

Approaches to Learning Needs Analysis

Determining the learning needs and interests of parishioners is a complex matter that benefits from a variety of approaches. Below are listed a number of ways to secure information about learner needs and interests, categorized according to “less formal” and “more formal.”

Less Formal

- Observation—Attending to what parishioners talk about and express interest in or concern about. Paying attention to what they read/ borrow from the parish library or buy from the bookrack. This also includes observing what programs draw interest in neighboring parishes.
- Media—Doing a regular analysis of what the media is covering in magazines, news reports, and TV features. What’s in the news is generally what is on people’s minds.
- Suggestion box—Encouraging parishioners to drop in their topics of interest in suggestion boxes strategically located throughout the parish.
- Leadership interviews—Interviewing the pastor and other key parish leaders who work directly with parishioners about their impressions of parishioners’ learning needs and interests.
- Pastoral visits—Using an existing pastoral visitation program to inquire about learning interests.
- Liturgical year—Drawing on the heightened interest in spiritual issues that usually accompany liturgical seasons, such as Lent and Advent.

More Formal

- Small groups—Convening groups of parishioners who volunteer to meet to discuss potential adult faith formation program offerings. These can be done at after-Mass coffee klatches, when parents drop children off for religious education, or at other available times when people gather.
- Post-learning-session evaluations—Using the evaluation process of a program to inquire about what else the learners are interested in.
- Questionnaire—Sending out, e-mailing, or posting on the parish’s website a well-designed questionnaire for parishioners to complete. Questionnaires can also be sent

home with the children in religious education or at the parish school. However, direct mail to a randomly selected group is most effective for securing valid information.

- Telephone interview—Calling randomly selected parishioners with several well-formulated questions about learning interests. The callers are trained to conduct the interview in the same way to ensure valid data collection.