



# Windows OF Faith

**Guide for Leaders**

# Windows of Faith: The Catechumenate for a New Generation

## *Catawhat?*

How can adults today, who were not raised in the church, come to know the Good News? How can they be invited and encouraged in a way that is life transforming? Is there a way the church can take the questions and longings of the unbaptized seriously, and open up the mysteries of the Christian faith in a way that makes sense to them?

The catechumenate offers the church a way of organizing its life and mission around the fundamental commission of Jesus to baptize and teach. It offers the adult inquirer a manageable path to faith. The *catechumenate* (“sounding in the ear”) has to do with word and with resonance—speaking and hearing, telling and listening, conversation and reflection in the context of human relationships.

## *Windows of Faith*

*Windows of Faith* is a catechumenate for today, designed to introduce young adults who have no experience with the church to the basics of a living faith in Jesus Christ. It offers guidelines for baptizing and teaching. It introduces the primary teachings and practices that shape the Christian life. It calls both the church and inquirer to baptismal, lifelong, daily, transformation.

To be effective today, a catechumenate must deal with the real life concerns of young adults. The church is sometimes accused of answering questions no one is asking. *Windows of Faith* takes young adult inquirers

seriously and helps them find the living Christ in their questions.

Young adults are searching for what’s authentic. While the topics of *Windows of Faith* are broad, the presentations and discussion are specific, interactive, and personal. Images and references from popular culture help inquirers make connections between their stories and God’s story. Although intended for 18-30 year old university students, it may also be adapted for parishes and other mission settings.

For at least the past generation, the historic churches of the Reformation have been acutely aware of their need to reach out more effectively to the unchurched. These churches have had a rich tradition of education, and they have made good programs of learning their best form of evangelism. But in many places, these programs have become diffused. Many young adults are not involved in the church. Today, few congregations spend more than a few hours with gathered inquirers before baptizing them or receiving them into membership.

## *The strategic role of missions on campus*

Campus ministry is in an incredibly dynamic place where the church meets the world and the past meets the future. Campus ministers have been especially alert to the need for more effective evangelism resources.

Since 2001, several professionals with experience in campus ministry have considered the realities of witnessing in the contemporary academic setting. They have developed a plan to generate a passion in the church for the inquirer. They have given definition to the basics of Christian belief and designed *Windows of Faith*, a fresh model for engaging young adults in a conversation with Christ and the community that bears his name.

*Windows of Faith* brings together two great gifts: 1. **the inquirers** (their stories, questions, experiences, loves, desires, and fears) and 2. **the**

**treasures of the Church** (the basics of the Christian faith including the triune God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the means of grace, and patterns for quality living and caring).

New member classes traditionally focus on introducing the inquirer to the treasures of the church. *Windows of Faith* also attends to the gifts of the ‘stranger’. The times in the Church’s history when it took the neighbor seriously were times of great renewal. This curriculum makes lots of space for newcomers to be who they are, gifts of God to the Church and to each other. It’s about loving our neighbors—perceiving that they are treasures and confidently addressing their hunger with the nourishment the Church has to give.

## *The curriculum*

*Windows of Faith* is an eight-week series of 90-minute classes that connect a young adult’s story with God’s story. All of its materials may be downloaded from [www.elca.org/windowsoffaith](http://www.elca.org/windowsoffaith) free of charge.

The curriculum for each session includes the following components:

- Preparation (before the session)

There are directions for setting up the room and getting everything ready for guests before they arrive so they can be welcomed without distraction.

- Gathering (20-30 minutes)

This relationship developing time gives participants the opportunity to get to know each other and the gifts each brings.

- Presentation (25-30 minutes)

Respected theologians and educators have prepared these oral

presentations which unpack the gifts of the church. Suggested visuals are placed in a box within the text. The introductory session, “Come and See,” invites participants into the process and gives them an overview of the seven themes to be explored: a brief history of God; sacred writings; the church; worship; Baptism; Communion; and vocation.

- Refreshments

Although refreshment time is placed in the middle of the sessions, at least the drinks should be offered at the beginning. If both food and drink are available at the beginning, make this a brief stretch break.

- Reflection (20-30 minutes)

Following the presentation are exercises for response and integration. The personal application to daily life begins during this time. This time may be closed with a brief introduction of additional materials available in the ministry/parish library for interested participants.

- Gift

Each session includes a giveaway, an important and tangible reminder of the theme. Although the gifts represent a considerable financial investment, they give participants an invaluable, clear picture of their own worth.

- Teaser and Closing Prayer

The teaser is an informal and inviting preview of what is to come. Participants should know that you are looking forward to spending time with them again soon. Some sort of closing ritual is important. A ritual from the historic liturgies of the Church is offered as a conclusion for your sessions. But if another closing ritual seems better, leaders

should feel free to use it. Establishing a closing ritual helps connect new folks to the community.

Ample materials and exercises are included in each presentation. Leaders are encouraged to explore each session thoroughly and edit to their own sense of priority and to the needs of those participating. As participants get to know one another, leaders may wish to allow more time for reflection.

Though *Windows of Faith* was designed as a weekly series, many different formats are possible—retreats, bi-weekly or monthly gatherings, or a combination times and settings. It would take an additional 20-30 minutes, but every session could begin with a simple meal, elegantly served. Leaders can rely on their own sense of what is right.

The program was designed for the unbaptized, but it could also serve as a “refresher” for those who want to renew their faith and as a way to motivate a core of faithful members for fuller baptismal, evangelical outreach. In the latter case, *Windows of Faith* might first be offered as an opportunity for renewal within the faith community. The faithful could then invite others and help with the sessions the next time the program is offered. Word of mouth is always the best publicity.

Though extensive, *Windows of Faith* cannot do everything. It is an overview, and it assumes the setting of a Christian community which offers ongoing opportunities for fellowship, study, community service, worship and in-depth exploration of the topics (seminars, reading groups, service opportunities, and web links).

## *Planning ahead*

Such an enterprise as *Windows of Faith* takes planning. The program is designed to be led by a team of three or more. Usually the campus pastor calls at least two faithful Christians that she/he would enjoy working with and who have the gifts needed to lead in this program. It needs to

be fun. This leader guide may be used as a recruiting tool. Those who accept the call can become familiar with the *Windows of Faith* materials by downloading them from the ELCA website (elca.org). Each team member will need a large three-ring folder with dividers in which to assemble and file materials.

In well developed programs, a team can divide responsibility for the many aspects of the program (publicity, incorporation of participants into the life of the faith community, sponsors, hospitality, etc.).

A start-up date needs to be set at least several weeks after the school term begins to allow ample time for recruiting participants. The leadership team will need to begin meeting several months before the scheduled start-up date. The following is a suggested schedule of questions to be answered and tasks to accomplish:

3 months before startup:

Why is a catechumenate so important?

What brought us here to lead in the venture?

What are some of the reasons Christians have been slow to share and invite?

How can we best interpret *Windows of Faith* to our larger faith community?

Who can best bring the governing board up to speed on the program?

How might we engage the ministry in conversations on outreach and Baptism?

2 months before startup:

Who do we want as participants in *Windows of Faith*?

How might we best contact and invite those folks to participate?

(posters, university newspaper ads, ministry website article, table on campus, emails, personal invitations, radio ads, etc.)

What needs to be done to effectively contact and invite them?

(A brochure with a registration tear off response form is also helpful. The *Windows of Faith* logo is available on the website for publicity use.)

What is each of us going to do and when?

How will publicity be prepared?

How will we keep a record of those expressing interest and contact information?

How can we insure that our ministry is engaged and praying for this endeavor?

6 weeks before startup:

Reserve rooms for the needed times.

Present a temple talk briefly introducing *Windows of Faith* at worship.

Plan how to ask members of the faith community to invite their neighbors/friends.

4 weeks before startup:

Determine what gifts will be given at each session.

Order/purchase them and any other materials you will need.

Insure that all publicity has gone out.

Present another temple talk at worship asking members to invite folks.

3 weeks before startup:

Review those who have expressed interest in the program.

Ask who is missing from the list of possible participants.

Contact all who have expressed interest with directions to the meeting place, time and place of the first session, and other necessary logistical details.

Consider faithful members of the ministry who might serve as sponsors. Sponsors can be an invaluable resource to participants. They are generally spiritually mature persons in the faith community who share the experience of *Windows* with participants. They may invite participants into regular faith conversations over meals, mentor and pray for them, and assume major responsibility for introducing them to members and events of the faith community. Sponsors may also be the prime movers in the “love letter” activity (see Session 2). They can be in touch with team leaders and Christian friends and associates of their participant, asking them to write brief notes to be given to the participant at the end of the series. These surprise letters can recall some humorous event or tell of how the participant has enriched and influenced their lives. These letters should be sent to the sponsor to be given to the participant at one of the last sessions. For help in orienting sponsors, see *Welcome to Christ, Sponsor Guide*, from Augsburg Fortress (item 8066-4032-4).

Call sponsors for each participant.

Schedule a meeting for sponsors.

Insure that participants are included in the weekly prayers of the church.

2 weeks before:

Decide how session responsibilities will be divided among the team. It may be helpful to have the same person serve as narrator from week to week. This person can open each session, review what happened last week, introduce the person who does the presentation, invite people to the refreshment break immediately after the presentation, regroup folks after refreshments, introduce the person leading the reflection exercises, and close each session with the teaser and prayer. This can give an extended series of gatherings continuity.

Consider how you might engage participants in the life of the larger community.(ritual, study, service, friendship, etc.).

Have an extended conversation on the importance of good hospitality.

## *Hospitality*

God's presence is made known through the gift of hospitality. It may seem extraneous; in reality, it sets the tone whereby everything else will or will not ring true.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”  
Hebrews 13:2

Hospitality is about relationships. It is not only about what we have to offer the stranger, but about receiving the marvelous gifts that await us as we get to know the newcomer, the ‘alien’. It's always in all ways about living in giftedness. When people feel welcome, they feel secure enough to reveal their gifts and open up to the gifts of others.

As we invite folks to “come and see”, some will be arriving with a high comfort level. Others will be appearing with a great deal of fear and

trembling. It is important to remember that some may drive (or walk) around the block several times before they actually decide to enter our buildings. The greeting and the welcome set the climate for the entire learning process.

Some basics of hospitality:

- Hospitality takes time. It cannot be a last minute thought, but must be part of the overall plan. It may even be good to have a hospitality team.
- The space needs to be welcoming, comfortable. Be sure it is comfortably set up and welcoming 25 minutes before the starting time. Round tables are better than square. Couches are better than folding chairs.
- Participants need all the details regarding the location, dates, time, etc. well in advance, preferably in writing. People like to know what they're doing.
- We need to look at our buildings from the perspective of our new guests. People want to know where they are going. Are there signs pointing the way to your building, meeting room, and restrooms?
- Written signs are good, and human ‘signs’ are better. Have warm, welcoming (but modest) folks who like to meet and greet helping to direct newcomers to *Windows of Faith*.
- Have drinks available when people arrive in the space where you meet. Food and drink are a vital part of hospitality. Sometimes the aroma of coffee brewing alone can bring joy, even to those who are not coffee drinkers. In the evenings make it decaf, and always have an alternate beverage. The refreshment time can then provide the surprise of something good to eat. Tablecloths, china, glass glasses, placemats, napkins, and candles say you are bringing out the good stuff for

your guests. Let folks know that throughout the session they are welcome to refill on beverages.

- The value of surprise in hospitality is not to be underestimated. We all want to be loved. For many people it's quite shocking when they witness folks regarding them as priceless treasures.

## *Planning for each session*

The leadership team will need to meet before or after each session for evaluation and planning. This is a time to become familiar with the fundamental human hopes and needs associated with the next session and to wrestle with its themes. Leaders need to consider what is at stake, what stories, life experiences, questions, or images come to mind.

*Windows of Faith* offers suggested materials. Each session will need to be shaped for the particular group of people involved and attuned to their gifts and needs. To be effective, it should be set within the dynamics of a particular time and place. Opening questions, the scripts for the presentations, interactive activities, and other resources are provided. But they will best serve if they are remodeled for the specific leaders and group. And we can't forget that the people who gather will offer insights far beyond what we leaders imagined. Participants will bring their wisdom rooted in other traditions, knowledge drawn from other fields, and a lifetime of experience.

Leaders will want to think about what will resonate with participants, what gifts, fears, joys and sorrows they will bring, and where they might need to be challenged. They will consider which questions are the best, and what stories have the most potential for teaching or stimulating discussion. They will also want to incorporate their own creative elements and exercises such as art, music, poetry, and trips into the program.

## *Guiding conversation*

You do not need to be an expert to lead quality conversation. *Windows of Faith* provides most of the content information you will need to help students share and to help leaders open up the basics of the Christian Faith. Each time you will be guiding a specific group of folks on a specific day. The energy will grow and recede. The conversation will have a course of its own, and unexpected things will happen. Good leaders have in mind what might happen from week to week. They come to the conversation with a plan, resources and ideas that are most likely to fit the circumstances. They are able to guide the reflection when the plan is helpful, quick to adapt and respond when it is not.

During the discussion time, some leaders may talk too much. While the facilitator's role is important, a discussion needs to recognize that the lives and concerns of participants are more important. Also, narrowly leading questions are less effective. If a leader has a 'right answer' in mind, the question probably should not be asked.

If a group of students is quiet, break them into dyads. In-depth sharing is often enhanced by working in pairs; folks will feel comfortable sharing some things in dyads which they don't want to share in the larger group. It might be helpful to give individuals freedom to respond to two out of five possible questions. They will almost always be more comfortable if they can choose their own level of self-revelation. After sharing in dyads, responses can be processed in the entire group, with a summary of what was talked about in pairs. The normal process is *think* (reflect personally on what was presented), *pair* (discuss with one other person), *share* (reflect with the larger group).

Leaders are crucial in setting the tone and the 'rules' of the gatherings. If leaders can take moderate risks, the group will recognize that it is okay to do the same. However, too much self-disclosure can be as bad as too little. What leaders share needs to be honest, based on real life experiences,

and appropriate to the level of intimacy within the group. Telling stories is a great way to communicate values, because listeners have the freedom of interpretation. They can take what resonates and let the rest go.

Occasionally it might be important to talk with the group about respecting the thoughts and responses of each other. Multiple points of view can come together and not require judgment.

Leaders will also want to be alert to body language and verbal comments during the session. Revealing responses warrant a follow-up conversation or call. Leaders should note particularly engaged or disturbed reactions by individuals and touch base with those participants after the session.

## *Feedback*

*Windows of Faith* is made available free of charge. All costs of developing the program are being covered through grants from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. The following theological writers were commissioned to write the presentations which provide the foundation for each session:

Come and See!—John Kautz  
Who is God?—Mary E. Hinkle  
Scriptures—Rolf Jacobson  
Church—Martin E. Marty  
Worship—Susan Briehl  
Baptism—Dan Erlander  
Communion—Donald Wisner  
Vocation—Marc Kolden

However, the design team does not consider this program to be “done”. It hopes that it will never be “finished”. In this sense, this is not a typical

published curriculum. The language and culture of the university setting evolves quickly. New resources become available, and old treasures are rediscovered. Every group that uses the program will come up with ways and ideas that worked better for them than what is offered here. The design team has an ongoing commitment to keep *Windows of Faith* alive and growing.

**So we ask only one thing from those who use this program: Upon completion of the curriculum please forward resources you have found helpful (such as web links, art, stories, questions, poems, movie clips, songs, other elements of popular culture, brochures, letters, e-mails, scriptural and confessional quotes, jokes) to [lutherans@txstate.edu](mailto:lutherans@txstate.edu) Please also share suggested revisions, deletions, and corrections which might be helpful to others. This will keep the presentations fresh and expand questions, presentations and activities for the folks who use *Windows of Faith* in the future.**

Your evaluation is crucial. The design team is especially interested in developing our web site to become more interactive and linked to other quality sites. In the future we hope to create PowerPoint visuals for each session and quality publicity materials which can be easily adapted for local sites. We also are beginning conversations to modify *Windows of Faith* for traditional parishes. These things happen best when we tap the immense creative resources of local leaders and communities. Please forward your creative work (electronic or hard copies) to us.

## *In closing*

The design team for *Windows of Faith* hopes that what is offered will resonate in the lives of all participating. But we also hope that it will stir up and provoke reflection about what faith might look like if it were more fully lived. Such reflection may run against the grain of popular culture and church practice. It may call us to new, and initially, uncomfortable places.

When you lead others in doing this, you are initiating a process far richer and lengthier than the group meetings themselves...They are times of planting, times when ideas are encountered that may lie dormant at first but later grow in unanticipated ways. You cannot control the outcome of a single session or of the group's experience as a whole, nor should you hope to do so. But you are nonetheless offering a wonderful gift when you agree to serve as a host at the table of mutual learning. May you find this table to be one where you are a guest as well.

*Practicing Our Faith: A Guide for Conversation, Learning, and Growth*  
Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1997, p.13.

The design team has never intended *Windows of Faith* to be “another thing we have to do.” The goal has been to provide a center, a way of doing Holy Baptism, around which the rest of the things we need to do can be gathered. The goal has been to draw the focus of the whole ministry outward toward world that God loves so much. The goal has been to attract university students to Jesus Christ and provide them with an apprenticeship in the Christian way of living.

The entire globe is experiencing a rebirth of interest in personal faith and corporate religion. Never before have the numbers of Christians increased at such a rate. Much of this growth is coming from the new churches in Africa and Asia. Stories out of Africa bring glimpses to us in North America of whole tribes responding to Christ, thousands surrendering themselves to become followers of Jesus. After a generation of hearing the Word of God patiently and confidently proclaimed, people are presenting themselves at rivers in such numbers that pastors cannot continue baptizing because they are exhausted from plunging candidates into their watery deaths and raising them up to new life in Christ. People are asked to return for baptism on another day. What a wonderful problem!

Young adults today are hungry for what is freely given in the Gospel. May our churches be hungry for them. May we in the North at least get some good exercise, if not grow weary, at the font because we are baptizing so many adults. May we wear out the furniture engaging the spiritually hungry in lively conversation around the strong love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ.

### *Additional background resources:*

#### **Gift-based ministry**

*Windows of Faith* is gift-based. For an important guide on gift-based ministry see *The Great Permission: An Asset-Based Field Guide for Congregations*, Augsburg Fortress (item number 6-0001-6960-4).

#### **Catechumenate**

Interest in the baptismal practices of the historical catechumenate, used by the church since its earliest days, is experiencing a revival in our own time. The time-tested format and ritual of the historical catechumenate are available in the *Welcome to Christ* resources from Augsburg Fortress (item numbers in the 0-8066-3390's).

These resources can be ordered at [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org) or by calling 800-328-4648).

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