

IT'S TIME TO WELCOME NEWCOMERS

The Catechumenate is all about welcoming newcomers to a baptismal journey that will enrich both their faith and the ministry of the congregation. Many congregations have already started the Inquiry Stage while others are preparing to do so soon, as they extend hospitality to those who are seeking baptism and/or wishing to go deeper in their faith walk.

This summer NAAC welcomed many new members who attended our Annual Gathering and Training Event in Vancouver, BC. And the Board of Directors is delighted to have a new representative from Canada on the board as we welcome Rev. Greg Smith from London, Ontario who joins a

hard-working group of colleagues dedicated to assisting congregations across North America. Greg is currently Director of Field Education, Worship, Community, and Formation at Huron Seminary.

You and your colleagues are welcome to join us at two upcoming events sponsored by NAAC:

- "Go Make Disciples" is a Catechumenate Training Institute for both those new to the Catechumenate as well as experienced practitioners. NAAC is tentatively planning two for 2015, one on the East Coast and one of the West Coast. For more information check the NAAC website and the related newsletter article for training opportunities.

- "Transforming Congregations

Through Spiritual Practice: Creating a Discipleship Community" is the theme for our next Annual Gathering to be held July 30-August 1 in Baltimore, MD. We have lined up two popular conference presenters, Jessicah Duckworth and Paul Hoffman as our keynote speakers. See related articles in this issue for more details or go to our website at www.catechumenate.org. If you are interested in serving on the 2015 Planning Team, contact Rick Rouse at rwrouse@comcast.net.

We on the NAAC Board are looking forward to another great program year and hope you will join us!

Your partner in Christ,
Rick Rouse, President

MISTAKES BECOME OPPORTUNITIES IN CHRIST

Reflections on the Gathering in Vancouver

It was one of those "mistakes." No one had a Bible. As group leader, I was embarrassed. I'd left my phone, which has my Bible app on it, in my room to charge. Then I figured the reading was in my notebook. It wasn't. Surely someone had a Bible, though. But, no. We were all duly embarrassed.

However, we all knew the story of the woman at the well. We knew it well. So we recreated it together orally — a whole chapter

of the Gospel of John. Each of us remembered details of the differ-

ent parts. We'd realize that we'd

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THE RITE OF WELCOME

Becoming a Christian is not like joining Rotary. Every Rotarian I have ever known has been a well-intentioned, generous, and compassionate person, but that does not make them a Christian. As Jesus said to the wise young scribe who had discerned that the heart of the Torah was love of God and neighbor, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12: 34) Yet only faith in Jesus as Lord gets you in.

For adults who are exploring becoming Christian, that faith needs to grow and be nurtured over time. Although Acts has examples of people whose profession of faith in Jesus leads to immediate Baptism, (Cf. Chs. 8 and 16.) the Gospels take a different approach. The authors of all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8) turn Jesus's parable of the sower and the seed into an allegory about why the seed of the Word bears fruit only in some circumstances — even when at first hearing, it was received enthusiastically!

Only an apprenticeship which could lead to a more mature and consistent commitment bearing fruit in deeds could reveal that the Word had been truly and deeply heard. The Apostolic Tradition, parts of which were written within a century of the Gospels, suggests that the catechumenal process should take about three years before Baptism could occur (at 17).

Yet North American culture in general is deeply uncomfortable with that sort of exclusion. Our first impulse seems to be to invite everyone in and then sort things

out later.

As I said, though, we are not reflecting here about joining Rotary. We are talking ultimately about rebirth by water and the Spirit, about dying and rising with Christ, about a life of ongoing discipleship as a member of the living Body of Christ.

To help people understand the need for this kind of apprenticeship period for the Christian life, I have found that using relationship analogies can be very helpful. Put simply: initial inquiry is like dating a bit, becoming a catechumen is like starting to go steady, final preparation is like engagement, and Baptism like matrimony. Most of us have a lived appreciation of how important it is to respect those stages of development in a relationship — especially since the rest of the marriage is really an extended mystagogy.

So when initial inquiry is over, what does the Rite of Welcome do? And perhaps more importantly, what does it not do?

In the various denominational versions of the rite, the person being welcomed is asked to make some form of initial commitment. Phased in various words, the core concept is that someone is being asked to turn to Christ, to accept him as Teacher, and to follow him as the Way. In our contemporary world filled with many spiritual teachers, guides and gurus, someone who up to then has just been inquiring now is committing to getting serious about Jesus and his teaching and values.

Getting serious should also mean getting personal and

getting real. The various service books provide possible answers to the question: "What do you seek?" — not a bad idea since people can be very nervous in public rituals and ordinary people appreciate a little guidance as to what form their answer might take. Yet it is excellent pedagogy to spend the last catechumenal session before this rite is celebrated reflecting on their personal and sincere answer to that question. (It is also a good idea to encourage them to speak their answer loudly so that the members of the community that they are joining can hear their answer.)

Yet what the rite does not demand is that someone say that they now accept Jesus as Lord. The new catechumen may be ready or even eager to say those words; but, as Romans 10: 9-10 points out, they must be uttered not just with our lips but from deep in our hearts. And so it is best not to say them too early in this relationship until the new Christian realizes more clearly what they mean and what their consequences are.

The ritual gesture that is specific to Welcome is one of the best examples of truth-in-advertising that I know of. The new catechumen is marked with the sign of the Cross — in many versions of the rite, quite literally from head to toe. And so, from the beginning of this apprenticeship, the catechumen is warned that grace is never cheap. Following Jesus is not a guided tour through an interesting and hopefully even intriguing spiritual landscape; it is

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MISTAKES BECOME OPPORTUNITIES IN CHRIST

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miss something and go back to put it in.

Each person's memory and insights enriched us all. What made this an even better exercise, though, was what it afforded us to reflect upon why we remembered what we did and examine more closely what we'd forgotten.

Memory, after all, is a product of what we value enough to notice and remember. And sometimes our memories are clouded by underlying unexamined narratives that need to be brought to light and re-remembered. This is the work of *anamnesis* — a term for the kind of remembering we do when we celebrate the sacraments. We remember the past today in such a way that it opens up God's future.

Therapists may not call it this, but they also engage in *anamnesis*, encouraging us to re-examine the past in order to foreground other things that we've "back grounded" in memory so that a new future can emerge that's more whole and holistic.

So, as we asked ourselves what we'd forgotten and pondered the reasons why we may have overlooked that, we discovered new avenues for healing revelations from God. God's Word spoke as the Spirit of Christ taught.

This is what I love about the catechumenate: a few people gathered together in prayer, attending to the Bible with open, sharing spirits becomes a place where God is manifest. A catechumenate's small group is what Celtic spirituality refers to as a "thin place" where the veil between heaven and earth is more translucent. It is sacramental as people offer themselves before the Lord and God graces us with divine presence.

But there's something else, too. What we deem mistakes, embarrassing mistakes, can be other ways of access into the Holy if we are honest and still seeking the Holy One. And that is perhaps the greatest lesson that was reiterated at Vancouver for a small group of mostly perfectionistic pastors and lay leaders. For the

catechumenate's transformative power is not dependent upon us and our abilities and best-laid plans that oft go awry. It is utterly dependent upon Christ and his grace offered freely to those who seek and find that, though they want to hide in embarrassment, they are found by God's persistent, searching love. Indeed, our leaderships' honest mistakes can model a sheepish courage to come out and trust in the light of that divine love and its ineffable grace.

Editor's note. Another opportunity for Christ: \$574 were collected at the Gathering for the Surrey Urban Mission Society (SUMS), our recipient of this year's Eucharist offering. Information about SMUS may be found at sumsplace.org.

Teresa Lockart Eisenlohr is the author of the *Presbyterian Rites for the Catechumenate* (available on the CD *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living*) and a member of the NAAC Board of Directors.



THE RITE OF WELCOME

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a costly and even brutal challenge to bring God's kingdom to reality in our world.

Pedro Arrupe, a much beloved superior of the Jesuits who led the Society through the challenges of the post-Vatican II years, suffered a terrible stroke in 1981. Quite literally nailed to cross of his own crippled body, he lived for another ten years. Yet in those years he said that he had come to realize that he was at last where he had always wanted to be — in God's hands, entirely and completely.

I submit that he was a person who had grasped the meaning

of baptismal living and that his words can teach us what we are about when we joyfully welcome new catechumens to their apprenticeship in Christian discipleship.

A final note: The original Latin title of this rite can give us a helpful insight: *Ritus Ad Catechumenos Faciendos, the Rite for Making Catechumens*. The English translation for North American Roman Catholics waffles a bit: "The Rite for Accepting Catechumens." Other churches have adapted that title to fit their own denominational and theological viewpoints; yet I have always liked the perspective

expressed in the Latin. Christian initiation from its first moments is not something merely internal to a given individual. Just as you can't baptize yourself, so you can't make yourself a catechumen.

Rather, initiation is always a work of grace; it is God at work through the Church.

Michael Marchal is author of numerous works including *The Spirit at Work, Conversion and the RCIA*, and *Toward the Table — Ritual Moments of Christian Initiation* (both from World Library Publications, Franklin Park, IL.

CATECHUMENATE TRAINING INSTITUTES PLANNED

"Go, Make Disciples" is the theme for regional training institutes that offer not only information about the Catechumenate but provides an in depth experience of this spiritual journey over the course of three days. Originated by the early church as a means of faith formation and preparing people for baptism, many congregations

have reclaimed this tradition as a means of renewing the church and making disciples for today's world. NAAC is planning an intensive training institute to be held fall 2015 at Trinity Episcopal Church in Sacramento, CA. In addition, the Rocky Mountain Synod of the ELCA will hold a training event in Denver Jan. 9-11,

2015. Check the NAAC website for more information.

NAAC is also entertaining invitations from churches in the US and Canada who would be interested in hosting a regional training event in **2016**. Last year, Christ the King Lutheran Church in Houston saw this as an opportunity to immerse a number of their staff and leaders in the catechumenate experience as they prepare to initiate this journey of discipleship in their own congregation. For those congregations who are already practicing the catechumenate, it can be an opportunity for sharing their experience while renewing their own team members. Mark Mumert, Minister of Worship at Christ the King, shares his experience in helping to lead the event in his own congregation:

"Hosting a NAAC Training Institute in our congregation was

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YOU ARE INVITED . . .

You are invited to attend the 2015 NAAC Annual Gathering in Baltimore next summer. "Transforming Congregations Through Spiritual Practice: Creating a Discipleship Community" is the theme for the upcoming Annual Gathering to be held July 30-August 1, 2015 at the Bon Secours Conference Center in Baltimore, Maryland. Located in a beautiful, park-like setting, Bon Secours is just minutes away from Baltimore and close to sightseeing venues in Washington, DC.

We are pleased to announce that our keynote speakers for the event are Jessicah Duckworth and

Paul Hoffman, popular authors and conference presenters. Jessicah is the author of *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church*, and Paul Hoffman has written *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond*. This dynamic duo will bring their experience and insights to light in their inspiring and useful presentations on baptism and discipleship.

The conference is for pastors, seminarians, musicians, and lay leaders who wish to gather for stellar worship, stimulating lectures on spiritual practice,

workshops on various aspects of faith formation and the Catechumenate, and a chance to network with ministry practitioners from all denominations across North America. It promises to be an enriching time for all.

The event is sponsored by NAAC, an ecumenical organization committed to assisting congregations grow as discipleship communities. For more information and/or to register, go to www.catechumenate.org or contact Devra Betts, Registrar, at devrabetts@gmail.com. Mark your calendars now and plan to join us next summer!

CATECHUMENATE TRAINING EVENTS PLANNED

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a unique blessing. We learned so much from everyone — the profound and pastoral leaders, the attendees with diverse experiences with the catechumenate, and those new to the process. Plus, we were able to include many people from our congregation in the training, both roster and lay leaders, giving us a shared foundation as we move forward in developing the catechumenate in our own ministry context."

NAAC provides an ecumenical training team for a parish hosted Catechumenate Institute and works with the local site planning team to insure a successful event. For more information see the covenant document available on the NAAC website at www.catechumenate.org. For those interested in hosting or attending a future training event, contact NAAC President, Rick Rouse, at rwrouse@comcast.net or call 612-710-7959.



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