

Conversion and Catechesis in the Community of Faith:
Examining the Catechumenate in Eight ELCA Congregations

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Introduction

Annie's life was spinning out of control. On her way home from work, Annie turned into the parking lot of the small Lutheran church which she usually passed by everyday without noticing. That day the words on the sign caught her eye, "Saturday Evening Eucharist: 6:15 p.m." "Perfect timing," she thought. She was searching for a place to pray. At worship that evening the sermon spoke to her directly. She returned to the church several more times because she enjoyed the services, the sermons and the people. Within a month she asked the pastor how she could join. Her pastor's response was: "We have a way." The following Tuesday Annie went out to dinner with the "Seekers" group which is a part of the congregation's catechumenate process to welcome newcomers in the congregation. Annie was paired with a sponsor from within the group and she began to meet with them for Bible Study and fellowship every other Tuesday night. Annie was also encouraged by the pastor and her sponsor to attend an adult class held at the church called "The Lutheran Course" which met on the other Tuesdays. Annie described being welcomed into this congregation as "perfect timing." She felt as if the whole process was designed with her in mind. At the Easter Vigil in 2006, Annie was confirmed and became a member of a community of people whom she now knew and loved – a community within the building of a church that she had hardly even noticed in her daily drive home from work.¹

"We have a way." This is the response that congregations within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) practicing the catechumenate give to inquirers of the faith.

- We have a way to welcome you.
- We have a way to encourage and explore your questions about Jesus and the Christian faith.

¹ Throughout this paper stories and interview quotations will be coded according to the chart in Appendix B. (B)

- We have a way to facilitate your participation and belonging in this church and your baptismal vocation in the world.

In a growing number of ELCA congregations the catechumenate is a faith-formation practice providing newcomers with an intentional process that fosters conversion, catechesis, and initiation into a local faith community. “Newcomers” generally refers to unbaptized adults within the catechumenate process, however, some congregations use this practice to re-affirm the faith of previously inactive baptized Christians, to provide an intentional period of renewal and catechesis for active baptized members of the community, and to welcome Christians whose faith practice was active in other congregations. Arising primarily from the twentieth century ecumenical movement of liturgical renewal, individuals within the ELCA, supported by the efforts of Roman Catholic and Protestant liturgical theologians, have sought to retrieve the early church’s practice of Christian initiation for adults for use in congregations today. Within Roman Catholic circles this practice is known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)² and among Protestants it is known by various titles, “The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation and Formation for Christian Life and Ministry³,” “Living Witnesses⁴,” “Come to the Waters,⁵” and “Welcome to Christ⁶” to name a few.

At one ELCA congregation in the northwest, the catechumenate process is called “Faith Journey.” “Faith Journey,” described very clearly in a tri-fold brochure available for all newcomers to the congregation, “is a pathway to spiritual growth and renewal that is patterned

² *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, trans. The International Commission on English in the Liturgy (New York: Pueblo Publishing House, 1976), 13ff.

³ See for the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation and Formation for Christian Life and Ministry*, (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990).

⁴ See for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Living Witnesses: The Adult Catechumenate: A Manual for the Catechumenal Process*, (Manitoba: n.p., 1994).

⁵ See for the United Methodist Church, Daniel Benedict, *Come to the Waters: Baptism and Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996).

⁶ See for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, ed. Samuel Torvend and Lani Willis (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

after Christ's way of welcoming people into community." On Wednesday evenings, individuals are invited to gatherings with a meal and opportunity for conversation. During the initial four-week period of "Faith Journey," two groups are offered. Group A is for people who are new to the Christian faith, returning to faith or exploring the possibility of faith. Group B is for people who are either coming from active membership in another church or very familiar with the Bible and other basic teachings of the church. Both groups are hosted by a pastor of the church who facilitates conversations around the questions of faith that arise from the experience of the newcomers. In this way, this congregation is able to facilitate the needs of all newcomers and each person can decide which groups fits them best.⁷

The catechumenate process is made up of four distinct periods: inquiry, catechumenate, preparation for baptism and baptismal living. Between these periods liturgical rites with prayers and blessings occur within the congregation's worship service to mark the transitions. In the resource documents provided by the ELCA, the first period of the catechumenate is "an open-ended period during which unbaptized persons make an initial inquiry into the Christian faith."⁸ Recognizing that conversion cannot be forced or rushed, open-periods provide the space and time for an individual's journey in the faith. The catechumenate process provides a faith community into which the inquirer is immersed as they ask questions and seek understanding about the Christian faith. At some point during this period the inquirer is matched with a sponsor, a baptized Christian who walks alongside the inquirer as mentor and model of the faith, encouraging the inquirer to ask questions while exploring their calling to Christ. A catechist, generally also a layperson, walks alongside the inquirer and their sponsor serving as a teacher and model of the faith. When the inquirer begins to ask deeper questions related to faith, they

⁷ Received brochure through request by phone interview.

⁸ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, 8.

become catechumens. This second period is also open-ended and is called specifically the *catechumenate*. The third period within the process is an intense period of *baptismal preparation* which often occurs (although not necessarily) during the weeks of Lent leading up to the Easter Vigil at which the catechumen is baptized. The final period is historically called *mystagogy*⁹ and occurs throughout the fifty days of Pentecost. The ELCA catechumenate resources emphasize this period as *baptismal living*: “a life-long period during which the newly baptized grow more deeply into the practice of faith and Christian life.”¹⁰ Following the ancient pattern of the catechumenate, congregations have a basic structure to help them focus on and orient around welcoming the newcomer to Christ and the Christian faith, encouraging their assimilation into the local congregation, and supporting their ongoing life of faith lived out daily in the world.

I first learned about the catechumenate in a liturgy course on the practice in seminary. While learning about the history, the recovery, and the evangelical and liturgical dynamics of the rites throughout the semester, I was struck by how few Christian Educators were involved in the conversation even though faith formation seemed central to the process.¹¹ With a few exceptions, liturgical theologians and historians have written the scholarship on the recovery of the catechumenate, including the scholarship on how teaching, learning, catechesis and formation should be approached by catechumenate practitioners. The pedagogical suggestions made by liturgical scholars seem to be less inherent to the practice of the early church and more a reaction to religious education in the early twentieth century. Michael Dujarier’s reflections on

⁹ Mystagogy was the period during which the newly baptized explored the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and their vocational callings in daily life.

¹⁰ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, 8.

¹¹ I am aware that this conversation is needed especially in denominations, such as the ELCA, that practice infant baptism. More attention is given to how people enter the faith and how they become members of a local faith community in denominations that practice believers or adult baptism.

Christian education are a case in point.¹² He highlights four components of Christian education characteristic of the catechumenate period: “catechetical instruction, exposure to the Christian life, participation in the liturgical rites and an introduction to the apostolic life of the Church.”¹³

Dujarier then suggests on the basis of the above characteristics, four principles to guide the contemporary catechumenate:

1. Christian education must become more experiential and less instructional.
2. Christian education involves the entire community.
3. Personal and communal prayer experiences play a vital role in Christian education.
4. Implementation of the Rites of Transition in the course of the catechumenate period is indispensable.¹⁴

The field of Christian education has much to contribute to this conversation and would be of great service to those practitioners in congregations struggling to discern appropriate ways to approach catechesis in the catechumenate.

A second aspect of the catechumenate which interests me is the relationship between conversion and Christian education. Mainline Protestant Christian Educators tend to spend more time on the question of how Christians grow, mature and live out their faith, than on the question of how individuals enter into the faith. I am eager to explore the catechumenate as a process that integrates and extends the ministries of evangelism, social outreach and Christian education toward the mission of the church in the twenty-first century.¹⁵

To explore the dynamics of the catechumenate ministry in ELCA congregations as it relates to the field of Christian Education, from 2005-2006 I engaged in an exploratory qualitative research study of eight congregations practicing the catechumenate. My research was

¹² Michel Dujarier, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Historical and Pastoral Reflections*, trans. Kevin Hart (New York: Sadlier, 1979).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁵ The questions of conversion and catechesis will be explored further in my dissertation.

a part of the Faithful Practices Project at Princeton Theological Seminary which attended to the relationship between Christian practices and faith formation in North American Christian congregations.¹⁶

I developed the framework for my research with a dual focus, attending to the catechumenate's role in the life of the congregation and the catechumenate's role in the life of the individual. Within the congregational perspective, I explored the catechumenate as an intentional process of congregational renewal fostering individual and corporate faith formation through education and worship with the intent of strengthening evangelism and social outreach. In each congregation I was eager to see how leaders integrated the catechumenate into the congregation's other ministries, how the role of sponsors encouraged the growth and maturity of current members in the congregation, and how the catechumenate spurred a missional or evangelizing spirit within the congregation. The line of questioning I used in my interviews did not attend to the congregational focus directly, thus the information I gleaned from comments and observations contributed to my analysis and became the backdrop to my second focus.

The second focus of my research explored the catechumenate as a process forming the faith of individuals as they become a part of a congregation (through baptism or affirmation of baptism) and forming the faith of individuals already members of a congregation (worshippers, sponsors and catechists). This focus arose from my interest in adult faith formation. To address this focus I developed a research question with specific attention to the faith formation process and development of spiritual practices within the catechumenate in congregations. My research

¹⁶ The Faithful Practices Project (FPP), sponsored by The Lily Endowment, asked three questions about the relationship between Christian practices and faith formation.

- How do people *enter* into Christian belief and life?
- How do people *grow and mature* in Christian belief and life?
- How might individuals and congregations be equipped more effectively to *live out* Christian beliefs in every sphere of their lives?

The catechumenate as practiced in congregations in the ELCA naturally engages all three questions. For more information about FPP visit <http://www.faithfulpractices.org/>.

at each congregation consisted of a semi-structured interview with church leaders (pastors and associates) and catechumenate leaders (catechists); a focus group with newcomers who joined after participating in the catechumenate process; a focus group with those newcomers who decided to join without participating in the catechumenate process; and a focus group with members who participated in the catechumenate as sponsors. More details about my research design and the questions which guided both the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups can be found in Appendix A.

Henry had been away from the church for thirty years. Although he was raised Roman Catholic, he describes spending most of his life “wandering, occasionally looking but never quite finding...never finding what I was looking for.” At the age of 49, Henry was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. At the encouragement of his doctor and some friends he started searching for a church. He found a Lutheran church just five-minutes from his house. The service felt familiar enough to his early childhood experiences to enjoy, but it was the pastor’s preaching which “blew him away.” He describes the sermons as “incredible.” More than the comforting atmosphere and the pastor’s sermons, Henry was captivated by the congregation’s welcome.

“...The first Sunday I came, not being quite aware of how things worked or anything about the Lutheran church, I came in and sat down and I was trying to follow along... One of the other members came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder and he handed me a program. He said, ‘It’s all right, here.’ Oh and I said, ‘thank you, it all makes sense.’”

Over time Henry began to see differences between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic perspectives, particularly through the preaching and felt more comfortable with Lutheran

theology and “the religion piece” as a result. He noticed a bulletin announcement about “The Way,” the catechumenate at this congregation, and decided to sign up.

Every Sunday evening from October through Pentecost, *The Way* participants gather together. When they arrive tables are set up for dinner. “It’s very interesting to me,” Henry recalled,

that that initial time at the dinner is spent just talking about your life. Just, how was your week. It’s not what happened with you and God this week, it’s, you know, my car did this and the kids, ah, you know. We’ve all become very close. And you know, we always sit at different tables. There’s been a pretty good mix. We’ve had pretty good conversations. There’s a trust and a community that has been built over that time. It’s really nice over that dinnertime, because we are sharing ourselves – not necessarily our faith. We are building this community of new people with the catechists who are there and our sponsors are there, everyone is there for dinner and you are really sort of drawn in. That section has really been, looking back, has really been nice...you know, really nice...whoever plotted this out was really wise, you know, really thinking.

After dinner, participants in *The Way* move to another room where they all sit together in a circle. There the pastors will bring up the church news and discuss any important events or experiences in the lives of those participating in the way. Then the leaders outline what the events are for the evening and introduce the text to be discussed. Henry describes the different parts within *The Way* as “gaining cohesion week after week -- gradually becoming routine.”

The large group then divides into smaller groups of six or eight, led by a catechist. Catechumens and sponsors, who are paired together by the pastors and the catechists, attend the same group with one another. Henry was paired with William.

Pastor works really hard and very carefully and in my case it was just a perfect match. William and I are like old buddies. We get together and just hang out, go have coffee. We get together and talk about God, and religion and how it affects our lives. We also care about each other. There is a really deep relationship. It was almost instantaneous for us. We’re both a little off the left of mainstream. Our lives have sort of wandered around, we’ve done this and we’ve done that...It was just an immediate [snapped his fingers] connection.

I asked Henry whether meeting someone like William helped dispel some of the myths he might have had about the average churchgoer. “Yes. It was just like, WOAHH, it was just like, WOW, you know, [we both had] an oddball sense of humor.”

As my interview with Henry closed I asked him to summarize his experience with The Way.

You know, we have this real special community, this really special group. And all the wonderful little relationships that are being built, not just the sponsors but everything that is going on. The chance to just be together and talk about ideas is just incredible. I wonder what will happen when The Way is finished. That will lead to something else because there will be a hole there and I’ll need to fill it. This has built a real longing. The Way continues for a while after Easter, but I know as that as it comes to a close it’s going to be very sad. OK, now I’ll seek something more because it has really sparked that. The group is just, a real sense of safety and security. Here is this group that I look forward to every Sunday.

Henry noted that he really hopes to fill the hole left by the catechumenate by cooking dinners for the next year’s catechumenate group. For as many church events that he can, he helps out in the kitchen. We met up again later in the week for the youth and children’s program at the church. When I stood from my table to get food, he was right there in the kitchen serving soup.¹⁷

Henry’s story is an excellent example of how the catechumenate involves both foci of my research -- individuals and congregations. As an individual, Henry’s catechumenate process was thoroughly supported by the community of faith through the welcome of a fellow worshipper, a visible announcement in the bulletin, the conversation and spiritual support of “The Way” community, and the friendship and mentoring of his sponsor. With that gradual immersion into a community of faith, Henry affirmed his faith and was moved to live it out through his ministry of hospitality (for the brief time that he still had) within the congregation and beyond.¹⁸

¹⁷ (D)

¹⁸ Henry died in October, 2005.

I researched eight ELCA congregations for this project; one in the northwest, two in the south, and five in the northeast. Although the majority of Lutheran congregations are located in the Midwest, Lutheran congregations practicing the catechumenate are generally found in the Northwest and the Northeast.¹⁹ None of the congregations I contacted in the Midwest were still practicing the catechumenate.²⁰ Among my research congregations, the largest worships with 340 in attendance on average and has just over 800 on the membership rolls. The smallest of these congregations worships eighty people on average with about 128 on the membership rolls. Five of these congregations are located in cities (two large, one medium and two small), one is in the suburbs of a small city and two are located in small boroughs. Two of the congregations have staff ministries, the others are solo pastorates. In only one of the eight churches does the pastor run the catechumenate ministry on his own, while the other seven congregations have active lay catechists who convene the groups, teach, and essentially run the catechumenate process. The pastor brought the catechumenate to the congregation in five instances, but in the other three, the lay catechists were critical advocates of the catechumenate during a pastoral vacancy and especially during the interview and call process for the new pastor. One congregation in the northwest has had an active catechumenate process for eleven years. Another congregation in the south has practiced the catechumenate inconsistently since the early 1990s. The other congregations practice of the catechumenate average about five years.²¹

¹⁹ In the 1990s the ELCA sponsored catechumenate trainings in the Northwest and in the Mid-Atlantic which spawned numerous catechumenate congregations. See Appendix C for more information.

²⁰ If the reader is aware of a Midwestern ELCA congregation with an ongoing catechumenate ministry, please contact me.

²¹ For a brief chart summarizing these congregations please see Appendix B.

Summary of Research Analysis

Guided by my research question, two core catechumenate convictions emerged as I interviewed individuals within these congregations: 1) the centrality of worship and the sacraments and 2) taking time for meaningful and formational catechesis. These core convictions lead to two critiques which arise directly from the interviews and an observation about the potentially problematic role of the parish pastor in this process. The initial critique is that the catechumenate process is effective at igniting faithful reflection and exploration, and fostering a sense of belonging within the catechumenate group, but not necessarily at directing participants to live their faith in service to the world. Similarly, congregations do not have an adequate response to alleviate the worry and anxiety participants experienced at the end of the catechumenate process. Ironically, though the catechumenate process in these congregations succeeded at initiating the newcomer into the faith and in developing a strong bond of faith and relationship within the catechumenate group, it was less successful at integrating members into the common life and ministry of the whole congregation, both within and beyond the church walls. Finally, it is clear that the catechumenate process depends greatly upon the leadership and support of the pastor (the congregation's called minister of word and sacrament), and that without pastoral support the vitality of the catechumenate can suffer.

Centrality of Worship and the Sacraments

Given that liturgical scholars have guided the recovery of the catechumenate, ELCA congregations that practice the catechumenate place critical importance on the liturgy and keep Sunday worship central in the life of the congregation. Nearly all the congregations who participated in my research would be considered highly liturgical and the pastors called to serve

these congregations have strong liturgical interests as well. All eight congregations in this study are attentive to the church year and follow the Revised Common Lectionary for the readings and sermon text for each Sunday.²² One pastor said his core conviction for the whole community is to “make regular worship a priority in your life.” “Worship,” he reiterates constantly, “is at the heart of your spiritual journey and your relationship with God and with other church members.” When a member and leading university theologian was not attending worship regularly, this pastor took him out to lunch and asked him directly why worship was not a priority for him and his family. This pastor is also very concerned that small groups not emphasize worship as a component of their gathering because it might detract from the centrality of the Sunday morning worship together with a larger community of faith. All programming, including the catechumenate, flows from and towards the faith community that gathers around Word and Sacrament on Sunday morning.²³

Sacramental theology is equally important in these congregations. All of the congregations practice weekly communion. Three congregations underwent construction in their sanctuary, redesigning their worship space in light of recent developments in sacramental theology. In most cases the baptismal font is large and central in these congregations, and in two instances the fonts had flowing water. In another congregation, a large basin (six feet long and four feet wide) is placed in the chancel area for baptisms during the Easter Vigil to replace the smaller, vertical font. The churches with vertical fonts have found ways to move their fonts to the center aisle or to the entrance of the sanctuary, marking visually for the congregation that baptism is the entry point into the church.

²² All services at each congregation are “traditional” in nature. None of the congregations in this study had a “contemporary” worship service.

²³ (F)

Believing in the importance of the sacrament of baptism led one pastor to encourage a catechumen to go to long lengths to discover whether or not she was baptized.

Lori did not know whether she was baptized. As the period of baptismal preparation arrived she decided to be baptized at the Easter Vigil -- just to make sure. The pastor simply told Lori she had to find out whether or not she was baptized. Lori remembers being angry. Still, she called her mom who gave her a completely mixed response and said only that Lori's grandmother wanted her to be baptized. Lori also called her dad who said, "yeah, I got stuffed into a suit for a couple of those things but who knows who it was for." Lori decided to call her grandmother's church. She made a few phone calls, remembering that her grandmother's church had burned down, and ultimately figured out where the salvaged records were transferred. She finally reached a church secretary.

When I told her my story she said she knew my grandmother but had no idea whether the baptismal records had transferred after the fire. She said she was really busy and would call me back when she got to it. I never thought she'd call back. But I couldn't believe when three weeks later she called. Me and my sisters were baptized on January 6, 1956. I was a child of God and I didn't even know it. My community had always been there. I was a prodigal daughter.²⁴

The centrality of baptism is also conveyed in Shelly's story. Shelly was a sponsor for a young woman who had not yet been baptized.

Shelly recalls being "shocked" when the pastor asked her to be a sponsor. "I was like, why me? I did not think I was the ideal candidate at that time in my life to be sponsoring someone. But other people know better than you do. Pastor knew that it was something I needed as well." I asked Shelly to describe one of the rites that she remembered as a sponsor. She said, "baptism." "The baptism took place at the Easter Vigil, which I thought was just the best it

²⁴ (D)

could have been. *It just seemed most appropriate to do it at the Easter Vigil.*” I asked Shelly what moved her most about the baptism.

The water. The water being shared. We allow water to move when we are baptizing. Those around also get wet. This is the first place that I had ever experienced that. Even with our infant baptisms the water is very free flowing. There is usually water on the floor. The sharing of the water and the Word and the overflowing of it means a lot to me. Other people may not get that. I still get chills when I see baptisms today. And I always sit up front. I’m experiencing it again, every time there is one. That sounds corny to some people. I had a lot ...I had a very rocky road to get to where my faith is today. Being involved in the catechumenate brought things back into focus for me. Worship is ...I’m not real active in the church...but worship is the number one thing for me... I have to be here. When there is a baptism it’s a renewing all over again for me.²⁵

In addition to keeping worship central, every congregation researched uses the liturgical rites that mark the progress of the catechumenate process. These public rites take place in worship between the catechumenate periods and include welcome, enrollment, blessings and baptism. When asked if she remembered any of the liturgical rites in the catechumenate, one college-aged participant responded:

There were four different times that you have to go in front of the church. I had to go and accept a Bible. I didn’t have one so that was great. The second time I was given a scroll.²⁶ I haven’t opened it yet because it is tied so nicely and I want to buy a frame. The third time was a blessing and the last time I got my own hymnal. Each time there was a blessing to say and the church would be with me. And then there was my baptism.²⁷

The rite of welcome was by far the most memorable rite, commented on by nearly all those interviewed, catechumens and sponsors alike. This rite takes place between the first and second period. At the start of the worship service, inquirers and their sponsors stand at the entryway to the sanctuary. Inquirers are presented by their sponsors, asked a few questions, prayed for and welcomed into the worshipping space. During the worship service, inquirers and their sponsors are invited forward for a blessing. Each sponsor traces the sign of the cross on the inquirer’s

²⁵ (F)

²⁶ The scroll was a hand-calligraphied copy of the Apostle’s Creed.

²⁷ (A)

forehead, ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands and feet. After the blessing, each inquirer receives a Bible. Henry describes it here.

We all went up as a part of the service and we all went up front and there was a “signing of the cross.” Eyes, mouths, shoulders, feet, it was symbolic of the goings on, but it was very, that is, you’re taking the whole...it’s not just an intellectual Sunday where you should be listening to God but this is what you should be thinking about, when you speak, be careful what you are saying. It was sort of this outward sign that you were willing to not just say it to yourself, lets pray now, but you were willing to stand up in front of the whole church and say, fine, yeah, alright, I will do this. It was almost like a smaller, precursor to the Affirmation of Baptism. It was...you were willing to stand up and say here I am, saying count me in.²⁸

Another college-aged participant at Henry’s church recalled the final blessing within the welcome rite when the whole congregation is invited to extend both of their hands towards the inquirers:

I think the one, I think it must have been the first one back in January, I don’t know, after New Years. I went up front and what was really kind of WOAHH was when everyone puts their hands up. Everyone is focusing on me. It’s really welcoming to think about. I don’t know how to put it, but they are focusing on you and soon I’m going to be a part of the congregation and I’ll be able to focus on somebody else.²⁹

Liturgical scholars argue that the blessings and rites of Christian initiation are a critical part of the catechumenate, fostering a greater awareness about the catechumenate within the congregation and encouraging ongoing participation by the whole congregation. Pastors and laity who participated in the catechumenate trainings sponsored by the ELCA in the late 1990s, were encouraged not to leave out the rites, which is one reason all the congregations use them. Dujarier, as quoted earlier, insists that the rites of transition are an indispensable part of the catechumenate process. This in turn has fostered a strict legalism among practitioners who tend to criticize congregations and pastors who leave out these transition rites and therefore, “don’t do

²⁸ (D)

²⁹ (D)

the catechumenate correctly.” And yet, another sponsor gets to the heart of the matter with this response:

There were people who asked me why I did it. It was my own choice and I saw it as an opportunity to be a part of what was happening here rather than just seeing people go up and being a part of the different blessings. Some of those blessings...were very touching moments.

The one I remember in particular is the blessing with all the parts of your body. From an observer's point of view it's kind of...what are they doing now? why are they doing the feet? But to be a part of it... I can say that I was a part of that and it was very impressive. I've grown from that.

So every year when I hear that music and I could sing it for you...it inspires me to be a part of it again. If you experience something, the wounded healer understands and otherwise..., sometimes..., you just can't get it.³⁰

Taking Time for Meaningful and Formational Catechesis

Second to worship, a core conviction of all eight congregations is that the catechumenate process takes time. Conversion and discerning God's call cannot be rushed and therefore emphasis is placed on regular and consistent Bible Study prior to baptism or joining a congregation. Nearly all of the congregations gather inquirers and their sponsors bi-weekly from October through December, meeting weekly then from January through Easter and throughout the days of Pentecost. The catechumenate gatherings should include opportunities for: 1) God's word to *engage* the participant's life, 2) *reflection* upon God's calling and what that means for their life, 3) *integration* into the participants life and the life of the congregation. The gatherings should also be 4) *holistic* - engaging the whole person and caring for their body, mind and spirit and finally, 5) *faith-centered* - by encouraging honesty so participants feel safe disclosing and participating in all sessions. In these gatherings of catechist, sponsors and catechumens, all are encouraged to use their primary language of faith as they reflect upon the text, using first-hand experiences and stories as opposed to talking *about* faith.

³⁰ (C)

Six of the eight congregations consistently practice what the ELCA resources call the *African Bible Study* or *Collatio* during those bi-weekly or weekly gatherings.³¹ This study, used in base-Christian communities in South Africa, encourages participants to listen to the text that is read. "...This method turns Bible study away from the intellectual pursuit of knowledge about the text and toward an attitude of listening to what God is saying through the text."³² The participant is encouraged to explore "his or her own life as it is addressed by God's word through scripture, the catechism, worship and conversation in the faith community."³³

The catechumenate gatherings in the research congregations begin with prayer and the reading of the appointed Gospel for Sunday.³⁴ Gatherings using the African Bible Study continue with silence and then, individuals are invited to share "a word, phrase, or an image from the text that catches their attention and speaks to their life at this time."³⁵ The passage is read a second time and silence is kept again. During the second sharing participants are invited to talk about how the text is speaking to them directly or to their relationships with others. After a third reading and a third period of silence, the final invitation is "to speak the prayer that grows out of the text and reflect on it."³⁶ The gathering closes with those prayers and/or a hymn.

The African Bible Study follows a consistent pattern which participants come to trust as the weeks pass. This pattern elicits memories, and fosters connections between the scripture text and daily life which is then shared among the group from week to week. As individuals described their experience with the African Bible Study for me, they used descriptions such as, "multiple voices," "deeper meanings," "ambiguity" and "meaningful to my life." The study

³¹ A second method for catechesis is suggested in the ELCA resources which encourages catechumens to visualize the text through drama or art. This method was not used by any of the congregations studied. *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide*, ed. Samuel Torvend and Lani Willis (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 50-51.

³² *Ibid.*, 49.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴ Some congregations read the text from the previous Sunday, others for the up-coming Sunday.

³⁵ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

consistently revealed that everyone held different perspectives of the biblical text and the text elicited a variety of stories. Harry noted:

That's been the really amazing thing about what other people will pull out. I didn't even hear...WOW...it's just... I know that, like, just last week when I got together just for our one-on-one,³⁷ the question he came up with was just a hundred and eighty degrees away from mine. And then our answers... It was just, well, what is the color of the sky? Well it's everything, or its blue or green or purple. So that's really nice.

I no longer really look at the Gospel or the sermons with quite the face value that I once did. It's a part of that seeing it in a group, so it's like, OH. So I will go home and read the Gospel and think at a whole other level, you know, deeper and further in. They parted the sea, they went through, okay fine, but what does that mean, you know, it's not just at face value, there is a lot more to it. And oftentimes it's like something completely different than what you initially heard in the service.

I also think about Pastor when he does his sermon. [whistle] He just roars into them and then BAM, turns the corner and shows you the other side of it. It's like, OH, WOAHA. He kind of leads you into it and then BANG...this is what he meant by this and not what you were really thinking. Between those two [the gatherings and the sermons] it has really struck home. I think the way its was written in the old language and tried to translate it into today -- they are written...the stories are written at different levels. That has been lifted up for me.³⁸

The African Bible Study equips laity with a way to read scripture faithfully. The regular sharing and reflecting on the Biblical text which occurs in this method, teaches a hermeneutic for interpreting the text in light of one's daily life. In addition, participants gain a new appreciation for the variety of interpretations which exist around any one text.

Lori describes herself as a Berkley rebel who spurned religion but was always interested in things spiritual. As she walked through the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, she realized, "something in me isn't forgiven." "I was a student of world religions and I thought, isn't Jesus the one who does that? Jesus said, forgiveness is yours." Lori found herself searching for a Christian congregation. She was not very impressed when she first arrived at her local Lutheran church but she inquired as to how she might join. The pastor told her, "we

³⁷ One-on-one time is an opportunity within the gatherings for the sponsor and the candidate to share apart from the group, alone with one another.

³⁸ (D)

have a way.” Intrigued, Lori began the catechumenate process called “The Way” at this congregation. “We start with Scripture - Read it – Reflect – Read it – Apply – Read it Again. Let the Word work on you. Most churches say here’s the story and here’s what it means. Not here. For thinking people like me this church asks you to turn on your brain.”

Although she continued to worship, Lori dropped out of “The Way” within a few weeks because she thought Lutherans were too nice (she was not), too quiet (she was not) and she had too many questions (Lutherans did not). Lori joined “The Way” a second time the following year. “This time I got stuck on the 4th commandment. I understood that it was important but there was no way I would honor my parents. I dropped out. Still, I kept coming to church. I guess the Holy Spirit was leading that part of the process.” A couple years later Lori joined “The Way” a third time. She stayed but fought the whole way through. “My questions became more and more complicated. I was a rebellious Adam, a doubting Thomas and the Woman at the Well. But my sponsor and the pastor kept telling me to ask my questions. They reminded me that sometimes I’d run up against mystery. Somehow I was comforted by this.”³⁹

Lori’s story represents two important dynamics integral to catechesis in the catechumenate. First, the initial period of inquiry was certainly open-ended in this congregation and Lori was consistently reminded that there was no “end result” compelling her towards Affirmation of Baptism and/or joining the church. She, unlike most, took advantage of the invitation to take more time discerning God’s calling in her life. Second, catechesis in the catechumenate, though shared in community, is also deeply personal and meets the individual where they are in their life journey. What is remarkable also about Lori’s story is the way she describes herself in terms of the biblical characters. Throughout our conversation she referred to Adam or Thomas or her favorite, the Woman at the Well, embodying their voices as she quoted

³⁹ (D)

scriptures, and wove these characters into her own story. Catechumens and sponsors vary along a wide continuum in terms of the vocabulary used to describe faith. The participant, while in control of what, when and how they share their experiences, learns to trust the gathered community as the community meets together. Lori's questions grew increasingly more complicated as she learned to trust the process. In turn, Lori was encouraged by her sponsor, the catechist and the pastor to enjoy the mystery behind her questions as opposed to answering them. Thus, catechesis is a collective process and yet encourages the collective to listen attentively to the individual.

Catechesis in the catechumenate involves conversation among peers. Although the catechist is present to facilitate the gathering, she is not the authority or knowledge-bearer in the room. Catechists, sponsors and inquirers alike, share authority and knowledge. Any residual authority the catechist has early in the process is transferred to the biblical text that is read aloud and to the stories and experience shared by the participants. Further, the African Bible Study does not presume a knowledge base from the participant other than that which the participants offer. For newcomers who have not been baptized or those seeking to affirm their baptism this Bible study method creates a non-threatening, safe atmosphere for adults to explore what they do not know or understand about the faith. This atmosphere is particularly crucial for sponsors who speak of the process as a "renewing" or a "refreshing" of their faith. Sponsors often said, "I certainly got more out of the catechumenate, perhaps more than the person I was sponsoring." Or, "it was just as much for me as it was for her." One gentleman participated in "The Way" because he was coming from the Greek Orthodox tradition. When I asked him whether his faith grew as a result of this process he said, "I believe it [The Way] helped to strengthen some of

my...,[mumbled word] but my religion has always been pretty straight forward.”⁴⁰ He also said that he never held back on any question he had. Another woman in the focus group reminded him that she always benefited from his inquiries and observations.

The catechetical guide in the ELCA catechumenate resources encourages the use of scripture, the worship book, and the catechism. Scripture is used in nearly every instance and the worship book is referred to as questions about the liturgy arise. With all that has been suggested by liturgical scholars about the pedagogical methodology inherent to the catechumenate, however, there seems to be confusion as to how catechists should use the catechism.⁴¹ Most catechumenate practitioners remembered the catechism as a tool used in traditional methods of Christian education, perhaps for the memorization of static doctrinal truths. As a result, catechumenate practitioners are at a loss for how to dynamically engage catechetical and confessional resources.

Most pastors and catechists use the catechisms or confessional books of the Lutheran church as a secondary resource in and around the study of the lectionary text. Although the catechism is used in these instances, catechists expressed frustration. They feel as though they force the catechism into the conversation, contradicting the catechumenate’s conviction that the catechumens’ questions and experience should always lead the conversation. Oftentimes, when the catechist is prepared to facilitate a conversation about the catechism’s contents, the conversation does not lend to that discussion. On the other hand, when the catechumen brings up an issue that the catechism could address, the catechist is often unprepared to answer the question or does not make the catechetical connection. Some pastors and catechists, eager to encourage catechumens to think of themselves more as Christians than Lutherans use Lutheran

⁴⁰ (C)

⁴¹ See footnote 14.

theological themes implicitly through conversation and in sermons without using the catechisms directly. In these congregations, the emphasis on Christianity or Lutheranism does vary from year to year depending upon the particular questions of the inquirers. Lutheranism will, of course, be addressed if it is of interest or concern but it is not structured into the conversation.

In some congregations, the pastor and catechist have spelled out how the Bible, the catechisms and the worship book will be used in each session. The pastor and catechist, together, plan and develop a lesson for each gathering addressing topics such as the Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, sacraments, and Lutheran liturgy. It is only in these congregations that participants described their experience within the gatherings as "confirmation" and spoke openly about being frustrated by the process. This frustration arose when individuals were not able to express their own questions because the "lecture" or "information" that was presented took too much time.

Finally, in two congregations, Annie's in particular, participants are encouraged to study the Bible and related theological themes within the catechumenate's gathering, while being encouraged to participate in a separate course on Lutheranism, open to the whole congregation. It is not clear to me whether this was intentional for Annie's congregation or coincidental during the time when Annie arrived.

Catechumenate practitioners tend to see a divide between instruction and education on the one hand, and experience and formation on the other, preferring the latter. This artificial distinction and unhealthy prioritization results in the neglect of the teaching office of the church, and sets up for the participants a model of the Christian life that gives a low priority to formal learning. In theory the catechumenate should not fall prey to this divide. In speaking about changes in "confirmation," Dennis Bushkofsky, makes the connection to the catechumenate,

Although scriptural and doctrinal teachings may play an important part in Christian catechesis, the goal of such catechesis is not merely an enlightened mind but an enlightened life. Opportunities to integrate cognitive learnings with daily life have proven to be increasingly effective in the learning process...It stands to reason that the most effective forms of Christian catechesis combine learning through study and discussion with learning through daily experience.⁴²

The catechumenate relies heavily upon teaching and modeling the faith. However, as we will see below, catechumenate practitioners are deemphasizing teaching and modeling in favor of the intimate and comfortable small group dynamics of the Bible study gatherings. The future of catechumenal catechesis depends on striking a balance between *learning and practicing* our Christian faith.

When I asked pastors and catechists to articulate the spiritual practices they hoped participants learned to use in the catechumenate, they inevitably mentioned worship, study of scripture and prayer as essentials, but they also included *service*. Each of them shared stories of individuals who were changed by the experience of the catechumenate and lived out their Christian calling to serve in the church or community in a new way as a result of it. In one instance a catechumen turned the tide of a congregational meeting announcing that she would leave the church if the congregation did not vote to allow the homeless to set up tents for a week on their property. In another congregation a catechumen baptized at the Easter Vigil one year was president of the Church Council the following year.

The situation was different, however, when I asked participants to identify ways that the catechumenate encouraged spiritual practices. Although participants in the catechumenate process are practicing the faith, the vast majority of those I interviewed did not have an answer to this question, even when I rephrased it without the word “spiritual” or changed the word “practice” to “disciplines.” According to the ECLA resources on the catechumenate,

⁴² Ibid., 8.

participants, both inquirers and sponsors, are to learn *and practice* their faith in the catechumenate. Together catechumens, sponsors and catechists are to gather for worship, study scripture and prayer, with sponsors and catechists modeling and mentoring these practices for catechumens. Additionally, sponsors and catechists walking alongside the catechumens are to bear witness to their faith through testimony, bear the cross of Christ visibly in their lives, and give voice to issues of injustice and violence in the world.⁴³

It is clear by the responses of participants and by their vivid descriptions of the worship practices and catechumenal rites that the primary emphasis in these congregations is on worship and catechesis before service. All who are involved in the process are encouraged to practice regular worship attendance. About a third of the catechumens and sponsors articulated one of the core practices encouraged by the catechumenate: worship on Sundays, scripture reading in the gatherings, and prayer. Regarding worship, one participant responded:

Before, back in the fall, I was like, well I don't think I want to go to church today. Now I've grown into...like this past Sunday I was so tired and I had a headache, as a bad as I was feeling I just thought about how much he [Jesus] has done for us. I've become more responsible about attending church. I think I've become a tiny bit nicer too. I think...more in depth about people and things.⁴⁴

Scripture reading was also important. Nearly every inquirer and sponsor affirmed that the catechumenate gave him or her the opportunity to reflect on their whole life of faith in relation to scripture. While scripture reading was reiterated as important, in response to the question of practices, few were reading scripture at home. Some were reading devotional books or devotional publications which they received at church and read at home. Prayer was the practice articulated most among those who answered the question. Catechumens felt strengthened in their prayer and brought that home through their opportunities to pray in the group and for

⁴³ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide*, 7.

⁴⁴ (C)

members of the group. One of the college-aged catechumens who had prayed very little in her life was prompted to think about it during one of the gathering times.

*There is one I do now. Somebody was talking about...the discussion was about when do you pray? Someone said whenever she hears an ambulance she pauses immediately and prays. I live on a main road by the hospital. So now, I just stop and pray, Oh, please God let them be okay, let them be okay. Someone else just said that's what they do. It seems so small...*⁴⁵

As a start to her prayer life, though, this is just the instigation she needed.

This research shows that catechumenate practitioners place a priority on worship and the sacraments and cultivate in catechumens Christian practices central to the communal, sacramental life of the congregation. These, however, are not the only practices to be cultivated in catechumens. Though spiritual practices related to the communal gatherings of worship and catechesis are nurtured through this process, many catechumenate participants seem to struggle with the spiritual practices of prayer and Bible reading outside of the gatherings. Furthermore, the ELCA guide to catechesis in the catechumenate encourages integration of faith and baptismal living at every step of the process.⁴⁶ Catechists and sponsors are to bear witness to their faith by modeling and encouraging the newcomer to participate in social service opportunities.

The video that accompanies the *Welcome to Christ* resources tells the story of a young man seeking baptism at a Lutheran church in the Northwest. A critical component of the catechumenate process in that congregation is the time this young man spends accompanying his sponsor to a soup kitchen to serve meals. In addition to serving, these two spend time getting to know those who come to eat. The sponsor of this young man modeled the faithful Christian practices of serving a neighbor, hospitality to the stranger, walking with the poor, and more, by providing this opportunity. Only one of the participants I interviewed spoke of an instance of

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⁴⁶ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide*, 6-15.

service outside the congregation. This is not to say that sponsors and inquirers are not practicing the faith outside of the church. One sponsor spends nearly every waking hour volunteering in the hospital, visiting and praying with patients. Henry, of course, only told me after the interview that he serves food for the congregational meals and volunteers at the food bank located in the church. It is to say, however, that sponsors and catechumens are not practicing service together, nor are they identifying service as a faith practice connected to or inspired by their participation in the catechumenate. Without service opportunities, catechesis in the catechumenate process lacks a critical component for both faithful reflection and faithful living. Faithful Christian practices include those that encourage growth and maturity in faith but also those that propel the Christian into service in the world.

The catechumenate enables newcomers to participate in the life of the congregation long before they join. The welcome that newcomers receive from the congregation in their first few visits is vital. Many individuals during the interview discussed how welcomed they felt and how obvious the process of joining became through bulletin announcements, signs, brochures and responses to questions. One catechumen described her feelings as a young person coming to a congregation of older people and families.

And it's so odd because sometimes I feel like odd-man out because I'm the only college student in The Way, but I don't know, something about this congregation reminds me about family. I see all the little old ladies and they look like my great aunts. And the little old guys look like my great uncles so that's why I stay here rather than go to a university type congregation which more youth, my age-base....And it feels like a family and I don't have family here so it can kind of be my extended family away from family.⁴⁷

Her reaction to the congregation is not necessarily the result of the catechumenate process, but a natural welcoming posture, inherent within the community of faith that practices the

⁴⁷ (D)

catechumenate.

As the catechumenate proceeds, newcomers are invited to experience belonging to the catechumenate group, along with the sponsors and catechists, prior to developing a sense of belonging to the congregation. However, in spite of the deep sense of belonging newcomers feel during the catechumenate process, these congregations do not have a way to alleviate the worry and anxiety participants experience at the end of the catechumenate process. The transition from the protective and structured environment of the catechumenate to life in the congregation post-catechumenate was described as scary. Pastors and catechists recognize the gap but are unsure how to address it. One pastor described the transition as a “lost opportunity.” In one instance, a young catechumenate group decided to become a young adults group.⁴⁸ But by adding current members from the congregation who held different ideas as to how the group should function in with the close-knit group of new members, the larger group developed factions and ultimately broke apart in anger and frustration. Both the pastor and the catechist at this congregation wish they had stepped in earlier to address the conflict. Unfortunately, this group could not find its niche. Attending to the transition from catechumen to life-long learner of the Christian faith is similar to attending to the confirmand’s transition from child to adult in the congregation. Yet in both cases ELCA congregations are generally unable to adequately transition newly baptized or confirmed members from highly intense and deeply personal periods of catechesis into the daily life of congregational membership. Congregations need to explore how they will welcome new members into full fellowship and participation, and catechumens need to hear how pastors, catechists and sponsors will guide their transition before, during and after the catechumenate process.

⁴⁸ (F)

As stated before, the catechumenate process caters to individual needs while encouraging the individual to explore their relationship with the Christian faith in a local congregation. Catechumenate congregations struggle to heed this calling. In practice, the process is complicated as pastors and catechists seek to address individual needs while simultaneously balancing the administrative needs of congregational ministry. Although the process is intended to have open-ended periods, in order to have sufficient time for baptismal preparation and catechesis prior to the scheduled date of baptism or reaffirmation of baptism, congregations establish schedules for the different periods of the process. Not everyone in the process will feel comfortable advancing through the process at predetermined dates. Individuals like Lori, who articulate their needs, will feel comfortable pulling out of the process, but others will continue in spite of their hesitance or because of embarrassment. This process will not always meet the need of every newcomer. Inevitably, some proceed through this process for the wrong reasons. One catechist struggled through a year with a young couple whose life was so complicated and broken that they often missed meetings, showed up late or listened with only half an ear to the conversation. The catechist realized that the couple was only interested in having their baby baptized. She prayed daily that they would receive something, if only the slight perception that the church would walk with them throughout their life and the life of their child's. Too often, though, she doubted even that.

Catechesis is an essential part of the catechumenate process. Unlike the core conviction around the importance of worship and the sacraments, the second core conviction about the importance of catechesis needs further guidance and attention to dispel the frustration and anxiety catechists display in approaching the catechumenate gatherings. A brief understanding of adult learning theory and instruction on when and how to use catechetical theory with adults

would strengthen the catechumenate practice in ELCA congregations. Seeking a balance between formation and education would encourage a catechumenal catechesis which remains inherent to the catechumenate process but guided by current pedagogical theory for adults.⁴⁹

Pastoral Leadership

A final observation is how critically important pastoral leadership is to the practice of the catechumenate. All of the pastors interviewed support the catechumenate process in their congregations and do not treat the catechumenate as a tangential ministry in the congregation. First and foremost, pastors need to model the relationships they expect catechists and sponsors to model for catechumens. Sponsors do not receive training for how to walk with catechumens on their faith journey. Rather, by observing the actions of the pastor and catechists, sponsors take their cues for how to proceed. In every congregation, the catechist and pastor are partners in ministry. This symbiotic relationship between pastors and catechists is crucial to the practice of the catechumenate.

Secondly, pastors play a vital role in matching sponsors and catechumens since they tend to have the most frequent interactions with members and newcomers and have some practice at discerning personalities. The match between sponsor and catechumen is very important. Experience has proven that while all of the sponsor-catechumen dyads are single gender, other characteristics such as age, occupation, and interests matter less than personality traits. Some pastors trust their “intuition” to make the match. Others have conversations with staff members or the catechists or use categories such as “introvert vs. extrovert,” “feeling vs. thinking” to make the match. A few pastors described their experience of answered prayer as they witnessed

⁴⁹ I will explore this catechumenal catechesis in my dissertation.

matches blossoming between complete strangers and odd combinations. Of course, those times the match fails, pastors watch carefully so as to not make the same mistake a second time.

Thirdly, congregations and pastors need to share a common liturgical vision to enable the practice to survive a leadership transition – particularly a theological commitment to baptism.

One pastor recalled:

Our catechist was on the call committee. She asked me in the interview process about the catechumenate and I said I'd be happy to learn and be involved. In the last sixteen to seventeen months she has been my mentor, teaching me about the catechumenate. I've been reading some things on the catechumenate. Last February the Synod had a workshop and then they had a session on the catechumenate for lay people and I went to that.⁵⁰

One of the reasons congregations cease practicing the catechumenate is because the pastor has not empowered and equipped the catechist and sponsors or integrated the practice into other areas of ministry. For instance, when the catechumenate is practiced as a small group ministry situated on the periphery of the congregation's life, the process does not last.

Fourth, pastors are the leaders of a congregation which can compel newcomers to participate in the catechumenate process in the first place. Pastors of catechumenate congregations in the ELCA name expectations clearly. "We have a way," is a clear indication that this process is not a choice that can be dismissed lightly. Those newcomers who choose not to participate in the process did feel, in retrospect, that they missed on a growth opportunity. However, only a few felt guilt for not participating. In most instances the pastors encouraged their participation as a catechumen at a later date or as a sponsor in the future. Expectations are also clearly expressed in relation to worship attendance, and attendance at the bi-weekly or weekly gatherings. In general those that I interviewed began attending worship regularly

⁵⁰ (A)

because it was expected.⁵¹ Finally, as in Lori's case, the pastor was very clear about her need to discover whether or not she was baptized. Pastors in these congregations take their role as leader very seriously and have high expectations for their catechumenate ministries.

Fifth, pastors have also discovered that the catechumenate cannot occupy their full attention. In each congregation, as pastoral leadership begins to shift a congregation's mission towards evangelism and the newcomer, existing members are likely to feel abandoned or at the very least neglected. When a pastor begins to focus on the new, he or she must continue taking care of the old. Thus, continued attention to pastoral care is critical towards a congregation's acceptance of the catechumenate practice. Three of the catechumenate congregations researched have active and vibrant Stephen Ministries and other caring ministries within their congregation.⁵²

Sixth, pastors in catechumenate congregations have imaginations and captivate attention with their story-telling and ability to inspire. They believe in lay ministries and even when they fall short of their intentions, their hopes and dreams are good. Interviewing the pastors was a pleasure and a renewal of my own commitment to serve in the church.

Finally, as the called minister of Word and Sacrament, the parish pastor is necessarily involved in matters related to sacramental practice – including the preparation for baptism and affirmation that is essential to the catechumenate. Even though many of these congregations exhibit extraordinary lay leadership in sacramental ministries, the pastor's participation and support of the catechumenate as part of the sacramental ministry is crucial.

⁵¹ Unfortunately, since the interview process was generally set up by the pastor and the catechists, I did not have access to those individuals who do not attend regularly, although I tended to hear about them from their sponsors.

⁵² Stephen Ministry is a lay-based program structured to give one-to-one distinctively Christian care giving to those in need. See www.stephenministries.org for a fuller description of the program.

ELCA congregations have a way to support newcomers seeking Christ through the catechumenate process. “We have a way” is the response these congregations give to inquirers of the faith. While the welcome is genuine and the encouragement to ask and explore questions about Jesus and faith is central, catechumenate congregations are still struggling to teach the catechisms, to facilitate a sense of belonging as the catechumen transitions into the congregation and their ongoing life of faith, and to help catechumens live out their faith beyond the congregation in service towards the world. The catechumenate is a faith-formation practice with promise. It clearly can providing newcomers with an intentional process that fosters conversion, catechesis, and initiation into a local faith community. Further attention to these matters from those in their field of Christian Education who attend to these same questions of conversion and catechesis would guide this meaningful process even further towards the mission of welcoming newcomers to Christ, which is the church’s calling in the world.

APPENDIX A

*Research Question*⁵³

- *What role does the Adult Catechumenate play in the faith-formation of new and current members: i.e.*
 - *How does the catechumenate form and affect the faith and spiritual practices of new members (both newly baptized and transfers)?*
 - *Does the catechumenate form and affect the faith and spiritual practices of sponsors?*

Within this research question I was interested in the following sub-areas:

- 1) *Does the catechumenate help them learn more about the Lutheran/Christian tradition? Have you learned more about your Lutheran identity? What does it mean to be a Christian? Did the catechumenate process significantly shape your identity as a Christian or as a Lutheran?*
- 2) *Does it connect with their personal faith journey and encourage them to participate in spiritual practices at home and in the church? Do you feel like this congregation has connected with where you are at this point on your journey of faith? Has the catechumenate process connected with your personal faith journey? Has the catechumenate process taught you any spiritual practices?*
- 3) *Does the catechumenate enhance their participation in church? How often do you attend in worship? Do you participate in any church activities? Has the catechumenate significantly changed your participation habits?*
- 4) *Does it increase their sense of belonging? Have you made significant connections with others in this congregation? How many of your total friends are in this congregation? Has the catechumenate significantly changed your sense of belonging?*
- 5) *Does it increase their comfort with evangelism and/or encourage participation in social outreach? How comfortable are you talking about your faith with others? Are you more involved in community service, social service and advocacy?*

Research Design

In planning my research design the criteria I used to define my sample was the congregation's willingness to self-identify as engaging in catechumenal ministry. My sample

⁵³I chose a descriptive research question because I was interested in how each congregation and each individual understood the catechumenate. I also asked generative questions because I did not have a given hypothesis for how these questions would be answered in the various congregations I studied. Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, Second ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 50.

was not random and their self-identification was of interest to my research. There is no listing of all the ELCA congregations that participate in the catechumenate.⁵⁴ In the fall of 2004, I attended an ELCA Catechumenate Task Force meeting with fifteen pastors and lay people interested in the catechumenate. Together these individuals listed eighteen (18) ELCA congregations that are practicing the catechumenate. When I returned home, an Internet search led to the discovery of fifteen (15) additional catechumenate congregations in the ELCA. I do not believe there is a typical case of the practice of the catechumenate. In fact, among the congregations I have identified as practicing the catechumenate there is a wide diversity of commitment to the practice. Additionally, the practice seems to be functioning “better” at some congregations than at others. One or two of these congregations could be considered a “best practices congregation.” Therefore the selection of my final sample looked towards maximizing variation (“to integrate only a few cases, but those which are as different as possible to disclose the range of variation and differentiation in the field”⁵⁵) among the churches.

Among the eight congregations I studied I conducted the following qualitative research methods. (In some cases the practice of the catechumenate in a congregation did not match this structure perfectly, in which case I adapted accordingly.)

- **Semi-structured interview** with church leaders (pastors, associates) and catechumenate leaders (catechists).
- **Two focus groups** with parishioners who have joined the church in the past five years -- one with those who participated in the catechumenate process and another with those who did not.
- **One focus group** with parishioners who participated in the catechumenate process as sponsors within the past five years.

⁵⁴ In 1994 under the leadership the Associate Director of Worship for the ELCA a catechumenate question was placed on the ELCA parochial report. “Do you practice the catechumenate in your congregation?” Unfortunately, as information was being collected, follow-up calls revealed that the question was vastly misunderstood. Many pastors filling out the report thought the question was in reference to confirmation and catechesis not the process of the catechumenate.

⁵⁵ Flick, 68.

- **Observation** of relevant worship services and programs (classes, small groups, Bible studies, etc.) over a three-day period. In cases where I could participate in the rites of the catechumenate or catechumenate bible study I was involved in participant observation. I also used video and photography to illustrate the rites of the catechumenate process and to capture location information.
- **Phone interviews** with one key informant in other catechumenate congregations (up to 15) during the summer of 2005. The aim of these conversations was to listen for the successes and failures of the catechumenate process in congregations other than the eight I visited.

I kept detailed notes given my own participation in this process to triangulate my data.

I attempted to engage in thematic coding of the data I received. Thematic coding is a process “in which the groups that are studied are derived from the research question and thus defined a prior.”⁵⁶ Data in thematic coding is collected with the goal of comparing analysis. The procedure for thematic coding is as follows:

- 1) write a short description of the case (checked, rechecked and modified)
- 2) deepened analysis of the case (develop a system of categories through open and selective coding)
- 3) cases are cross-checked
- 4) thematic structure results from cross-check

“The result of this process is a case-oriented display of the way the case specifically deals with the issue of the study, including constant topics which can be found in the viewpoints across different domains.”⁵⁷ I also aimed to triangulate the data I collect with a review of current research on the assimilation of new members within congregations.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁸ The results of this research will appear in my dissertation.

APPENDIX B:

Code	Established	Staff	Population/Location	Average Worship	Lay Catechists	Years of Cat.	Cat. Initiated by
A	1765	Solo	11,600 - Borough, Mid-Atlantic	96	One	7	Lay Catechist
B	1846	Solo	26,263 - Small city, Mid-Atlantic	72	One	7	Pastor
C	1852	Solo	30,700 - Small city, Mid-Atlantic	190	One	6	Pastor
D	1915	Two Pastors	573,900 - Large city, Northwest	315	Four or five	11	Congregation
E	1920	Solo	11,600 - Borough, Mid-Atlantic	80	One	4	Pastor
F	1922	Pastor, AIM ⁵⁹	187,300 - Medium city, South	238	One	10 ⁶⁰	Lay Catechist
G	1940	Solo	205,648 - Medium city, South	77	None	4	Pastor
H	1959	Solo	55,351 - Small city, Mid-Atlantic	140	One	3	Pastor

⁵⁹ An Associate in Ministry is a non-ordained rostered leader in the ELCA.

⁶⁰ Inconsistent over these ten years.

APPENDIX C:

Liturgical scholars initiated the recovery of the catechumenate practice for twentieth century congregations first out of the recognition that the contemporary context required a structured practice for bringing people to faith and passing on the faith. Within the Roman Catholic Church, increased intermarriage between Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics inspired the need for classes which baptized or affirmed non-Roman Catholics in the faith prior to marriage. Secondly, scholars sought the retrieval of the catechumenate out of their renewed interest in baptismal theology and the initiation rites of the early church. The recovery of the ancient rites of Christian initiation beginning with the Second Vatican Council followed this scholarly interest. Initiated in 1972, “the RCIA has attempted nothing less than the repristination of the awe-inspiring rites of initiation in the ancient church, as described in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, the writings of Tertullian, the church orders of the fourth and fifth centuries, and the mystagogical homilies of the great bishops of antiquity.”⁶¹ Protestants were equally involved in this conversation. Liturgical theologian, Maxwell Johnson has noted:

...The contemporary Roman Catholic patristic-based recovery of the importance of sacramental signs as signs has been influential in the liturgical revision of Christian initiation rites among modern Protestants. Ritual actions, ceremonies, and gestures, especially elements often omitted from the rites of the Reformers in the sixteenth century as ‘superstitious human ceremonies,’ and contrary or even ‘repugnant’ to the Word of God, in favor of the ‘essentials’ of water and Trinitarian formula, have been restored today as parts of richer and more full liturgical-sacramental rites.⁶²

Working together in the United States, Episcopalians and Lutherans had similar conversations about the theology of baptism and its relation to confirmation and first communion. Reformation theology and the baptismal rites of the sixteenth-century, in addition to the knowledge of the

⁶¹ Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 662.

⁶² Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 306.

Roman Catholic initiative to bring the RCIA to congregations, played an important role in the development of Anglican and Lutheran material for the catechumenate.

The catechumenate involvement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America might be characterized in fits and starts. A description of the practice of the catechumenate was included in the Lutheran *Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* published in 1982.⁶³

In 1989, individuals who were interested in the catechumenate met in Indianapolis. This gathering led to another the following year in Denver which focused on learning and practicing the rites of the catechumenate. Both Lutherans and Episcopalians were invited to this initial training. What followed was an Episcopalian initiative to finance -- with thousands of dollars -- training events in the catechumenate rites around the country. In 1993, the ELCA and Episcopal Church, USA in a joint initiative pulled together an organization named the North American Association of the Catechumenate (NAAC). The United Methodist Church began to participate

⁶³ The notes read: The preparation of candidates for Baptism is a solemn responsibility of the Christian community. Congregations may find people seeking membership who have received little or no religious instruction and are not baptized. Especially in those cases, an enrollment service, followed by a period of systematic instruction and formation in the Christian faith, may be desirable. Their preparation for Baptism is marked by three stages.

Stage 1. Inquirers' Class. This stage involves sufficient preparation through instruction and example to enable persons to determine their desire for Baptism.

Stage 2. Enrollment. This service ordinarily is scheduled on a Sunday several weeks before the stated day for Baptism. When Holy Baptism is administered at Easter, enrollment as a candidate occurs at the beginning of Lent; when Baptism is planned for The Baptism of Our Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany), the enrollment takes place at the beginning of Advent.

Stage 3. Instruction. This stage involves regular association with the worshiping community (although the candidates do not receive Holy Communion); the practice of life in accordance with the Gospel (including service to the poor and neglected); encouragement and instruction in the life of prayer; and basic instruction in Christian understanding about God, human relationships, and the meaning of life.

A fourth period immediately follows the baptismal incorporation into the body of Christ. When persons are baptized at the Vigil of Easter, this period extends over the 50 days of Easter. This period is devoted to formal and informal activities which will assist the newly baptized in experiencing and appropriating the fullness of the corporate life of the Church and in gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of the sacraments. LCA AELC, ALC and ELCiC, *Occasion Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship*, Ninth printing, 1998 ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 15.

in 1996 and the Mennonites joined also around this time. In the late 1990s, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ became denominational members of NAAC. Member denominations also include the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

At the 1989 gathering in Denver supporters of the catechumenate met with representatives of the Evangelism and Worship divisions of the ELCA. Both representatives were very interested in this ancient process of bringing people to faith as it pertained to the ELCA. Meetings in Orlando and Portland in 1994 led to the formation of a Lutheran catechumenate training team locally in the Lower Susquehanna Synod (in central Pennsylvania) of the ELCA and the publication nationally of a series of handbooks for Lutheran congregations wishing to adopt the catechumenate as a process of adult initiation. This series entitled *Welcome to Christ* was published in 1997 and includes three books, a congregational leaflet and a video. The first book, *A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*⁶⁴, makes the case that the catechumenate is not an ancient relic but can address contemporary issues in Lutheran congregations and seeks to allay the common American Lutheran concern that the introduction of a process marked by several liturgical acts is too “Roman Catholic.” This book introduces the catechumenate step by step and helps congregations identify the leaders needed in a catechumenal congregation. Finally it provides a rich bibliography of resources available for congregational leaders. The next two books introduce the integrated approach central to the catechumenate which combines both catechesis and liturgy. The first introduces the liturgical rites for the catechumenate, including music and accompaniment⁶⁵ – and the other is a

⁶⁴ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate.*

⁶⁵ Paul Grime, Donald W. Johnson, Marcus J. Miller, Gail Ramshaw, Martin A. Seltz, Robert Buckley Farlee and May L. Schwarz, *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*, ed. Paul Nelson, Frank Stoldt, Scott Weidler, Lani Willis (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

catechetical guide.⁶⁶ The fourth book, published in 2002, is a guide for sponsors participating in the catechumenate.⁶⁷ This book can be purchased by congregations for each of their sponsors as an introduction and guide to their call as sponsors and their responsibilities in turn. The *Welcome to Christ* leaflet⁶⁸ is a promotional piece to introduce whole congregations and visitors to the process. In a similar way the *Welcome to Christ* video⁶⁹ offers an opportunity for congregations to see an entire congregation journey alongside inquirers in the process of the catechumenate.

During the time between the 1994 meeting and the publication of *Welcome to Christ* the ELCA's Division of Worship was hard at work developing catechumenate training teams under the leadership of the Associate Director of Worship and encouraging congregations to attend training events. In addition to the team in Lower Susquehanna an ecumenical team was set up successfully in the Pacific Northwest.⁷⁰ Pastors from two or three practicing congregations began offering course, workshops and trainings in congregations and at Lutheran seminaries and colleges both in the United States and Europe.

Efforts to encourage the practice of the catechumenate within the Division of Worship reached a peak in 2002 with the *Renewing Worship* initiative of the ELCA.⁷¹ The *Renewing*

⁶⁶ *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide*. Interestingly, none of the essay authors in this resource are Christian educators.

⁶⁷ Beverly Piro, *Welcome to Christ: Sponsors Guide*, ed. Robert Buckley Farlee and Becky Lowe (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

⁶⁸ Dennis Bushkofsky, "Welcome to Christ: Preparing Adults for Baptism and Discipleship," (Chicago: Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA, 1998).

⁶⁹ Karen Ward, *Welcome to Christ: Preparing Adults for Baptism and Discipleship* (Chicago: Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA), Video.

⁷⁰ The Associate Director for Worship was also instrumental in placing the question "do you practice the catechumenate in your congregation?" on the ELCA's annual parochial report. Unfortunately, as information was being collected, follow-up calls revealed that the question was vastly misunderstood. Many pastors filling out the report thought the question was in reference to confirmation and catechesis, not the process of the catechumenate.

⁷¹ *Renewing Worship* is a five-year initiative of the ELCA to develop worship materials that respond to contemporary shifts such as "increased ecumenical consensus...broadened understandings of culture, increasing musical diversity, changes in the usage of language, a renewed understanding of the central pattern of Christian worship, and an explosion of electronic media and technologies." *About Renewing Worship: Provisional Resources*

Worship resource called *Holy Baptism and Related Rites* repackaged the liturgical rites contained in the *Welcome to Christ* material and attempted to reach a wider audience. The five-year conversation instigated by *Renewing Worship* led to the creation of a new hymnal in the ELCA, called *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*.⁷² Only the welcome rite and the Easter Vigil were included in the pew edition of the ELW, although the full version of the liturgical rites for the catechumenate will be included in the *Occasional Services* companion to the ELW.

The pastor at Annie's church learned about the catechumenate in a course she took at a Roman Catholic seminary for a Masters degree. Most practitioners of the catechumenate have learned about the process through a seminary course or class, by attending a conference workshop or training or through the encouragement of a bishop or member of the synodical staff. Since trainings have been scattered throughout the last two decades, catechumenate congregations are not numerous in the ELCA. Out of the 11,000 ELCA congregations in the United States there are perhaps twenty-five to thirty congregations practicing the catechumenate with regularity.

In the fall of 2004, I attended an ELCA Catechumenate Task Force meeting with fifteen pastors and lay people interested in the catechumenate. This group has met twice more seeking to facilitate and aid more congregations in their adapting the life-changing process of preparing adults for baptism and baptismal living.

for the Next Generation of Elca Worship, [webpage] (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2004, accessed January 10 2005); available from <http://www.renewingworship.org/about/index.html>.

⁷² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, forthcoming.

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