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An ancient journey, rediscovered
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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Study guide

An ancient journey, rediscovered

ELCA congregations adopt the catechumenate

By Robert C. Blezard

Older members of your congregation may remember when most stores were closed on Sundays, or when public schools hosted Christmas pageants and taught kids to sing carols. In our current culture, the stories and tenets of our faith aren't always passed along as readily as they once were. Perhaps because of this, more people today seem to be yearning for a deeper experience of the sacred. The catechumenate is an ancient spiritual process that helps deepen faith through education and spiritual practices. Has its time come again?

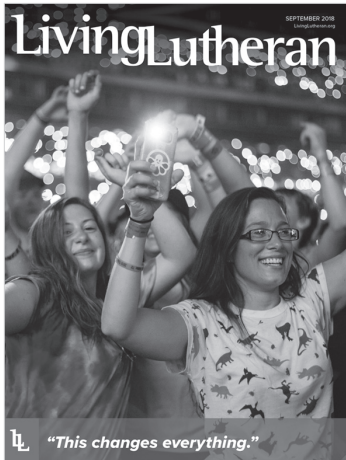
Exercise 1: Your confirmation

The catechumenate began in the early church as a way to initiate adults into the faith by preparing them for baptism through an intensive regimen of learning and practices. With infant baptism long the norm, the church today teaches teenagers about the faith in order to confirm their baptism. Some are rethinking confirmation.

- How old were you when you were confirmed? What grade were you in?
- What were your experiences of confirmation? What did you like best about it? Worst?
- How might your confirmation education have been better?
- How well did confirmation prepare you for the faith questions that arose when you were an adult? Explain.
- What are the “pros” of teaching confirmation to middle- and high-school-age youth? What are the “cons”?
- What are the pros and cons of replacing traditional confirmation with catechumenate that is geared toward confirmands, but also open to people of all ages?

Exercise 2: Newcomers and seekers

As a consequence of the church's decline since its peak in the mid-1960s, fewer adults have grown up in the church. Thus, they missed the Sunday school, confirmation and Christian education that many of us take for granted. Many unchurched and dechurched folks who come through our doors want and need education on the basics of faith and spirituality.



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In addition, many people who were raised in the faith desire something more substantial.

- Do you sense that when unchurched people join your church there is a wide gap of knowledge and understanding between them and the folks who have been there a long time? What have you observed?
- How might an intensive catechumenate program, open to both newcomers and longtime members, help address that gap?
- Do you sense that some people, both churched and unchurched, are hungering for a different experience of faith? What have you observed?
- How would you characterize what they are looking for?
- Why do you think this is so?
- Are you looking for a deeper connection to faith? Can you explain?
- How would an intensive program of education help you in your faith development? Would you welcome it?

Exercise 3: Education or formation?

- What's the goal of your congregation's Christian education program? Well, obviously, it's education. But what are the marks of a person who is educated in Christian matters? How would you know?
- Generally speaking, is education concerned with the development of a person's brain or heart? Intellect or character? Explain.
- Is it possible for a person to be educated in Christian matters and still think and behave in ways that are not Christlike? Why or why not? (And haven't you met folks like that?)
- The catechumenate focuses on Christian formation—helping the person not only to understand tenets of the faith, but also to live them out. In other words, formation. Is this a better approach? Why or why not?
- How might a catechumenate program compliment your congregation's existing Christian education to help form people in the faith? For what reasons might both support one another?
- List the benefits that people would have from such a complimentary pairing. And list the benefits to the congregation.

Exercise 4: New-member classes

Does your congregation have a program to bring new members into the life of the church?

If no:

- Why not?



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- How does your congregation make sure that new members know the basics of what it means to be a Christian?
- How might a catechumenate program serve this need?
- How could intensive preparation assist a new member in integrating more easily into the life of the congregation? How would this benefit the new member? How would it benefit the congregation?

If yes:

- Is there a handbook or course book that your congregation follows? If not, why not?
- If so, how well does it cover the Bible, history of Lutheranism and spiritual practices?
- How could intensive preparation assist a new member in integrating more easily into the life of the congregation? How would this benefit the new member? How would it benefit the congregation?
- Would a catechumenate program serve better than what your congregation has currently? Why or why not?

Discussion questions:

- How are spiritual practices taught in your congregation? What does your congregation do well? What suggestions for improvement would you consider? How might a catechumenate program help congregants get a good grounding in spiritual practices?
- Though it's often not intended to be, how often does confirmation become the primary and last time that people are given training and education in the faith? What are the problems with this? How might the catechumenate serve as a good refresher course?
- Is youth the best stage of life in which to give faith education? Why or why not? What might be a better stage of life?
- How might a catechumenate program serve as a good spiritual refresher course for people who have had traditional catechism in their youth?

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ELCA congregations adopt the catechumenate

By Benjamin J. Dueholm

A young woman came to my church, Messiah Lutheran in Wauconda, Ill., seeking to be confirmed before her wedding to a Roman Catholic man. Ours was not the first parish she had cold-called for help. And, like the others, we had a confirmation program for middle schoolers but nothing to meet her particular need.

So, with the help of a faithful member who served as her sponsor and a devotional book to guide them, we made up an ad-hoc process to prepare her for affirmation of baptism at that year's Easter Vigil.

Reflecting on that experience, we came to the conclusion that faith formation should not be something reserved for, and imposed upon, only children and youth. We joined the growing number of Lutheran communities adopting some version of the ancient catechumenate.



Illustration: Lauren Wright Pittman, Leyp Studio

More a diverse set of local practices than a uniform institution, the catechumenate was the way inquirers were prepared for baptism in the early church. It usually involved public recognition and prayer in the liturgy, instruction in the essentials of the faith, and a central role for lay sponsors, or catechists, who guided the new believers in the practices and virtues of Christian life.

In the catechumenate, faith formation was treated as an essential part of initiation into the body of Christ. It was only

later, after Christianity became the dominant religion in the territory of the Roman Empire, that we treated baptism and faith formation as two distinct events.

If that ever really made sense, it doesn't anymore. People come to Christ as adults without having been baptized in childhood. Or they bring their child to the font after having a limited or scattered education in what the promises of baptism are and what they mean. Bringing faith formation—mutual prayer, shared meals and fellowship, learning and discussion—back

into these moments of initiation takes some effort. But church history and current experience gives us resources for doing it, and the impact on congregations and lives is significant.

Deepening relationships with Christ

Amy Zeittlow, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Decatur, Ill., started a catechumen process when a family showed up with a high school senior wishing to be confirmed. “She was asking different questions” than the middle schoolers in their confirmation program, Zeittlow said. “I was looking for a way to replicate a catechism process that could culminate with her affirmation of baptism during the Easter Vigil service.”

This pastoral need turned into regular gatherings of 12 to 15 people.

John Flack, pastor of Our Saviour Atonement Lutheran Church in New York City, was tired of new-member classes. “I wanted something . . . that helped people deepen their relationship with Christ,” he said.

Our Saviour Atonement has used a catechumen model for baptism and membership for three years. Members sponsor catechumens, praying, eating and standing together for the liturgical rites of welcome and blessing. “It’s the best thing we’ve done,” Flack said.

Over eight to 12 weeks between Christmas and Easter, the catechumen groups at Peace Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas, meet for prayer and conversation on the lectionary texts. Carolyn Albert Donovan, pastor of Peace, described feeling uncertain about one longtime member’s engagement with the process, and being moved when, at the end, he shared “how much

it had reconnected him to a sense of purpose in his family’s spiritual life.”

Like the other pastors, Tim Brown, who serves Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Raleigh, N.C., found Paul Hoffman’s book *Faith Forming Faith* (Wipf and Stock, 2012) helpful in inspiring and guiding their catechumen process. Running nine months, Good Shepherd’s catechumenate begins with monthly meetings for inquirers to test the format and becomes more frequent after Christmas and especially during Lent.

“We’re offering a more formal confirmation program for adults this fall because we’ve had this request,” Brown said.

Transformed communities

It’s no small thing for people to request a confirmation program. But it’s remarkable what can happen when people are given the chance to really explore the meaning of their baptism. Parents and children get baptized together. Longtime members come alongside

newcomers and both are transformed. “It seems to have brought baptism more into our consciousness,” Donovan said.

When the high school senior affirmed her baptism at Holy Cross, she named each participant in the catechumen group and what she had learned from them—“not a dry eye in the sanctuary,” Zeittlow said.

That’s been my experience in the eight groups that have met at Messiah since that first adult confirmand came through our doors. Longtime members came as learners. Newcomers started serving as sponsors. And along the way, we shared grief, joys and questions that aren’t easily aired over coffee and doughnuts after worship.

It may be that Christians today—whether they are beginning the life of baptism, or beginning it again as they bring a child to the waters or seek to become members—need and want not less community, less faith and less commitment, but more. And God, through our communities, is always ready to provide it. **L**

Resources for your catechumenate

- “The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament” (elca.org/worship).
- *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church* by Jessica Krey Duckworth (Fortress, 2013).
- The North American Association for the Catechumenate (journeytobaptism.org).
- LEAD (waytolead.org).
- The Faith Five (faith5.org).

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Benjamin J. Dueholm is a pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Wauconda, Ill., and the author of *Sacred Signposts* (Eerdmans, 2018).