

FORMING FRIENDSHIPS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH THE SEARCH

“The formation of friendships builds a stronger church community.”

Diane Rigotti

Director of RCIA / Faith Formation
Our Lady of Sorrows, New York

When the new Our Lady of Sorrows church building was constructed in 2013, the design allowed for the seating of 600 parishioners.

For the parish of Vestal, New York, 80 miles south of Syracuse, the disadvantage of a large space is that people can go to Mass together for years and not know one another. And that’s why the parish is “very big on faith-sharing and building community,” said Diane Rigotti, the director of RCIA and Faith Formation.

Having used the Alpha program for several years, Rigotti wanted to try something new as a follow-up for those who had been exploring the Catholic faith. The parish had subscribed to FORMED for five years and tapped its online programs for various ministries and activities: *Reborn* for baptismal preparation, SYMBOLON for RCIA, and Bible studies with the LECTIO studies on the Eucharist, prayer, and Mary.

To test the waters following the COVID-19 pandemic, Rigotti decided to offer THE SEARCH. Some parishioners were familiar with presenter Chris Stefanick from his appearance at the church years



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before, so Rigotti knew that the program would encourage discussion. In that first post-COVID offering, 30 people signed up to participate.

Once a week, the group met at 6:00 p.m. The first hour was devoted to dinner, with 30 minutes reserved to show that week's episode, followed by 30 minutes of discussion of questions from the accompanying study guide.

"Everyone enjoyed it," Rigotti said.

Participants appreciated the testimonies in each episode that offered several different views on each topic. The videos held their interest for 30 minutes, Rigotti said, and many feedback comments praised the series' cinematography.

"THE SEARCH reinforces our Catholic values and theology," Rigotti said. "For someone who's been away from the Church or has an issue, THE SEARCH helps us look at the Catholic side of things."

As someone who is used to putting in long hours of preparation for her work, Rigotti appreciated that "THE SEARCH is a very easy program to run."

Rigotti would preview each episode, look over the questions in the study guide, and choose four on which to concentrate during the half hour for discussion, with each table choosing one person to serve as leader.

"I would feel confident passing this off to another facilitator," Rigotti said.

Meeting again in person also gave Rigotti the opportunity to promote FORMED. Each time the group met, Rigotti would have papers on the tables that encouraged participants to check out other resources on [formed.org](https://www.formed.org).

"I can bring people to that site," Rigotti said. "My job is to plant the seed."

And for a parish that believes that friendship builds a stronger church community, the weekly discussions bore another kind of fruit.

"I always see new friendships that are formed," Rigotti said.



To learn more, contact **Brian Truckenbrod**
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