

THE CONGREGATIONAL TASK OF MAKING DISCIPLES

From the NAAC Board of Directors

What do you think is the central task of a Christian congregation? Which one of the following would you choose?

1. Weekly Worship
2. Bible Study
3. Building community through Christian fellowship
4. Community outreach and service projects
5. Faith formation for Baptismal Living (Disciple Making)
6. Other

To read Paul's letters, the Book of Acts, and the writings of the Early Church Fathers, it would appear that we should heed Jesus' Great Commission to "go make disciples" as the first order of business. While all the other faith practices are important, it is important to remember that an intentional faith formation for adults through a process developed by the Early Church called the Catechumenate was seen as paramount to changing lives and changing the world.

It is sad to note that the vast majority of mainline Protestant congregations in North America (92%) do not set aside time for newcomers to learn how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ because most congregations still assume

a Christian culture and generally expect newcomers to know what it means to be Christian. So claims Jessicah Duckworth, author of the new book *Wide Welcome: How the Presence of Newcomers Can Change the Church* (Augsburg Fortress, 2013). She argues for a more rigorous and intentional faith formation process for both newcomers and members such as the Catechumenate.

Unlike typical newcomer welcome programs such as a pastor's class or a three-hour welcome session, the Catechumenate gathers newcomers and established members (serving as sponsors and catechists) together to practice discipleship through Bible study, prayer, worship, and service. In this way, newcomers and members alike learn to be disciples through actual participation in Christian practices. By teaching people how to live out their baptism in daily life, congregations can move from a membership culture to one of discipleship and mission.

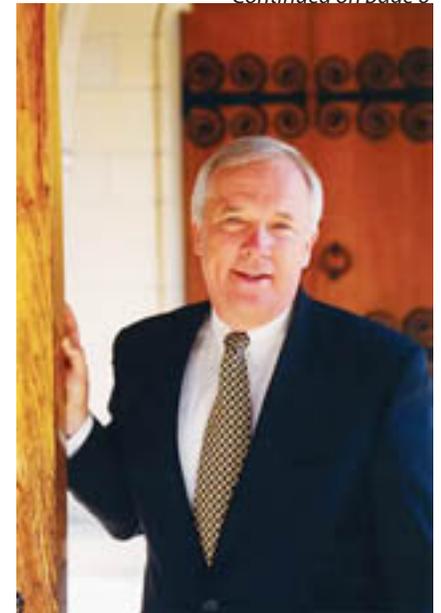
The North American Association for the Catechumenate (NAAC) is an ecumenical organization serving the mainline Christian churches of the United States and Canada. This parachurch group provides printed and video resources, training events, educa-

tional conferences, online forums, and other sources of support for those seeking to cultivate and promote a culture of discipleship. Using the Church's ancient faith formation practice known as the Catechumenate, congregations invite people into a deeper walk with Jesus and with each other that helps them live out their baptismal calling and that can ultimately transform their faith communities.

NAAC is seeking to help congregations fulfill their calling to make disciples by offering two special educational and training opportunities this year:

First, "Reclaiming our Baptismal Calling: Discipleship in a Post-

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William Willimon

BOOK REVIEW OF LIVING INTO COMMUNITY

Over the centuries, responses to the question: What does it mean to live as a Christian community? have been diverse. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is reported that “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” In Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, observed that many a time, “a whole Christian community had broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream.” For Bonhoeffer, the disillusionment that shatters such utopian fantasies about community is an act of grace that helps a group of Christians to discern the true community God is trying to create. Christine D. Pohl’s *Living into Community* does that by exploring four practices that characterize authentic Christian community.

Pohl posits four essential practices that sustain community:

- Embracing gratitude as a way of life
- Making and keeping promises
- Living truthfully
- Practicing hospitality

Each practice is explored in three ways: an exposition of the practice, complications encountered with the practice, and drilling down by “exploring what weakens and what strengthens” the practice.

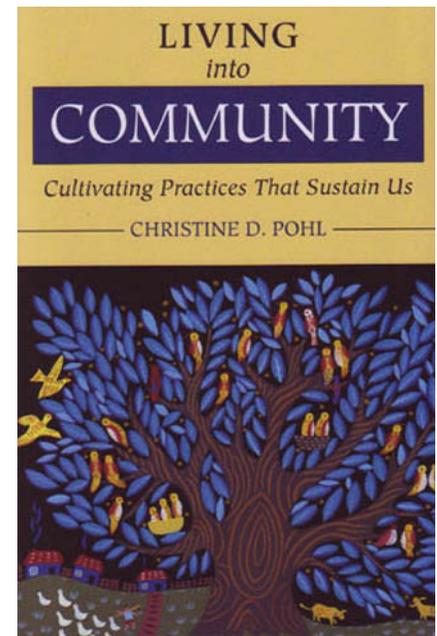
Pohl does not argue that these four are the most important practices (like forgiveness or discernment), but that “they are central to community life and to God’s character . . . [and] central to the Christian moral tradition.”

Communities with liturgical traditions of celebrating the Eu-

charist every week may not need much convincing that having grateful hearts is a foundational practice of Christians; after all, Eucharist is the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Readers will appreciate the explorations of the complications associated with the practices and the thoughtful observations about what weakens and what strengthens a particular practice. Examples of complications in gratitude are “gifts we don’t want or aren’t sure how to use” and the assertions that “every gift has strings.”

The section on making and keeping promises includes the distinctions between “contracts” (with their escape clauses) and “covenants,” (which are durable); addresses complications like having multiple or conflicting fidelities, or living with promises we don’t like; and reflects on ways betrayal, abandonment, and misplaced trust undermine fidelity. In recognizing the blessing of consistency, Pohl quotes Jean Vanier, who “observed that ‘the essential nourishment’ of healthy communities ‘is fidelity to the thousand and one small demands of each day.’”

From a pastoral perspective, I found the section on living truthfully full of useful insights. When Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount speaks out against oaths (“let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No”) he is holding up the virtue that ALL speech should be truthful, making an oath unnecessary. In the age of Photoshop and spinmeisters, truthfulness sometimes gets compromised because of cultural pressure to make



ourselves APPEAR flawless rather than real. Pohl discusses the challenges of “speaking the truth in love,” concluding with Frederick Buechner’s observation that it means speaking “with concern not only for the truth that is being told but with concern for the people it is being told to.” She also describes how truth-telling is affected by how situations are framed; and she looks at deformations of truthfulness, like flattery, dishonesty, lying, and self-deception, and how they harm community.

Because a previous book of Pohl’s, *Making Room*, explores the practice of hospitality in detail, the final section focuses on how hospitality provides a way of living into the practices and integrating them in different ways into the life of a community.

The natural audience for this book would be pastors and church leaders, and even though the book grew largely from

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CATE-CHUME-WHAT?

Our congregation hosted its first catechumenate, or preparation for adult baptism, this year. God is up to some amazing things through it. About 40 adults were received into our congregation at the Easter Vigil. Of them, three were adult baptisms. Many are returning to the Christian faith after long absence. Most come to us from traditions other than Lutheran. We also anticipate many children being baptized. In a congregation of more than 600 members, this is a sizeable addition.

Because the catechumenate is the kind of process that, once incorporated, affects the overall culture of the congregation, I offer here a simple series of points I hope intrigue readers and inspire further inquiry into establishing a catechumenate in your context.

1. Get a mentor: Our congregation started seriously entertaining the idea of launching a catechumenate last year. I called Paul Hoffman, who is pastor of Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, and started asking a lot of questions. That conversation turned into an ongoing dialogue and prayer partnership. Phinney Ridge prays regularly for our congregation as we implement the catechumenate. Paul chimes in on our Facebook planning group page, sends me emails of support, and fields my many questions. I literally could not imagine launching a process like the catechumenate without a mentor.

2. Pilot the program with a lead team: It's really hard to lead a new community of people through a process you yourself haven't experienced. This past summer eight

of us, along with our lead team for the catechumenate, spent a night each week together gathered around a meal and Bible study. By the time we formally launched the inquiry stage of the catechumenate in the fall, we knew what we were inviting others into, at least enough to be dangerous.

3. There's not a curriculum other than life and liturgy: For some reason when I first learned about the catechumenate, for years I wanted there to be a "cut and paste" curriculum to simply drop into place and use. But the catechumenate doesn't work this way. It's very open, with lots of space for the participants to bring their questions and concerns. It is authentically about inquiry. And it is not technologically fancy. All it is, ultimately, is the creative interplay of many things you are probably already doing in your congregation, including meal hospitality, Bible study, and worship. The crucial difference is —

4. It is designed for new people: Everything is structured to make space for the new in your midst

to have a place and for your congregation to attend to them. Keep your attention focused, like a laser, watching for opportunities to invite new people into the catechumenal process. You'll be surprised how often opportunities come up once watching for them is perpetually top in your attention.

5. Matching sponsors with catechumens takes a lot of one-on-one conversations: At the beginning of the year, I had no idea I would need to tap into our current congregational members and match 40 sponsors with 40 catechumens. This has required many phone conversations, chats at the coffee shop, invitations by letter and Facebook. Some people say no. Others are thrilled to say yes. Somehow, it works. What it also means is 40 of our current members are gathering — together with new members — for Bible study and fellowship.

6. The catechumenate really is an ancient process. It is worth digging deeper and learning its

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MATTERS OF THE HEART: LENT, CANDIDATES, CONGREGATION

The whole liturgical assembly forms new Christians. At its deepest level, the recovery of the ancient church's baptismal understanding in our congregations embraces those whom God



is calling in rites and blessings proper to the catechumenate in Lent.* Beginning on Lent I, the assembly "enrolls" or "calls" persons to baptism at Easter. On Sundays III-V in Lent the community includes in the liturgy's response to the word a time focused on blessing each candidate. And on Lent III and V respectively, the community surrounds the candidates with the sound of its faith and its prayer.

All of this intensifies the process of preparation for baptism that has been going on since the first inklings of inquiry months, if not years, earlier. As with tinder smoldering in order to light a fire, the assembly blows with the intent of paschal fire at the Easter Vigil when the candidates become neophytes through bath, anointing, and meal. The period of intense preparation (Lent) is not done in a classroom. It is done publicly in the worship space under the prayerful gaze of the assembly.

Why these ritual moments? Is it simply mimicking ancient church practices? Or are these rites about conversion of men and women at the deepest levels? I find a clue in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of*

Adults (see no. 146) and the *Book of Occasional Services* (Episcopal Church, 2003, p. 126, no. 1) that call for the Year A gospel readings during Lent at services where candidates for baptism are present. You will recall that these are substantial readings that go to the heart of conversion of our attitudes, wills, affections, and commitments. The stories of Jesus' encounters with Satan (lust and temptation), Nicodemus (necessity of new birth), the Samaritan woman (thirst and woundedness), the man born blind (blindness), and the raising of Lazarus (death) become communal metaphors for encounter with our own temptation, second birth, wounds, thirsts, blindness, and death. In these encounters we are emboldened to pray for the conversion of the candidates, who with us are tempted, yet to be born, thirsty, blind, and needing new life and resurrection.

So, enrollment for baptism at Easter is entry into an intensive journey of conversion at the deepest levels of the candidates' being. And we, the assembly, give ourselves to the candidates and to prayer for them on each of the Sundays in Lent leading to Holy Week and the Great Three Days (the Triduum). The blessings, times when the candidates come forward with their sponsors for prayer, were called exorcisms in the ancient church (and still are in the Roman Catholic RCIA). We might be a bit squeamish about calling them exorcisms, but seeing them in that light hints at this being serious business! As with all catechumenal ministry, we are about far more than conveying information! Congregations are

about pregnancy and birthing, naming demons and deliverance, facing darkness, the abyss, and death. With the candidates we are called to face that which threatens to undo us in the most primordial recesses of our psyche and spirit. Only illumination will do; only the Holy Spirit can work at such depths.

So, praying for them (and ourselves), touching their shoulders in solidarity and caring, we surround the candidates and give them the faith of the church (the symbolum — the Apostle's Creed — the foundation on which our prayers rest) on the third Sunday, and we give them the prayer of the church (symbolized by the Lord's Prayer) on the fifth Sunday.

These blessings and gifts signify relationship, inclusion, and anticipation. They are the finishing touches in the womb before birth through the waters of baptism at the Easter Vigil. Richard Rodriguez in his book *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* captures well the dynamic of Lent and the dynamic of conversion within the community. He quotes an anonymous pamphlet: "The Creed, or symbolum, is the symbol of our profession of faith; it is not the faith itself. We believe something because we first believed someone and that someone was Jesus." Then he continues: "But before

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MATTERS OF THE HEART

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we get to Jesus . . . there is probably someone else, Mama. Papi. Miss Nowik. Nibs. Rabbi Heschel. Brother James. Jim Downey. Robert McAfee Brown. Flannery O'Conner. Father Costa. Andy Warhol" (224).



And certainly, a congregation! Then a bit further on Rodriguez continues: "The congregation does not believe one thing; we believe a multitude of hazy, crazy things. Some among us are smart;

some serene; some feeble, poor, practical, guilt-ridden; some are lazy; some are arrogant, rich, pious, prurient, bitter, injured, sad. We gather in belief of one big thing: that we matter, somehow. We all matter. No one can matter unless all matter. We call that which gives matter God" (224).

Imagine: That homeless woman there who is a candidate for baptism, kneeling now with her sponsor's hand on her shoulder matters. If she matters to us in our attention and the grace with which we bless her, she just might be able to join us in believing and trusting that she matters to God and has a life that matters in the cosmic scheme of things! That is, in part at least, conversion! Such matters are the stuff of enrollment, blessings, and gifts dur-

ing the forty days leading to the sacraments of initiation.

*Check the worship book in your tradition for the specific rites for enrollment/calling to baptism, blessings, and handing on of the creed and prayer of the church. For sources see pages 168-170 in *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living* (Augsburg Fortress, 2012).

Daniel Benedict is a retired United Methodist presbyter and serves as Ecumenical Associate at the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint Andrew in Honolulu working with the catechumenate. He is a contributor to *Go Make Disciples* and author of *Come to the Waters*. For many years he has been a teacher of all things catechumenal and now is a local church practitioner.

CATE-CUME-WHAT?

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history: My own story engaging the catechumenate is decades in the making. I first read about it in Philip Maxwell Johnson's *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Development* (Liturgical Press). It helped me to know its history, although the complexity of its shape and influence in the early church also intimidated me a bit.

7. If you are the leader, this is your highest priority: All ministry,

every day, is an opportunity to connect people to the catechumenate, opening space for faith formation bringing new Christians to baptism and beyond. As Martha Grace Reese discovered in her important study of vital and evangelical North American congregations, one important measure of the vitality of Christian ministry is the number of adult baptisms in a community.

Clint Schnekloth

Clint Schnekloth is the pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, an ELCA congregation in Fayetteville, Ark. Published with permission of the ELCA's "Seeds for the Parish."

See more at: <http://www.elca.org/Living-Lutheran/Seeds>

The photo on page 3 accompanying this article is that of a priest blessing the candidates in St. James Cathedral, Seattle.



THE CONGREGATIONAL TASK

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Christian Culture" is the theme of the upcoming NAAC **Annual Gathering and Training Event** which will be held August 5 to 8, 2014 at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia. This event, sponsored by the North American Association for the Catechumenate, features Will Willimon from Duke University as keynote speaker and Susan Johnson, National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, as preacher for our closing eucharist. Other presenters include John Hill, Paul Palumbo, and Rick Rouse along with a stellar worship team of Lyle McKenzie (ELCIC) and Scott Widler (ELCA). This year a full catechumenate training event is included in the package!

Second, a **Regional Discipleship Training Event** is also being offered next fall for both those new to the Catechumenate as well as experienced practitioners. The event will be held at St. John's Episcopal Church in Portsmouth, VA from Thursday, Oct. 2 thru Saturday, Oct. 4. Pastors and Lay leaders are encouraged to come as a team for this three day immersion experience.

LIVING INTO COMMUNITY

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teaching a seminary ethics course, its approach is not overly academic or technical; any person who takes living in Christian community seriously would not find this book daunting. Additionally,

Limited scholarships are available for both events and interested individuals should contact our registrar, Devra Betts at devrabetts@gmail.com for more information. Also visit the NAAC website at www.catechumenate.org to read more about these events, register online, and/or download brochures and fliers related to these and other opportunities provided by NAAC.

The Catechumenate is a process of faith formation and spiritual development leading to baptism or affirmation of baptism. It is ideal for twenty-first century people who may have little or no previous association with the Christian faith. The Catechumenate helps people develop the disciplines of faith in their lives: corporate worship, the study of Scripture, prayer, and baptismal living. It is process-oriented rather than program-oriented, lay-led rather than clergy-dominated, and focused on formation in Christ rather than information about Christ. Through the catechumenate, adults on a spiritual quest are offered an apprenticeship in the life of faith and those already baptized are aided in the

it includes questions for discussion and reflection, so it would make a good book-group book.

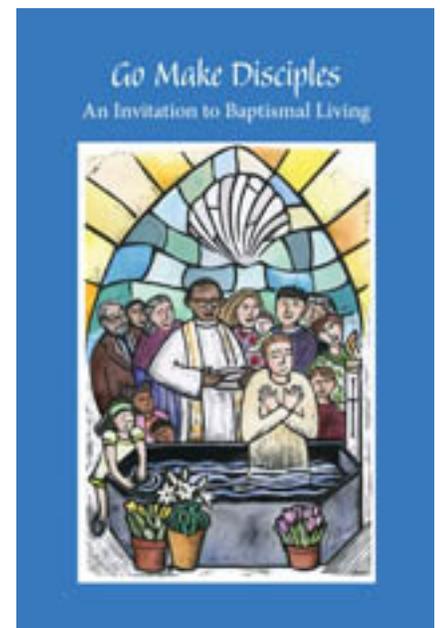
Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that*

deepening of their faith and commitment.

Join us on this exciting journey of making disciples!

With you in Christ's joyful service,

Rick Rouse, NAAC President



READ MORE ABOUT IT. *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living* is the first ecumenical handbook for congregations on the catechumenate. Written by members of NAAC and published by Augsburg Fortress (2012). Book and accompanying CD-ROM available at www.augsburgfortress.org

Sustain Us (Eerdmans, 2012).

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