexts and their experiences. Practitioners have noticed that many people are withdrawing during this time. It seems to be a happy choice for some who regard the need for lockdown and physical distancing as an opportunity to slow down and be more reflective and contemplative. Many welcome the temporary relief to the natural environment and the healing effects on the earth as traffic flow decreases and fewer airplanes are flying. Yet, withdrawing is not a welcome choice for many others.

¹³ We appreciate the complementarity between our findings and chapters III and IV of the new *Directory for Catechesis* (2020). These attend to the catechesis and formation for Catechists, identifying it as a vocation. Furthermore, Pope Francis’ *Motu proprio* of May 10, 2021, institutes “Catechist” as an official ministry of the Church, acknowledging its vocational nature and its inclusion of both men and women as official ministers in these roles.¹³

¹⁴ *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 136.

¹⁵ *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 140.

Our discussions helped us to recognize many faces and contexts of the pandemic from seniors isolated by public health restrictions to front-line health care workers who are overworked, exhausted and stressed. In fact, we realized that we needed to check our own assumptions and worldviews. Not everyone has more time on their hands or the option to stay safely at home. Similarly, some have no homes to stay in, while for others home is not a place of safety and refuge. Recognizing this diversity invites us to become more aware of the assumptions we make and the worldviews we hold.

Our discussion also moved us beyond our Canadian context to consider the many faces of the pandemic around the globe. From the impossibility of physical distancing in India to the scarcity of vaccine across the continents and the lack of safe housing in so many countries (including our own), the challenges of this pandemic invite us to recognize the wisdom that “While we are all in the same storm, we are not in the same boat.”¹⁶ Our sense is that not only the diversity but also the inequities call for our deepest Christian response.

Our sense is that the pandemic is teaching us that:

9. *Effective adult faith education/accompaniment helps the learner to recognize the importance of context and to identify their interior assumptions and worldviews*

As mature Christians, we are called upon to know our context and to respond to our reality from a catholic worldview that embraces a “Christian culture ... of encounter, which has the ability to unify, allowing the Gospel to unleash forces of true humanity, peace and justice.”¹⁷ Our capacity to respond in this way depends upon the quality of our interior selves. As retired CEO Bill O’Brien observed, “The success of an intervention depends upon the interior condition of the intervenor.” Meeting people where they are during this pandemic invites us to both recognize the complexities and diversity of contexts and to listen carefully for the assumptions and worldviews that shape each person’s interior life.

The diversity and dynamic nature of adult life has also drawn our attention to the often conflicting and polarized views that exist within the Christian community. Some of our faith education leaders have noticed that the “poles” seem to be more numerous and intense as a result of the pandemic. In addition to existing divides, “pro” and “anti” polemics are arising about mask wearing, vaccines, health restrictions, the shutdown and/or limiting of numbers who can gather in our churches, the pros and cons of online platforms for Sunday Mass and other faith gatherings, and so on. One of our semi-structured interview participants asked this evocative question: “What is the role of adult faith education in addressing the poles that divide the Church?”

¹⁶ Damian Barr, a British journalist, made this observation in the *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2020.

¹⁷ *Directory for Catechesis*, no 103.

Our engagement with this pressing reality and evocative question has caused another insight to arise as a result of practising adult faith education/accompaniment during the pandemic:

10. *It is essential for adult faith education/accompaniment to educate for the human maturity that is integral to Christian maturity and that discourages polarization*

Our discussions of this important question led us to reflect on the inseparable relationship between faith maturity and human maturity.¹⁸ A mature, integral faith is always asking, “Where is the call and how are we to respond? What is God asking of us in this time and place?”

- i) *The capacity to hold the tensions of paradox is a characteristic of human maturity that is necessary to move away from polarization*

“It is a huge mistake for people to confuse debates about ecclesiology with sharing faith and growing together as a Christian community. Those debates are not faith sharing and they prevent something much more important from happening.”

The capacity to hold the tensions of paradoxes and conflicts comes with a stage of maturity in human development that most of us never reach. In this way, it becomes difficult – perhaps impossible – to listen with empathy, without judgment, and simply to understand the perspectives of another when we do not agree with them. The pandemic seems to have multiplied – and perhaps intensified – the poles and the divides they cause.

One of our research team members recalled how a priest and scholar who led a parish faith education session shared his concern when an intense disagreement among participants arose within that session. It led him to this insightful conclusion: “It is a huge mistake for people to confuse debates about ecclesiology with sharing faith and growing together as a Christian community. Those debates are not faith sharing and they prevent something much more important from happening.”

A pastor among our semi-structured interview participants noticed that when some restrictions were going to be lifted in his parish and a plan was needed about how to accommodate a few more people at Sunday gatherings, “a few people began immediately

¹⁸ See promising practices #4 and #2, which address this in Phase 1. We have highlighted the inextricable link that must exist between human and faith maturity as well as the fact that adult faith education is at the service of human freedom and agency.

digging their heels in about what was the right and wrong way to do it." He wondered why opposition and disagreement was first stance adopted when listening to one another and collaborating would have been so much more helpful. We wonder why there is often a tendency for us to automatically move to the poles – a reflection of simplistic "either/or," "right or wrong" thinking that is not reflective of human maturity.¹⁹

Why is there often a tendency for us to automatically move to the poles – a reflection of simplistic "either/or," "right or wrong" thinking that is not reflective of human maturity?

ii) *Human freedom and agency do not come cheap!*

One of our research team members had a difficult experience when she and a family member clashed over a controversial position expressed publicly by a clerical leader. Our team member does not agree with this cleric's position, while her family member does agree with it. Her family member confronted our team member with the cleric's statement as a way of admonishing her. She realized that the only thing she could do to keep the relationship open was to suspend her judgments and defensiveness and listen with the intention of trying to understand what her family member was trying to convey to her. As she described it, "Human freedom and agency do not come cheap!" She realized that while she was offering her family member an open mind and heart, she was not being offered the same in return. As she noted, "There was no way we could come to a place of peace or understanding. All I could do was keep the relationship from being damaged." This experience illustrates some of the key dynamics at work when polarized disagreements and debates arise.

iii) *The ability to reflect on our experiences and recognize our assumptions is essential*

We know from both transformative education and developmental psychology that being able to reflect on our experiences and to recognize our assumptions and feelings is necessary for adults to learn and grow. It seems to us that intentionally practising listening with an open heart, mind and will promotes human maturity. It allows us be present to each other and to grow together as human beings in transformative ways. Furthermore, it provides a framework that allows us to intentionally bring the sources of insight and wisdom from our faith tradition into conversation with life experiences.²⁰ Our sense is that it is essential to discover more about creating spaces for adult faith education/accompaniment that support this.

¹⁹ Scharmer's Theory U Levels of Listening identify and address this problem.

²⁰ This conversation between our wisdom sources and life experience is the essential foundation for theological reflection.

For Your Reflection:

1. What are the many faces and experiences of the pandemic where you are?
2. What assumptions and worldviews about the pandemic can you recognize in yourself and others? How are these impacting the faith education/accompaniment being offered?
3. Do you recognize polarization around you? How do you see the role of adult faith education/accompaniment in addressing it?

11. *An invitation to consider new perspectives on “real presence” and online gathering spaces*

For us as the Christian community, for whom “real presence” holds so many essential layers of meaning, perhaps the most immediate, impactful and enduring aspect of the pandemic is the challenge it presents to our understanding of what it means to gather and be present to one another.

A deacon who participated in our semi-structured interviews described his awkwardness and disorientation when giving a homily in front of a livestream camera for the first time: “I can’t tell you how difficult I found it to be speaking to a camera when I am so used to sharing my homily with real people.” Similarly, a pastor participating in the interview discussed his discomfort about “being taped” while presiding, explaining that he uses a “different set of filters” when he knows he’s being recorded and has no idea who will watch the video. He spoke of missing the “intimacy and closeness” of gathering and sharing with his parishioners in the warm “home environment” of their parish church.

i) Our physical presence matters

All of us had stories illustrating awkwardness, disorientation, fear and trepidation that characterized the foray into all things online. Many pressing questions that we think require further consideration continue to emerge. For example, one pastor wonders if livestreaming

or recording Mass from the parish is really the best solution to not being able to gather for Mass. “What happens to our ‘full, conscious and active participation’?” he asks. Others raised related concerns about treating members of the Christian community as spectators and what the long-lasting effects of “watching Mass” and other gatherings and events might be. “What does it mean to believe in the importance of incarnation and not be able to gather in

Our semi-structured interviews and other research meetings indicate that our real physical presence matters.

person?” an interview participant asked. Certainly, being able to physically gather in the same place together is essential. Our semi-structured interviews and other research conversations indicate that our real physical presence matters.

ii) The new normal will mean embracing virtual ways of being present

One semi-structured interview participant frequently expressed her eagerness for things to “return to normal.” But we wonder if there is any “normal” anymore, and if any future “normal” would not include the more frequent use of online platforms, given all that using them during the pandemic is teaching us. One of our semi-structured interview participants captured our sense of this so well: “moments like this [referring to the pandemic] are a threshold, an opportunity. We can continue to try and remake this time into what we have known how as our ‘practice’ – what feels comfortable – or we can forge new paths forward.”

We are realizing more and more that accompanying adult faith during the pandemic is expanding our perceptions and offering us surprising and encouraging experiences of the possibilities for real, meaningful presence with one another in online gatherings.

Two members of our research team recently had an experience leading a Transformative Leadership Formation Program for participants from across the country, where very meaningful relationships and learnings occurred among a group of fourteen who never met in person. Though the lack of in-person meeting was lamented (and the participants have a plan to gather in person when the pandemic is over), it did not detract from an effective and highly valued experience of building relationships and learning growing in faith together. One of our research team members described “the warmth” that was palpable among participants who gathered for a class on Zoom. Others spoke about meaningful seminars, workshops and times of prayer and faith-sharing that have all occurred in interactive video conference settings. One of the pastors who participated in a semi-structured interview described a weekly time of meditation where he gathers with others and they spend time in silence while on Zoom together. “It is a meaningful time of prayer and community,” he explained. A member of our team is “excited” by the participation in so many parish events by people who, she claims, “would never attend in person.” “We have the opportunity to reach so many new people,” she told us. In light of this potential and so many positive outcomes, one of our research team members expressed

We are realizing more and more that accompanying adult faith during the pandemic is expanding our perceptions and offering us surprising and encouraging experiences of the possibilities for real, meaningful presence with one another in online gatherings.

her frustration with those leaders in faith education/accompaniment who are not willing to try to lead gatherings online.

Several people are discovering that certain aspects of Zoom events may even be superior to in-person gatherings. The break-out rooms, for example, allow for excellent small-group discussions. Screen sharing opens up many possibilities for engaging with images, information and music. And the ability to gather people from many locations who could not otherwise be together in the same place – even without a pandemic – can be advantageous. One of our research team members commented, “We have been struggling to think outside of the box and find new ways of meeting and gathering outside of our church buildings. The pandemic has forced us to do this.”

iii) Those without internet access can be considered “the new marginalized”

The fact that those without adequate internet services were highly disadvantaged became apparent very early in the pandemic. One of our research team members described this reality in the many rural areas of her diocese. Because so many did not have the bandwidth needed for effective streaming and video conferencing, it was impossible to engage in effective online gatherings. We went so far as to identify those without adequate internet services as “the new marginalized.” It has been encouraging to see this particular diocese take steps and find funding to address this issue.

We went so far as to identify those without adequate internet services as “the new marginalized.”

Other disadvantaged members of the community are those whom one diocesan leader in faith education described as “parishes who were not already using some online technology.” He described how those who were already engaging their parishes in some online events were able to “adapt quickly and well” to more online contact, while those unfamiliar with the technology “were really struggling.”

(T)hose who were already engaging their parishes in some online events were able to “adapt quickly and well” to more online contact, while those unfamiliar with the technology “were really struggling.”

One of our research team members shared an experience that captures something of the puzzle that integrating virtual gatherings while maintaining our real presence brings to the fore: “Some of us [faith education leaders in her diocese] were convinced that moving online was the be-all and end-all for the Church, while

others – I was one of them – thought it would be our undoing! I can see now that it’s neither/nor and will be part of our future.”

iv) Virtual presence is a new frontier for the Church

“Virtual presence” is without a doubt a new frontier for the Church moving forward in the midst of the pandemic. The answer to the question of whether the future of the Church is in person or online is “yes”: “yes” to both. What the conversations among all our practitioners in adult faith education suggest is that online platforms are neither our salvation nor our demise, but they have taken a vital and necessary place during this time that has surprised us, has disappointed us and opens pressing questions to be addressed. There have been surprising experiences of presence, creative engagement and the opening and shifting of boundaries. In the Eucharistic celebration, with its deep incarnational dynamic, how has the presence of Christ been experienced in the gathering, in the word proclaimed and received, in the presiding minister and in the sacred species itself when an assembly is virtual?

With their limits and their potential, virtual gatherings and events have fundamentally changed the landscape for our faith-sharing and accompaniment. Our sense is that we need to be intentional and creative about continuing to engage the essential questions moving forward. It requires our ongoing commitment and study.

For Your Reflection:

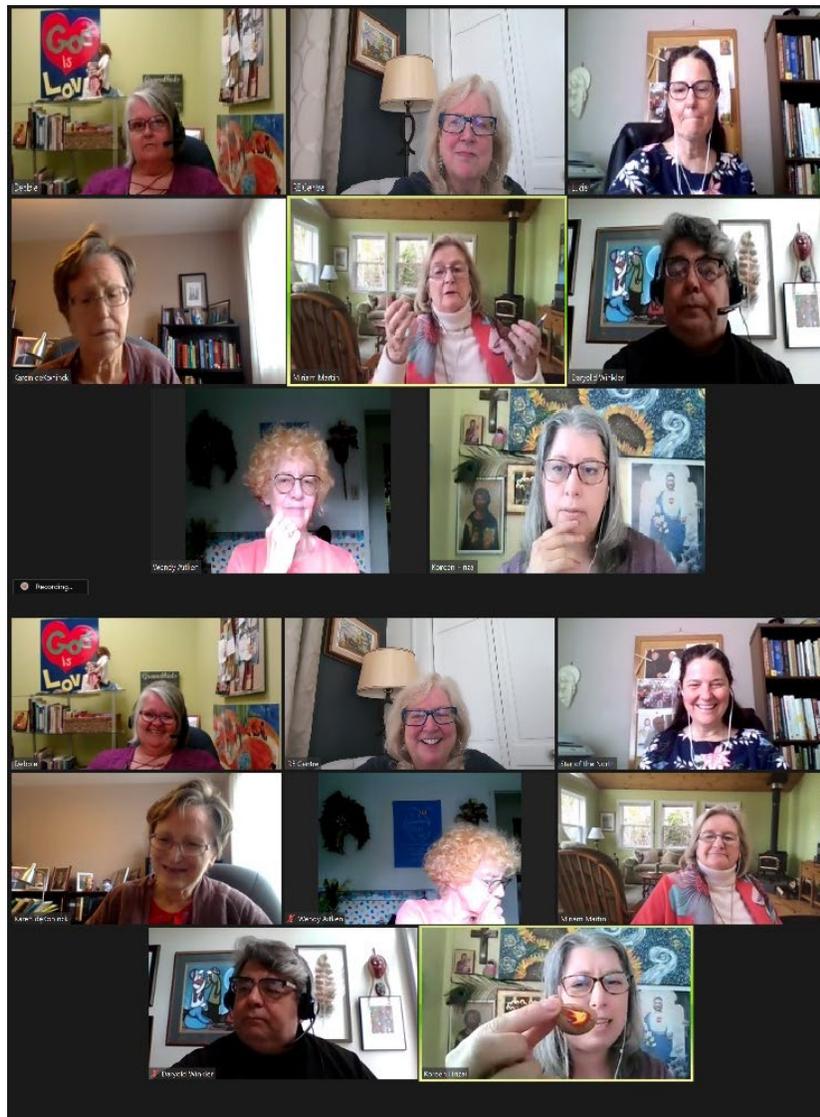
1. How are virtual events and gatherings being used in your context? What is working well and what isn't?
2. What are your experiences of the strengths and limits of adult faith education/accompaniment using online platforms?
3. What strengths and limits of virtual gatherings do we need to consider as we shape our plans for the way forward in adult faith education/accompaniment?

VI. In Conversation with a New *Directory for Catechesis* and the Official Ministry of Catechist

As we are bringing this Phase II of our research to a conclusion by sharing our findings with you – our community of practice across the country – we are grateful to be shaping new research questions and learning edges in the context of a Church that has just adopted a new *Directory for Catechesis* that affirms so many of our insights and findings. Coupled with Pope Francis' recent institution of the official ministry of Catechist, we believe there is great complementarity and potential for rich partnership as we find our way forward.

VII. Continuing the Conversation and Toward an Emerging Future

It is our hope that we will be able to gather (virtually and, hopefully, in person before too long) to continue to share and discuss all of the wisdom we are acquiring about where faith and life meet while we're two metres apart. We are eager to pursue the pressing questions and issues that are arising during this challenging time, and we trust that the wisdom we are gaining together will help us toward an emerging future in adult faith education filled with hope. Please join us.



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