

Christian initiation and renewal: One congregation's story

by [Clifford King Harbin](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

St. Andrew Episcopal Church in Kokomo, Indiana, began its commitment to the catechumenal process by launching two experiments. In 1992 the church had an enthusiastic congregation eager to share with others both the faith and the rich liturgical symbolism of the Episcopal/Anglican tradition. And it had a priest who believed that liturgical catechesis and formation are at the heart of church growth and revitalization.

The church's first project involved the parents of children who would have been baptized during the past year but were not because the church had not had a permanent priest. During ten classes, these parents studied the sacrament of baptism, using the Bible and the World Council of Churches' document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. They learned the history of baptism and watched a video of the priest's infant son's being baptized by effusion. The child was seated in a large copper pot filled with warm water, and large amounts of water and then oil were poured over his head. A young mother who had grown up at St. Andrew decided that she wanted her daughter to be baptized this way. "What congregation member wouldn't understand that it's a bath and a cleansing!"

After the infant baptisms were held, the congregation repeated the class for all who were interested. Then the vestry, the church's administrative body, acting on the recommendation of the worship committee, established a new policy for infant baptism. It required that the immediate family participate in the congregation for at least six months (including making financial contributions), that the parents receive baptismal instruction and that at least one godparent be a nonfamily member active in this community of faith. Baptism by effusion would be strongly encouraged but not required.

The following Lent the congregation began a study of the richness of liturgical symbolism. It included presentations about water, fragrant oil, bread, wine, ashes,

scent, the white of baptismal robes, gestures, light and beeswax candles. We watched a video, "This Is the Night," produced by Liturgy Training Publications (Chicago); it tells the story of a group of adult seekers involved in the catechumenal process, which culminates in their baptism at the Easter Vigil. People began to ask, "When will we do a vigil like that, including adult baptisms and that much water?" We held our first vigil on Easter Eve 1993.

The congregation began to wonder when an adult would be baptized at the Easter Vigil. The priest suggested that the Holy Spirit would send an unbaptized adult when the congregation was ready to receive one. What did the church need to do to get ready? The priest explained the catechumenal process and asked those who felt called to this ministry of welcome and initiation to participate. Those who had never been baptized, who had never made an adult profession or confirmation of their faith or who had never been received into the membership of the Episcopal Church were invited to enter into a process of initiation loosely based on the catechumenate. It would conclude three months later on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, which takes place in January, on the Sunday following Epiphany.

This group met weekly to hear a presentation and then discuss that Sunday's Gospel reading. The only complaint about the process was, "It didn't last long enough!" When we repeated the process with another group, we lengthened it to five months and broke the gathering down into smaller groups for the discussion of the Gospel reading.

After these successful experiences, we were ready to begin the catechumenal process in earnest. We named our program "Pilgrims in Christ." The first group that went through all four stages and all the rites began in fall 1993 and concluded on Trinity Sunday 1994. Although all the adults who participated that first time were already baptized, the experience made us feel that we were now ready for anyone the Holy Spirit sent us.

In the fall of 1994 the first unbaptized adult joined our catechumenal process, and the real work began. From a farmers' hardware store we bought an oval five-by-seven-foot cattle watering trough (made by Rubbermaid). The local car appointment shop spray-painted it-blue on the interior, gold on the exterior. The pet store helped us rig the water thermometer and continuous water-circulating fountain. The flower guild decided how to aesthetically camouflage it.

The team began presenting the foundations of our faith and exploring the gospel's relevance. During Epiphany, everyone involved in the process shared his or her own faith stories. The congregation and the catechumen together experienced the scrutinies (or the Examinations of Conscience) during Lent, and prayed and studied the creed of the church. On the day of the catechumen's baptism, we were with her from early morning, when she made her affirmation of faith, through the evening vigil, when she was fully immersed three times in 600 gallons of water. The scented oil of chrism was then poured on her head and she was marked as "Christ's own forever." We presented her with a white robe and candle to remind her that she is now "one who glows with the Light." Returning dry to the sanctuary dressed in a white robe, she joined the congregation in receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ .

We adhere to the core principles of the catechumenal process (see page 348) and continue to receive seeking adults. This year we will baptize a woman in her 50s and a single mother in her 30s. We are trying to fulfill the Great Commission: "Go, therefore, into all the lands and baptize." And we find that our congregation is growing both in numbers and commitment.