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The Adult Catechumenate: One Church's Experience

Daniel Meeter

Introduction

The adult catechumenate may be defined as *a process by which the congregation offers Christian formation to new believers (catechumens) through Bible study, prayer, companionship, teaching, profession of faith, the sacraments, and service, that begins in Advent, gets moving in Epiphany, intensifies in Lent, climaxes with baptism at Easter, finishes at Pentecost, and manifests itself at key stages within Sunday worship.* The process may be modified to serve the "re-formation" of those who are already baptized.

We might describe the catechumenate in different terms, however. It might be described as a liturgical and sacramental approach to adult education that is designed for seekers. It is derived from the way the ancient church brought adult converts through baptism into communion. In our day it may be used for seekers who are previously baptized, if it climaxes in an act of confirmation that is clearly baptismal in character. It may even be used for current church members who simply desire renewal in their faith.¹

We may also define the catechumenate more dynamically as *The Walk: A Journey in Faith Hosted by the Congregation*,² the title used by the Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The terminology derives from the Old Testament description of faith as a "walk" (Gen. 17:1 and Psalms 1 and 119). The phrase, "hosted by the congregation," signifies that this is not simply a pastor's class or small-group Bible study. The word "journey" suggests intensity, commitment, and development, as well as the great amount of learning that a journey can occasion, both in new knowledge and in personal growth. Every person's journey is unique, but this particular journey must be taken in the company of others, and over ground that many others have walked.³

The term *catechumenate* (cat-e-kyú-men-et) is part of the church's ancient nomenclature. Like *catechism* and *catechesis*, it comes from the Greek word for "echo back," a reference to the question-and-answer teaching style used by the early church. The point of using this nomenclature is not the revival of a specific technique, but the recovery of a specific genre of education that is distinctive to the church. All sorts of educational techniques can be employed within the process, but they all serve a purpose and outcome that is unique to the church. This kind of education is therefore as mystical as it is informative and as spiritual as it is intellectual. Thus, the catechumenate seeks to harmonize such typically contradictory categories.

The catechumenate model is receiving increased attention within the various denominations, from Roman Catholic to Mennonite. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has committed staff and resources to the model, as have the United Methodists. The Reformed Church in America has been the first Reformed denomination to explore it, and now the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the United Church of Christ, and the Christian Reformed Church are following suit. The model appeals to Reformed churches because it wonderfully integrates education and evangelism, seekers and the sacraments, the intimacy of private reflection and the participation of the full congregation, doctrine and devotion, content and community, and service and spirituality.

Advent and Inquiry

The catechumenate begins with the questions ordinary seekers have. The first part of the process takes place during Advent, when a pastor offers a regular time, in an inviting place, for seekers to come and ask their questions. At this stage, questions are not answered, but honored and understood. The pastor offers safety and space. The answers come later, when they are given by the seekers themselves. Indeed, the answers are not the goal. The goal is a mature relationship with God that is directed and nourished by the Word and sacraments and sustained within the community of faith.

In order to sharpen the issues that the catechumenate addresses, I propose that congregations consider a series of leading questions in the tradition of the ancient technique:

Does your church make a strong connection between education and evangelism? What is the purpose and desired outcome of your adult education program? How do you determine your curriculum? Is it designed to support the process of conversion? How rich (read "Reformed") a doctrine of conversion does your church's educational program work with?⁴ Does your church make a strong connection between education and the sacraments? Does your church conceive of its weekly Sunday worship in terms of "formation"?

Does your church make a strong connection between seekers and the sacraments?⁵ Do you understand worship itself to be the primary tool that God uses to develop faith in us? Does your church have an intentional and well-defined process for bringing adult new Christians to baptism? Is this process integrated into the Christian year and the major holidays? Are key steps in this process made part of the Sunday worship service? Does this process include the participation of the congregation as a whole? Do you have recognizable patterns by which your ordinary members can participate in your discipling ministry?

Is new-member formation in your church the responsibility of the pastor or of the congregation as a whole? Do you have a way for your current church members to be involved in the formation of new Christians? How do you build relationships between your seekers and your members? How deep in the faith do you get with your new members?

What is your church's motivation for adult education? Do you have an intentional and well-defined process by which your current members can revive their souls and renew their minds? Can you imagine your members repeating their profession of faith before the congregation (just as many married couples renew their wedding vows), and even becoming confirmed again?

Is your church's motivation for evangelism to get more members and increase the size of the congregation? Can you imagine an evangelism program in your church that is not so motivated? How do you continue to work with people after they become new members? Does your church have a process in place for serving the seeker who comes to you without any knowledge of the Christian faith? Does your church even anticipate baptizing adults?

Epiphany and Formation

The catechumenate provides room for people to tell their own stories, and to see them as part of the greater story of our Lord. Here, for example, is the story of the catechumenate at Central Church. Three years ago, another pastor and I were leading a new members' orientation class. Nine of the ten prospective members were transfers from other mainline Protestant churches, but one of them (call him Anthony) was not a transfer. He had grown up Roman Catholic, had gone through a painful divorce, had come to personal faith through Pentecostalism, had backed off from that, and was now dating a member of our church.

It was the usual mainline church new-members' class, short and sweet. Our format introduced the people to us, to each other, to the congregation's history and character, and to the Reformed tradition. Halfway through the Saturday morning session, Anthony had the courage to say, "Thanks for telling me all this, but I need to know if your church can tell me about Jesus. I'm just a baby Christian. Do you have anything here to help me learn about Jesus?"

We were convicted and excited. We were convicted because our church's adult educational program made no provision for "baby Christians." We were convicted because our programming had not yet faced the reality of an increasingly post-Christian culture, even in Grand Rapids! But we were also excited because Anthony had clearly signaled what we had to do. I had to answer him honestly. "No, Anthony, I'm sorry, I guess we're not set up for that. But I promise you we will be soon."⁶

I had studied the *Didache*, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus, and I was aware of how the ancient church catechized candidates for baptism.⁷ I was familiar with what the Roman Catholics call RCIA, the "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults." I knew that the Episcopalians had been producing their own versions of RCIA. I knew that Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., the liturgical officer of the United Methodist Church, was developing the model along more evangelical lines.⁸ I knew that St. John's Episcopal Cathedral in Denver had developed the catechumenate into a powerful tool for evangelism

and church growth. And so when Anthony asked his question, I figured it was time to act.

I presented a proposal to the requisite committees and consistory. I asked Jim, a leading elder, to attend a three-day training event hosted by Benedict. The elder came back enthused and able to interpret the project to the consistory and advocate for it. Knowing we would need a part-time staff member, we committed to a three-year trial. We secured seed money from the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes. A denominational officer suggested we be a pilot project for the Reformed Church in America, and we agreed (their support has been valuable). We hired the Reverend Cheryl Molhoek, newly graduated from seminary, and asked her to develop the program. In the spirit of the catechumenate, we were confident that she would learn what she needed along the way. Although budgetary pressures demanded that we give her responsibilities for adult education in general as well as a share in the pastoral work, the catechumenate has been the centerpiece of her work.

Our first task was to gather a design team to be properly trained. We kept the team small: myself, Cheryl, Jim, and Dawn, a young mother with special gifts – she was a former Inter-Varsity staffer, a part-time seminarian, and a highly competent “Children in Worship” leader. Cheryl, Dawn, and I attended a training event hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and led by the Reverend Karen Ward of their staff.⁹ Over a period of two days we journeyed from Advent to Pentecost. There were lectures and videos, but more importantly, all techniques were modeled and every liturgical event was fully acted out with everyone participating. It was at this event that our team members “got it.” That is precisely how the catechumenate works: it is a very experiential kind of learning. There is a “feel” to it, and the introduction and training have to feel like catechumenate.

Lent and Preparation

Returning from the training event, our design team set to work. Our initial task was to fit what we had experienced into our congregation’s culture and calendar. The catechumenate is a model with as many variations as there are congregations, and although the more widely the model is practiced the more variations there will be, certain features are essential.¹⁰

First, the catechumenate emphasizes relationship and community. Each seeker is provided with a companion from the church’s membership. The companion is neither a mentor nor a sponsor, but simply someone who is willing to walk beside the seeker all the way, experiencing everything the seeker experiences.¹¹ We invited seven seekers worshiping at Central to be paired with seven companions, including Jim and Dawn. The seekers and companions were formed into a weekly group led by a trained lay catechist and supported by a pastor. We decided that, for the first year, Cheryl would be both pastor and catechist, but that in the second year Dawn would be the catechist.

Second, the catechumenate has four main stages that are connected to the liturgical year, from Advent to Pentecost. This framework not only integrates the process into the worship life of the whole congregation; it also has the added benefit of personalizing the liturgical year. The chief benefit, however, is the Christocentric and salvation-historical character of the entire experience.

Third, each successive stage is marked by the catechumen's participation in specific liturgical acts that take place in the middle of the full congregation. The end of the first stage falls on one of the Epiphany Sundays in January.¹² In this short ritual, just after the processional hymn, a number of things happen: the seekers and their companions are recognized; they state their desire to walk in the way of Christ; the companions give Bibles to the seekers; the congregation welcomes them and prays for them; the pastors and elders bless them; the ritual closes with a stanza from a hymn, and the service returns to its usual order. The group then meets together after the service, or on Sunday night around a meal, or during the week. They engage in a very simple but carefully designed Bible study on that day's sermon text. (Using the Common Lectionary is advantageous, but not essential.) Because it suits its purposes admirably, the modern catechumenate movement has settled on the "African method" of Bible study.¹³ The catechist instructs the catechumens on further steps along the way, answers common questions, and leads the group in forms of prayer.

The second stage ends with a ritual on the first Sunday of Lent, between the sermon and the prayers. After the catechumens come forward, the companions, facing their seekers, draw the sign of the cross with their index finger on the seekers' forehead, eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and feet, while the catechist leads the congregation in a responsive litany. This is a surprisingly powerful ritual. The experience gains in intensity as a preparation for the great events of Holy Week and Easter. The group now adds the study of the Apostles' Creed as well as other personal spiritual exercises appropriate for Lent. The elders meet with any seekers who desire to be baptized, to transfer membership, or to make profession of faith.

The third stage ends in the celebration of Easter, and here arises a problem for most Reformed churches. Our celebrations of Easter tend to be large and rather impersonal events, with an emphasis on decorations, choir anthems, and additional music. The catechumenate demands Easter worship that is both more sacramental and more personal. The Easter Vigil service, beginning at sundown on Easter Eve, is the obvious remedy.¹⁴ This is not the place to introduce or advocate that service, but the historical and theological grounds for it are overwhelming. Indeed, the burden of proof is actually upon traditions that do *not* observe such a service. Of course, a Reformed Easter Vigil need not imitate an Anglican service, but the key elements are light, Scripture, baptism, and Communion, with generous time and space for full enjoyment and a very personal experience of Easter.¹⁵

The first year at Central, we baptized two seekers and confirmed five, while the second year we confirmed seven, laying hands on them and blessing them.

Both years we anointed all fourteen seekers and companions with fragrant oil. Other worshipers reported that, during the anointing, the fragrance that filled the church brought them into the experience. Although the Vigil service is actually designed for the whole congregation, not just the catechumens, their special involvement in the baptismal portion of the service energizes the entire event for everyone else. In fact, the second year, during the final hymn following Communion, fifteen other worshipers spontaneously came forward to receive anointing and the laying on of hands.¹⁶

Pentecost and Vocation

The final stage of the catechumenate deals with the “so what” of the Christian faith. The group deals with such things as acts of Christian service in the community, the identification of individual spiritual gifts, and the Christian perspective on the concerns and occupations of daily life. This stage culminates in a short ceremony on Pentecost Sunday, when each catechumen makes a public commitment to a specific application of Christian service, and the congregation responds with gratitude and blessing.

Our third year of practicing the catechumenate is a time for evaluation and revision, and for the board of elders to consider its implications. The design team has been expanded, and we are currently seeking ways to improve the integration of the process into the larger program of our church and its general identity. We have only begun!

I close with a brief theological reflection. The model strikes me as explicitly Christocentric and implicitly Trinitarian. The seeker is looking for God, a knowledge of God, and an experience of God. This God is approached by means of the word of Jesus Christ and experienced by means of his body. The Holy Spirit applies all the benefits of Christ to the individual believers and also empowers them to offer their lives in the world as a living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the Father of Jesus Christ. The fact that the catechumenate provides a means for both individuals and the community to experience the Holy Trinity is the best reason for congregations to commit themselves to try it.

ENDNOTES

¹ To use it in such a way, however, will require some rethinking of confirmation on the part of most of our churches. A key change will be the acceptance of confirmation as a repeatable act. For the RCA, see the two General Synod studies on this subject: “Confirmation and the Reformed Church,” *Minutes of the General Synod 1992*: 455-68, and “Recognizing Baptism and Professing Faith,” *Minutes of the General Synod 1995*: 195-207.

² This title was formulated by the Rev. Cheryl Molhoek.

³ There is value in maintaining the more technical word “catechumenate” in at least some level of parlance. It keeps the ecumenical and historical connections clear. It points to the distinctive purpose of the process, especially when a congregation does

other educational programming of a more general nature. And, more subtly, it reminds Protestant and evangelical congregations that there is something larger and greater out there!

⁴ See Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 88-90, which presents conversion as a lifelong process. This basic Reformation tenet is already present in the Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther.

⁵ Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 65: "The Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel and confirms it by our use of the holy sacraments."

⁶ Anthony's need is addressed by Rick Warren's valuable book *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). Warren's whole approach has many points of contact with the catechumenate model. At the same time, Reformed theology forces discontent and frustration with many of his suppositions and solutions. *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), by George S. Hunter III, is also very helpful.

⁷ The patristic pattern of formation began to fall away once the church became established in the Roman Empire. Then, Christianity became Christendom, and church membership became the norm of citizenship. One can, however, trace the pattern in the writings of Anselm and Augustine.

⁸ See *Come to the Waters: Baptism & Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers & Making Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996). This resource is a very good introduction to the catechumenate for evangelical congregations.

⁹ See Karen Ward, "Making Adult Disciples: Rite for Our Times," *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, 116:10, 348-50, together with that issue's accompanying articles on the catechumenate.

¹⁰ The details that follow are offered by way of example. Copies of our rituals at Central are freely available to assist other churches in their own designs. Our Epiphany and Lenten rituals differ from the Episcopal and Lutheran ones. These latter are available in print from their respective denominations.

¹¹ The word "companion" literally means to "share bread with."

¹² For obvious reasons, we do this at Central Reformed on the Sunday of Christ's baptism.

¹³ This is also known as the "aural method" of Bible study. Although the method "feels" like catechumenate, it is not essentially so and can be used in many other contexts as well. The text is read without comment, and the first question asked is, "What word or phrase stood out?" After silence, each participant responds, with no added explanation. The text is read again by a different voice, and the second question asked is, "Who are you in this story (passage), where do you fit?" Silence, then response, again without explanation. The text is read again by a different voice, and the third question asked is, "How is God calling you this week?" Silence, then response, sometimes with elaboration. The key is the conviction that God actually talks to us, in community, through the reading and hearing of Scripture. There are variations on the questions, and the method is meant only to supplement other more familiar methods of Bible study.

¹⁴ Easter Sunday actually starts at sundown on Saturday, not midnight, according to the Jewish and biblical reckoning of time. Our modern Protestant Easter sunrise

services are actually late in the day! Although our typically large Easter services would be considered extremely deviant and offensive by the Reformers, they may well have great value as quintessential “seeker” services.

¹⁵ Among many available publications, a useful and practical introduction to the Easter Vigil can be found in the United Methodist *Book of Worship*.

¹⁶ As people came forward, I asked an elder to kneel beside me, and as I anointed them to lay hands on their heads and bless them. The elder whispered, “What do I say?” I answered, “You’ll think of something.” He did. That captured the essence of catechumenate. When you celebrate the presence of Christ in the forms of the church, the right words follow.