

The Centre for Religious  
Education and Catechesis



## **Bridging the Faith-Life Gap in Adult Faith Education/Accompaniment**

*Expanding Perspectives on Practice that Meets People Where They Are  
and Empowers Mature Christian Disciples*



A Resource for All Who Accompany Adult Faith

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The images of “The Road to Emmaus” on the cover and in this resource are used with the permission of the artist, Daniel Bonnell (bonnellart.com), to whom we are deeply grateful.

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In addition to our deep gratitude to the seven practitioners in adult faith education/accompaniment who formed our focus group for Phase III, we would like to express our appreciation to the more than 30 people from across the country – leaders working with Newcomers, in catechetical offices, diocesan pastoral offices, retreat houses, university chaplaincy, Catholic school boards, bishops and Indigenous pastoral leaders searching for the way forward – who participated in our semi-structured interviews. They added depth, breadth and richness to our findings as well as vision for our ongoing research by so generously sharing wisdom from their particular contexts about practice that meets people where they are.

*Dr. Carol Kuzmochka, lead researcher, and Dr. Lorraine Ste-Marie, co-researcher*

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# **Bridging the Faith-Life Gap in Adult Faith Education/Accompaniment**

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## **I Please Join Us, with Fresh Eyes! Welcome!**

Welcome to this resource, which explores the expanding perspectives that have surfaced in our research into bridging the faith-life gap in adult faith education/accompaniment. This resource is the fruit of phase III of our research. It builds on the findings of phases I and II and continues to deepen our understanding of what we call the “faith-life gap” and the effective processes in adult faith education/accompaniment that bridge it.

The Church identified, more than 60 years ago, a “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives [that] deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Second Vatican Council may seem like a distant event in the life of the universal Church, its rich insights continue to inform our understandings and practices as God’s people. The Council clearly identifies the indivisible **two-fold purpose** of the Church’s responsibility to heal the split between faith and life: i) for the life of the person and, through their discipleship, ii) for the life of the world, “to make God ... present and ... visible ... by the witness of a living and mature faith ... [that] must prove its fruitfulness by penetrating the believer’s entire life,”<sup>2</sup> and “by activating (them) toward justice and love...united in spirit as they work together for the faith of the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> Our sense is that it is perhaps more important than ever for us to clearly understand this indivisible two-fold purpose of adult faith education if we are to discover effective practice in our current Canadian context.

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), #43.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #21.

<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #21.

Furthermore, the Council recognized that in addition to the forces arising with atheism, and with expanding secularity, the Church herself contributes to the faith-life split when believers “may be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion.”<sup>4</sup>

This research rests on the Council’s claim that it is the Church’s vocational responsibility to engage practice that bridges the faith-life gap<sup>5</sup>: “[The Church must know] that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart when she champions the dignity of the human vocation, restoring hope to those who have already despaired” and that “far from diminishing [people], her message brings to [their] development light, life and freedom. Apart from this message nothing will avail to fill up the [human] heart: ‘Thou hast made us for Thyself,’ O Lord, ‘and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.’”<sup>6</sup>

Since Vatican II, the gap between faith and life continues to grow in complexity, such that it may be said that “It has never been more challenging to educate in faith and life than in our time.”<sup>7</sup> In keeping with this insight, this research rests on the conviction that it is essential to deepen our understanding of this problem and to discover transforming/effective practice in adult faith education/accompaniment that bridges the gap (heals the split).

Pope Francis’ invitation to create a *culture of encounter* as a *Synodal Church walking together by listening and being heard* emerged during phase III of this action research. We were deeply impacted by the additional richness and meaning this brought to the context for our

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<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #21.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* #21 describes the Church’s responsibility to heal the split as two-fold: that is, for the life of the person and, through their discipleship, for the life of the world: “to make God present and ... visible as ... the witness of a living and mature faith ... [that] must prove its fruitfulness by penetrating the believer’s entire life” and to “unite believers in a spirit of unity characterized by love for one another as they live their communal commitment to the justice and love of the Gospel.”

<sup>6</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #21.

<sup>7</sup> M. Myrtle Power, “Religious Education and Vatican II,” *Theoforum* 41 (2010).

research, and we immediately recognized the profound alignment of this project with his vision and call. This has been experienced as a sign of the

The profound alignment of this project with Pope Francis' vision and call has been experienced as a sign of the Spirit's faithful presence among us. We're eager to continue to search for the practice in adult faith education/accompaniment that supports and empowers this Synodal Church.

Spirit's faithful presence among us.

And we're eager to continue to search, together with you and others, for the practice that supports and empowers this Synodal Church.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2018, findings from this Action Research Project<sup>9</sup> have been leading us to a deeper and richer understanding of the faith-life gap

and the view that "meeting people where they are" is the primary process that underlies effective practice and bridges it. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the havoc it has wreaked throughout the world, has underscored one of our most important findings about effective adult faith education practice: it is defined by a process that listens, attends and is present to all of life's experiences – especially in the most important times of life (no matter what content may be on the agenda). Adult faith education that bridges the faith-life gap meets people where they are in joy, in crisis, in

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<sup>8</sup> In a June 2022 presentation in Halifax to Development and Peace representatives Cardinal Michael Czerny spoke of Pope Francis' commitment to Vatican II. "Vatican II is being brought to fruition through the ministry of Pope Francis," he asserted. We recognize that effective practice that achieves the two-fold purpose of adult faith education/accompaniment is needed for this Synodal Church that represents the ongoing implementation of the vision of Vatican II.

<sup>9</sup> The Centre for Religious Education and Catechesis at Saint Paul University exists to support practice in faith education/catechesis across the country by engaging in research and providing resources and education for practitioners. **Action Research** has been chosen as the methodology for this project because its strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners by engaging them in the research and the subsequent development or implementation activities. This project is designed to address the identified problem of the faith-life gap in adult faith education/accompaniment in Canada by generating innovative responses, resources that support practice and data that point to future research to address the problem. Here are the links to the phases I and II resources:

[https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC\\_Five\\_Promising\\_Practices\\_and\\_Other\\_Practical\\_Wisdom\\_March\\_2020.pdf](https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC_Five_Promising_Practices_and_Other_Practical_Wisdom_March_2020.pdf)

[https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC\\_Where\\_Faith\\_and\\_Life\\_Meet\\_While\\_Were\\_Two\\_Metres\\_Apart\\_June212021.pdf](https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC_Where_Faith_and_Life_Meet_While_Were_Two_Metres_Apart_June212021.pdf)

need – in the *liminal space*<sup>10</sup> of life and faith – when the search for meaning and hope is keenly felt, and God comes alongside in a process of *walking with*.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the havoc it has wreaked throughout the world, has underscored one of our most important findings about effective adult faith education practice: it is defined by a process that listens, attends and is present to all of life's experiences – especially in the most important times of life.

The story of the road to Emmaus has frequently been used to explore our practices in faith and life, and with good reason: it beautifully captures a dynamic and inspired model, led by Jesus, of meeting and being met on the journey of faith and life.<sup>11</sup> It epitomizes what Pope Francis refers to as the art of encounter.<sup>12</sup> The importance of context – frequently identified in this research as *meeting people where they are* – is

being emphasized more and more to describe the defining process of effective adult faith education.<sup>13</sup> If we imagine what would have been the literal worldview that framed the context of the disciples on the road, they would have understood the earth to be a flat disk with a dome over top holding the sun, moon and stars.<sup>14</sup> This context is radically different from

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<sup>10</sup> It bears mentioning from the start of this resource that phase III invited us to consider more carefully the importance of meeting and listening to people in “liminal space” as an essential dimension of effective adult faith education. It aligns closely with Jesus’ method of creating learning and growing spaces in faith and life as demonstrated on the road to Emmaus. “Limen,” or “threshold,” Richard Rohr explains, means that all transformation happens in liminal space – the ultimate teachable space where real change can happen. Nothing new emerges from business as usual. It is a time when life has opened us and we are in the graced space of a threshold (Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return* [New York: Crossroad, 2004], ch. 12).

<sup>11</sup> To give just a few examples: In 1999, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted the Emmaus story as the model for its “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us” pastoral plan for adult faith formation; in 2014, the lead researcher of this project, Dr. Carol Kuzmochka, placed the Emmaus story as a model at the centre of her doctoral thesis as she explored adult catechesis that empowers mature Christian disciples:

<https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/30968>; the Centre for Religious Education’s 2021 Symposium used the Emmaus story as symbol and model: [https://ustpaul.ca/en/centre-for-religious-education-and-catechesis-resources\\_7482\\_1218.htm](https://ustpaul.ca/en/centre-for-religious-education-and-catechesis-resources_7482_1218.htm); and, most recently, in 2022, one of our phase III focus group members, Dr. Anne Walsh, used the Emmaus story as a model for adult catechesis for a series offered by the CCCB’s National Office for Catechesis and Evangelization: <https://youtu.be/ou5F2pEMQPY>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, his October 10, 2021, message on Twitter: “We too are called to become experts in the art of encounter by taking time to encounter the Lord and one another, to listen to what the Spirit wants to say to the Church”: <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1447154954913865730>.

<sup>13</sup> This is an emphasis also made in the *Directory for Catechesis* (Vatican, 2020) – the Church’s current normative document for catechesis – which underscores the importance of context.

<sup>14</sup> David Aune, “Cosmology,” in *Westminster Dictionary of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).



the one in which we find ourselves with the vast, cosmic worldview this 21st century offers. As the story of the road to Emmaus began to surface again in phase III, we wondered if it was a Spirit-filled invitation to fresh perspectives on this scripture passage as we share the expanding perspectives of our findings to support and enrich the practice of all of us who are searching for effective practice in adult faith education in the Church in Canada.

*For your reflection:*

Please take a moment to reflect on the image of the road to Emmaus on the cover of this resource.

- How does it speak to you about all that is happening in that encounter?

We see a dynamic, contemporary, expansive image of this transformative journey of faith that invites us to revisit this familiar story with fresh eyes and to engage in “*real listening*,” which, as one of our research participants describes it, “means that the other *knows* they’ve been heard.”

“*Real listening*,” as one of our research participants describes it, “means that the other **knows** they’ve been heard.”

This innovative Emmaus depiction alludes to the wide, complex, rich, real, relational journey of faith and life that characterizes learning and growing spaces that transform. We invite you to explore with us the expanding perspectives that have surfaced in phase III. Some may be fresh and innovative for us, others may deepen and enrich what is already known, and others may invite us to pick up new lenses to see with new eyes and to

listen with an open mind, open heart and open will<sup>15</sup> that can lead to meaningful change. Please join us with fresh eyes!

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<sup>15</sup> *Awareness-based Action Research* methodology uses Otto Scharmer's Theory U levels of listening, which can overcome blind spots in experience and open the way for meaningful change. It is the kind of listening practised on the road to Emmaus and that our findings point to as the listening that supports transformative learning and growing spaces. It is also contained in the Template for the Spiral Process generated in phase I.



## II Opening the Path to Findings from Phase III

### a) *How Did We Study the Problem and Gather Our Data?*

Our specific research methodology is called *Awareness-based Action Research*. As with all action research, it uses a spiral approach<sup>16</sup> to learn from what we do as we do it.<sup>17</sup> This version of

Our specific research **methodology** is called *Awareness-based Action*

action research recognizes that our *knowing from experience* is our blind spot – we only *think* we’re fully accessing experience and learning from it. Intentionally employing Theory U listening (which is integral to this method) allows us to be

present to our experiences and one another to “catch social reality in flight.”<sup>18</sup> This is the place where wisdom can be found that leads to transformative change.<sup>19</sup> Keeping a focus group<sup>20</sup> as the primary method for our *Awareness-based Action Research* allowed us to benefit, once again, from the rich practical wisdom that is generated. Each focus group member is a recognized leader in adult faith education in Canada and is a member of a network with whom they can consult and engage for the research. The

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps you’ve noticed, as the researchers on this project have, that all significant learning and growing processes take a spiral shape, where we come back around to build on what we know. It may sometimes seem that we return to the same place but, in fact, our learning and knowing deepens as we move through the process.

<sup>17</sup> All action research moves through the spiral process: observation – reflection – planning – action – observation...

<sup>18</sup> It could be said that this is what Jesus helps the disciples do on the Emmaus road.

<sup>19</sup> We experienced the complexity of this methodology as we engaged with it. For more, see Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, “Awareness-Based Action Research: Catching Social Reality Creation in Flight,” in Hillary Bradbury, ed., *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016; online edition, 2020: <https://methods.sagepub.com/book/the-sage-handbook-of-action-research-3e>).

<sup>20</sup> As researcher Ewe Flick explains, “Focus groups are highly regarded for the rich qualitative data they can generate: A small number of individuals, brought together as a discussion or resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample. Such a group, discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it as they meet one another’s disagreements, will do more to lift the veils covering the spheres of life than any other device that I know of” (Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. [London: Sage, 2006], 191). For this project, focus group participants are chosen from recognized leaders in adult faith education from across the country who are also part of networks with other practitioners and can bring these voices to the research.

richest data comes from exploration and conversations engaging many voices and experiences. Each focus group member brought their own practice into conversation with the findings of phases I and II – our underpinnings and point of departure for phase III (see pp. 15–16) – to help construct a common intention<sup>21</sup> and to shape the lenses applied for phase III.

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We met regularly and, on a few occasions, for *Intensive Sessions* over several days to listen deeply to one another and engage in generative conversations to surface the insights that were arising for us about the faith-life gap and practice that bridges it. This experience of connection and contribution<sup>22</sup> brought rich practical wisdom to each person in their leadership as well as to the findings as a whole. As one of our phase III focus group members expressed, “Even my bishop and my colleagues have noticed how I have grown in my leadership in faith education because of my involvement in this research.”

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<sup>21</sup> The research problem we are addressing/our common intention for phase III: The current call of Pope Francis to a *Culture of Encounter* and a Synodal Process are rich, relevant frames for our work. Note that the Spanish word *encuentro* is very rich and encompasses the collective/social field.

- We will continue to search for effective/transformational practice in adult faith education/accompaniment that bridges the gap (maintains the profound coherence) between faith and life and generates learning and growing spaces for meaning-making and agency as mature Christians.
- We will listen to the voices of Indigenous peoples and Newcomers to Canada who have particular and necessary wisdom about the adult faith education practice/accompaniment that promotes healing and inclusion. Our practice in adult faith education/accompaniment is called to be at the service of this healing and inclusion.
- We will listen to the voices of those on the periphery to inform and shape this work.

<sup>22</sup> See Adam Kahane, *Facilitating Breakthrough: How to Remove Obstacles, Bridge Differences, and Move Forward Together* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2021), 5, where he presents connection and contribution as two of the dimensions of transformational facilitation. Connection and contribution are integral to relationships and essential for effective adult faith education.



**PHASE III researchers and focus group members:**

**(Top, l-r) Dr. Murray Watson**, Adult Faith Formation Animator, Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board, Barrie, Ontario; **Dr. Carol Kuzmochka**, Director and Lead Researcher; **Ms. Charlene Peters**, Director of Catechesis, Diocese of Charlottetown, and Chair, Atlantic Catechetical Association

(Middle) **Dr. Anne Walsh**, Chair, Association of Canadian Catholic Adult Faith, and Program Director, Redemptorists and Adult Faith Education Archdiocese of St. John's, Newfoundland; **Ms. Alessandra Santopadre**, Program Director, Office of Culture and Ritual (devoted to Newcomers), Archdiocese of Montreal; **Ms. Koreen Hrizai**, Chair, Western Conference of Catholic Religious Educators, and Coordinator of the Office of Catechetics and Adult Faith Growth, Archdiocese of Saint Boniface

(Bottom) **Fr. Daryold Winkler**, pastor, Archdiocese of Ottawa, and Anishinaabe from Manitoulin Island; **Dr. Lorraine Ste-Marie**, Co-researcher; **Ms. Marilena Beradinelli**, AQ for Catholic Teachers Educator, and doctoral student, Toronto School of Theology

We used a second method – semi-structured interviews – to expand our generative conversations and include the wisdom of other recognized leaders from across the country about the faith-life gap and effective adult faith education/accompaniment.

We used a **second method – semi-structured interviews** – to expand our generative conversations.



*Some of our semi-structured interview participants*

Given our current Canadian context, we intentionally included the voices of Indigenous peoples and Newcomers to Canada in this phase of our research. It was a *very* modest effort when we consider the wide scope of difficult and complex issues that require study and response in this regard. However, we realized that any current Canadian research of this nature requires this intentional inclusion and attention. Remarkable wisdom and insight about adult faith education practice/accompaniment that promotes reconciliation, wholeness and inclusion have deeply enriched our findings. Phase III has expanded our perspectives about practice that restores the profound coherence of faith and life and about the gaps that disconnect them.

Given our current Canadian context, we intentionally included the voices of Indigenous peoples and Newcomers to Canada in this phase of our research. It was a *very* modest effort when we consider the wide scope of difficult and complex issues that require study and response.

**We are eager to share these expanding perspectives with you in the pages that follow! We hope we will be able to walk this Emmaus road together, listen deeply to one another, and share the wisdom each of us is gaining about adult faith education/accompaniment that meets people where they are.**

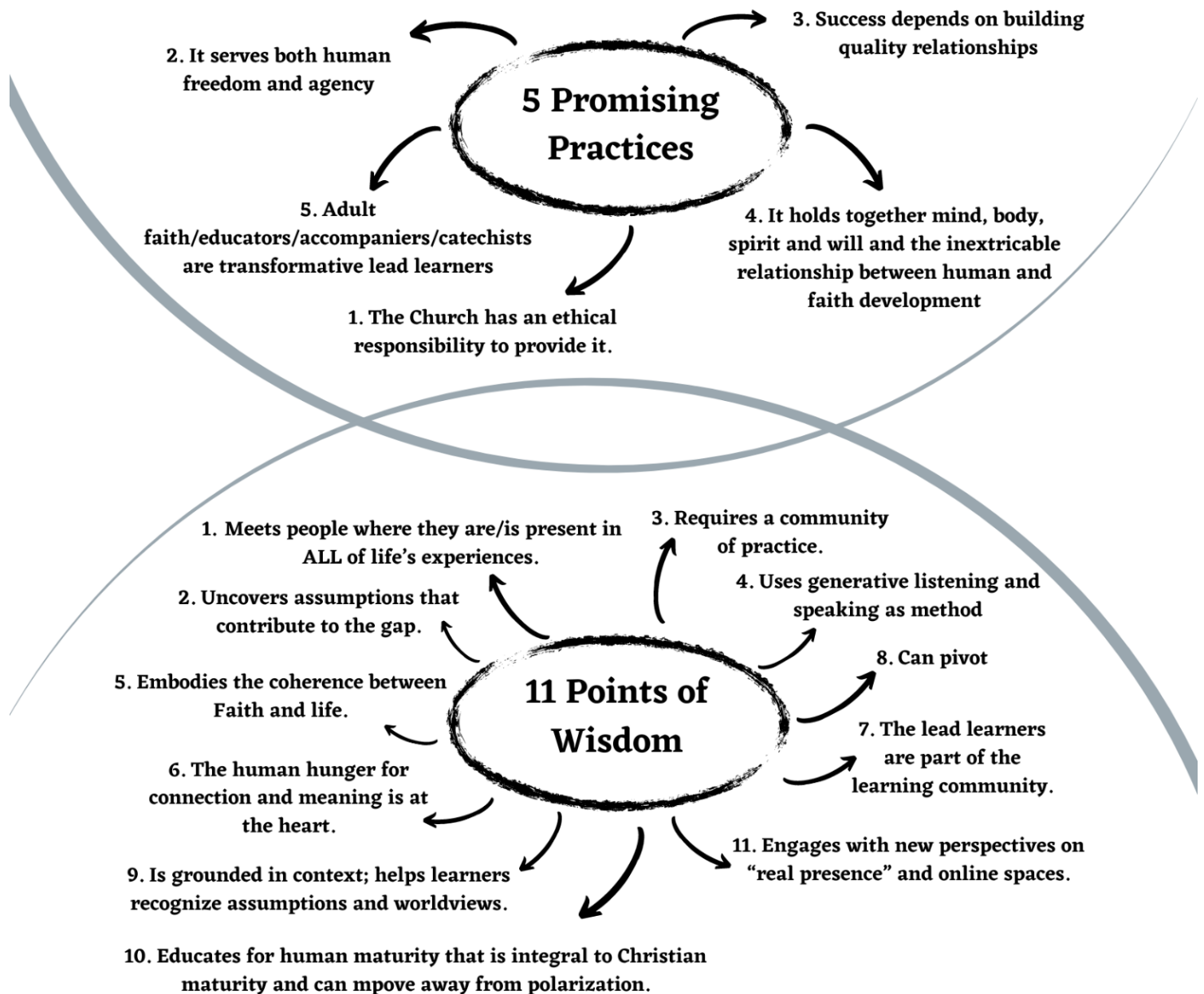
## b) The Findings from Phases I and II

**These two pages provide an overview of the findings from phases I and II (2019-2021) for those who are not familiar with them (and a refresher for those who are). You'll find a detailed unpacking in these two resources:**

[https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC\\_Five\\_Promising\\_Practices\\_and\\_Other\\_Practical\\_Wisdom\\_March\\_2020.pdf](https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC_Five_Promising_Practices_and_Other_Practical_Wisdom_March_2020.pdf)

[https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC\\_Where\\_Faith\\_and\\_Life\\_Meet\\_While\\_Were\\_Two\\_Metres\\_Apart\\_June212021.pdf](https://ustpaul.ca/upload-files/CREC/CREC_Where_Faith_and_Life_Meet_While_Were_Two_Metres_Apart_June212021.pdf)

# Overview: Findings from Phases I and II Effective Adult Faith Education/Accompaniment

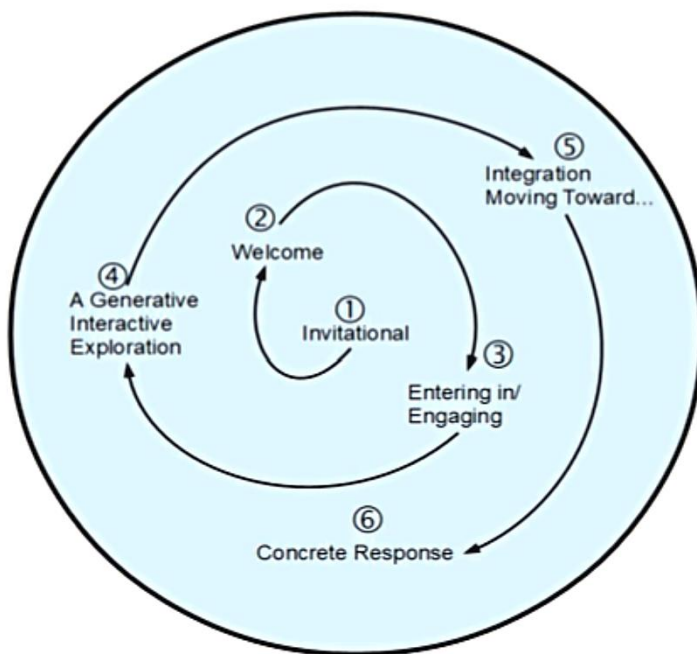




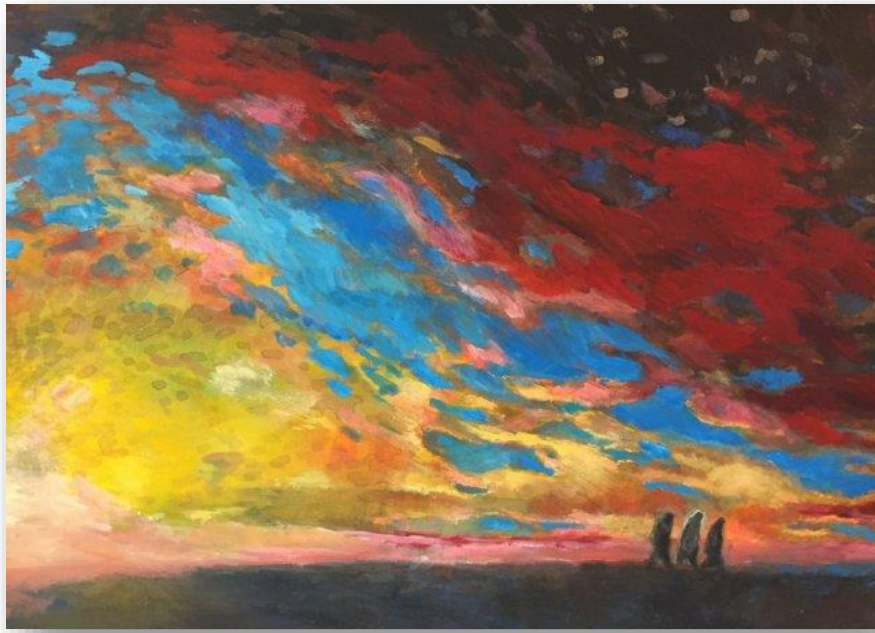
In addition to the 5 Promising Practices and 11 Points of Wisdom, phases I and II contributed a growing contemporary understanding of the faith-life gap as well as a Template for a Process Spiral to support the design of effective adult faith education spaces. These are briefly presented below. They have been further studied and elaborated in phase III.

**Findings from Phases I and II (cont...)**  
**Some Reasons for the Faith-life Gap**

- Compartmentalization
- Lack of meaning and relevance
- Loss of trust
- Marginalization
- Assumptions about adult faith education/catechesis that separate it off from being present to accompany adults in the reality of every-day life experience, especially in times of crises or need.



findings from Phases I and II (cont...)  
**TEMPLATE for A Process Spiral for Effective Adult Faith Education,**  
 Kuzmochka and Martin, 2019



### III FINDINGS FROM PHASE III

Our findings from Phase III are separated into **two categories** and presented in sections III a) and b) respectively:

a) Expanding perspectives and unearthing assumptions about the faith-life gap.

These are presented as findings #'s 1 – 6,

b) Practices that bridge the gap.

These are presented as findings #'s 7 – 21.

#### **a) Expanding Perspectives and Unearthing Assumptions about the Faith-Life Gap: *fresh eyes on the problem* (findings 1 – 6)**

A contemporary understanding of the faith-life gap is essential for finding effective practice in adult faith education/accompaniment that bridges it.

Our Emmaus story offers a clear example of a faith-life gap. The context in which the disciples are disconnected from their commitment to Jesus, the community of followers and its mission is complex: at a personal level, they have suffered a terrible loss and disappointment, and they don't yet have the lenses they need to see that the death of Jesus does not mean he is

not the Messiah. They are abandoning their commitment to Jesus, the faith community and its mission in despair; at a social level, the disciples are

It is the deep connection they experience with Jesus, in the midst of their despair, and the fresh perspectives he offers that allows them to bridge their faith and life.

afraid of being arrested and killed like Jesus, so they are fleeing from danger; at the level of their communal story of faith, their perception is that the mission has failed – Jesus was not the Messiah and mighty ruler foretold by the prophets who would come to

free the people from their oppressors. A gap between their life experience and their faith story has formed. It is the deep connection they experience with Jesus, in the midst of their despair, and the fresh perspectives he offers that allows them to bridge their faith and life.

**Building on phases I and II, findings from phase III provide a more complex, contemporary understanding of the faith-life gap.** One of our semi-structured interview participants provided an important observation: “I often hear people talking about how our problem is that people are ‘not coming to church.’ I find that this reinforces a story often told about how *‘the Church is good and people are bad.’*”

Phase III makes it clear that this narrative is oversimplified and hinders both an accurate understanding and effective responses.

Our first Phase III finding that expands our understanding of the faith-life gap is:

1. **A false dichotomy, that *‘the Church is good, and people are bad’* may lead to over-simplified (and perhaps false) assumptions about the faith-life gap.**

Phase III allowed us to identify varied expressions and complex reasons for the faith-life gap. It’s important to unearth and explore the assumptions we and other pastoral leaders make about it.

“I know many people who have stopped going to Sunday Mass, but I would *not* say it means that they have lost their faith.”

On a number of occasions, members of our focus group pointed out that the fact that someone has distanced themselves from the gatherings of the Christian community – even the Sunday Eucharist – does not necessarily mean they have

“disconnected from their faith.”<sup>23</sup> As one of our focus group members explained, “I know many people who have stopped going to Sunday Mass, but I would *not* say it means that they have lost their faith.”<sup>24</sup> Research conversations described situations where people who continue to self-identify as Catholic express strong conviction of Christian beliefs; they have a solid spiritual practice and engagement in the common good. Yet, they have stopped participating in the Sunday Eucharist and other engagement in their local community for many reasons – often those that were identified in phases I and II.<sup>25</sup> This finding suggests that:

- 2. There is a variation of the faith-life gap -- expressed as a gap between the person and the local Christian community which does not necessarily mean the person has disconnected from their faith.**

A pastoral leader in a Quebec diocese has noticed some “faith-filled, committed” pastoral leaders disengaging from their local communities while maintaining a strong personal faith life that includes meeting with others in small groups for prayer and reflection on the Sunday readings and engagement in activity for the common good. Her sense is that recent

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<sup>23</sup> There seems to be a common assumption that Mass attendance is a clear indicator of where people are in their own faith journey. This was expressed, for example, in a recent webinar on catechesis and evangelization during which the presenter equated not being at Sunday Mass with a “pre-evangelization stage” of faith development. Our findings suggest that these assumptions need to be unearthed and discussed if we are to better understand the faith-life gap and respond effectively and appropriately.

<sup>24</sup> It’s important to point out that sometimes this **does** indicate that someone no longer believes in God. Recent 2022 Angus Reid data show that almost 30% of people who identify as Catholic indicate they do not believe in God. See Angus Reid Institute, *Canada Across the Religious Spectrum*, 2022, <https://angusreid.org/canada-religion-interfaith-holy-week>.

<sup>25</sup> The research of Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has consistently challenged the assumption that the fact that a growing number of Canadians have decided to take a pass on religion means they are not believers or spiritual. In fact, his research demonstrates that many have indicated their willingness to reconnect with the Christian community if the experience could be relevant and meaningful. Reginald Bibby, *A New Day: The Resilience & Restructuring of Religion in Canada* (Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada Books, 2012), 3, 17.

scandals and abuses, as well as ongoing experiences of clericalism, are among the underlying reasons for their distance from the local community. She has noticed that not only have these people not “lost their faith,” but they are passionately committed to living it meaningfully and responsively.

Angus Reid has adopted the language of “Religiously Committed” and “Privately Faithful.”

Angus Reid has adopted the language of “Religiously Committed” and “Privately Faithful”<sup>26</sup> to try to describe both those who are engaged in the religious practice of the community (which does not *necessarily* mean they are engaged, mature Christians) and those who may be disengaged from the community’s practice but have not lost or abandoned their faith. This has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made in-person participation in the Eucharist impossible for most people. This opened up new ideas about engagement and “real presence” – especially with the introduction of a plethora of opportunities to engage online – that require ongoing reflection.

Related to the assumption that “not going to church” means “losing faith” is the idea that being present for Sunday Mass indicates an engaged Christian disciple.<sup>27</sup> Being “religiously committed” does not necessarily translate into a committed, integrated, mature Christian life.

Being “religiously committed” does not necessarily translate into a committed, integrated, mature Christian life.

Unpacking some of these assumptions points to the complexity of the faith-life gap and encourages us to accept the dilemma that attending Sunday Mass does not equate mature discipleship, and “not going to church” does not necessarily convey a lack of faith or commitment to Christian life.

<sup>26</sup> Angus Reid Institute, *Canada Across the Religious Spectrum*, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> What seems to be a common assumption -- that Mass attendance is a clear indicator of where people are in their own faith journey -- needs to be unearthed and discussed if we are to better understand the faith-life gap and respond effectively and appropriately.

3. **This expands and deepens our understanding of the variation of the faith-life gap identified as *compartmentalization* in phases I and II: that engagement in Sunday Mass can have no apparent connection with the rest of life for some.**<sup>28</sup>

Phase III has surfaced greater insight into the gap between faith and life that occurs when people are excluded or in some way disconnected from the Church community. This expands our understanding about the faith-life gap caused by marginalization. Listening to Indigenous experiences during phase III reveals that:

Phase III has surfaced much greater insight into the gap between faith and life that occurs when people feel excluded or in some way disconnected from the Church community.

There is a serious split from the Church for so many when, in addition to other forms of abuse, their spiritual traditions and practices were rejected in the past.

As an Indigenous woman, who is also a member of a religious community, pointed out to us: “Celebration, symbol and ritual is a powerful meeting and healing place, but it will only come with the very hard work of relationship-building, which includes being genuinely open to the other.” Phase I of our research highlighted the fact that God is already present and at work in every life. It is not the religious educator who brings God to the relationship by “doing unto” the other. These findings from phase III expand and deepen this vital perspective.

Another semi-structured interview participant, who is a director of catechesis, noted how events to support reconciliation with Indigenous communities in her diocese are not as well supported and attended as many other types of gatherings, a sign of the continued marginalization of Indigenous people in her area. Many research conversations took place just before Pope Francis’ July 2022 visit in response to the invitation to meet

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<sup>28</sup> In addition to the disconnect between faith and life attributed to all associated with the rise of atheism, this was another expression of the faith-life split clearly identified as a serious concern in *Gaudium et Spes*.

with Indigenous people and apologize on Canadian soil. While his visit was a sign of great hope, Indigenous participants in our research conversations identified this as “just a beginning” to a long and demanding process of reconciliation.

One of our focus group members who gathered with other pastoral leaders to discuss ministry with LGBTQ2S+ communities provided rich reflection on experience of the faith-life gap of marginalization and the importance of adult faith education that meets people where they are:

Adult faith involves navigating often-complex moral situations in our world, in our communities, and in the lives of our families, friends and colleagues. This can sometimes lead to tensions between where the institutional Church is at in its formal statements and where individuals are at on their own faith journey; these may not always fully align. For some people, this can be the cause of considerable inner struggle, and individual conscience may lead in directions different from official Church teachings. In these situations, caring and respectful accompaniment can be reassuring and affirming; it can help to alleviate a sense of being “in conflict” with the Church as institution and can be a reminder of a larger and more informal Church community, which is often more amenable to a broader range of views.

Our understanding of marginalization as an aspect of the faith-life gap was also greatly enriched by a focus group member who is a Newcomer and who accompanies Newcomers in her diocese. Connecting deeply with Pope Francis’ call to go to the periphery, she helped us recognize the contradiction of seeing those whom society may marginalize as anywhere but at the centre of the Christian community. “Are the margins society has created also those of the Church?” she asked. “If we regard Newcomers to Canada as ‘on the periphery,’ then who is it that we see at the centre?” This perspective on marginalization was strengthened by the experience of another focus group member who met regularly to listen to and

accompany people who were homeless in her area and those reintegrating (which she describes as “in reality integrating for the first time”) after time in prison. Seeing this as intense liminal space, she observed the power of listening and accompaniment to create learning and growing spaces in faith where people could tell their stories over and over again as a way of integrating their faith and life.<sup>29</sup> “These are people who have never had anyone to listen to them,” she noted.

Marginalization was powerfully experienced by another focus group member when a child experiencing gender dysphoria wanted to wear a dress and be called by a new feminine name during the celebration of a sacrament. The response chosen by the bishop was to address *no one* by name during the celebration. This focus group member conveyed the deep pain she and others experienced when, during a sacrament – defined by being called by name – everyone was nameless.

Each of these experiences shared during our research conversations surfaced key insights into marginalization as an expression of the faith-life gap and the importance of addressing it.

Each of these experiences, as well as the continued experience of not finding the space for real conversation and lacking a “safe” place to search and question with these challenging situations, surfaced key insights that culminate in this finding:

- 4. Marginalization is a complex and key expression of the faith-life gap that needs to be unpacked and addressed.**

Our findings about practices that bridge the gap will be explored in the following section.

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<sup>29</sup> Notice this spiral process of retelling our stories, which can help lead to new knowing. This learning, growing process will be explored further later in this resource.



Our understanding of another expression of the faith-life gap – identified in phase II when we noticed that adult faith education offices were being closed during the pandemic – was deepened during phase III as we explored further dimensions and implications of:

What assumptions are we making about effective adult faith education/catechesis practice if we separate it from the real experiences of life – especially in times of crises when the need to find meaning and support in faith and life is most intensely felt?

**5. The faith-life gap between adult faith education/catechesis and the everyday experiences of adults, especially in times of crises or need is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.**

What assumptions are we making about effective adult faith education/catechesis practice if we separate it from the real experiences of life – especially in times of crises when the need to find meaning and support in faith and life is most intensely felt? We have continued to recognize, during phase III, that this expression of the faith-life gap undermines effective adult faith education. As one of our focus group members shared, “I see this happening in Catholic schools as well as in other locations. The recognition and resources are not strong. We don’t seem to realize that without skilled lead learners who can help individuals and communities find meaning and direction in the most challenging of times, we can’t create the learning spaces needed for an integral mature Christian faith to grow.” This is an important insight that will be explored further in the “Practices that Bridge the Gap” section to follow. As a focus group member who accompanies Newcomers emphasized, “Adult faith accompaniment is a central aspect of the pastoral life of the Church that we all share and an aspect of what we do when we walk with others. We need to hold it together.”

While during phase I, *loss of trust* due to the scandal of clergy sexual abuse and other abusive behaviour was identified as a reason for the faith-life gap phase III has expanded our understanding:

**6. It seems that the shocking discovery in 2021 of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children has taken that loss of trust to new heights in the Church in Canada.**

The shocking discovery in 2021 of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children has taken that loss of trust to new heights in the Church in Canada.

As an Indigenous pastoral leader who participated in a semi-structured interview pointed out, trust can only be restored through listening and the very hard work of relationship building.

As Jesus was able to engage in a process that allowed the split to be healed and the disciples to be transformed, a more complex understanding of the faith-life gap opens the way for us to learn more about the processes in adult faith education that bridge it and lead to transformation.

As Jesus met the disciples “where they were” and, by listening, came to understand the gap between faith and life that they were experiencing, a richer understanding of the complexity of the faith-life gap and its many variations can allow us to walk with one another in the liminal spaces

that mark the journey of adult faith. As Jesus was able to engage in a process that allowed the split to be healed and the disciples to be transformed, a more complex understanding of the faith-life gap opens the way for us to learn more about the processes in adult faith education that bridge it and lead to transformation.

*For your reflection:*

- How do these expanding perspectives on the faith-life gap connect with your experience?
- What new perspectives (if any) does unearthing these assumptions offer you? How might this enrich and support your practice of adult faith education as you meet and are met on the Emmaus journey in your life and leadership?



## **b) Practices that Bridge the Gap (findings 7 – 21)**

In addition to new perspectives on the faith-life gap, phase III has both expanded our understanding of practices that bridge the gap and added fresh insights about effective adult faith education/accompaniment. These are reflected in the findings that follow. Phase III has allowed us to both expand our understanding of the first *Promising Practice* from Phase I and the first *Point of Wisdom* from Phase II and to realize that, together, they form a foundational perspective about practice that bridges the gap from which other practices flow. This leads to our first phase III finding about practices that bridge the gap:

- 7. Effective practices that bridge the gap between faith and life flow from a foundational perspective that effective adult faith education/accompaniment is both a) *a crucial ethical responsibility of the Church* and b) *a deeply relational journey/process*.<sup>30</sup>**

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<sup>30</sup> We noted in our resource for phase II – and it bears repeating here – strong complementarity between our research and the *Directory for Catechesis* (2020) that also underscores the importance of relationships for effective faith education. See, for example, paragraphs 50, 65 and 75.

Phase III has allowed us to identify aspects of effective practice that flow from this perspective and to consider them within the concrete reality of our current Canadian context.

Phase III data have expanded and deepened our understanding of the first Promising Practice from phase I and the first Point of Wisdom from phase II and allowed us to see how they are an integral foundation for other practices.

The following finding is an *expanded understanding* of the first Promising Practice from phase I and can be articulated like this:

8. **The Church has an ethical responsibility to provide learning and growing space for adult faith education/catechesis that is *both* i) for the life of the person and ii) through their mature discipleship, for the life of the world.**<sup>31</sup>

Further to this, an *expanded understanding* of the first Point of Wisdom from Phase II can be expressed in this way:

9. **Adult catechesis/Adult faith education is *accompaniment on a journey*; it listens, attends and is present to all of life's experiences – especially in the most important times (liminal space) of life.**

Returning to the road to Emmaus is an excellent place from which to unpack these findings further and to present other effective practices that have surfaced from them in our findings. As we can see in the encounter, it is essential to have the ability to present and interpret our story of Salvation History in conversation with life's experiences for effective learning and growing in faith. This is what Jesus was doing when we hear in the

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<sup>31</sup> James Fowler provides an excellent frame for understanding these two indivisible aspects of an adult faith. Adult catechesis focuses on both and holds them together: 1. "life for the person" involves the fulfilment of that intense and universal human vocation expressed in the hunger for meaning which indicates how we are "hard-wired for God"; and 2. Fowler points out how "life for the world" is the vocation of the Christian disciple who – responding from their partnership in a triadic relationship with God, self and others – is called to heal the world (as the human vocation for meaning-making leads to development, the circle of who matters expands and the capacity for discipleship deepens). Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 60, 69, 75, 116–17.

scriptures that he opened their Salvation History “and interpreted to them” – “[b]eginning with Moses and the prophets...” (Luke 24:27). Yet, it’s important to ask: While it’s an essential dimension, is the fact that Jesus unpacks the story of Salvation History enough?

*For your reflection:*

- While it’s an essential dimension, is the fact that Jesus unpacks the story of Salvation History – “[b]eginning with Moses and the prophets,” he interprets the scripture passages about himself for the disciples on the road (Luke 24:27) – enough to create an effective learning and growing space in faith for the disciples on the road?
- What else is going on that makes the experience one of transformative learning?

**We would like to share this important insight with you: What Jesus does on the road is so much more complex and integral than simply presenting “content” about the faith story of the disciples.**

James Fowler helps us understand by clearly describing the foundational process of transformative learning in faith education that occurs: “[A]ny serious intentional approach to helping persons and groups form their lives in accordance with the Christian story and vision has to coordinate the convergence of ... personal life narratives ... what

“[A]ny serious intentional approach to helping persons and groups form their lives in accordance with the Christian story and vision has to coordinate the convergence of ... personal life narratives ... what constitutes their evolving life structures ... and perspectives on the divine praxis and purpose offered in the core story of Christian faith.”

constitutes their evolving life structures ... and perspectives on the divine praxis and purpose offered in the core story of Christian faith.”<sup>32</sup> This characterizes the process that marks the encounter between Jesus and the disciples on the Emmaus road: he meets them where they are (in a liminal space – a time of crisis) and coordinates a learning and growing space where the convergence needed for the disciples to experience transformative learning can take place. Phase III has helped us to unpack this further and to be able to identify this aspect of effective practice with greater clarity:

**10. Whatever content we are working with, it is not the information but the transformative educational process that allows it to be effectively received and integrated within the learner. Attending well to both content and process is essential.**

This finding arose as we grappled with the question that often arises among us as practitioners in adult faith education – “But what about the content?” In this regard, it may be helpful to underscore two things: on the one hand, whatever content we are working with, it is **not** the information but *the transformative educational process that allows it to be effectively received and integrated* within the learner; on the other hand, it is important to attend well to *both* content and process that generate learning and growing spaces where the gaps we create are bridged and the profound unity between faith and life flourishes.<sup>33</sup> *The kerygma* we hold and proclaim is not “detached information.”

Rather, it is *embodied in our relationships*. It’s

important to be explicit, in this regard, that the idea of instruction or

The kerygma we hold and proclaim is embodied in our relationships. It’s important to be explicit, in this regard, that the idea of instruction or “transmission” does not capture the fullness of this dynamic process

<sup>32</sup> James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 112.

<sup>33</sup> Note that the *Directory for Catechesis* echoes the emphases presented in previous directories and catechetical documents regarding the importance of “overcoming any opposition between content and method, between faith and life” (#4). Furthermore, the Directory emphasizes that “catechesis is an authentic ‘laboratory of dialogue’” (#54), highlighting the importance of relationships and communication – as Jesus always practised – as the primary way to facilitate growing and maturing in faith.

“transmission”<sup>34</sup> does not capture the fullness of this dynamic process.<sup>35</sup> The rich contexts/life experiences of individuals, communities/society and the Christian story must converge for effective education in faith and life.

This is the transformative process that undergirds effective adult faith education that bridges faith and life. It points to the two-fold purpose of adult faith education/catechesis described at the start of this resource and expressed in finding #8 about practices that bridge the gap. It is captured well in Jesus’ deep desire for *each* person and *all* people to be fulfilled: “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The deepest purpose of adult catechesis is two-fold: to open the way for life for each person and – through their discipleship – for life for the world. Clearly recognizing this two-fold nature points to the fact that human flourishing and mature discipleship are indivisible. They are both integral to the learning and growing spaces where the gaps we create are bridged and the profound unity between faith and life flourishes. This can be summarized as the following finding in this way:

**11. Human flourishing and mature discipleship are inseparable, and both must be attended to for the two-fold purpose of adult catechesis to be realized: i. for the life of each person and ii. through their discipleship for the life of the world.**

To explore, more deeply, the ethical responsibility of the Church to provide effective adult faith education for this two-fold purpose, turning to James Fowler’s seminal work can, once again, help us. Fowler was the first to make the essential connection between the growing social science in

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<sup>34</sup> Since “language functions,” it’s important to ask if the word “transmission” – the term often used in catechetical documents – is an appropriate descriptor for the inherently relational nature of adult faith education. See chapter 3 of Lorraine Ste-Marie’s *Beyond Words: New Language for a Changing Church* (Novalis, 2008) where she describes how old language gives way to new terms to hold new knowledge.

<sup>35</sup> “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.” This key insight expressed by John Paul II in his seminal 1979 *Catechesi Tradendi* (#5) continues to define the fundamentally relational nature of catechesis.

human development and faith development.<sup>36</sup> In *Stages of Faith*, his ground-breaking work integrating constructivist developmental psychology and faith development, he defined two connected understandings of “faith” which are embedded in the two-fold purpose of adult faith education:

i) Fowler presents “faith” as the human universal quest for meaning hardwired into the human being. (Some claim the desire to make meaning rivals – and may even be stronger than – the desire to survive. This is what Augustine recognizes when he claims that our souls will only rest when they rest in God.)<sup>37</sup> In this general way, Fowler regards faith as this universal quest for meaning. All effective adult faith education must respond to this deep, universal human need for meaning-making which is only – ultimately – answered in God.

ii) Fowler also presents a Christian definition of faith (which can’t be separated from the first) based on the triadic relationship with God, self and others. This is the understanding of “faith” that defines the Christian vocation – the human partnership with God in bringing the Gospel reality into the world.<sup>38</sup>

The Church has an ethical responsibility to provide adult faith education that responds to *both* integral aspects of mature faith. While this could be explored at length, there are a few essential perspectives to underscore here.

The Church has an ethical responsibility to provide adult faith education that responds to *both* integral aspects of mature faith.

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<sup>36</sup> James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith* (1981) and later his *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (2000) were pivotal in opening an understanding of the integral nature of human and faith maturity. It was such essential work that contemporaries of Fowler’s claimed he redefined the field of practical theology (see Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, eds, *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology* [St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003], Introduction, 1–15). That book is, in fact, a series of essays dedicated to James Fowler. It is germane that it contains an essay by Thomas Groome that acknowledges the significant connections between Fowler’s stage theory and religious education.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Patricia O’Connell Killen and James DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 21.

<sup>38</sup> See Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 68–78.



As the person matures, their “circle of who matters” enlarges, and the capacity to hold the tensions of paradox and conflict takes shape (this happens at stages 4/5 of development). Fowler describes how it’s at stage 5 – conjunctive faith – that we develop the capacity to integrate “elements in ourselves, in society, and in our experience of ultimate reality that have the character of being apparent contradictions, polarities, or, at the least, paradoxical elements.”<sup>39</sup>

These are aspects of both human and faith maturity that are necessary for mature Christian discipleship - to be in partnership with God to bring the Gospel into the world. Yet, research suggests that less than 15% of the adult population ever reaches this level of maturity.

Fowler describes what he refers to as the “eschatological virtues” required of the mature disciple that take shape at this stage 5 level of development: “[T]he qualities of moral strength, skill and capacity that enable the community to respond with courage, resourcefulness and world-transforming effectiveness to the invitations and imperatives of the new age.”<sup>40</sup> These are

aspects of both human and faith maturity that are necessary for mature Christian discipleship – to be in partnership with God to bring the Gospel into the world. Yet, research suggests that less than 15% of the adult population ever reaches this level of maturity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>41</sup> See Susanne Cook Greuter, *Nine Levels of Increasing Embrace in Ego Development: A Full-Spectrum Theory of Vertical Growth and Meaning Making* (2013), 6. Our sense is that it’s very important for all of us to consider the implications of this statistic for our practice: less than 15% of the population reaches the level of human and faith maturity needed to engage in the work that is required of mature Christian discipleship.

*For your reflection:*

- What do these perspectives and statistics on human and faith maturity invite us to consider for our practice going forward?
- What do we need to explore/develop to become more effective in our adult faith education/accompaniment?

One of our semi-structured interview participants, an ordained minister and theologian in a pastoral leadership position for his diocese, shared an important observation in this regard:

I find that in parishes, there's a lot less focus on ... adult faith development and a lot more on ... evangelization programs, which are often based on a model of "Yes, you can bring your questions, but the Christian tradition or the Catholic Church has the answers to those questions that you're asking, and we're going to give them to you." So, for me ... it's the struggle with finding the balance between the necessity for a kerygmatic proclamation in a world which often doesn't even know the most basic things about the central Christian message [as well as] the need for something to help people mature and grow in the faith.

This points to a finding that further expands our understanding of the Church's ethical responsibility to provide practice that bridges the gap as crucial for the human flourishing and mature Christian discipleship:

**12. The ethical responsibility to provide effective adult faith education/accompaniment requires the Church to find the**

**catechetical/educational/practices of accompaniment that promote integral human and faith maturity.**

One of our focus group members – the pastor of a busy parish – chose to explore this perspective during both phase II and phase III. As he intentionally regarded this ethical responsibility, he found himself in a rich collaboration with parishioners and intentionally adopting the process spiral to open effective learning and growing spaces for faith and life. “Meeting people where they are” and “connecting faith and life” became central considerations for him and his collaborators that have deeply shaped their parish life. “I am learning so much that is essential for my leadership,” he expressed.

We wonder if one of the reasons we, as leaders and practitioners in adult faith education, struggle to find effective practice that meets people where they are is because this two-fold purpose of adult faith education – may not be clear for us.

We wonder if one of the reasons we, as leaders and practitioners in adult faith education, struggle to find effective practice that meets people where they are is because this two-fold purpose of adult faith education – i) for the life of the person and ii)

through their mature discipleship for the life of the world – and their integral relationship may not be clear for us.

*For your reflection:*

- What do we need to do to better integrate these essential perspectives about adult faith education and the transformative processes that underlie them into our practice?

Phase III has allowed us to further explore the implications of the Church’s responsibility to find the catechetical /educational/practices of accompaniment that promote human and faith maturity.

Our catechetical directories recognize that Adult Catechesis is *education* in an essential partnership with higher education (in particular, the human sciences) that is needed to support it.

Since Vatican II, our catechetical directories have recognized that Adult Catechesis is *education*.<sup>42</sup> in an essential partnership with higher education (in particular, the human sciences) that is needed to support effective adult faith education/catechesis.<sup>43</sup>

Phase three has surfaced and clarified this perspective about practice that bridges the gap:

**13. It can be said that being true to its nature, *Adult Catechesis* is, in fact, transformative education in a very exciting and privileged form at the service of mature Christian discipleship.**<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In this regard, it's so important not to lose our sense of adult catechesis as an *educational process* as the Church is using the language of "catechesis" more frequently.

<sup>43</sup> As have all of the catechetical directories published since Vatican II, the current *Directory for Catechesis* defines the importance of catechesis as "education" and describes the important partnership with higher education and the human sciences. See, for example, #156, #180–81 and #194–95 of the Directory.

<sup>44</sup> Its origin is the biblical term *katecheo* (to sound down into the ears/to resound), which appears only eight times in the New Testament and only in verb form, while terms for "to teach" are used over 100 times in the New Testament. *Katecheo* refers uniquely to a relational moment of *resonance* when an oral proclamation by one person is deeply received by the one to whom it is proclaimed. It speaks of both relationship and of integral learning – something given by one and deeply received within the other. It's interesting that in the earliest days of the Christian community, "catechesis" became the chosen term to describe the relational activity of learning and growing in the way of Jesus. It evolved into "catechumenate" and "catechumen." The nuances associated with indoctrination became widespread, especially after the Council of Trent (16th century), and were exacerbated by the rationalism and the associated separation of mind, body and spirit that came with the Enlightenment (17th century). While reclaiming the language of catechesis is filled with life in its desire to return to the original meaning (Vatican II, *ressourcement*), it continues to carry heavy nuances that are contrary to effective practice. Just recently, one of our researchers heard an accomplished theologian address a group, saying, "Responding in faith like this [referring to discipleship and mission of the Church] is not to be confused with learning our catechism." And, in another experience, it was clear that presenters regarded "catechesis" as an aspect of evangelization and did not venture to define it or ascribe any unique role to catechesis outside of it being the aspect of evangelization where "people learn the faith." Reclaiming "adult catechesis" means *both* intentionally recognizing and releasing these nuances *and* doing the knowledgeable, thoughtful and intentional work of embracing an understanding of a vibrant, life-giving process of learning, growing and responding in mature faith that "catechesis" defines. The term "catechesis" carries the heavy weight of nuances, and the term needs reclaiming. See Kuzmochka, *Reclaiming the Heart of Adult Catechesis*, 69–72.

It is vital that we attend to this partnership. Transformative education focuses on processes that help learners fully integrate new ideas and perspectives. An indication that the learner “knows” (or has really learned something) is the integration of the learning -- it can be observed in the concrete actions of the learner.

*Adult Catechesis is, in fact, transformative education in a very exciting and privileged form at the service of mature Christian discipleship.*

Faith that has reached heads, hearts and hands defines a “...living and mature faith ... [that] prove(s) its fruitfulness by penetrating the believer’s entire life.”<sup>45</sup> This integrated faith is essential for mature Christian discipleship and points to the processes of transformative education required to facilitate it.

A focus group member who chairs a network of adult faith educators from across Canada reminded us that among those who accompany adult faith, the need to move into process-based approaches continues to be clearly recognized, and the desire strongly felt to learn the methods that facilitate it. But there is an ongoing struggle to know what to do and how to do it.

The Template for Process-based Spiral (p. 17), generated from our data during Phase I, identifies a process that can be utilized to design process-based learning and growing spaces that bridge the faith-life gap by engaging the expertise of transformative education.

While transformative education has many theories and practices to offer for effective adult faith education/accompaniment, the Template for Process-based Spiral (see p. 17), generated from our data during Phase I, is an effective tool. It identifies a process that can be utilized to design process-based learning and growing

spaces that bridge the faith-life gap by engaging the expertise of transformative education. We can see how each of the phases of the process are present in the encounter on the road to Emmaus.

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<sup>45</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #21.

- As they are walking toward Emmaus, the “stranger” joins the disciples in their time of despair in an invitational and welcoming spirit; the encounter is opened with an invitation to tell their story – to share what is really happening in their lives.
- The primary method for helping the disciples engage is listening (not telling) as they share what is happening with them and the crisis in faith they are experiencing.
- Jesus then brings their Salvation History (beginning with Moses and the prophets) into a generative interactive exploration with their experience that allows them to apply some new lenses of their faith to their story of despair.
- Inviting him to stay with them opens a place of integration when they recognize him, which moves them toward a complete “turnaround”: this results in the concrete action of returning to the very place they were running from with fresh eyes and burning hearts from the transformative learning they experienced.

**14. Experience with the Process-based Spiral during phase III provides additional support for it as an effective tool for engaging in process-based adult faith education/accompaniment.**

This finding surfaced most clearly as one of our focus group members -- who worked intentionally with the Template for a Process Spiral for Effective Adult Faith Education -- noticed that the perception of the relationship between content and process shifted as those using the template realized the richness of generative conversations for helping people to integrate faith and life during sessions. In particular, a priest who co-led a session with her was struck by how the quality of learning was enriched when time was given for meaningful interactive conversations about the content with the participants – an essential step in the process spiral. He began to see the content-process relationship in a new way. Our focus group member noticed that they were generally engaging in 20

minutes of interactive conversation for every 10 minutes of input. Evaluations suggested this was an excellent process for integral learning.

As our focus group member explored the use of the spiral with other colleagues in faith education leadership, they described integrating the approach as “a bit awkward since it’s unfamiliar.” However, they were beginning to see how attending to each step in the process opened the way for integral faith-life learning. “It occurred to me [that] this spiral provides the structure, spaces and processes for transformation, and that adult faith education is supposed to be transformative – that’s the point,” this focus group member observed. She also noted how, in this process, it’s vital for stories/experience and whatever content is being presented to come into conversation/interaction.

We, as practitioners in adult faith education, continue to learn about all that it means to move to this *process-based* approach as the foundation for effective adult faith education. The rich contexts/life experiences of individuals, communities/society and the Christian story must converge for effective education in faith and life.

**15. Phase III has underscored previous findings from both phases I and II that formation is greatly needed for adult catechists/adult faith educators who are grounded in the methodologies and methods in transformative education that open learning and growing spaces for meaning-making and agency as mature Christian disciples. Primary to this is an understanding of the adult faith educator as a “lead learner” – (someone who may have a special role but is a *part of*, not *apart from*, the learning community) – rather than a “lead knower.”**

The need for education to prepare those who accompany adult faith has been expressed strongly and frequently during all stages of this research. While phase III has underscored the fact that this education requires a strong foundation in transformative education, it has also deepened insight into the highly relational nature of adult faith education expressed, among

other ways, in the understanding of the role of “lead learner.” Lead learners have a specific leadership role, but that role does not separate them from the learning community. It was one of our focus group members who paid careful attention to her role as “lead learner” during an experience of leading an additional qualifications course who was able to describe the importance of being a “lead learner” rather than a “lead knower.” “It fundamentally changes the dynamics of the relationships” she shared with us. We realize that this is an essential aspect of the formation we require to accompany adult faith.

Jesus’ accompaniment of the disciples on the Emmaus road is a vivid illustration of the complex relational process of creating learning/growing spaces in adult faith. Our exploration of the process of his accompaniment can be expanded to encompass the complexities of “the now” of our challenges to bridge the faith-life gap. Understanding that Catechesis/Adult Faith Education is *accompaniment on a journey*; it listens, attends and is present to all of life’s experiences, especially in the most important times (liminal space) of life – has surfaced many essential perspectives during phase III.

One of our focus group members expressed the integral nature of growing in life and faith when she described of her accompaniment of

Newcomers, “I never thought about myself as a *faith educator* before. But now I see that when I meet Newcomers, in the process of sharing our lives and experiences, especially when we are very vulnerable, there is space to grow in faith together.” This focus group member, and another research participant who accompanies Newcomers, underscored the importance of knowing that we meet people with richly storied lives where God is already *very much present* and at work.<sup>46</sup> One of our semi-structured interview participants captured another essential

We meet people with richly storied lives where God is already *very much present* and at work...

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<sup>46</sup> This perspective was realized in our phase I findings.



aspect of this: “If we’re trying to develop faith in mature adults and we’re not engaging the real issues of life in the process, we’re in a dreamland.”

As our understanding of effective adult faith education/accompaniment as

“If we’re trying to develop faith in mature adults and we’re not engaging the real issues of life in the process, we’re in a dreamland.”

*a deeply relational journey/process expanded during phase III* this finding quickly and frequently came to the surface:

**16. Listening<sup>47</sup> is the core practice for effective adult faith education to open the way for our lives, contexts and the Christian story to converge for transformative learning and growing to happen.**

Our focus group member working with Newcomers helped us to realize that invitation and welcome go far beyond superficial expressions. It is the embodiment of the Kerygma that we hold and proclaim. Including

**Listening** surfaced as the core practice for effective adult faith education.

someone and truly welcoming them into a community are profound and powerful expressions of relationship that open learning and growing spaces. Similarly, being excluded

and unwelcome block relationship and never allow learning and growing spaces to take shape. This focus group member helped us to understand listening as the first and most fundamental practice of relationship and expression of true hospitality.

Luke 8:18 advises us to “Take care how you listen.” We’ve learned that the generative listening our research methodology requires means that we must intentionally listen with an open mind, heart and will.<sup>48</sup> Being fully present in the moment is the space in which we walk in communion with one another. Participants in phase III have described effective listening in a variety of ways, such as “listening such that the other knows they’ve been heard”; “listening with our whole selves”; “authentic listening”; “listening

<sup>47</sup> It bears repeating that generative listening is also the key practice of our research methodology, and we continue to experience – as we did in phases I and II – the power of listening that can open new perspectives.

<sup>48</sup> For a brief video on the levels of listening, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLfxpRkVZal>.

has to go somewhere.” Focus group members and semi-structured interview participants alike shared powerful experiences and insights about listening. One person told a deeply moving story about how a person who had been distant from the Christian community for a long time was profoundly impacted when his sister travelled a long way in difficult conditions to simply say, “I just want to listen to you; to hear your experience.” Another participant shared how listening has been a critical learning process for teachers in an additional qualifications course she is teaching as she created the space for them to bring their faith stories into conversation with the story of Salvation History.

Two Indigenous women emphasized how there is no relationship and no way forward without listening – the kind where *the other knows they’ve been heard*:

I’ve been part of a working group of Anishinaabe that has been meeting for a long time. I’ve come to realize that the only reason we can continue learning and growing together is because of the relationships we have built. There has been pain and disagreement, but we keep coming back and moving forward because we listen so that the other knows they’ve been heard. It’s only the hard work of building relationships that allows us to continue.

Being engaged in the current synodal process allowed two of our semi-structured interview participants, who are pastoral leaders in a large diocese, to share some essential insights into listening that they were gaining:

The synodal process offers us the opportunity to observe what happens when listening is **not** practised well. Unfortunately, the synodal process is not going well where we are; there is not the engagement we hoped for ... We are seeing, far too often, that people have had experiences of ... “the appearance” of being listened to ... Then, they realize down the road, they have not really been heard (there is no feedback, and nothing changes). This erodes trust and

generates apathy and superficiality.” Our listening needs to go somewhere. We need to be willing to be changed by what we hear.

Several other research participants noted the profound connection between healthy relationships and good listening and the breakdown in relationships that occurs when listening is diminished or stopped.

**17. To be explicit about further insight that surfaced in phase III about the practice of listening, we discovered that authentic listening – such that the other knows they’ve been heard – is the foundation for transformative learning and growing spaces, while poor listening erodes relationship and effective practice and leaves people feeling voiceless and disempowered. Authentic listening leads to change and action.**

An adult faith educator in a large parish described meetings in her home to discuss anything on people’s minds as her most effective adult faith education initiative. Her observation is that authentic listening can produce a lot of fear because it means we have to allow ourselves to be changed by what we hear. “Yet,” she observed, “there is no real learning, growing or building of relationships without it.”

The way Jesus approaches the disciples on the road and spends the first part of their encounter simply listening to their struggle and disillusionment illustrates clearly the primary role listening plays for effective practice that bridges the faith-life gap.

Jesus approaches the disciples on the road and spends the first part of their encounter simply listening to their struggle and disillusionment.

Another key finding, related to listening, surfaced during phase III:

**18. It is essential to help people to tell their essential faith-life stories and to bring their personal narratives (experiences) into conversation with the Christian story.**

One of our focus group members made keen observations about how listening allowed a woman she was accompanying – who needed to tell her story over and over again – to grow: “As I listened, it became apparent that she was learning to trust me in the process. She helped me realize that the learner learns when they’re ready. And when stories are told over and over, the learner is not going in a circle but is slowly moving forward in a spiral.” Drawing on an insight from the *Directory for Catechesis*, this focus group member noted how recognizing and utilizing beauty can be a powerful vehicle for listening to and telling stories.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, several research participants who work with Newcomers emphasized that the central ground for learning and growing together is comprised of the essential, liminal experiences of their lives. One semi-structured interview participant noted that when people arrive in the aftermath of terrible suffering it is so often their faith that sustains them and helps them move forward. “They are our teachers,” he emphasized. Considering Fowler’s point that any attempt to shape our lives as Christian lives much involve the convergence of our narratives and context with the core of the Christian story, it becomes clear that lead learners must become particularly skilled at opening spaces for stories to be told and heard.

The importance of listening as a core practice of effective adult faith education took on a particular depth when observed and considered in the context of those who are marginalized/on the periphery. An important perspective arose in our research conversations from a series of insights from Newcomers, Indigenous leaders and those accompanying members of LGBTQ2S+ communities. It gained a great deal of traction in our research conversations and may be expressed in this finding:

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<sup>49</sup> *Directory for Catechesis*, #106–109.

**19. We need a more developed theology of inclusion, and this needs a partnering theology of diversity that genuinely regards difference as a gift and not a problem.**

Regarding the vast diversity that confronts her when dealing with so many languages, cultures and experiences in the Newcomers she meets, one of our research participants commented that listening is the key – among all of us. A bishop who participated in our research conversations described how overwhelmed he feels when he looks at the diversity in his communities. “I honestly don’t know what to do when people and their priests want to do things in such different ways,” he said. Our Newcomer research participant described an experience when she and her bishop were going to lead a meeting with many people of different languages and cultures present trying to form community together. She asked her bishop to focus on listening rather than speaking. “We don’t have to have all the answers,” she told him. They used the image of the *tree of life* to highlight both common and different roots, branches and leaves – all part of honouring the diversity. Rather than arriving to tell the people how to move forward, they focused on listening and asking questions. “Soon we could see that the community was coming up with some good answers for how to move forward in the diversity,” she told us. It was an important learning experience for both her and her bishop.

**Marginalization is a pressing challenge that invites intensive reflection and response. We invite you to consider along with us: Who do we consider on the periphery? Who do we consider at the centre? What more developed theological frameworks do we need to support wider inclusion and honouring of diversity?** These are essential questions.

In this same spirit, a focus group member spoke about the fear many have about being excluded from the community, even risking their jobs, for engaging in conversations about greater inclusivity of LGBTQ2S+ people in the community and listening to the needs being expressed.

**20. The need for safe, brave spaces for conversations “where important conversations (one-on-one, or in small groups) can take place in a supportive and non-judgmental environment” was emphasized,**

This became the focus of many important generative conversations. As a focus member shared:

Allowing people to be authentically themselves, with all their complexity, is essential to effective faith formation and a healthy relationship with God. Where people feel compelled to publicly espouse views which they may not privately hold, they can feel hypocritical, dishonest and less than transparent. This ultimately impedes good faith formation, accompaniment and growth.

We discussed the importance of being connected to a wide range of theological thinking, scripture interpretation and pastoral approaches.

*For your reflection:*

- What need do you perceive for safe, brave spaces for conversation to support adult faith education that bridges the faith-life gap?
- How can we integrate this practice into our leadership in adult faith education/accompaniment?

Phase III underscored and expanded our previous finding that:

**21. A community of practice<sup>50</sup> is essential for effective adult faith education/ accompaniment.**

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<sup>50</sup> Participatory action research promotes “transformative communities of practice” that foster transformative change – rather than “reproductive communities of practice” that reinforce the status quo. See Renée DePalma,

As our focus group worked together throughout phase III, members frequently reflected on how participating in the phase III research enriched their practice. “The quality of our conversations and the experiences and insights that are shared help me see things I wouldn’t otherwise see,” one member commented. We continue to be aware that focus groups – as communities of practice – generate support and wisdom that none of us can find on our own.

A community of practice can be seen as a vibrant expression of Jesus’ promise that “Where two or more are gathered in my name I am with you.” (Matt. 18:20)

We need to gather and share our experiences and insights to find our way forward in effective adult faith education/ accompaniment. A community of practice can be seen as a vibrant expression of Jesus’ promise that “Where two or more are gathered in my name I am with you” (Matt. 18:20). It is in this spirit and trusting that this invitation embraces all of us who are engaged in adult faith education/ accompaniment in the Church in Canada that we have shared our findings with all of you who, like us, are seeking effective practice that meets people where they are and empowers mature disciples. We are hopeful for opportunities to explore these findings together and to learn from one another as we continue to invite the Emmaus story to speak to us in our current context.

*For your reflection:*

- What are you discovering about effective practices in adult faith education practice?
- What might we discover together as we meet on the road in the reality of our lives and listen and engage deeply?



#### **IV With Burning Hearts Toward an Emerging Future**

As phase III comes to a close, and we prepare for phase IV of our action research, we move forward with burning hearts, trusting that renewed life and energy come from this encounter on the road. We are hopeful that these findings point to an emerging future of more effective adult faith education/accompaniment practice for all of us. We are eager to, along with you, integrate the findings into practice, explore the results and be attentive to the new research questions that emerge. We trust that Jesus continues to come alongside to walk with us in all the liminal spaces that lie ahead.

It seems prophetic that the Working Document for the Continental Stage<sup>51</sup> of the Synodal process has just been published under the heading “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.” We sense that many of our findings ask us to do this. Once again, we sense the alignment with Pope Francis’ call.

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<sup>51</sup> See <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/working-document-for-the-continental-stage.html>.



As we move into phase IV, it seems essential to ask, “What kind of adult faith education/catechesis/accompaniment is needed to support this Synodal Church?”

As phase III was getting under way, the core of the nation’s capital was paralyzed by a convoy of truckers and other supporters demanding an end to government mandates related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflects a broader Canadian context and, in fact, the context of the Church in Canada, which is characterized by polarized positions and frequently by vitriol.

This reality, as well as many findings from this research project to date, point to the importance of studying more fully the practices that empower mature Christian disciples who can hold the tensions of paradox and difference and overcome polarization. Polarization erodes a culture of encounter, of listening, and prevents us from walking together.

We look forward to continuing the journey together and to all of the encounters and conversations that can happen over the days ahead to support effective practice in adult faith education for all of us in the Church in Canada.

