

Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

PDF generated November 07, 2015 by Kalin's PDF Creation Station WordPress plugin

Table Of Contents

The Catechumenate	3
Christian Initiation at St. Nicholas Catholic Church, Evanston: An Interview with Sister Christina Fuller, osf	9
A Sounding in the Ear: A Small Congregation's Experience with the Catechumenate	13
Great Conversations	17
Sprinkling the Whole Family	20
Feed My Sheep: A Journey toward Life Together	23
Customizing Your Catechumenate: Questions to Ask Before Getting Started (and After) ...	27
As I See It: Preaching With Catechumens Present	32
On the Way: Starting Again	37
Book Review: Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians To Baptism And Beyond by Paul E. Hoffman	39

The Catechumenate

by Frank C. Senn - Sunday, March 15, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/>



Of all the liturgical practices in the Roman Catholic Church that came out of the Second Vatican Council, arguably the most radical was the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in 1972 by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. With an eye on the explosion of Christianity in the global south and acknowledgment of the growing secularism in Europe and in the Americas that was alienating vast portions of the population from the Church, there was recognition that what the North African father Tertullian said in 200 A.D. was also true as the Church approached the year 2000: “Christians are made, not born.”

With the collapse of the culture of Christendom in Europe, its diminishment in North America, and the fertile new mission fields in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, one would not become a Christian by cultural osmosis. Whatever it took to make Christians, the Church would have to do it without the help of other cultural institutions. With attention to this missionary situation and with unexpected radicalism, the document promulgating the RCIA showed a true sign of renewal. It reversed more than a thousand years of initiation practices (Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion) and went back to the church orders of the ancient church to find a model for the present missionary situation. The late Ralph Keifer described it as a liturgical revolution. “Under the aegis of an ecumenical council, with the approval of the Roman see, and over the signature of the Roman pontiff, the primary rites of initiation...have been turned upside down and inside out, heralding a cry to begin a reform and renewal of the most radical sort.”¹

The ritual spectrum and ceremonial details of the RCIA are extensive.² But as Ralph Keifer’s teacher and mine at the University of Notre Dame, Father Aidan Kavanagh, osb, observed, “The importance of the restored rites of adult initiation lies...less in its ceremonial details than in its strategic vision of the Church local and universal. It is a practicable vision of what the Church is and can become through the continuing renewal process of evangelization, conversion, catechesis, and the paschal sacraments of Christian initiation.”³

Evangelism, conversion, catechesis, and the sacraments of initiation—Baptism and Holy Communion—is what the RCIA is all about. This can hardly be a “program.” It is the very life and mission of the Church. It requires a lot of the congregation. But what does the church have to do that is more important than making new Christians who are true disciples of Christ? This assumes, of course, that the church is evangelizing, which is really the first stage of the RCIA. Doing all the stages requires all the resources the local church can muster and not every parish or congregation has the energy or the will to undertake this task. Non-Roman Catholic Churches have been reluctant to take it on, even though some resources have been available for some time now.⁴ We have remained fixated on infant baptism as the primary way in which people are received into the church, making provision for the baptism of older youth and adults as need arises. In contrast, without at all abandoning the practice of infant baptism, the Catholic Church in its radical reversal of initiatory norm made adult baptism the norm and within this norm also provided for the baptism of young children. This is evident in the report on the practice of the RCIA at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Evanston, included in this issue of *Let's Talk*. The result is that each year at the Easter Vigil thousands of new adult Christians are baptized in Roman Catholic Churches throughout the United States—and hundreds of thousands throughout the world. Local parishes are not left to their own devices in the RCIA; dioceses are involved in the process, as is the case in the Archdiocese of Chicago. I had once suggested that our synods should also be involved in the catechumenate.⁵

Perhaps one of the reasons for the success of the RCIA in the Roman Catholic Church has been the work, over a period of three decades since its founding in 1981, of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate. The Forum had to disband in 2013 for lack of funds. But during its heyday it played a starring role in shaping formation ministries across the United States and Canada that centered in an immersive, experiential approach to Christian initiation. Bible study ceased to be an academic exercise and became, in Kavanagh's words, “conversion therapy.” “Catechesis helps the convert reassemble his or her personality and life around the new center of gravity which is God revealed in Christ Jesus.”⁶ Institutes of the Forum on the Catechumenate emphasized not only catechesis and liturgical ritual, but also community life and pastoral service. “It isn't only head knowledge,” said Vicky Tufano, a pastoral associate at Ascension Catholic Church in Oak Park, who helped lead Forum institutes since 1987, “It is about the whole person coming into a relationship with God.” The catechumenate upends the seeker's assumptions about God, the world, and even the church, and catechists are the ones who lead catechumens through this process of conversion, assisted by the catechumens' parish-appointed sponsors.

In its early years, the Forum sometimes had 50 to 75 institutes a year in the United States and Canada. Some institutes had 150 participants. There could be 7,500 to 10,000 people a year participating in Forum institutes. The Forum's biggest legacy is the thousands of lay ministers it helped to train as evangelists, sponsors, and catechists in the RCIA in Catholic parishes and dioceses. Tufano said, “I think Forum helped create in this country a really strong understanding of what Christian initiation is about, and people who have that vision will continue to pass that on.”

As with The Liturgical Conference, which was originally a Catholic organization devoted to liturgical renewal that became ecumenical in 1979, so non-Catholics began to participate in the Forum's institutes—even some Lutheran pastors and lay people. Now Lutheran pastors and congregations are catching on that some version of the RCIA is a tried and true and ecumenical way of making Christians.

There's nothing new about this for Lutherans. It's just taken a while for the message to get out. The very first order in *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (1982) is “Enrollment of

Candidates for Baptism” (pp. 13-15). Locally, I gave a workshop on “The Process of Making Christians: The RCIA” at a Parish Life Conference of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod in 1993.⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) has provided an expanded order for the enrollment of catechumens.⁸

This issue of *Let's Talk* features reports on several congregations in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod that have implemented some version of the adult catechumenate and the rites of Christian initiation. We trust there are others. We hope that during this Lenten season catechumens are being prepared for their baptism and first communion at the Easter Vigil in congregations throughout our synod and the ELCA and in other congregations and church bodies as well. Lutheranism, among the Christian traditions, has emphasized the premier role of Baptism in the life of the church and in the personal Christian life. Our theology says that this is where we should be putting our emphasis in congregational life—inviting people to the font.

Let me tell a story about invitation. At Immanuel in Evanston an active church family with several children always sat in the front pew. The father had been raised in the Jewish tradition but increasingly attended worship with the rest of the family. I wasn't too surprised when I saw him singing the hymns and chants because he liked music. But the Sunday I saw him reciting the Creed I went up to him after the service and said, “Charly, if you're going to confess the Trinitarian faith you've got to get baptized.” He was surprised but readily agreed. He became my first real adult catechumen according to the process of the RCIA. He was enrolled as a catechumen on the First Sunday in Lent and met with me during the week for catechetical instruction. (Okay, he was a man with a Ph.D. so I threw in Luther's *Large Catechism* as well as Karl Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*, which was a commentary on the Apostles' Creed.) On the Third Sunday in Lent I presented the Gospels and the Creed to Charly and to my confirmands. (See my [“As I See It” column](#) in this issue of *Let's Talk*.) On the Fourth Sunday in Lent I presented the Lord's Prayer to this group. On the Fifth Sunday these texts were recited back. We included prayers for Charly in the Intercessions. His whole family (all six of them) served as his baptismal sponsors. The whole congregation was so excited about what was happening that we had a really good attendance at the Easter Vigil that year for Charly's Baptism and First Communion. Charly was the first of several other catechumens over the years—including one baptism that had to be delayed until the Pentecost Vigil one year because of a late start on catechesis, with the whole choir serving as sponsors.

With this introduction we offer in this issue of *Let's Talk* reports from congregations that have had experience with the catechumenate. It seems appropriate to begin with [a report from a Catholic parish](#) since the Roman Catholic Church pioneered the retrieval of the rites of Christian initiation of adults and the catechumenate. I interviewed Sister Christina Fuller, osf, who is the Director of Religious Education of St. Nicholas Catholic Parish in Evanston and coordinates the catechumenal process. The reader will see similar processes being used in several of our synod congregations.

These rites of Christian Initiation were retrieved and implemented at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Chicago. In [“A Sounding in the Ear.”](#) Pastor Monte Johnson explains the roots of the term “catechumen” and describes a process at Immanuel that lasts from Advent through Pentecost. Immanuel draws into its catechumenate adults who need to be baptized, adults who desire to renew their Baptism, and parents who desire Baptism for their young children. Pastor Johnson provides an outline of what happens in the catechumenate and with the newly baptized after Easter at each stage along the journey.

Krista Kapp, a Discipleship Director, and the Rev. Timothy Brown, Pastor, submit [a report on the](#)

[intentional development of a catechumenate at Luther Memorial Church, Chicago](#) after a group in the congregation read Paul Hoffman's *Faith Forming Faith* (reviewed in this issue—see below). Luther Memorial has catechetical seasons in both the Fall and the Spring leading to reception of new members on All Saints' Sunday and at the Easter Vigil. This has proven to be a successful way of drawing new members into the congregation. As in the other reports, the role of the sponsors at Luther Memorial is crucial to the faith formation and integration of new members.

With the increasing emphasis on the Christian initiation of adults we cannot forget that our Lutheran congregations are still baptizing infants and young children. PJ Malin, Pastor for Family Life for Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Naperville, describes a [small group effort to work with parents who desire their children to be baptized](#). As baptism increased in importance in the lives of the parents and the congregation, it provided a welcome environment for unbaptized adults to come forward seeking baptism—particularly Pastor Malin's father.

We hear from someone who has gone through the catechumenal process as a young adult leading to [a meaningful renewal of baptism](#). Marcus Lohrmann is a Master of Divinity student at the University of Chicago Divinity School serving at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chicago as a field education seminarian. Pastor Craig Mueller has involved him in organizing a catechumenate at Holy Trinity.

The retrieved catechumenate has been around long enough to evaluate its effectiveness. Pastor Mark D. Williamson, my co-editor on this issue, [wrote about the catechumenal process at St. Paul Lutheran in Wheaton](#) in a previous issue of *Let's Talk* from 2012. Here, in his piece "[Customizing Your Catechumenate: Questions to Ask Before Getting Started \(and After\)](#)," with the benefit of four years of hindsight, he offers guidance on some of the key questions pastors and other leaders wishing to design a catechumenate will want to sort through as they prepare for launch.

For my "As I See It" column I offer [a sample sermon for preaching in the presence of catechumens](#)—and the possibly bewildered congregation at St. Luke's Episcopal Parish in Evanston to whom I preach it on the third Sunday in Lent. (I had been invited as the Sunday morning guest preacher during Lent in 2014 with the expectation of giving attention to the catechumenate and mystagogy⁹—instruction on the sacraments). I also offer some ritual possibilities for the "handing over" of the gospels to the catechumens and make a not so subtle argument for the restoration of exorcism. I think we miss the mark if we don't make use of the opportunities for effective ritual offered in the rites of Christian initiation.

Our other regular columnist, Benjamin Dueholm, writes about his congregation's [experiment with a catechumenate group](#). He raises the important question: how can congregational cultures formed by the more "easy access" church growth philosophy adapt to this older, more intensive form of making disciples? What do we do with those who come into the church with practically no background in Christian faith and life? The catechumenate seems to be the answer and it has the advantage of being adaptable to the various faith-situations of our seekers—more than just a two- or three-week new member class, in my view.

Finally, the Rev. Heidi Haverkamp, the vicar (pastor) of The Episcopal Church of St. Benedict, Bolingbrook, [reviews *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians To Baptism And Beyond* by Paul E. Hoffman](#). Hoffman describes a catechumenal process called The WAY that he implemented in Seattle, Washington, which is a highly unchurched section of our country. Haverkamp acknowledges that the

rigorous intentionality of Hoffman's seven-month program can be off-putting to many pastors and people in the church.

This issue of *Let's Talk* is being posted close to Holy Week when the rites of Christian initiation come to a climax in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion at the Easter Vigil. Those who have the catechumenate in their congregation may compare notes with the reports given here. Those who want to implement this process (it is not a program!) in their congregation now have plenty of time to prepare for next Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, since the gathering of seekers needs to begin in the fall.

The reports in this issue indicate that there is no one way to do the catechumenate. There is just a general agreement that the aim of the process is conversion, that conversion can't be rushed, and that there must be follow-up beyond Baptism or Affirmation of Baptism. There is no better preparation for pastors who want to implement the RCIA in their congregation than to immerse themselves in the study of the Church's practice of baptism and its associated catechumenate. You have to know the tradition in order to adapt it to your local context. Current scholarship resists seeing uniformity in the sacramental practices of the ancient church, only a trajectory.¹⁰ There was not one way of doing the catechumenate in the ancient church either. But there was unanimity in the belief that God the Holy Spirit is at work through the sacraments instituted by Christ to make disciples of Christ. Pastoral experience today suggests that we need to take seriously Tertullian's dictum from ca. 200 A.D., "Christians are made, not born."

With that we invite the readers, as always, into the conversation—but hopefully also into the task of implementing the catechumenate and full rites of Christian initiation in their congregation.

[Frank Senn](#)

Notes

1. [^]Ralph Keifer, "Christian Initiation: The State of the Question," in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate* from The Murphy Center for Liturgical Research (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 138.
2. [^]See *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1976), 3-181.
3. [^]Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1976).
4. [^]See the *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997); *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997); *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997); *Welcome to Christ: preparing Adults for Baptism and Discipleship*, Videotape (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998); *Welcome to Christ: A Sponsor's Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).
5. [^]See Frank C. Senn, *The Witness of the Worshiping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 149-64.
6. [^]Aidan Kavanagh, "Catechesis: Formation in Stages," in Michael W. Merriman, ed., *The Baptismal Mystery and the Catechumenate* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), 39.
7. [^]Frank C. Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 28-39. I

included two chapters on the catechumenate and Christian initiation in *The Witness of the Worshiping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 134-64.

8. [△]See “Welcome to Baptism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leaders Desk Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 592-95. See the commentary on the catechumenate in Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages. Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 79-95.
 9. [△]In the ancient church bishops withheld instruction on the sacraments (*mysteria* in Greek) until after the catechumens were baptized and communed at the Easter Vigil. During the Week of White Robes following Easter Day they preached mystagogical catecheses—instructions in the sacrament.
 10. [△]See Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: A Pueblo Book, The Liturgical Press, 1999); Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, Second Edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144-70; Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2014), 135-175.
-

Christian Initiation at St. Nicholas Catholic Church, Evanston: An Interview with Sister Christina Fuller, osf

by Frank C. Senn - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/christian-initiation-at-st-nicholas-catholic-church-evanston-an-interview-with-sister-christina-fuller-osf/>

The St. Nicholas Catholic Church building is an imposing gothic structure on Ridge Avenue in south Evanston whose tall steeple is a visible landmark. The parish was founded by German-speaking Luxembourgers in 1887 who embraced German-speaking Catholic immigrants from Germany and Poland who lived in nearby communities. The neo-gothic structure was erected in 1904-06.

St. Nicholas Parish has served a variety of other immigrant groups over the years. African-American Catholics became a growing element within the St. Nicholas Parish during the Evanston school busing conversations in the 1960s. Caribbean Blacks, especially from Haiti, and Blacks from various African nations followed in later decades. And the closing of Ascension Parish in 1990 brought a thriving Hispanic community to St. Nicholas and reestablished the parish as a multilingual community with a significant immigrant population.

An extensive renovation and reconfiguration of the interior took place over a period of nine years beginning in 1991. One notable feature of the renewal is the placement of the altar, at the crossing of the nave and transept, with seating for the assembly circling it. Another striking addition to the space is the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, painted by renowned Mexican artist Octavio Ocampo. I think the most notable new feature is a baptismal pool located in what had been the chancel area of the old configuration. A main door from the parking lot alongside the Pope John XXIII School brings worshipers into the building through the apse. The space and the altar were dedicated by Francis Cardinal George on June 5th, 2000.

Hispanic ministry, social ministry outreach, and liturgical renewal all flourished under the pastor emeritus, Father Robert Oldershaw. Several lay members who worked for Liturgy Training Institute of the Archdiocese of Chicago and served on the Board of The Liturgical Conference undoubtedly made a contribution to the vibrant liturgical life of the parish. Not the least of these liturgical developments was an Easter Vigil that has become the liturgical high point of the year and the implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) with its catechumenate. The RCIA has been in the parish since 1982.

The catechumenal process is coordinated by Sister Christina Fuller, osf. Sr. Christina is officially the Director of Religious Education of the parish. I visited with Sr. Christina in the St. Nicholas Rectory. What follows is the content of my interview and Sr. Christina's answers to my questions. This is not a verbatim, but she has seen and agreed to this report.

I first asked about her role in the RCIA at St. Nick's. She said that she has coordinated the RCIA team since 1995. The RCIA team consists of volunteer members of the parish who recruit and train sponsors and catechists.

How are candidates for the RCIA gathered at St. Nick's? Every available means is used. Invitations are placed in the parish bulletin in August because the catechumenal program begins in September. Parishioners invite their friends to seek baptism. Some people respond after seeing the rites celebrated at the Easter Vigil or from attending masses during Holy Week and desiring to make a deeper commitment. People inquire. Sr. Christina said that many call in January, perhaps because of making a New Year's Resolution to get baptized.

Sr. Christina distinguished between different categories of persons who participate in the RCIA. Among those who inquire are some people who identify themselves as Catholics but had never received the sacraments. Some African-Americans and Hispanics, for example, might have grown up in a family that considered itself Catholic but they were not raised in the church. But there may also be inquirers who were baptized as young children but were not confirmed or communed. There are also people who come from other Christian traditions who need to be received into the Catholic faith. So the persons who are enrolled in the catechumenate are distinguished in terms of catechumens who need full initiation, candidates who are completing initiation (Confirmation and First Communion), and baptized candidates from other Christian traditions who are making a full profession of faith. But they all go through the same formation because, as Sr. Christina said, they witness to one another. And sometimes inquirers have already done some studying of Catholicism before being enrolled and may know more than others.

How many catechumens and candidates are you dealing with, on average? In recent years the number of catechumens and candidates has ranged from 7 to 13. But there is a great diversity in this small group. They might be multi-lingual and multi-cultural: from Nigeria, Brazil, and Spanish-speakers. They may range in age from children through older adults. Sometimes a whole family is preparing for initiation. If possible, younger children are placed in a separate group.

Are young children baptized at the Easter Vigil? Sr. Christina said no, except if a whole family is baptized together. The baptism of young children takes place on Easter Day and at other times. Some parents prefer a separate day for the baptism of their young children.

Are sponsors recruited for every catechumen and candidate? Yes. The team looks for people who practice their faith and can walk with their candidate not only through the catechumenal process but for a year after their baptism. The sponsors are expected to contact the newly-baptized at least once a month for a year after their baptism.

In terms of the content of the catechumenal program, I asked if catechumens are engaged in acts of ministry. Sr. Christina said that the parish RCIA team has not intentionally provided for this, but that sponsors may also bring the catechumens and candidates into the activities of the parish, including social ministry projects such as soup kitchens.

How often do the catechumens and sponsors meet? There are weekly meetings from September through Easter, and then after Baptism until Pentecost.

What would be the content of the catechesis? Sr. Christina said that the study of Scripture, especially from the Sunday lectionary, is primary. This includes discussion of how to read the Bible. Theological issues are addressed. Who is God? Who is Christ? The concept of sacramentality is explored along with the sacraments observed in the Catholic Church. The Church's moral teachings are also presented and

what it means to be the Church.

I noted that in the ancient church instruction on the sacraments or mysteries (mystagogy) took place after the newly baptized had experienced Baptism and Holy Communion. Sr. Christina agreed that this was so. The post-baptismal classes at St. Nick's discuss how Christians live the sacramental life.

The rites of election and the scrutinies are intended to be public rites in the RCIA. How are those handled at St. Nick's? Sr. Christina said that all catechumens in all the parishes of the archdiocese are presented to the archbishop during Lent. This happens five times during Lent. Holy Name Cathedral is filled each time with catechumens, their sponsors, and families. The point is that they are not becoming members of a parish but of the Catholic Church. So there has to be a way for the bishop to be involved in the process of Christian initiation. This was the practice of Cardinal George and it is expected to continue under Archbishop Cupich.

The handing over of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer takes place in the catechumenal class sessions and these texts are repeated back at Morning Prayer on Holy Saturday.

We talked about the practice of Baptism and First Communion at the Easter Vigil at St. Nick's. I noted the impressive baptismal pool that has been installed in the sanctuary and asked how baptism in the pool is handled. Sr. Christina replied that the candidates know they will get wet, so they are told to wear something suitable. They have not taken to wearing bathing suits (Easter can be pretty cold in the Chicago area), but they might wear old pants and a t-shirt. They also remove shoes and socks. They kneel down in the water and water is poured over their heads. They will dry off, change clothes, and put on an alb afterward.

What about the pastor? Fr. Bill Tkachuk also goes barefoot into the pool wearing an alb and stole. He changes vestments afterward.

(I didn't ask, but I assume that suitable songs—litanies, psalms, hymns—are sung while everyone is changing clothes.)

In the Eucharist the newly baptized present the bread and wine at the offertory. They also stand around the altar to receive First Communion as a group. (The altar stands at the crossing of the gothic transepts on a circular platform.)

I asked about Confirmation, since that is usually administered by the bishop in the Catholic Church. Sr. Christina said that the archbishop gives authority to parish pastors to confirm those who are baptized at the Easter Vigil. The bishop's involvement with these candidates is at the rite of election. Otherwise the baptized have to be confirmed at the cathedral or when the bishop comes annually to visit the parish.

Finally, I asked Sr. Christina for her assessment of the RCIA in general and its use at St. Nick's. She replied that "it is always a process, never a program." People come into the catechumenate with different motives and needs and there is always the issue of balancing individual need with the communal life of the Church. Those who are enrolled as catechumens need to be committed to the process. "If they are not committed to the process, they may not be committed as Christians," she said. Sr. Christina added, "I tell people that if I'm working too hard to help you, this may not be the right time for you to be making this

journey.” (This struck me as good advice for all pastors!)

In conclusion, Sr. Christina said, “The RCIA works at St. Nick’s because of good liturgies and good catechists. Sponsors are also key. They have to make the faith journey with the candidates.”

A Sounding in the Ear: A Small Congregation's Experience with the Catechumenate

by Monte Johnson - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/a-sounding-in-the-ear-a-small-congregations-experience-with-the-catechumenate/>

People come to Immanuel Lutheran in Chicago for a variety of reasons and from diverse backgrounds:

Lindsay was baptized Catholic and grew up Episcopalian—sort of. She's an entrepreneurial young artist piecing together a living as a choreographer, dance instructor and acting educator. She's engaged to a Missouri Synod Lutheran man. Finding a shared faith community is important to them. But what kind of faith tradition (or blend of them) can she call her own?

Chrissy is a mother of three. She and her husband grew up in Salvation Army families. A few years ago, they blazed their own religious trail and were baptized in Lake Michigan as part of a small emergent Christian community. Soon after, they came to our church looking for a children's ministry. Now Chrissy wants to know more about the Lutheran church she and her family regularly attend, but are not members of. What does the church teach? What does she believe? Is it time for her children to be baptized at the Easter Vigil? Or perhaps another of the four baptismal festivals we have sprinkled through the Church year?

Ron has been a member of Immanuel for more than fifty years. On any given Sunday, he's likely to be an usher, or worship assistant, or leading silent prayer. At various times, he's been the treasurer of the congregation or the endowment fund. Longer than most can remember, he's provided support to our current treasurer—as her spouse. Now, he feels called to deepen and renew his faith. How is God calling him to serve in this chapter of his life?

Lindsay, Chrissy and Ron (with six others) will affirm their baptism at the Easter Vigil this year. Each person brings important spiritual and religious questions. Accompanying them on their journey of faith is a great privilege of ministry, not to mention fun. Yet, how is any church, let alone a smaller congregation where the average attendance at worship is 75, supposed to respond? Resources are limited and time is scarce. What can meet the spiritual hunger of life-long Lutherans, the unchurched, the differently churched, and the nominally churched—while at the same time satisfying ELCA constitutional definitions of church membership?

Fortunately, the long history of the church provides an answer. It is called the catechumenate, an ancient process of preparing adults for baptism. For more than a thousand years, Christians lived, worked and thrived in times like our own—when newcomers rarely arrived fully formed in faith, and/or when people could be attracted to the mission of the church, but seldom to the cause of protecting or preserving the institution.

From the Greek *akuou* (the ear) and *katekeo* (to sound into the ear), the word *catechumenate* comes from the same root as *catchesis* and *catechism*. Pope John XXIII brought the catechumenate back with Vatican

II. Roman Catholics follow the catechumenate for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) by which one joins the church, either by baptism or affirmation of baptism.

While in the Roman Church the catechumenate is for seekers, at Immanuel we've opened the catechumenate also to longtime members like Ron who seek to renew their faith. Our group each year typically divides evenly between members and new friends of the congregation. The catechumenate is a way to explore with others how we are called to love and serve God as life circumstances change.

A lay-led Baptismal Living Team coordinates the catechumenate at our church. The team includes a catechist, a lead sponsor, a special liturgical trainer, and small group leaders. Several members of this team received training by attending a workshop of the North American Association of the Catechumenate (NAAC). Training helped form a nucleus of committed leaders who understood the process and could work together to get the project off the ground.

On The Way is divided into four steps: Inquire, Explore, Prepare and Discover. The Inquire series begins in Advent. We finish with Discover sometime during Easter. Participants proceed from one stage to the next at their own pace. Some may take several years to complete all four. We typically gather for 90 minutes after Sunday worship. Sessions include fellowship over a light lunch and childcare is available. Each step has a unique theme.

INQUIRE: (In Advent, typically three sessions)

This is a time structured around the specific questions and doubts of participants, whatever they may be.

- It's a relaxed time of sharing stories and talking about Christian life: the roles of grace, belief, worship, service and community.
- The culmination of this Inquire period comes with the *Rite of Welcome* on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord for those who choose to continue their journey with us *On the Way*.

EXPLORE (in Epiphany, typically three sessions)

Participants in this step have the opportunity to study, pray, and to travel the landscape of the Christian life in the Lutheran tradition.

- Focus is on prayer, the scriptures, the creeds, and the liturgy.
- Participants are joined by "sponsors" from the congregation to walk with them on the way of Christ. These relationships can become life-long supportive friendships.
- This step is marked by a *Rite of Enrollment* at worship on the First Sunday of Lent. Participants are given the title of "Catechumen" if not baptized, or "Affirmer" if moving toward Affirmation of Baptism.

PREPARE (in Lent, typically four sessions)

This part of the journey coincides with the season of Lent. We become immersed in the meaning of Baptism and Eucharist.

- Looking backward we see ways God has been preparing us. Looking forward we see the waters of new life at the great Vigil of Easter.
- We pass on the prayers and blessings of the congregation in special rites and gifts.
- At The Great Vigil of Easter we experience the Rite of Baptism/Affirmation of Baptism. Afterward we celebrate in honor of all who have been baptized or affirmed their baptism.

DISCOVER (in the Easter season, this year a one-day retreat)

Throughout the Fifty Days of Easter, participants continue to explore what it means to live out their baptism in daily life. Discover focuses on discernment of vocation.

- Participants recognize the gifts God has already given them, and prepare to use those gifts in future service in the Body of Christ and in the world.
- This step of the journey is noted by the *Rite of Affirmation of Christian Vocation*—this year on the Third Sunday of Easter.

The rites of Christian worship are beautiful and powerful, but they can be emptied of much of their meaning if they aren't backed up by something real among those involved. You can't fake it. Relationships take time to develop. Belonging built upon Affirmation of Baptism presupposes personal belief and acceptance in what is being affirmed. We each find our own path through the forest of doubts, experiences and questions to reach the point of shared confession. Some traverse the distance between received and owned faith quickly. For others, it takes years. There can be serious obstacles to overcome. No matter how long the journey, Christian faith forms best when each step can be accompanied by the worshipping community and a Christian friend or sponsor.

Each congregation seems to find their own name for the catechumenate. At Immanuel we noticed that “on the way” is a recurring theme in Mark’s gospel, which identifies disciples as those who walk with Jesus (Mark 8:27; 9:33-34; 10:17; 10:32 and 10:46). Of course, “The Way” was also a name used among early Christians to describe themselves (Acts 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Martin Luther provided the final inspiration for us with these beautiful, very modern sounding words:

*This life, therefore, is not godliness
but the process of becoming godly,
not health but getting well,
not being but becoming,
not rest but exercise.*

*We are not now what we shall be,
but are **on the way**.*

The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on.

This is not the goal but it is the right road.

*At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle,
but everything is being cleansed.*

On The Way is a time to inquire, explore, prepare and discover—a process of spiritual growth and renewal where we gather around the word of God and reflect on our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is a place where our questions, doubts and hopes are all welcomed as we look for answers together. It is a way to build Christian community upon the bedrock of Word and Sacrament.

Based on our experiences at Immanuel, I believe introducing a catechumenal process like *On the Way* could be an answer to prayer for many contemporary congregations and faith leaders.

Great Conversations

by Krista Kapp and Timothy Brown - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/great-conversations/>

How do we cultivate Christians in a culture where Christianity is once again (and for the better) a choice? How do we begin to change church structure to be highly invitational, highly relational, and to have higher expectations than previous generations had experienced the church? How do we integrate new members into a fast growing church in such a way that our back door shrinks even as our front door expands?

These questions were the start of some great conversation at Luther Memorial Church of Chicago, and it led to what we call The Great Conversation, our new membership program.

In doing some research, the pastor and two key lay leaders became greatly influenced by a little book entitled *Faith Forming Faith* by Pastor Paul Hoffman of Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, Washington. Pr. Hoffman had integrated a *catechumenate* model into his church as it welcomed new members, and his exposition on the work was not only inspiring, it was also practical.

The Great Conversation (“TGC”) was born out of the discussions and prayerful reflection that happened after reading this story of faith formation that is both ancient and modern.

In developing TGC, we sought guidance not only from this book, but also from history. What has the church historically done to integrate new people into talking about matters of faith and spirituality? The answer, we found, was the *Catechumenate*. *Catechism* (literally means “to sound down to the ears”) functioned in the ancient church as a way to introduce people to what it meant to be Christian, a Christ-follower, in a culture where Christianity was a choice. Newcomers were paired with long-time church goers to engage in a process of conversation, spiritual discipline, and education that fostered faith.

If you’re reading this with an eye toward the practical, here’s how we organize it. TGC is presently held twice a year, once in the Fall leading up to All Saints Sunday and during Lent culminating at the Easter Vigil. Prior to the start of each session, we seek current church members to volunteer as sponsors who are then paired with new members or Catechumenates through the Catechumenates’ journey of faith, spirituality, inquiry and exploration. TGC provides an open environment of welcome discussion where the Catechumenates and their sponsors can engage in conversation over topics such as “Church,” “God,” “Jesus,” and “Religion.” It’s a time of formation and information, where we learn by experiencing together. A safe place to discuss and at times even question faith—where there are no wrong answers.

So, how does it work? Two members serve as Discipleship Directors to lead the Catechumenates and the sponsors during each session. Prior to the commencement of each session of TGC, the discipleship directors and our Pastor put together a list of potential Catechumenates and sponsors from people within the congregation who show interest in membership or in renewing their faith (Catechumenates), and who have the gifts and abilities to help foster faith in others (sponsors). Our Pastor and the discipleship directors then contact the potential participants to confirm their participation, allowing room for the Holy

Spirit to do some work, too. It is made clear that participation in every session is expected, and that if a participant is going to miss more than two sessions, that they wait for another time where they'll be free to participate more fully.

We want this to be an intentional process. The requirements are high, and so are the stakes. We're talking about the future of Christ's work at this church, in this neighborhood, in this city, and in this world.

Once a list of participants is confirmed, the Discipleship Directors and the Pastor prayerfully and mindfully pair Catechumenates with sponsors so that the relationship will be mutually beneficial. At the beginning of each session we schedule a kick-off dinner for all participants at which time we introduce the Catechumenates to their sponsors. In addition, we watch a video (in the *Animate: Faith* series by Sparkhouse) to introduce a discussion topic (God, Jesus, Spirituality, etc.) after which the Catechumenates and their sponsors discuss the topic coming from their own perspective, and hopefully great conversation ensues.

For the next six weeks, all of the Catechumenates and their sponsors meet, discuss, learn and reflect on video topics or additional subjects such as Martin Luther, our local congregation and stewardship. At Luther Memorial, TGC takes place during the hour between our morning services to allow for those attending the early service to stay for an hour, or for those coming to the later service to come an hour early and then stay for services. We do this with an eye toward our young families who want to participate, but for whom weeknights are already over-scheduled.

At the end of the six weeks, the Catechumenates are welcomed into the congregation after a blessing during the Great Easter Vigil in the Spring and All Saints Sunday in the Fall with huge festival celebrations.

We also ask each "pairing" to find a time to share a meal together outside of church. We believe it is important to the spiritual growth of each Catechumenate to develop a relationship with their sponsor in order to feel they can freely inquire and explore their faith and membership with their sponsor—in addition to the resultant benefit of spotting someone at this new church they know and can sit with during worship. Further, we ask that each pairing meet to participate in a service activity in the community or through our church such as buying groceries for our refugee family, serving at the local food pantry or assisting the night ministry.

If you're reading with an eye toward the theological, here is why we do it: to create new Christians and strengthen long-time Christians. We do it to integrate a community that is constantly in flux. We do it to allow people to have meaningful conversation about faith and life and where they intersect in a world where such forums are becoming more and more scarce and homogenized.

We do it because God has called us to.

Over the last three years, we have successfully welcomed approximately 100 new members through TGC at Luther Memorial. TGC has served not only to be a journey of faith and service for the Catechumenates, but I believe for the sponsors as well. In this way, we have welcomed new members to our church and at the same time renewed the faith and involvement of long-time members.

It has done the Godly work of moving us forward while also bringing us back to our early church roots.

Sprinkling the Whole Family

by PJ Malin - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/sprinkling-the-whole-family/>



Sometimes we need new wineskins. When Jesus came to earth, God was doing something new and exciting. Sadly, the people had a hard time receiving this new move of God because of their old patterns of thought and religious practice. In response Jesus said, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins. The wine would burst the wineskins, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine needs new wineskins” (Mark 2:22).

About two years ago, our church realized we needed some new wineskins when it came to baptism. Of course nothing was faulty with the sacrament itself. It remained a powerful means of grace packed with God’s life-giving, life-transforming promises. But we made two discoveries that helped us realize we needed some new thinking and some new approaches to the sacrament of baptism. Both discoveries had

to do with parents.

The first discovery was a sad one. Our church was baptizing a lot of children every year. That sounds exciting! However, we noticed that a large number of parents who brought their children to be baptized were leaving the church as quickly as they came.

The second discovery was a game changer. Our children's ministry came across a few statistics that have since changed the way we approach children's ministry. They learned that parents have way more time with their kids than we ever could. If a parent brought their child to church every week, the most time we would have with them in a year is around 40 hours. In contrast, a parent has roughly 3000 hours with their child. Just by the sheer amount of time a parent has with their child, they are the most influential person in a child's faith development. Research supports this truth. In a survey of young adults who stayed with the faith after graduating high school, almost all of them said the most influential person in their faith journey was a parent. And that is how God meant for it to be. In Deuteronomy 6, God calls parents to be the primary spiritual leaders in their children's lives. So it occurred to us that if we wanted to have the biggest impact on a child's spiritual life, we cannot simply focus on the children. We have to focus on the parents too!¹

Together, these two discoveries challenged us to consider new wine skins when it came to how we thought about and approached baptism. In the past, we had 1 hour-long class that parents attended before the baptism of their child. Maybe it was time to try something new.

Around the same time we were having this conversation, we were experiencing the growth of small group ministry in our church. It was clear that small groups were a powerful way to help people connect in a church, build close friendships, and grow spiritually. We began to explore the idea of hosting a three-week small group experience for parents who were baptizing their children. The concept was simple. We wanted to create a small group that helped families connect with others in the church. We also wanted to help parents see the significant role they play in the spiritual lives of their children and give parents tools to be successful in their role.

We started with leaders. We contacted couples from our church who were passionate about God and passionate about connecting with new families, and we invited them to be hosts for the baptism small group. These host couples are the ones making the initial contact with baptism families. They are present at every gathering. They build relationships throughout the small group. And they help with follow up by attending the baptisms and then inviting the parents back to other family related activities.

Next, we developed a small group study guide. This guide has been tweaked and revised several times, yet the major content is the same. The theme of the first week is "Beginning with the End in Mind." We talk about the kind of people we hope our children become and how to guide them in that direction from the very beginning, starting with baptism. In the second week, we focus on how the parents can deepen their own walk with God. In the final week, we talk about the many ways our church can support and partner with parents. Each of these sessions is relational and conversational, rather than a lecture style format.

God has been pouring new wine into our new wineskins. Do some families still disappear after the baptism? Unfortunately, yes. But we have noticed a lot more of the baptism families sticking around after

the baptism. Some have become new members.² Some have joined other small groups. But the most exciting results are transformed lives. We had couples tell us, “We’ve talked more about God in the past three weeks than we have in our entire relationship.” We have seen healing and reconciliation between parents who were no longer married but went through the small group together. We have seen parents baptized with their children. We have heard parents telling us about the new faith practices they are doing with their children.

This started as a tool to help a parent with their child, yet God used it to help a child with their parent. Early in 2014, I began having deeper faith conversations with my dad. He had not been baptized as a child and he did not have a close relationship with God as an adult. I used this small group study to talk with my dad about baptism and about a life of faith with God. To my joy and astonishment, my dad decided to be baptized at our church. He made the trip from his home state of Hawaii to Illinois where he was baptized in April. Since then, my dad has continued to grow in his walk with God. We read the Bible and talk about it together every day. My dad regularly worships with a church in his home state, and he is genuinely seeking to honor God in his work, in his relationships, and in his actions.

This journey of new wineskins and new wine has been exciting. People are still being baptized. But now, more than ever before, we are seeing God sprinkle the whole family through this amazing sacrament. I would be happy to share more about this baptism small group model with anyone who is interested, but I do not presume it is the right fit for every church. Nevertheless, I would challenge everyone to prayerfully consider what new wineskins God might be leading you toward in order for his new wine to be poured out through the sacrament of baptism.

Notes

1. [^]Reggie Joiner’s book *Think Orange* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009) in particular helped us arrive at these insights.
 2. [^]Parents are not required to be members in order to have their child baptized with us. Many are not. Some are regular visitors or they heard about our church through a friend or family member. The child becomes a member at baptism, but the parents are not yet. Several of the parents have gone through the New Member Class after going through our small group and having their child baptized.
-

Feed My Sheep: A Journey toward Life Together

by Marcus Lohrmann - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/feed-my-sheep-a-journey-toward-life-together/>

The catechumenate presupposes something about the condition of the people entering our church buildings. It is a presupposition that gets lost between the cracks of our clamoring anxiety in conversations about dwindling church membership.

The catechumenate presupposes that people are *hungry*.

There are a number of ways of understanding where and how an adult catechumenate group fits into our church contexts. We might access the conversation, for example, via ancient authoritative texts like *The Didache* or a nod towards Luther's inspiration for writing the *Large* and *Small Catechisms*. Yet, given that the catechumenal movement is a relational and narratively inclined process, it seems most fitting to access it with a story or two.

A Portion Rejected

I was the kid in your youth group who came back from youth gatherings and pestered the pastor to start a contemporary worship service. The lines of my argument were clear: when I sat in church every Sunday morning it seemed like the words didn't matter. I couldn't connect to the words of the liturgy. I couldn't connect to the music. The preaching didn't make sense.

That is, until I went to a youth gathering.

Rock & Roll made sense. Rhythm and melody made sense. Praise bands seemed to make church more accessible. I first encountered that accessibility in the raucously hormone propelled youth gatherings. They connected my adolescent hunger to the work of the church.

I want this to matter to me, I'd beg my pastor, I want to be here... but can you please just make it more relevant?

My church family gave into the incessant pleadings and graciously allowed a group of us to lead "more relevant" worship service music on Sunday morning, even if some of the older members stayed in the back with their hearing aids switched off.

But when Rock & Roll stopped being the end-all-be-all answer to the empty pit in my stomach, as eventually happened, the church's attempt to connect to me through "relevant" means ceased to bear fruit. The church did have food on the table for me, but I didn't know where or how to look for it.

Like many others of my generation I eventually just left church altogether. When the glamor of contemporary worship music wore off I found myself in the same predicament as before, maybe worse: unsatisfied and hungry.

Encountering the Feast Again

My first encounter with the catechumenate happened at Lake Chelan Lutheran Church. My wife Bekki and I had just moved to Chelan, WA to begin her seminary internship year at that congregation.

Although I resolved to be a supportive spouse to Bekki as she began her studies at LSTC, I had continued to harbor resentment and frustrations with the church. At my best I'd just refuse to reenter religious conversation (especially any that smacked of Lutheranism). At worst I'd actually go to church, usually only to devolve further into frustration during the service. It was a nasty cycle, and I lacked a language to deal with the growing unrest.

By the time we arrived in Chelan two years later my cynicism had devolved into despair. Out of support, however, I grudgingly agreed to attend services during the first few Sundays of internship.

I was hungry for good news, starving for it. Having grown up in the church I knew the liturgy inside and out but couldn't see the way that it had anything to do with that hunger.

Something was different about the people of the small Lutheran community in Chelan, though. They were fluent in the life of the liturgy – not in that old timey way we might expect from people who have been singing Setting One for fifty years – but in a curiously palpable and nourishing sort of way.

They sang the liturgy as if they had been waiting for it all week – as if it *mattered!* – as if it *were a feast*. They sang like hungry people who knew where the food was kept.

I couldn't resist.

A few weeks later, when Bekki politely asked me if I wanted to be a part of the catechumenate process in the forthcoming weeks my answer wasn't a scoff. I said, "yes." It shocked us both.

Listening for the Spirit

Over the course of the year my catechumenal journey connected the daily rhythms of my workaday life to the movement of the liturgy.

In my first week of the catechumenate process in Chelan Pastor Paul Palumbo invited the group into a conversation about our history with the church: a wide spectrum of experience emerged. There were those of us from generations of Lutheran families who had been going to church every Sunday of our lives. There were some who grew up in other traditions.

A few in the group had always felt phony in church (any church). Others had been a part of other faith communities but were dissatisfied. One or two in the group had never really been interested in church; a friend had invited them once and they were skeptical but interested.

At the end of each week's session we were given homework inspired by the liturgy. If the next week's topic, for instance, was going to be on a specific segment of the Kyrie (i.e. "Help, save, comfort and

defend us,") Paul might assign the homework: *notice when you defend yourself this week.*

Next week we'd come together and share our stories of wrestling with the homework. These stories were like a goldmine in the catechumenal process, stitching together the communal movements of liturgy to the personal struggles or joys experienced over the prior week.

By the time the Easter Vigil arrived I cupped my hands and brought the water up over my forehead, affirming my baptism.

Building Life Together

It's hard to overstate the differences between a small rural church in Chelan and Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood. When Holy Trinity's Pastor Craig Mueller asked that I work with him to establish a catechumenal model for the church I assumed that we could import my experience. This was a sorely naïve assumption.

But that's not to say the people in Lakeview aren't hungry too.

Although city life demands its own pace and schedule, it also lends its particular assumptions, questions, and imagination to the catechumenal discussion. Context matters: the catechumenate resists a one-size-fits-all curriculum model just for this reason.

Craig and I poured over our respective experiences in catechumenal groups, resting on a loose model for our sessions that might more faithfully allow the urban context to speak, question, and dream.

Given this context, where Chelan's model centralized around the pattern of the liturgy, Holy Trinity's method would revolve around specific questions and topics that our group members raised during the period of *Inquiry*.

These questions were broad. A formerly Southern Baptist woman asked, "What is a Lutheran anyway?" A member with a United Church of Christ upbringing asked, "Why do you all talk about sin, the devil, and evil so much"? After gathering questions we compiled and divided these into topics that reverberated nicely against different elements of the liturgical season, the lectionary texts, and the movements of the liturgy.

Each week we gather around a question that has been assigned in the last meeting, importing Chelan's model of using homework as an entry point into conversation topics.

On the first Sunday of Lent, for instance, we gathered around the question, "What are you captive to? What binds you?" The stories that emerged stretched from individual struggles of workaholicism to frustrating family dynamics. These reflections provided our entry point into the words of confession and forgiveness, which we then spent the next hour discussing as a group.

The homework is shared in a space that is intentionally safe and inviting. We've adopted Chelan's so-called *rules* for sharing homework. These include:

- 1) *No cross talk* – that is, when someone is sharing something, we don't interrupt her. Fight the urge to correct someone else's story, even if he isn't getting it theologically "correct."
- 2) *Keep one another's stories confidential* – The catechumenate group is a safe space.
- 3) *Listen for the work of the Spirit* – Trusting that ultimately the work isn't ours, we wait and watch for God's.
- 4) *Feel free to pass* – Again, this is a safe space. Catechumens may participate as they are comfortable and able.

The Voice of the Spirit

The catechumenate is not the destination; it is a way of bridging the divide between a journey that has given rise to hunger and the work of our life in Christ together. In my own journey I've come to hear the aching of hunger as the voice of the Spirit.

Hunger is not a threat to the body but its turn toward starvation is a deadly one.

If we don't believe that people are hungry for the Gospel – that there exists a yearning and hunger so deep within them that they're willing to stick their necks out and walk into our churches, so often alone – *if we don't believe that people are **this** hungry*, then we've lost our collectively inclined ear for the Spirit.

Take it as an invitation to begin a catechumenate process the next time you hear a parishioner say something about church needing to be "more relevant" or that they're looking for a "more authentic religious experience."

Listen for the Spirit guiding their words – listen to that request the way a mother might hear her child crying for food in the middle of the night. *Don't underestimate their hunger.*

Because the truth is that the work of our Sunday assembly is both wholly relevant and authentic. When we invite people into the catechumenate we are inviting them to a feast that's already been set before us.

The trick is helping one another up to the table.

Customizing Your Catechumenate: Questions to Ask Before Getting Started (and After)

by Mark D. Williamson - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/customizing-your-catechumenate-questions-to-ask-before-getting-started-and-after/>

Our catechumenate process at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Wheaton, called BASIC, has been in existence for nearly four years now. I described our approach in detail in an earlier piece for *Let's Talk* called "[The Adult Catechumenate and the Missional Church.](#)" But in a nutshell, BASIC is distinctive in the following ways:

- It's a two-year process, composed of six discrete units of varying lengths: The Story of God (an introduction to the overarching narrative of the Bible); The Lutheran Way; Prayer and the Christian Life; Exploring Christian Beliefs; a New Testament Gospel study; and an Old Testament book study.
- Units are arranged in a rotating cycle, thus providing six different points of entry over two years.
- Participants are considered Inquirers in their first unit (sometimes longer), and partake in a Rite of Welcome/Enrollment when they commit to the full process.
- Catechumens who have not been baptized receive Baptism and First Communion about mid-way through the process, at one of our periodic Baptism festivals.
- A Rite of Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized marks and celebrates the culmination of the two-year journey.

Whether designing BASIC this way back in 2011 was innovative or foolhardy is difficult to say. No doubt some of both. While we certainly have reasons behind the model we've adopted (and I'll share some of those reasons below), an approach like ours may not make sense in your own setting. How you give shape to the catechumenate in a particular congregation is all about context. So to help spur your own catechumenal imagination, I offer, instead of a list of best practices, a list of best questions. These are the matters to which you'll want to give some serious and deliberate thought in your own research and development phase.

1.) What is the relationship between the catechumenate and the church year?

It's the age-old question: which came first, the Easter Vigil or the catechumenate? Most of the examples and resources out there give the impression that the only way to establish a catechumenate ministry is to commit to introducing an Easter Vigil service—the traditional climax (though not culmination) of the process—and then work your way backward to arrange the various stages of preparation. For some, due to limited resources, low worship numbers, or other factors, this requirement of an Easter Vigil may feel like a non-starter.

At St. Paul, a Vigil tradition that had petered out still lingered in the community's memory. It wasn't

time to bring it back yet. We also understood that in our context the vast majority of adult seekers had already been baptized; the norm was people looking to recommit to the life of baptism. Newcomers wishing to join the congregation would continue to be received into membership by Affirmation of Baptism after just a few orientation classes—no one wanted to make the catechumenate a membership requirement—so focusing on the same rite again as a goal if these folks pledged themselves to the BASIC process seemed redundant. Instead, we put more emphasis on the catechumenate as training for ministry, and fixed our sights on the rite of Affirmation of Vocation, a kind of disciple commissioning ceremony at the true culmination of the process. Most of our “graduates” have partaken in this rite on Pentecost Sunday.

Nowadays, we do have an Easter Vigil. Catechumens are involved in the planning of the Vigil during Lent and may take on various roles in the service itself. But without having anyone to baptize these two years, the main baptismal rite of the evening is a Remembrance of Baptism that catechumens simply participate in with the rest of the assembly. (Before we reintroduced the Vigil, we had two adult catechumens baptized, both quite happily on the Second or Third Sunday of Easter.)

The real tradeoff you have to consider is the relative value of having frequent points of entry for newcomers versus adhering more closely to the liturgical year, particularly a period of intense preparation during Lent. With our rotating scope and sequence, I don't have to make seekers wait until September when I meet them in January or April. The downside is that the experience of progressive, intensifying stages mostly goes by the wayside. That and you might wear out your registrar, having to keep track of where everyone is in the cycle!

2.) How will adult catechesis connect with youth catechesis, especially confirmation?

If you have a “confirmation program” in your congregation, you already have a catechumenate. The question is, why are the only people eligible adolescents? It might be too pastor-driven, it might be siloed from rest of the congregation, it might be that some of your learners don't want to be there, it might be tilted too strongly toward information rather than formation. But at root, you have an intentional process of catechesis for emerging disciples; you just haven't opened the door to a process like this for grown-ups.

Because of my heavy responsibilities with youth and family ministry over my first few years at St. Paul, my primary point of reference when I first started thinking about the catechumenate was confirmation ministry. The question that nagged at me was: why do we have this glaring double-standard—three-and-a-half years (in our case) of fairly intense discipleship training for youth but nothing even remotely comparable if you happen to be fifteen or older? This was not just a problem of inequity; it was a severely impaired pedagogy for our young, who learn above all from the example of the adults in their lives. The title of a newsletter piece I wrote when we were just starting to publicize the adult catechumenate reflects our motivation here: “Our Strategy for Raising Faithful Children: Faithful Adults.”

Most of the guides to the catechumenate published in recent years, in my judgment, under-explore this relationship between the adult catechumenate and youth confirmation. (My running theory is that Lutheran worship specialists and education specialists don't talk to each other a lot.) What would it look

like in your context to integrate the same principles of free inquiry, apprenticeship, and whole-congregation involvement into the disciple-making process across ages?

3.) How should our catechumenate relate to the new member process?

The catechumenate is first and foremost a process for incorporating newcomers. The challenge is that your newcomers are a diverse lot, ranging from lifelong Lutheran Christians who are simply transferring membership to unbaptized seekers just starting to poke their heads into a new and unfamiliar world. An adult catechumenate is probably not going to be your one-size-fits-all solution. If you do decide to require all newcomers to participate in some version of the catechumenate, you probably want a model on the shorter end, not a two-year marathon like ours. If you want to remain more adaptable to the different backgrounds your newcomers bring, you may want to pursue a more multi-pronged approach, with enrollment in the catechumenate one possible path. In either case, the undergirding value (one we are still learning to apply consistently at St. Paul) is setting a clear expectation for high-commitment for all newcomers from the get-go, and so gradually fostering what some would call a discipleship as opposed to a membership culture.

4.) Who should be invited to participate, and how?

Everyone engaged in these contemporary experiments with the catechumenate appears to agree that what you want is established members and newcomers learning alongside one another. No one is arguing for setting up ghettos for the neophytes. How can you put established members, particularly ones with a demonstrably mature faith, in relationship with inquirers and explorers, so that the former are investing in the latter?

The standard terminology for these two roles is *sponsor* and *catechumen*. We have both at St. Paul, though I'd be lying if I said people fall tidily into those two categories. Small-to-midsize churches like ours will usually be wary of putting the energy into developing a catechumenate process without it being able to serve multiple needs. In our case, BASIC includes those with little to no church background at all, those returning to church life after a period away, those raised in Christian traditions other than Lutheran (especially former Roman Catholics), long-time Lutherans who want a do-over on their youth confirmation experience, and others. There are always some folks as well who just want to step in for one particular unit. We cast the invitation widely, and many have accepted (this year we added a second, Sunday morning cohort to run parallel with our Wednesday night cohort).

Strikingly, almost everyone wants to be regarded as a tenderfoot. Finding sponsors for our first cohort of (initially twenty-six) catechumens was just too unwieldy. Eventually, however, this group of pioneers—and later, other alums and second-year catechumens—proved to be the best source from which to draw sponsors. No, the catechumens-turned-sponsors generally don't attend the classes over again. But all sponsors are expected to have a role in the associated liturgical rites, serve as prayer partners, and connect periodically with their catechumen as the process moves along.

It's fairly messy, but, by and large, the diversity of experience among the catechumens themselves, combined with the flexible way we apply the sponsor role (some catechumens call for more personal attention than others), produces the desired environment of mutual learning and friendship between

newcomers and more seasoned Christians. Another approach would be to narrow your definition of a catechumen, which could potentially expand your pool—and presumably your expectations—of sponsors.

5.) What content will we include?

Another way of putting this question might be: what about your catechumenate makes it catechesis? Quite a few Lutherans who were confirmed in their youth carry a grudge over a style of catechesis in which a teacher (usually the pastor) provided both the right questions and the right answers, requiring only that students be able to parrot back both from memory. On the other end of the spectrum, Paul Hoffman describes in his book *Faith Forming Faith* ([reviewed in this issue](#)) a model for the catechumenate that has no curriculum beyond “lectionary and life” and tends to speak of formation as the happy alternative to education.¹

You will likely want to find a place in the middle that makes sense for your own context. Our version of the catechumenate includes the classical elements of reflection on the Creed and the sacraments, and extends into considerable engagement with the Bible, core Christian practices (with special attention to prayer), and the Lutheran confessional witness. Most units involve a short book or two in addition to the Bible; we also incorporate video resources, drama, music, art, and testimony. The key is allowing ample space for catechumens to offer up their own experiences and questions, without neglecting what Jessicah Krey Duckworth calls “the honest need for newcomers to explore the reified stories, symbols, practices, concepts, documents, and forms of the community’s practice.”²

6.) Who is going to lead?

If you are a pastor reading this, the truth is that getting the ball rolling on a catechumenate process is likely going to depend on you. Just make sure you have the support of other leaders before you move ahead, and that introducing a catechumenate is in some way an answer to communal discernment that has already been taking place in the congregation.

Because a sustainable catechumenate ministry can’t revolve around you either, start thinking about how you can prepare and equip lay catechists. Paul Hoffman writes, “In our process in Seattle, pastors identify, recruit, and train the catechists.... Then we do our best to get out of the way.” He also maintains the role of clergy is chiefly to lead the accompanying “ritual life” and “hold the vision of what it means to be a congregation committed to forming faith.”³

The extent to which a pastor actively teaches in the process will have much to do with the gifts and passions of the pastor, and what content needs to be covered. Some conversations will indeed flow more easily without a pastor “in the way.” At other times, like when catechumens are trying to grasp the difference between law and gospel or are curious about the theological controversies behind the Apostles’ Creed, it would be rather poor stewardship of a seminary education for a pastor not to be more directly of service.

A final charge: look before you leap, but don’t forget to leap

Establishing a catechumenate ministry in your congregation, however you decide to customize it, is no small undertaking. Even if you read all the manuals and conduct the most thorough planning, some things

are not going to work out like you drew them up. In our case at St. Paul, sharing a meal each Wednesday night before class did not prove sustainable, no matter how many times I called eating together “the original Christian practice.” Participation in our Lenten spiritual retreat is usually thin, and one year had to be cancelled. Our retention of catechumens—those who make it all the way through the two-year process—is around fifty percent.

But even as we continue to figure it out as we go, I can't imagine a more satisfying endeavor in ministry. If you've begun to put your own missional imagination toward making disciples in this ancient-yet-contemporary way, think through the questions, do your homework...and then jump in.

Notes

1. [^]Paul E. Hoffman, *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), see especially chapter 5. We have actually used this model of small groups reflecting on the Sunday lectionary texts—with no curriculum or pastor in the way—as the inspiration for our “Connecting Sunday to Monday” groups at St. Paul. The first was actually organized by some graduates of BASIC. These groups are perfect for newcomers who are less in need of the foundational catechesis provided in BASIC.
2. [^]Jessica Krey Duckworth, *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) p.65. As the title indicates, Duckworth sees newcomers, like those who participate in the catechumenate, as playing a critical role by virtue of their questions and experiences in “disestablishing” the congregation. The church cannot be an ecclesia crucis without their unsettling presence. At the same time, she is critical of a “highly reductionistic” understanding of education that views the sharing of a community's reified resources of faith as mere indoctrination: “Congregations desperately need a cruciform catechesis through engagement with a confession of faith to facilitate the participation and belonging of newcomers in dynamic relationship with established members and the central works of a broadly conceived ‘deposit of faith.’ This would include the Bible itself, the church's ancient creeds and liturgical foundation, and the catechisms and disciplines of faith developed by later generations that together form an essential corpus of a Lutheran inheritance within the Christian tradition” (p.105).
3. [^] Hoffman, p. 73, 75.

As I See It: Preaching With Catechumens Present

by Frank C. Senn - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/as-i-see-it-preaching-with-catechumens-present/>

During Lent of 2014 I was invited to serve as the Sunday morning preacher at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Evanston. There was interest in the parish in the catechumenate and mystagogy (instruction in the sacraments). The Gospels in Year A of the Roman and Revised Common Lectionaries are the preferred readings if the parish has an adult catechumenate.¹ In any event, 2014 was Year A of the Lectionary. I share here my sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, which is one of the Sundays of the Scrutinies in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. This is the Sunday on which the Gospels and the Creed would be handed over to the elect. The Lord's Prayer would be handed over on the Fourth Sunday and these texts would be recited back on the Fifth Sunday. While I invited the congregation to imagine catechumens being present, this sermon would be preached in the hearing of the baptized and actual catechumens as well as any seekers who might be present.

If there is children's time or a children's homily in the Service this would be a good time to introduce to the children the iconic images of the four gospels: the man for Matthew, the lion for Mark, the ox for Luke, and the eagle for John. Posters of these images may be available to download from the internet. Sometimes these images are visually present somewhere in the worship space: on pulpits or lecterns, on a book of the gospels, on a banner, in stained-glass windows. They are usually portrayed with wings. These symbols are taken first from the Prophet Ezekiel (1:1-21). They are replicated in the Book of Revelation 4:6-8. The second century church father Irenaeus of Lyons first likened these figures to the four gospels. St. Matthew is represented by a winged man because the Gospel highlights Jesus' entry into this world, first by presenting His family lineage. St. Mark, represented by the winged lion, begins with the voice crying in the wilderness, like a lion's roar. The winged ox represents St. Luke because oxen were used in temple sacrifices and that's where the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, was serving when the birth of his son John was announced. St. John is represented by the rising eagle because its prologue "rises" to pierce most deeply the mysteries of God, the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the incarnation.

A script can be developed in presenting these gospels to the catechumens and to the children simultaneously. If there is a free standing altar, have an assisting minister vested in an alb standing at each corner reading in turn the script for each gospel, explaining the symbol. This would be a good time to present Bibles to the catechumens and youth in the confirmation class. This would be done just before the Creed. The presentation of the Apostles' Creed, the baptismal creed, can be done by reading each article and having the catechumens and youth in the confirmation class recite it back. It should be explained that the Creed is the rule of faith that outlines what is most important in our understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on the basis of the Scriptures and the Holy Gospels.

Third Sunday in Lent. Year A. March 23, 2014

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Last week we imagined adult catechumens in our midst being enrolled as the elect—that is, as candidates for Holy Baptism at the Easter Vigil. I would like you to imagine that these candidates are with us again today. They have been enrolled as the elect; they are on their way to take the plunge into the death and resurrection of Christ. But they need some equipment to sustain them on this faith journey. That would be presented today in the scrutinies. And they would be exorcized.

Scrutinies? Exorcisms? It sounds pretty daunting, doesn't it? Perhaps it should, too, but it would be a good idea if we make sure we are feeling daunted for the right reasons and not because the names sound like they come straight out of horror movies. It might also be a good idea if we look at how these daunting rituals fit within the overall picture of our life in God. Fortunately, our readings today are helpful in this regard.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes a lot about the struggles of living the Christian life. Here in the passage we heard today, he speaks of weakness and suffering, and holds out the hope that at least suffering will produce endurance, and endurance will produce character, and character will produce hope. So at least suffering has some side-benefits. Paul isn't offering any sort of explanation for the existence of suffering. He's just saying it's not entirely bad news.

He acknowledges that struggle and suffering continue to be part of our experience. This implies that God's salvation of the world is still a work in progress. We are living in the in-between time—the time in between God's decisive victory over the powers of deathly evil and the final coming of the reign of peace and joy made possible by that victory. And in this time in between, we're living with a foot in both camps. We have embraced the life of the coming kingdom, but we are trying to live it out in a world that runs according to other agendas and other interests, a world which continues to dole out suffering, misery, futility and death.

Now these special rites which the elect experience on this day are all about what it means to live as committed followers of Jesus Christ in this tough in-between time. Those who have been catechumens, who are now enrolled as the elect, are getting close to the climax of their journey. Over the course of their time as catechumens, their catechists did their best to share with them the faith and life of the community of God's people in Christ, and have asked of them that they immerse themselves in that faith and life and listen for the call of God in their lives, that they might know whether God is calling them to commit themselves to living out the fullness of baptismal life in the company of God's people. But here, in this season of Lent, we are all together facing up to the fact that living out the fullness of baptismal life is at times an arduous and costly journey. As the Apostle says, the struggle may have some benefits, but it is a tough struggle nevertheless.

There was an old African-American spiritual we sang in my college choir, "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel." One of the stanzas said, "Some go to church for to sing and shout, before six months they's all turned out." People who come into the church with great enthusiasm and an instant conversion experience find that after a while the experience fades into memory and other realities take hold of their lives. Soon they're not so regular any more, and eventually they just drift away.

The early church must have had experience with these kinds of converts, and the catechumenate with its scrutinies and exorcisms was designed to toughen them up for the long haul of the life of faith amidst the competing claims of life, such as careerism, consumerism, and familyism.

John's Gospel tells us that many of those who flocked to Jesus decided that what he was asking was too tough and they turned back and returned to normality. It's always been this way. That's why in ancient times the Church endeavored to make sure that its baptismal candidates were going into the baptistery with their eyes open and the word of warning in their ears. Actually, an important part of this annual Lenten season is to remind not just the candidates, but all of us, of these realities, so that we might examine ourselves, and steel ourselves and seek renewed strength and resolve from God for the continuing journey ahead.

So here's what the scrutinies were all about. They were about handing over texts to the elect that had to get into their minds: the four Gospels, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer—the kind of stuff that was put into Catechisms. They were given this stuff by catechizing. "Catechesis" means "what is sounded down." The texts were read and the candidates committed them to memory and on the Fifth Sunday in Lent they had to repeat them back.

St. Augustine tells us in his *Confessions* that when he had to repeat back what he had heard and learned in Milan he was a nervous wreck, even though he was a teacher of rhetoric. Those who went through a Lutheran confirmation program in the days of my youth had to stand in front the congregation and answer questions asked by the pastor. We had to commit the Catechism to memory.

The reason for the name "scrutinies" is two-fold. In part, it is because the candidates are being scrutinized. If they are to be baptized and admitted into the membership of Christ's body, the faithful had to know that these newcomers were serious in their intentions. And they would be prayed for with the laying on of hands. Some of those prayers were exorcisms.

So the second reason why the rites were called scrutinies, is that these prayers are tough prayers which invite the candidates to scrutinize themselves, to examine their own hearts and minds and call on God to strengthen them on this journey toward the font. In particular, these prayers invited the candidates to *confront* the powers of evil and sin which so easily entangle us and take us captive.

Our modern prayer books don't provide exorcism prayers. They reflect the rationalism of our modern age. But don't you think we need them? Every time we turn on the television, open our mail, check our emails, or search the internet we are assaulted by messages, beliefs, values, and temptations which would seek to invade and colonize our hearts and minds, taking on a life of their own, and drawing us into conformity with the demonic greed, fear, and selfishness of the world around us. None of us can escape it, so we must arm ourselves to live with these temptations without succumbing to them or being destroyed by them. So, in the meantime, we use the prayer we have been given by Jesus: "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil."

Now probably all I've done so far is make the journey of discipleship sound even more impossibly daunting than before. But wait! There is hope! There are wonderful promises in today's readings, and rather than being a mere dangled carrot, the gospel writer and the Apostle would have us know that all this talk about struggle and hardship are mere blips within an overall story of promise and hope.

In the story of the people of Israel wandering through a thirst-inducing wilderness, even though they grumbled against God and Moses and, in Moses' words, "put the Lord to the test," God provided water from a rock that the people might drink and live.

In the wonderful Gospel story Jesus was thirsty and asked the Samaritan woman at the well to draw water for him. He gets into a pretty interesting conversation with her and when his insight into her life becomes too close for comfort, she wants to change the subject and talk about religion. But Jesus will not be distracted. He turns the tables and invites the woman, and in fact all of us, to seek in him the wellspring of the water of life. Those who drink this water, he promises, will never be thirsty again for the water will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Now when you hear that, the prospect of having to go the distance through the dry deserts where callousness and hostility seek to drain us of life suddenly doesn't seem nearly so perilous. When you have guaranteed access in Christ to a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life, the fires of hell can do their worst, but we will live and flourish and grow.

Our reading from the Apostle Paul was perhaps even more explicit in putting the whole thing in perspective. Although, as we have noted, he speaks of suffering and the possibility of drawing some gain from the pain, the real point of this passage is in the material that frames those comments and speaks of being put right through faith and finding peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. These comments really do frame the tough realities of this in-between time, because they look back to what has already been achieved and forward to what is yet to come, so that we might live with hope in the here and now.

Paul hammers away on the point that we don't have to prove ourselves in the midst of the present conflicts before God will accept us and open the wellspring of life to us. It was while we were still weak, while we were still sinners, while we were still impossibly entangled in the corruption and ruthless competitiveness of the world that Christ died for us. Paul is mind-boggled by this, and is trying to awaken us to the same awe and wonder. It was not for those who deserved it that Christ put his life on the line. It was not for those who had earned it or proved themselves worthy. It was for the ungodly, the hard-hearted, the hostile and bitter; it was for us at our very worst. And, says Paul, you can't imagine a more dramatic proof of love than that. Christ died for us, knowing that most of us would ignore his love, and that even among those who responded to his call, many would drop out and declare it all too tough. But God loved us so much, that he went through with it even knowing that.

And on that basis, Paul looks forward and says that if all that is true, then you can be even more sure, much more sure, that God will follow through on what has been begun in Christ and bring our salvation to fulfilment and give us life in all its fullness. God would not make that level of self-sacrificial investment in us without being able to see the job through and bring us into the promised land of freedom, joy, and living water bubbling up to eternal life.

Those who have been immersed in those flowing waters of baptism that well up to eternal life are all framed within the unshakable promise that God's love for us would stop at nothing, and that God's all-conquering grace and strength are more than enough to see us overcome anything and everything that would stop us or harm us or destroy us.

So to the catechumens real or imagined, I said: depart, all you unclean spirits, and give place to the Holy and life-giving Spirit.² And wear the holy cross on your brow, the seal of him who died, and claims you as his own. Amen.

1. [^](#)The Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults specifies that the scrutinies “take place on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. The readings from series A are used, with their chants as assigned in the Lectionary (nos. 745-747). See *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, English translation prepared by the International Commission in English in the Liturgy (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1976), 72. This means that at the Mass in which the scrutinies of the catechumens takes place the readings of Year A are used even in Years B and C of the Roman Lectionary. The reasons are the special relevance of these readings to the catechumenal process.
 2. [^](#)Martin Luther begins his 1526 Order of Baptism with the exorcism and sign of the cross. “Depart, you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit.” “Receive the sign of the holy cross upon the forehead and breast.” See Martin Luther, “The Baptismal Booklet: Translated into German and Newly Revised,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 373.
-

On the Way: Starting Again

by Benjamin Dueholm - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/on-the-way-starting-again/>

The challenge that faced us was hardly out of the ordinary: parents bringing their children to baptism, or adults coming on their own, wishing to know more intimately the faith they are about to profess, or perhaps have intermittently professed since childhood. Our particular congregation, like many others, was not really prepared to answer this need. Our holy communion class is designed for 5th graders and our confirmation program for middle-schoolers. Our adult forum is very good but not very basic. And so an adult who arrives among us without having been instructed in the sacrament or having affirmed their baptism after a course of learning and relationship-building is, in effect, treated as an anomaly. We're a sincerely welcoming place, but we are built around an implicit understanding that every adult who comes to church has gone to Sunday School, received their first communion, and been confirmed.

If that has ever been true in the American church, it is not true now. And as I heard more and more people tell me they wanted to do something like confirmation (or baptism) as adults, I started planning for a catechumenate-style group. The last straw was actually a call from a woman who was going to be married in the Catholic Church and needed to be confirmed in order to do so. Her religious education had ended shortly before confirmation would have happened. But every Lutheran church she contacted—including the one in which she was baptized—told her, in effect, that they couldn't do anything for her. I even encouraged her to consider becoming Catholic, but she wanted to be Lutheran. She just needed some group of Lutherans to take her up on it.

And so first with a single learner and sponsor, guided only by a book I rummaged up somewhere, and now with a whole group meeting weekly during Lent, my parish joined the growing segment of Lutheran churches that look to the ancient catechumenate as a model for introducing new or renewed believers to the Body of Christ.

Since as of this writing we are three sessions into our first "Christian Basics" small group, I will refrain from offering any deep insight into what such a thing can and can't do. Suffice it to say that I felt vindicated in the idea before we began when I heard the responses, including from some long-time church folk, to it, and even more so when I delved into a few big, broad topics with the group (which, in proper catechumenal fashion, includes eating together, mutual prayer, and each learner matched with a sponsor).

But I have already been struck by how this new program in my church, and how the renewed practice of catechesis in Lutheranism more generally, sits alongside the rest of what we do. My community poses, on the one hand, an explicit and broad welcome to everyone to be part of virtually every aspect of worship and community life. And on the other hand we have created a highly structured and rather exacting process for the production of a confirmed, mature believer. We are hardly unique in doing both of these things.

The catechumenate model falls somewhere in between them. It suggests, by its very existence, that faith is not something that can be taken for granted, not something that can be rightly inferred on the basis of

one's ability to enter a church building at roughly the right time while maintaining a pulse. And yet it also suggests that faith formation need not be tied to the developmental markers our curricular and programmatic structures insist they be.

It's a practice that gives me hope for the possibilities still latent in our corner of the church. It counters the growing (and unintended) impression that we hold Christian faith and life to be so trifling that one must have literally no prior acquaintance with it before leaping into the middle of its highest expressions. And it also counters the reaction that grows in the other direction, that only the people formed in the deepest and most arcane fashion really know the faith well enough to escape the cultural orbit of dabbling and self-help. It imagines, in our world if not in the world that originated it, a lively and dynamic relationship between the church as it is and the church as it becomes through the engrafting of new believers. It's a process that leads those new believers to a new start through baptism, in some fashion. But that process offers us the chance to start again in our faith, too, and with some consequences we could never have guessed.

Book Review: Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians To Baptism And Beyond by Paul E. Hoffman

by Heidi Haverkamp - Friday, March 13, 2015

<http://mcsletstalk.org/catechumenate/book-review-faith-forming-faith-bringing-new-christians-to-baptism-and-beyond-by-paul-e-hoffman/>

When our current Episcopal bishop Jeff Lee arrived in Chicago in the winter of 2007, he brought with him a deep passion for the adult catechumenate. He, like Paul Hoffman, had served a large congregation in the greater Seattle area and been deeply moved by the Christian formation of the unchurched and unbaptized. He would often tell a story about a man who came to St. Thomas in Medina, his parish there, whose life was changed by his experience in the catechumenate. The Bishop would often share this quote from that man, who after his baptism by immersion and his anointing said: "I've just never been touched like that before." Of course, what "like that" means, exactly, is one of the mysteries of the Christian faith.

Early in his episcopacy, Bishop Lee strove to inspire priests and congregations to focus more on the adult catechumenate. He preached about it. He instituted a special worship service in Holy Week for adult catechumens, including also teenage confirmands. He pointed us toward the catechumenate process laid out in our *Book of Occasional Services*, which involves the whole congregation in a series of blessings over the candidates through the season of Lent, much like what Hoffman describes in his book. Much like Hoffman, Lee got pushback. Priests insisted their new members were mostly disenchanting Roman Catholics and evangelicals – and *already baptized*. Few people showed up for the special Holy Week service, which eventually disappeared. Now, Bishop Lee has turned his focus to other things.

As a bishop, it may be impossible to move the culture of churches across a diocese or synod toward something like the adult catechumenate. It is a change better left, it seems to me, to individual pastors or priests. The catechumenate is a process of building community and relationships, of teaching and formation, which are by nature congregationally based.

For pastors looking to enrich their formation programs – whether or not they seek to implement a process as broad-based as that of Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle – *Faith Forming Faith* is a wonderful resource. Hoffman explains the congregation's process and culture of developing community and spiritual formation around the unbaptized in clear terms with specific details and examples. The program is called "The WAY" (there is never an explanation given for the all-caps), and is both for adults seeking baptism and for parents seeking the baptism of their young children (and perhaps themselves as well).

I thought that the most interesting thing about The WAY is its involvement of the *whole* congregation. Each catechumen is assigned a baptized sponsor who is already a member of Phinney Ridge. The formation team invites new sponsors to participate every year, striving to include as much of the congregation as possible in the process. Sponsors attend the formation program alongside the catechumens and seem to receive just as expansive a formation in their faith as a result. As one 80-year member put it, despite her lifelong involvement in church, "I have never done anything as spiritually enriching as this" (42). Over time, that formation process has touched the entire congregation and brought a unity that would've been missed if it had only been offered to newcomers.

The WAY has two stages. The first is a Sunday evening series in the fall and winter. Participants commit to attend six to eight of these sessions over the course of several months. The sessions include a meal, childcare, and small group, open-format, lectionary Bible study. New participants can join at any time. The second half, occurring every Sunday night during the season of Lent, is a closed series for committed catechumens and sponsors. There is deeper, more personal reflection in this more committed group. During Lenten Sunday worship services catechumens receive blessings and tokens as a welcome into the Body of Christ as lived in the Lutheran tradition: a catechism, a worship book, a copy of the Apostles' Creed, and a hymnal.

If a program as elaborate as this sounds like an impossible dream for your congregation, take heart. As the solo pastor of a church with about 70 people in worship on Sundays, I felt overwhelmed by the scale and success of Phinney Ridge's work. However, I found many small ways I could adapt or be inspired by its methods and style, and by Hoffman's passion. He includes an appendix with reflections and questions for "getting started" in a variety of congregational contexts. He offers ideas for enacting a cultural transition like this over time, and also for Easter Vigil, confirmation classes, spiritual enrichment of existing leadership teams, and one I particularly appreciated called "Even With Just One Inquirer."

Some of his ideas will seem radical or too demanding to some readers. For instance, Phinney Ridge asks all parents wanting to baptize children to complete The WAY, even if it means waiting a year to baptize their child. This is hard to imagine in a small parish like mine; however, his point about the responsibility as well as the "free gift" of baptism is well-taken. Baptismal preparation would be much improved if pastors used it to help parents transform and enrich their faith lives and not just to prepare for a single liturgical act. Thinking for my own context, asking parents to invest more time and personal reflection in their child's baptism would not only reduce the number of our "drive-thru" baptisms, but would probably lessen my own feelings of resentment when baptizing children I have a hunch we will never see again. Even if we don't implement a seven-month catechumenate program, I will think differently about my baptismal and confirmation preparation, as well as my new member classes.

This book has helped me understand more fully the passion of my own bishop for the adult catechumenate, which seemed a bit incomprehensible back in 2007. As churches, after all, we exist in order to help people know God, and to introduce more people to God and the love God has shown us in Jesus Christ. Hoffman reminds us of this, with inspiring ideas and sound theology. He is certain that more unbaptized people are sitting in our pews and in the general environs of our churches than we think, even in the well-churched Midwest and South. (He may be right, although I'm certain there are many more in metro Seattle!) Regardless, his ideas and theology of the catechumenate, and the ongoing formation of all children and adults, make for worthy reading material.

Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

PDF generated November 07, 2015 at 3:58 AM by Kalin's PDF Creation Station WordPress plugin