

Making adult disciples: Rite for our times

by [Karen M. Ward](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

During the past 30 years various churches have begun to revive an ancient pattern for preparing adults for baptism and Christian discipleship. The Roman Catholic Church began the process in the 1980s by creating a Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults-now the way one becomes Catholic as an adult. The Episcopal Church soon followed with a process of its own. Many mainline Protestant churches, especially Lutheran, Methodist and Mennonite, are beginning to experiment with adult initiation-technically called the *catechumenate*.

Like the more familiar *catechism* and *catechetics*, *catechumenate* comes from the Greek word meaning to "sound in the ear." Through the catechumenate the church proclaims the gospel and sounds the faith in the ears of those new to Christ. No quirky "blast from the past" or nostalgia program, the renewal of the catechumenal process has come about out of necessity. Fifty percent of the North American population is either unchurched or not Christian. The people who do come to churches for the first time as adults often come as the result of some kind of crisis. Their marriages may have ended, their jobs failed them, or their children gotten into trouble. They have discovered that nothing they create or control (whether stock portfolios, property, relationships, food, illegal substances or possessions) can truly guide and ground their existence.

In *A Generation of Seekers*, Wade Clark Roof describes Americans as a people searching for direction, purpose and meaning. Many are attempting to slake their thirst for spirituality wherever they can find a promising spring, whether in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or New Age approaches. The catechumenal process is a way for churches to minister to this new generation of spiritual seekers. Many who come to the doors of the church are not looking for an orientation to a new denomination or congregation. They seek an introduction to Jesus Christ. Often they are not concerned about the secondary questions that church folk are so well prepared to answer-questions like "What is the difference between a Presbyterian

and a Lutheran?" "Why do some ministers wear white robes and others wear black?" "What are the differences between Mark's and Luke's Gospels?" Many seekers do not know what the Bible is, much less who Mark and Luke, or Calvin or Luther, are. They ask primary questions: Who am I and do I matter? Who is Jesus, and why does he matter?

The catechumenate was essential to the early church. During Christianity's first centuries, the church had to stand its ground in the religious marketplace alongside many other religious and philosophical traditions vying to be heard and to attract adherents. The church had no choice but to grow Christians from scratch. When Christianity became an established and favored faith, the catechumenal process faded away.

During the long era when Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire, the lines between church and state became blurred and baptism became as much a sign of social status as of Christian discipleship. Characterizing some of the converts during this period, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, wrote: "And here is one who comes to the church because he is looking for honors under the Christian emperors; he pretends to request baptism with a simulated respect; he bows, he prostrates; but he does not bend his knee in spirit."

This rush to be baptized caused the church to shorten the time of preparation (once three years long) until baptism could be had almost on demand. As the generations of those raised as believers grew, nurturing the children of Christian families, rather than conversion, became the primary means by which congregations grew. Adult conversion and baptism were eventually replaced by infant initiation.

Until recently, this approach worked well for the European and American church. But now many people are brought up with no Christian background at all. The modern secular state and culture neither support nor favor religious faith of any kind. Once again, the church is one among many competing voices in the religious marketplace. The church again has the task of making Christians from scratch.

The initiation begins with seeking and inquiry, and may go on to conversion, faith formation and baptism. Adults need time to learn, to discern, and to count the costs before plunging into the waters of baptism. Though in our culture of instant gratification people are encouraged to download most things at lightning speed, churches are wrong to think that quick initiations are "seeker friendly" and will bring

desperately sought membership gains. Slick and quick tactics may attract people initially, but are not likely to keep them. An initiation process marked by integrity and authenticity will.

The church must offer adult seekers true friendship by asking them to join the Christian venture of encountering scripture; praying; worshiping; growing in faith; engaging in ministry; and discerning the call to baptism. Such spiritual friendship honors both the seeker and the search. Honest initiation has no hidden agenda (membership gains) or predetermined outcome (baptism). Many churches give this kind of friendly care and nurture to children and youth reared in the faith but do not offer it to adults new to the faith.

Too often, adult seekers are provided only with a short class given by the minister. Those who need Christian formation the most (even more than youths reared in the faith and preparing for confirmation) receive the least. In many churches, preparation for confirmation takes one or two years during which young people are intentionally formed in the faith, are given mentors, meet in small groups, study scripture and their Christian tradition, learn about worship and participate in service projects. Adult initiation requires a similar process.

The ordinary life of congregations forms the foundation for the catechumenate. Church members, not pastors, must play the central and intentional role in this program. The primary Christian evangelists are not the clergy but the laypeople who witness to Christ in their daily lives. Lay Christians, who bring their friends and relatives to the church doors, can also be the catechists (teachers of the faith) and baptismal sponsors for those who are brought in. A congregation that intentionally undertakes the catechumenate will undergo a gradual shift from being primarily a fellowship community to being a baptizing community.

The catechumenal process is made up of four distinct periods: inquiry, catechumenate, baptismal preparation and postbaptismal catechesis. Inquirers begin by spending some time on an initial exploration of Christian faith and life. The agenda for this period is driven by their needs. If and when these adults indicate their readiness, they are received into the catechumenate through a public rite of welcome.

The catechumenate proper is an open-ended period during which people delve more deeply into Christianity through prayer, worship, Bible study and ministry. This

period may last from a few months to more than a year. Each catechumen participates in a small group with other catechumens, lay sponsors and lay catechists. Catechumens become apprentices in the faith. Finally, when catechumens and their sponsors discern that they are ready, candidates take part in a rite of enrollment or calling, to state publicly their desire to be baptized. For those who will be baptized at the Vigil of Easter, this ceremony usually occurs on the first Sunday in Lent.

During the weeks leading up to baptism, the candidates continue in the small-group process but also take up a specific ministry of service, such as working at a shelter or delivering meals to the poor. Since the original purpose of the Lenten season was to prepare people for baptism, the restoration of the catechumenate restores to Lent its central content and evangelical thrust. Traditionally, Lent ends with the great Vigil of Easter, in which candidates are baptized and receive holy communion. (Easter is the ideal time for adult baptisms, but they can of course take place during other church festivals.)

Baptism is the beginning, not the end, of the Christian journey. The final phase of the catechumenate allows new Christians to reflect on their baptism and discern their Christian vocation and call to ministry in daily life. Some traditions conclude the process with a rite for the affirmation of vocations-ideally held at Pentecost, though it may be done at other times.

During the catechumenal process, the congregation periodically blesses and prays for the candidates during weekly worship. This connection witnesses that the newcomers will be joined not only to Christ but to the church. New Christians learn how to worship by being welcomed into the congregation's regular worship life. In this way, they learn that faith is not just a private enterprise. The entire congregation participates in their initiation. These public prayers mark, bless and celebrate the workings of the Word and the Spirit in those who are being joined to Christ. A process peculiarly well suited to our times, the catechumenate is vital to the well being of the church and of those hungry for the life of faith.