

# JOURNEY TO BAPTISMAL LIVING

NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE CATECHUMENATE

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## JBL CASE STUDY FOR ADAPTATION OF THE CATECHUMENAL PROCESS

IN: *ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)*

*Urban, upscale neighborhood, Chicago*

*500 members; 200 average attendance*

*Largely white; age diversity; many families with young children; large LGBTQ community*

### **Background**

1. What four characteristics best describe your church community, especially what makes you unique?

a. Our worship is traditional (very liturgical, multi-sensory, catholic) yet our theology, welcoming statement, and social justice commitments make us very progressive.

b. Our neighborhood is made up of 100,000 young adults in their 20s and 30s. Some of them attend, but do not become members or participate beyond worship. On a given Sunday, then, sometimes 30% are guests, i.e. folks from the neighborhood. In that sense we are a bit like a collegiate chapel.

c. Holy Trinity was one of the first Reconciling in Christ congregations in Chicago. In the 1990s it seemed like a “gay church,” but there is much more diversity now, welcoming dozens of straight couples and families. In the past decade, we have a strong antiracism ministry.

d. Though there are many lifelong Lutherans, we have a large number of folks from other denominations as well, including several dozen Protestant/Lutheran – Catholic couples.

2. What is the biggest challenge facing your community?

Since it is a very transient neighborhood, it is challenging to build a sense of community. With decline in religious participation, fewer folks are becoming members and putting down roots in the congregation, even if our worship attendance remains stable.

### **Pattern of the catechumenal process**

3. How does an inquirer connect with your community? How is initial contact made?

We advertise our Life Together process on our website and all publicity materials. If we are aware of someone who could benefit from Life Together, a staff member reaches out to them as well.



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## 4. How do you figure out what their background is? And what they are seeking?

If they sign-up for Life Together, we will eventually find out their background and ask what they are seeking and what would be most beneficial. Whereas we had an average of one or more adult baptisms from 2005 – 2015, we are seeing fewer folks seeking baptism. Even some of the unbaptized folks seem fine participating as they are, likely because of our general welcome and because many urban people seem to be loosely affiliated with organized religion.

## 5. How do they get to know other inquirers? When do you have gatherings with them?

With busy urban schedules and folks desiring to commute to church once a Sunday or weekend, we need to modify our meeting schedule. We also do not have a parking lot. Whereas, as leaders we would prefer weekly or every other week gatherings, we find that what works for us to publicize a schedule of gatherings ahead of time—usually it is four or so gatherings between November and Lent, and then weekly in Lent, and several during the Easter season.

## 6. What is a typical format for a gathering?? How long does it usually last?

Depending on the time of the meeting, sessions last from 60 – 90 minutes. There is often some kind of connection to the day/season or appointed readings, as well as a particular theological / spiritual topic.

## 7. Who serve as their catechists and mentors through the process? Lay people? Clergy?

We have a team of four lay persons who are involved with leadership, as well as two clergy who serve as catechists. We are one church in two sites, and whether we offer our Life Together in one or both sites, varies from year to year, as well as the number of lay and clergy leaders / catechists.

## 8. When do you provide them with sponsors as companions and support?

It varies. At the minimum sponsors are chosen in the weeks before Affirmation of Baptism / Baptism at the Easter Vigil. In some cases, sponsors attend some sessions with the catechumens for several months.



**Stages of the growth in the catechumenal process**

9. When are they ready to be recognized by the congregation as seekers/hearers/catechumens?

Our process has varied over the years. In an ideal setting, we would have a rite of welcome in January, and enrollment on the first Sunday in Lent.

10. How do your gatherings help them to encounter the Word of God, especially as it is found in the lectionary?

We often use appointed lectionary scriptures for reflection, study, or springboard to the topic of the day.

11. What additional topics from Christian tradition and practice do you try to share with them in your gatherings?

Creeds

Commandments

Prayer / Spirituality

Liturgy / Things in Church

Salvation / Cross

Sin / Confession of Sin

Mission

Inter-religious issues

Interpreting the Bible

Sacraments

Grace, Lutheranism

12. When are they ready to be recognized by the congregation as candidates for Baptism? How do your gatherings use the Word to open their minds and hearts to a deeper sense both of repentance and of Jesus's love?

The candidate discerns their readiness for baptism.



13. How does the period of intense preparation prepare them to make the Baptismal Covenant/Promises?

Following their participation in Life Together, the candidates seem ready and eager for baptism / affirmation of baptism.

14. How have you best managed to involve the participants in the life of your community, especially in service to the world?

We stress baptism as a calling to ministry in everyday life, or as Lutherans and others call it, the priesthood of all believers.

15. How have the various rituals of the catechumenate affected your participants?

We value ritual very highly. We baptize by immersion (in a horse tank) and both candidate and congregation find this very moving. The signing of the cross ritual is also very meaningful.

16. How have the various rituals of the catechumenate affected the congregation?

Same as above.

### **Advice**

17. What is the most important bit of advice that you have for another practitioner in your situation?

We have had to adapt a process to our setting, though often regretfully. When you compare our process to the older practice of a pastor baptizing an adult on a Saturday morning with little or no catechesis, our process is quite intense. Yet comparing it to very structured processes in large Roman Catholic, or other churches, what we do is rather informal and abbreviated. Our advice is to find what works for your community, leaders, clergy, and most of all, seekers.

