

JOURNEY TO BAPTISMAL LIVING

NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE CATECHUMENATE

Journeytobaptism.org

JBL -- A Case Study:

IN: *ELCA, Suburban Vancouver WA*

Congregation Background

St. Andrew is in Clark County, WA, just north of its more well-known and liberal neighbor, Portland OR. About .5 million people reside in Clark County. One-third of the labor force commutes to Oregon.

When I retired from St. Andrew in 2016, the congregation had around 750 members, with an average of 250 at worship. It is a primarily white, upper-class congregation, with many educators and professionals.

The vision of the congregation is to bring healing and wholeness to lives and all creation. Its goals are to end homelessness, provide spiritual transformation, and support youth and families. The church is known in the community for its Christian Preschool and for serving as the site of an overflow homeless shelter for up to 50 people a night in the winter months.

Catechumenate Background:

The Catechumenate began in fall 2005, when I took a van load of parishioners to a catechumenate training at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle. The group was eager to start the catechumenate at St. Andrew, so we began with a shortened process after Christmas. It culminated in the Easter Vigil, which was already a part of the St. Andrew's worship life.

At St. Andrew, the catechumenate is called "Journey of Faith." The name of the phases are based on the church's mission statement: "Jesus calls us...Come and See, Come and Grow, Come and Serve." The Inquiry phase is "Come and See," the catechumenate proper and preparation for baptism/affirmation of baptism is "Come and Grow," and the time of mystagogy is referred to as "Come and Serve." Those in the process are called "Journeyers" and their sponsors are known as "Faith Partners."

The Leadership Team consists of 4 to 8 lay leaders and a pastor. Initially I met regularly with the chair of this team for planning purposes. By the time I retired (ten years after the process began), I was more of a consultant and cheerleader. My major role was to arrange for the rites in worship.

Inquiry/Come and See

Come and See is a series of 6 to 8 one-hour sessions held Sunday mornings in the fall during the adult education hour. Attendees are worship visitors who have been invited through personal contact, a written invitation, or announcements in church publications. Everyone who is new to the church is encouraged to attend these sessions.



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The sessions are led by the JF leadership team and the pastors when they are available. This is the general outline for the sessions:

1. Welcome and introductions. Participants are often asked “How long have you been attending St. Andrew” and “What brought you here?”
2. Everyone shares a blessing and concern
3. A short scripture reading/reflection from the Sunday lessons (this is skipped for the sessions where a *lectio* is planned), followed by prayer.
4. An opening “icebreaker” question or activity – e.g. share a hobby, a favorite vacation, Christmas tradition, what you like to do on a rainy/sunny afternoon, etc. As trust is built, people are encouraged to share some about their past and faith story.
5. An invitation for people to ask their questions – about the worship service, St. Andrew church, Lutheranism or the Christian faith, etc.
6. If there is extra time, the session might include
 - a. A summary of the Lutheran faith (often using Dan Erlander’s “It’s About Love” handout)
 - b. A church tour and description of its major ministries
 - c. A short presentation about a ministry program, often presented by a congregational member not on the JF team
 - d. A past JF participant sharing their experience with the process
 - e. A short teaching session on a topic that is of interest to the group
7. After 3 or 4 sessions, *lectio divina* is introduced to the group since this is key component of *Come and Grow*. Often a shortened version of *lectio* is used the first few times it is practiced.
8. Closing prayer

During this time of inquiry, the leadership team and pastoral staff get to know the newcomers to the church better, often in visits and conversations outside of the *Come and See* sessions. Through *Come and See* and these conversations, newcomers learn about JF and are helped to discern if they are being called to follow Christ through this process which leads to baptism/affirmation of baptism and membership at St. Andrew. To help newcomers understand the difference between church membership and a discipleship process like Journey of Faith, we discuss the handout, “More the Membership,” which is attached to this case study.

Towards the end of *Come and See*, the JF schedule and covenant is shared, so people are aware of the commitment needed and can plan for it. Those who want to continue their connection with the church are asked to fill out a sign-up sheet with basic information about themselves. On this sheet they can express their intention to continue with JF or ask a pastor to contact them if they would like further conversation. Although all newcomers are encouraged to go through JF, those who are eligible can transfer their membership, which generally happens in the spring after an orientation to the church.

Sometimes newcomers to St. Andrew never make it to the *Come and See* sessions. However, through conversation with the pastors or other church members they learn about JF and join the *Come and Grow* sessions.



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Catechumenate Proper/Come and Grow

Come and Grow sessions usually begin in November and meet every other week until Lent, when the group meets weekly. Sessions are held in the evening and last 90 minutes. The date and time is picked according to what works best for the Journeymen and Leadership team. Childcare is offered if needed.

The leadership team, along with the pastor, selects and recruits faith partners for each journeyer. When the catechumenate began at St. Andrew, a training was held for faith partners, but these have been dropped since most partners have now been through JF. If they haven't, a one-on-one training is done. Faith partners attend *Come and Grow* sessions with their Journeyer. They are also encouraged to meet with their Journeyer outside of sessions, pray for them, extend hospitality, and participate in at least one service activity with them.

The initial sessions of *Come and Grow* are devoted to the sharing of faith stories. Journeyers and their Faith Partners each map out their story, then share it with each other. Highlights are shared with the whole group. Some time is also spent in the early sessions preparing for the *Rite of Welcome* which usually happens around the start of Advent. Journeyers with the aid of their faith partners compose their responses to the question "What do you seek from God's word and God's church?" and share these during the rite. During the *Come and Grow* session after the rite (which we refer to as "blessings"), the Journeyers reflect on their experience and share their responses to questions such as

- What stood out for you about the blessing? What was most meaningful?
- What was hard/didn't like/didn't understand?
- What did you learn/experience about yourself or God? What do you want to remember about the experience?
- Were you surprised or confused by anything? Is there anything you wish could be explained?

Early on the Journeyers are asked for any questions or topics they would like to see addressed during *Come and Grow*. The Leadership Team uses this information and what they know about the Journeyers, to outline topics for each session. These can include reading the Bible, worship, church year, prayer, stewardship, baptism, communion, Holy Week, etc. Depending on the week, 20 to 40 minutes is allocated for this teaching time. The Leadership Team, pastoral staff and other lay leaders present these topics, striving to make them interactive with time for reflection, conversation, and questions. Handouts or suggested reading is available for those who want to go deeper into a topic. Often the *Come and Grow* groups read through Don Johnson's *Praying the Catechism*, which sometimes serves as the basis for a few of the sessions. Although we plan out our sessions in advance, we stay attentive to the questions, longings and needs of the Journeyers, so we can respond to these as they arise.

One popular session introduces Journeyers to a variety of prayer practices using stations that are set up throughout the sanctuary. This session is held early in the *Come and Grow* cycle to help people identify devotional practices they can use at home.



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Nearly every session of JF ends with a time of *lectio divina* in groups of 4-6, using one of the appointed lessons for the coming Sunday and led by a member of the Leadership Team. The lesson is usually printed out for those who need to see it, along with a brief commentary. A brief check-in (blessings and concerns for the week) follows the *lectio*, and then the small group ends the evening with prayer, sometimes praying for the person on their right. We have found *lectio* to be a key component of JF for many reasons. It is a bible reflection process that all can participate in equally, no matter their knowledge of scripture. It connects the Bible to people's everyday life. It grounds the Word deeply in people's hearts and prepares them to hear it proclaimed during Sunday worship. It cultivates the gift of listening, so people learn how to listen to God through scripture, as well as to their inner selves, others, and the Spirit.

Due to a lack of other suitable space, Come and Grow sessions were moved to the sanctuary a number of years ago. We have come to love this setting, since it viscerally connects JF to the worshipping assembly. Since the sanctuary has moveable chairs, they can be arranged in a large circle for the entire group, and in smaller circles for the *lectio* groups. There's a small table with a covering, candle, and cross in the center of each circle of chairs to set apart the space and remind us we are centered in Christ.

The majority of those who have gone through JF have been affirmers. Before Lent, lay leaders or pastoral staff meet with those seeking baptism to discern if they are called to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. (I can only recall one instance when a Journeyer decided to wait a year for baptism. She met with her sponsor during that year for further faith exploration and conversation.) Those planning to be baptized take part in the "Enrollment of Candidates for Baptism" during worship on the first Sunday in Lent. Affirmers participate in the "Calling of the Baptized to Continuing Conversion" during the Ash Wednesday liturgy. Preparation takes place before these rites and reflection happens afterwards. We've not been consistent in using the "Blessings of Candidates for Baptism" on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. Sometimes we've just used one or two of them, and usually we include the affirmers as well. We generally use the "Preparation of Candidates for the Three Days" that takes place during the Maundy Thursday service.

The highlight of the church year and JF is the Easter Vigil service where Journeyers are either baptized or affirm their baptism. Increasingly, we've lifted up the rich symbolism of this service by using a horse trough for an immersion font (although we let people choose their method of baptism) and an abundant use of oil in the anointing after baptism (and we invite the entire congregation to splash in the font and be anointed as they remember their baptism). Usually the JF groups prepares and presents one of the Scripture readings for the service.



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Mystagogy/Come and Serve

During the season of Easter JF meets three to four times. The first session is a chance to deeply reflect on Holy Week and the Easter Vigil. With permission, I've taken to recording some of these reflections and sharing them with the Worship Team and Church Council, so they know the impact of the JF process.

During the other sessions, the Journeers identify their spiritual gifts and callings with their faith partner. They craft a statement about their gifts and callings which their faith partner shares during the "Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized in the World" which happens during worship on or near Pentecost.

The last session begins with a celebration dinner. Everyone takes time to reflect on the trajectory of their faith stories since they began the JF process. These are shared with Faith Partners, and highlights of their journey are shared with the whole group. Journeers and their Faith Partners share words of appreciation with each other and Journeers receive prayer shawls. We ask everyone to fill out an evaluation about the JF process as well.

Reflections

At the start of a JF year, it seems like an overly lengthy process, that we can't reasonably expect anyone to commit to. By the end, it seems all too short. We never have enough time to cover all that we would like, but invariably the Spirit does her work by forming disciples, building community, and transforming lives through Word and Sacrament.

Yes, as a pastor, it was a ton of work to start a catechumenate process, but the process got easier as lay leaders were empowered to take on more of the leadership each year. We discovered that the work of the catechumenate is the work of the church: forming followers of Christ through worship, fellowship, prayer, and service.

One delightful discovery for me has been the power of the rites during worship. I continually expected newcomers to decline to be involved in these public rituals, especially the Welcome Rite with the full body Signing of the Cross. But the power of these rituals continued to astound me as evidenced by the reflections of the Journeers, their Faith Partners and those in the congregation. The Spirit works deeply in these public blessings.



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Advice

And a bit of advice? Give up any expectation of reaching perfection and an orderly process. Sessions and rites won't go smoothly. People will drop in and out of the process, sometimes without notice. Often Journeymen want to be a part of the catechumenate, but they end up missing sessions for a variety of reasons. When Journeymen need to be absent from sessions, we ask Faith Partners to attend the sessions on behalf of their Journeyman, then meet privately for "make-up." One year we had a snowbird in Arizona go through the process. For most of the year she and her faith partner had their sessions over email. And never give up on the Spirit! I remember one JF group that the Team leader and I secretly called the "worst group ever." Their engagement and attendance was the worst we had seen. And yet, surprisingly, they all showed up for the last session, proclaiming how JF had changed their lives.

Thanks to Danette Leisle and Diane Smith, JBL Team Leads, who reviewed and edited this case study.



Attachment:

More than membership

We are glad you are a part of the St. Andrew Church community! We are about reaching people with God's radical acceptance and grace in Jesus Christ to make lives whole. We pray that you have been touched by God's grace during your time here. We invite you to deepen your relationship with God by joining our "Journey of Faith" process where you can continue to experience God's love and grow in your faith.

God's dream for St. Andrew Church is our vision – bringing healing and wholeness to lives and all creation. Our mission is to live out Jesus' invitation to "come and see, come and grow, come and serve."

To live out our mission and vision, we offer the "Journey of Faith" (JF) process as a gift to all those new to our community. Although you will become a member of St. Andrew as a part of this process, the focus of this process is not on membership, but on helping you grow in discipleship. We recognize a life of faith is not about being a member, but about being a follower of Christ in a community of fellow believers.

If JF sounds intriguing, we invite you to learn more about his process by attending our "Come and See" sessions which will take place between services in the fall. If you decide JF is not for you at this time, you have other options which include meeting privately with a faith mentor, transferring your membership to St. Andrew, or going through JF at a later time.

The chart on the back will help you understand our approach at St. Andrew as we focus on the emerging way of discipleship instead of the traditional way of church membership.



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Traditional Way of Membership	Emerging Way of Discipleship
New member classes	Catechumenal process (Journey of Faith)
New people conform to the way we do things	New people transform congregation and even challenge how we do things
We give you the answers	You raise the questions
Voting member only needs to commune once and make a contribution of record each year	Christianity is a way of life
Church provides you with all you need to be religious (in an hour a week!)	Living as a Christian is a 24 x 7 proposition, that mostly happens away from church
A product	A process
Focus on destination – becoming a member	Focus on the journey, where the trip is as important as the destination
Disseminating information.	Building relationships with God, self and others
Assenting to doctrine	Practicing faith through prayer, Bible reading, worship and ministry in daily life
Limited time span	As long as it takes
For new members only	Whole congregation involved through serving as faith partners and blessings in worship

