



“How to Create a ‘Parents In Conversation’ Class in Your Parish”

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Prayer – Jesus reach for me.
Spirit strengthen me.
God catch me. Amen.

- Mrs. Phoebe W. Griswold
From “Women’s Uncommon Prayers”

1. Introductions
Name – size of parish
What do you hope to offer or what do you offer for parents?

2. How we began “Parents In Conversation”

When I started at St. Matthew’s fourteen years ago, I was responsible for Church School and programming for nursery through fifth grade. We had great programming for children and we had great programming for adults but I kept noticing parents leaving the building after church to go to the grocery or to Target while their children were in classes.

I talked with some of the parents and discovered that they really were not interested in the current adult offerings so off they went.

I asked a small group of parents who strongly supported the children’s program what they would find most helpful in an adult class. Their response was that they would like a place where they could sit and talk with other parents about what worked for them in their roles as parents.

We knew we needed something big to start the program and break the mold, so to speak, of spending that hour away from the building.

One of our parents is a family therapist and on faculty at one of our local universities. I told him what we were planning and asked if he would lead a discussion on “How to Keep Marriages and Adult Relationships Alive In the Midst of Parenthood”. He thought the idea of the class very beneficial and suggested that we begin with an evening gathering.



We advertised for about two months in our weekly Sunday bulletins, in our monthly newsletters and via e-mail.

The Sunday evening gathering ran from 5:30 – 7:30 (same time as our youth group). We had pizza, salads, desserts and soft drinks. And we offered free childcare and activities for children who were not old enough to be in the youth group.

We had a big crowd. It was a great time for everyone to be introduced and begin to form relationships. The program part of the evening lasted for about an hour. It was the spark that interested everyone in the concept of a class on Sunday mornings just for parents.

3. The First Two Years –

The first two years – Parents In Conversation was advertised in our monthly newsletter, on our website and listed every week in the bulletin. It was always couched in positive language – i.e. “Come and tell us about your parenting successes.” “What works best for you as a parent?” “Come and celebrate the joys of parenting!”

I asked one of our children’s committee members to chair the class. She is a school counselor and very good at facilitating a fairly unstructured class...this takes someone with the ability to:

- ❖ Lead introductions in ways that will be interesting to everyone
- ❖ Able to form a covenant with the group and discuss the covenant frequently until the group fully understands the guidelines of being part of this class
- ❖ Move the conversation away from a non-stop talker – this is not a venue for a parishioner’s individual therapy session. That needs to be discussed with the group when drawing up a covenant. If you can have the covenant printed and posted in the room or printed to give to newcomers, you can handle that situation more easily. There will always be someone who needs verification of parenting and sometimes those people need to seek the advice of a professional. Other times the person is convinced that he/she has all of the right answers to parenting. Even if that person does, the group needs to share speaking time to succeed. When someone monopolizes the class in this way, it will be unhealthy for the class and the class will have a set back. If you or the class facilitator sees this being repeated, you will need to talk with the individual.



- ❖ Move the course of the conversation if it becomes argumentative
- ❖ Be a really good listener and know when the discussion needs to shift
- ❖ Motivate those who may be quiet or shy and will not readily offer opinions or suggestions, to talk. Many times the most thoughtful, thought-provoking comments will come from these quiet individuals.
- ❖ Find humor in the conversation
- ❖ Be comfortable with praying and bringing God language into the conversations
- ❖ Be compassionate

For the first two years we had a small core group (6 – 8) who attended Parents in Conversation each week. We had a larger group of parents who would show up when they weren't interested in other class offerings or a run to Target. I discovered that they would come if it was listed in the Sunday bulletin that our chair or I was addressing a specific issue of parenting.

For several years the class was known as a parent support group.

Everything was allowed on the table and everything was discussed from potty training to bed wetting to school selections to tattoos and body piercings to peer pressure.

When we had a critical mass (12) and could tell that the group was comfortable with talking openly and wanting more from the class, we introduced topics. We started by having the class read a parenting book over the summer. The book was discussed for the first four weeks of the programming year. The discussion was facilitated by two of our parents.

- Today, nine years later and after an extensive renovation of our facilities, we have our own room appropriately named "Parents In Conversation".
- We are absolutely blessed to have the same chair.
- The group has grown and changed over the years. We average 25 people each week.
- We begin most Sundays with introductions unless an outside speaker is with us.
- All subjects can still come to the table but not all can stay.
- We have a covenant with rules about privacy and confidentiality.



We have called on the expertise of our congregants.

- Therapists have discussed marriage, blended families, single parenting, anger issues, illegal and prescription drugs, thriving adults, thriving teens
- Psychologists have talked about child abuse, discipline.
- Teachers and school counselors have talked about bullying, peer pressure, keeping parents and school connections.
- A counselor from the Kentucky Department of State has led excellent classes on "Beyond the Birds and the Bees" – how to talk with your children about our bodies, and healthy relationships.
- Detectives from the police department have talked about internet crimes against children, drugs, alcohol.
- Adolescent drug counselors have talked about prescription drugs
- Priests have talked about "When Your Child Decides There Isn't a God", "Death"
- I have talked about the Spirituality of Parenting, Books that belong in every family's home, prayer, etc.
- Church School teachers have led classes about what their children are learning at church, "Godly Play" sessions for parents
- Our youth have come to talk with parents on several occasions
- The vestry comes to talk with the group once every semester
- Nutritionists have talked about eating right
- Doctors have talked about everything from children's skin and the sun to eating disorders
- A "Godly Play" trainer came in to lead the parents through an Introduction to "Godly Play" including a story

4. How we have measured the success of this program

- The class size continues to grow
- Parishioners are happy to be invited to speak to the class
- The vestry asked to be put on the speakers list which speaks to the fact that this often unheard group in a congregation (parents) has a voice
- This class has grown solid friendships
- Even when the subject is difficult, there is a sense of warmth and understanding
- This class has given new parishioners an easy group in which to belong



This class has had spin-offs:

1. Parents Night Out - A parenting co-op that meets at church one Saturday night each month
2. "Women In Conversation" One Morning a Week Bible Study for moms with young children (we offer childcare during the class)
3. I just had a grandparent ask for a "Grandparents In Conversation" class
4. "Women In Conversation...After Dark!" meets the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month. This is a book study based on theological reflections.

Books the group has read:

"Six Point Plan for Raising Happy, Healthy Children" by John Rosemond
"Nurture by Nature" Myer-Briggs way of looking at how your children are motivated
(This was facilitated by a Myer-Briggs facilitator and all of the parents took an on-line Myer-Briggs assessment before the two classes were held.)
"Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion & Sexuality" by Steve Clapp
"Getting It Right With Children" by Madelyn Swift
"The Five Love Languages" by Gary Chapman
"The Five Love Languages of Children" by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell
"What Size Are God's Shoes" by Tim Schenck
"How Full Is Your Bucket" by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton

Closing Prayer:

From "Women's Uncommon Prayers"

Lord, guard us, your children, wherever we wander,
Release us from pressures we cannot withstand,
Lift us high when we falter or founder,
Place our feet on rocks and not on sand.
Give us your hand as we walk through the darkness,
Strengthen our souls with bright hope from above,
Keep joy in our hearts against all the world's starkness,
And fill all our emptinesses with your love.
Amen. - Ms. Miranda K. Smith

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