

A Case for the Catechumenate

Background

Although the number of adults presented for baptism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is not overwhelming, the practice is not uncommon. Since 1988 there have been 158,880 baptisms of people 16 and over in the ELCA, an average of 7,566 per year. In addition, 1,217,856 have been received by “affirmation of faith” over the same period. This means that about 13% of people who have been received by means other than an “active letter of transfer” from a Lutheran or other Christian congregation are adult baptisms. How are these adults prepared to enter the baptismal covenant and the life of our faith communities? How are they encouraged and equipped to live out their baptismal vocation in the world? The same questions can be asked about the 1.2 million who have affirmed the baptismal covenant in congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. One process, widely called the catechumenate, is based on ancient practices of forming disciples and preparing adults for baptism over several months. Catechumenal origins are found in the second century, when the vast majority of Christians were “made and not born.”

A Brief Summary

The catechumenate in modern form is known by different names (some find the traditional language to be off-putting, and the use of alternate language can still preserve the content) and can be adapted to local contexts (it is not a proscriptive “program” in the conventional sense), but is essentially a **process** of becoming one with Christ and his church. This requires being able to observe the community of the baptized and at the same time enter this community from a wide range of angles. The catechumenal process attends to the whole person—body, mind and spirit—and is intended to be a life-changing event. It can be viewed most simply as an ordered way of welcoming people into the rhythm of congregational life rooted in the Word of God, Jesus Christ. As practiced today, it can also be adapted for baptized persons who are “de-churched” or “un-churched” and will make an affirmation of baptism.

Why Bring This Up Now?

A highlight of the *Evangelizing Congregations Missional Plan*, proposed by the Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission (EOCM) unit, is congregations paying focused attention to faith practices. As the EOCM inter-unit Faith Practices Team reflects on a new “faith practices initiative”, a comprehensive and cohesive plan for commending the catechumenate to this church can be significant as **one** central strand in the **tapestry of ways** that people come to Christ through the church. Further, catechumenal congregations promoting spiritual renewal can serve the objectives of a new faith practices initiative. Properly understood, the catechumenal process involves the entire congregation. It involves catechists and sponsors as well as candidates. These people replicate themselves over time: pastors train the catechists who oversee the catechumens; members of the congregation who are asked to become sponsors go through the process with their candidates; candidates are later asked to become sponsors; some sponsors go on to become catechists. Over time, many—if not most—in a congregation will have gone through this process. The process involves many, if not all, of the seven faith practices identified in the missional plan. The heart of the whole process is centered in the Book of Faith—the Scriptures—especially as presented in the lectionary.

What Does It Look Like?

There are usually four phases in a catechumenal process. They are flexible both in time and shape, as well as how they are locally named. Each part has a formation component as well as a community ritual (“the rites”).

1. Inquiry—an open-ended time of initial exploration. This is a time for open-ended questions about the nature of faith, God, the world, the Bible and the church. Questions include, “what is the place of faith in my life?” and “Am I ready to reorder my life through prayer, worship, reflective study and community life in order to hear and follow the call of God in Christ?”

RITE: WELCOME OF INQUIRERS Inquiry ends with a rite of welcome. At the Sunday assembly, questions are asked of the inquirers regarding their intent to seek baptism. The assembly is asked to support these people and pray for them. The new catechumens are presented with a Bible, marked with the cross and prayed over.

2. Catechumenate—a period of deeper exploration of the Christian faith through reading of Scripture, prayer, worship and ministry in daily life. Groups meet to discuss the meaning of the lectionary Scriptures for themselves and their daily lives. There is prayer over this word, and at the end of each session the catechumens are prayed over by catechist and sponsors.

RITE: ENROLLMENT OF CANDIDATES FOR BAPTISM (frequently on the First Sunday in Lent) The candidates' names are announced, and they are asked if they desire to be baptized. The assembly is asked to support these people through prayer, presence and example, and the candidates receive a blessing.

3. *Baptismal preparation*—includes the six weeks of Lent for those candidates to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. The candidates use this time through lectionary and catechism to reflect on how the life, death and resurrection of Christ transform one's relationship to home and family, work and co-workers, stewardship of life and world, and the church. Questions like, "What must die in me in order that God's new life might burst forth in my life?" are asked. Candidates receive public prayer and blessing on several Lenten Sundays and may be presented on different weeks with a catechism and a worship book. They may be offered an opportunity to make a testimony of faith as part of worship.

RITE: BAPTISM The Vigil of Easter with its direct connection to being joined to Christ's death and resurrection was the original context of the baptism of catechumens, following their final 40-day preparation in Lent. Epiphany or the Baptism of Our Lord are options for those prepared during Advent. Those already baptized come to affirm their baptism and to be renewed and strengthened in this death, resurrection and new life.

4. *Baptismal living, or call to mission*—the post-baptismal period of study and reflections that extends throughout the 50 days of Easter and beyond. The 50 days of Easter are spent reflecting on the sacraments as a call to mission and a model for daily living. The central question is, "How do I live as a baptized, communing Christian, offering my gifts and talents as a living sacrifice in the Christian community and in the world?"

RITE: AFFIRMATION OF CHRISTIAN VOCATION On the day of Pentecost (or on the Transfiguration of Our Lord) the newly baptized and those who have affirmed their baptisms come forward in worship at the Sending, and with prayer they affirm their vocation as Christians in the world through their daily work and lives.

Catechumenate and ELCA Faith Practices

In summary, to frame it in other language, the catechumenate—with whatever name serves it best and however it is locally adapted—is all about the seven faith practices named by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

PRAY—Prayer is integral to both the public rites as well as the weekly gatherings. Each catechumenal gathering begins in prayer and ends with prayer for blessing (possibly with the laying on of hands) for the candidates.

STUDY—At the heart of this process are the weekly gatherings of catechumenal groups centered in becoming fluent in the first language of faith—Scripture as the Book of Faith—facilitated by a lay catechist and including the sponsors for each candidate.

WORSHIP—Candidates are invited to regular worship as a central component of their faith formation. They are supported by the assembly's prayers at each step with public rites in the Sunday assembly. The liturgical rhythm of the church's year and the themes of the lectionary shape this formation.

INVITE—This catechumenal process is all about inviting people to a new or renewed relationship with the risen Christ and the church.

ENCOURAGE—Catechists and sponsors primarily, and the entire congregation by extension, serve as teachers, coaches, mentors and guides in the faith in a process that is centered in passing on faith.

SERVE—Throughout the process, but particularly in the stages of baptismal preparation and then baptismal living, candidates reflect on what Christian service looks like in light of the cross and resurrection and in light of baptism and eucharist.

GIVE—Whole-life stewardship is a particularly clear theme of the post-baptismal time focused on baptismal living or call to mission, as new and renewed Christians reflect on sharing their gifts.