

Middle Schoolers and the Catechumenate

A Workshop Led by the Rev. C. Pierson Shaw, Jr.

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1. The needs and outlook of today's middle schoolers (Grades 6-8)

(Workshop Group Responses)

- Traditional catechism of learning facts may no longer be sufficient
- Some congregations may need to wait until a later age to begin catechism
- Maturity in some areas greater and in other areas not as great as in previous generations.
- Groups often lacking in basic Bible literacy
- Young people today often dealing in more ambiguity concerning issues than ever before
- Young people today have a greater sense of loss of identity due to societal, family, and even cultural shifts
- Trends and tastes among Generation Y constantly in flux

2. Combining traditional Catechism with the Catechumenate?

With the presuppositions above in mind, might we consider in some cases combining the catechumenate for middle school aged kids with a traditional catechism class? A combined or "hybrid approach" might well offer the "safe place" to ask some questions, while offering the additional time among peers in a traditional catechism class. The approach may offer group interaction and even a valuable experience for those in the catechumenate as well as those in the catechism class with whom they interact. The decision to take this approach may depend upon the size of the parish, the size of the group of those who are in middle school who may be good catechumens, the need to offer the type of activities for catechumens that are already found in the traditional catechism program, and the dynamics of the group. One other consideration which may affect the decision to take the "hybrid approach" is the length of time that may be needed to provide for mystagogy. Since a good traditional catechism class should offer a good deal of mystagogy for young people who have already been baptized, this may or may not be a good for unbaptized catechumens were the "hybrid approach" to be used. Some catechumens may be candidates for baptism or some may be those who were baptized, but whose families may have

remained unchurched for so long a period that this “hybrid approach” catechumenate would not be appropriate. The decision however, to combine the two in a “hybrid approach” needs to be based on local situation.

3. Research of Project Zero at The Harvard Graduate School of Education and Howard Gardner www.pz.harvard.edu

Dr. Howard Gardner is a developmental psychologist and neuropsychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is passionate about the study of how we learn. He along with David Perkins until the year 2000 was co director of Project Zero, which was a group of educators interesting in how adults and children learn. Dr. Howard Gardner remains with the project and has authored several books including: *The Unschooled Mind; How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*. While the primary thrust of Gardner’s work is in secular education there is much which may help in understanding how the rites, process and methodology of the catechumenate may well help in the preparation of middle schoolers in being faithful Christian disciples.

4. The world after Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson

Much of the education world has been affected by the pioneering work of Jean Piaget in developmental psychology and Erik Erikson’s work with the eight stages of psychosocial development. Today there is greater critique of their theories and their methods. For instance the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget used his own children as the basis for his observations. Modern educators and psychologists like Howard Gardner are not the only ones looking beyond Piaget and Erikson. Piaget and Erikson summarized their theories in a series of steps or stages through which human beings progressed in a lifelong learning. More modern educators and psychologists are resistant to the stair step approach that views attaining a certain stage of learnings or development before advancing. Howard Gardner would share this more modern view. While the issue may be interesting to explore, when considering the education and development of middle schoolers, Piaget and Erikson’s models may no longer seem helpful. Theologically speaking, as the ELCA developed the provisional rites for the catechumenate, the use of stages or steps was avoided in the discussion of the periods between the rites. Since the catechumenal process remains four periods of open ended conversation, in which transition is marked by certain rites, the notion of avoiding the use of Piaget or Erikson models in the Catechumenate is not new.

5. Nature or nurture?

Much ink and many trees have been invested in the endless debate over this issue. From Howard Gardner’s perspective the issue is a moot point. From a physiological point of view as human creatures we are wired to absorb information, evidence would

suggest, even in vitro. In other words even before birth we are absorbing information and learning. For his purposes in helping educators and others develop a better understanding of how we learn, so that we might in fact be more efficient teachers, Gardner would suggest not becoming bogged down in this endless debate. For our purposes it should be remembered that faith cannot be reduced to mere memory of facts, but is rather grasping to “that which trusts the promise.” Our task is to be a part of the conversation that helps the catechumen hear the words that “trust the promise.” That endeavor becomes an issue therefore of nurture.

6. Left brain or right brain?

Based on Howard Gardner’s research with children who are developmentally disabled and those who have suffered brain injuries he finds this argument overly simplistic. Clearly there are those who are more gifted in analysis, mathematics, or foreign languages. Still others find their gifts lie in more creative endeavors. There are those who excel in the visual arts, performing arts, dance or various disciplines of music. Yet in the case of the latter, while there is a great deal of music that involves creative gifts (i.e. typically thought of as right brain skills), music also requires analytical and mathematical skills in order to master the disciplines of music theory. Even in persons who have suffered traumatic brain injury where one hemisphere has been greatly damaged, research reveals that often the same functions can be picked up by the other hemisphere. For our purposes the catechumenate even in middle schoolers should help the catechumen develop the creative as well as speech and analytical skills. How we do that we will explore in more detail momentarily.

7. Testing for the test or learning?

A great concern for Howard Gardner is that we tend to help students and adults in school learn the bits of knowledge which is testable. We learn to provide the correct answers on the test, but lack the ability to take what information we have learned and apply it to real world situations. Gardner in his book sites many examples of physicists, and scientists and trades people in various disciplines who have been so programmed to learn for the test that they can not apply to the “real world” situation even the most basic laws and concepts which are empirical to their discipline. Gardner bemoans the situation which has made the standardized test the sole determinate in advancement, college entry, and proof that course requirements have been met. More recently the “No Child Left Behind” law passed by the U.S. Congress views testing as the criterion upon which a given school may be judged as to its ability to teach. What Gardner would advocate rather is a variety of teaching methods that help a student develop the ability to apply the concepts in a variety of circumstances. As we will look in a moment at the methods of teaching advocated by Gardner, these may be quite helpful with respect to the Catechumenate for Middle schoolers since the test ultimately is life. Formation for a life of discipleship is rooted in some basic beliefs and most importantly God’s promises. How we may be called to live that out is not

testable, but can only be lived out. Unfortunately many traditional catechism programs have failed in many cases to recognize this fact.

8. Use of music with rites and worship (synapses)

As I mentioned earlier, Howard Gardner downplays the notion of right brained and left brained learners. As we have already discussed one sees a breakdown in this theory in the discipline of music. As I have already suggested, music practitioners engage in both creative and what have been thought of as right brained learnings and music theory or left brained disciplines. In my own tradition, we often quote Martin Luther as having said, “to sing is to pray twice.” Beyond the sense of having offered the prayer to God through the gift of music there is a level at which research shows we learn through music in a different way than through the spoken word. It is not without accident that some of our richest theology comes from hymns. No where is this more evidenced than on the deathbed when the faithful often sing or request a favorite hymn that grants them assurance and comfort in the journey. Children often learn ideas and concepts, such as the alphabet or sometimes even multiplication tables to music. Research has shown that learning new songs and tunes causes synapses to fire from one part of the brain to the other. The catechumenate which takes seriously the use of music within the rites and use of music in the worship should consider especially in the process using music and hymns in the discussion times throughout the process.

9. Three types of learners:

Rather than look at stair step approaches to learning theory, Gardner puts forth three types of learners. These are not to be seen as three distinct persons but rather as ways in which all of us process information. In infancy we rely upon the first type listed here, but as we progress in years the other two types of learning styles come increasingly into play. Yet, we never cease to be an intuitive or natural learner. The catechumenate should involve all three of these types in helping to make the experience richer for middle school children.

a) Intuitive or Natural learner

This type of learner absorbs information through all of the senses. As a child matures in years, conversation and various media including movies and television or print media help to shape our learning process.

b) Scholastic Learner

In this learning style we engage in more direct lecture or development of concepts. This is the approach used by most academic environments and while it is an important type to recognize reliance on this type of learning should not be the sole method at any age in the catechumenal process.

c) Disciplinary Expert

This was the preferred approach of teaching a given trade employed by our ancestors. Trade guilds ensured that trades were mastered through apprenticeships. Today in many disciplines learning through doing is enjoying a comeback with required internship programs in a given discipline. The Catechumenate has often been called an “apprenticeship in discipleship” When working with middle school children it is important to not lose this focus. Fieldtrips and opportunities to serve both in worship and in daily life help to make connections for this type of learner.

10. Realizing all three learning styles in the Catechumenate for Middle Schoolers

The catechumenate for the middle schooler should make use of various media both religious and from popular culture. Often film clips from popular films or the entire film may offer a great opportunity to engage the “Intuitive or Natural learner.” Bible studies and reflections on sermons and worship may help to engage the “scholastic learner.” Finally offering opportunities to do hands on may help the “Disciplined Expert Learner” Since all middle schoolers at some level possess by that age the capacity to demonstrate all three styles of learning, the catechumenate adapted for their age group needs to take these styles into account.

11. Gardner’s Seven Intelligences:

Howard Gardner outlined seven intelligences which are ways he has theorized; we take in process and retain information. All of these make perfect approaches for working with middle school kids and are important when considering the process for the catechumenal process. Here I would like to look at how Howard Gardner’s seven intelligences may be applied to the catechumenate with middle schoolers.

a) Linguistic

- Discussion of Biblical language
- Conversation on issues for today’s disciples
- Lecture

b) Logical-mathematical

- How does what we believe inform how we make decisions (Theology in practice)
At the middle school age this is a process that according to Howard Gardner is still in its infancy developmentally. Therefore patience is called for.

c) Spatial

- Surroundings and symbols in worship
- The acoustics in the worship space
- Size of the worship space
- Orientation of the worship space
- Posters in the classroom.

- Setup of the learning environment (chairs, tables, AV equipment)
- Outdoor ministry and camp setting experiences

If for instance the nave has a tall ceiling with cathedral acoustics the sense of space becomes very different than a space in which worshipers do not get a great sense of resonance, or where the altar is back against the wall. The learning environment may need to change to help the catechumen develop a greater variety of learning environments. Some of the most rich learnings take place in a part of a week long outdoor ministry experience. The catechumenate for this age may do well to consider this.

d) Musical

- Use of music with the rites
- Inviting catechumens to express themselves through musical gifts
- Use of music during classroom conversation and reflection times
- exploring new and old music throughout the history of the Church

e) Bodily-kinesthetic

- If the congregation is employing liturgical dance in worship here is an obvious area
- Use of gestures with the rites
- Use of gestures and movement in worship by all participants
- In discussion of issues a catechist may employ the use of bi-polar statements.

With respect to the latter point, this might apply to an issue such as pre-marital sex. The middle schooler may then move along a wall on which have been placed placards. One placard at one end might read: "Never have pre-marital sex." At the other end of the wall the catechist might place one reading: "Sex before marriage helps a couple to better get to know each other" Then a group of participants would be asked to stand somewhere against the wall along that continuum. They can then respond why they are standing where they are. This requires respect for divergences, but it allows catechumens to vote with their bodies and thus to deepen the learning experience.

f) Interpersonal

- Reflections on corporate worship life
- Make use of small group work for learnings
- Foster ways for the sponsor and catechumen to deepen their relationship
- Outdoor ministries help to foster this sense of community

h) Intrapersonal

- Offering opportunities for self expression
- Being affirmed in activities in and around the catechumenal process

12. Realizing all “Seven Intelligences” in the Catechumenate for Middle Schoolers

Helping catechumens realize all “seven intelligences” throughout the process is both easy and a challenge. It is easier in this age group because many newer conventional catechism classes employ many of these “seven intelligences.” It is also a challenge however, because employing all of these especially for middle schoolers calls on the catechumenate team to be creative and willing to risk.

13. “Symbol” and “Scripts”

Howard Gardner employs the two terms “symbol” and “scripts.” For all human beings language is made up of symbols which when put is a coherent group for words sentence paragraphs and so on. This is an obvious example of letters as symbol and words and paragraphs as scripts. But his use of the term goes beyond that and is helpful for the purposes of our discussion. At an early age we develop an early image of what a chair looks like by developing a mental image of that object. And yet we are able to allow for the fact that a chair may include rockers, recliners, straight backed, swivel, etc. The formation of all of those ambiguities is part of the development of the mental image or development in our minds of the “symbol” of what a chair is. Scripts therefore are the development of the ability to account for what happened around those objects for which we have formed symbols. For instance, who is sitting in the chair and what function does the chair serve? The parallel in the Church which is full of symbols of its own kind is how the “symbols” relate to the “script” of the Biblical narrative and to the promises received in the Gospel. Here I am employing Gardner’s broader sense of the words “symbol” and “scripts” “Symbols” in this sense means the mental images of any object color, furniture, and worship environment along with artworks or what are traditionally regarded as symbols. In short “symbol” in this sense is everything we do in worship. No where is there more ambiguity in the use of these “symbols” than among the various congregations, denominations and cultures reflected across the Church? Helping catechumens recognize these different types of “symbols” and more importantly how they fit into the “script” of the Biblical story and the Gospel is one of our most important tasks in the catechumenate.

14. Vocabulary: “Language of Zion”

Throughout the Church we use a particular language, which we might call the “language of Zion.” It is not just Biblical language it is the language of a given tradition and of worship matters. Gardner has found that children in secular education may be able to learn vocabulary words for a test. Children may even have to use vocabulary words in sentences as part of homework assignments. But the vast majorities never integrate the newly learned words into their daily language. The only way to make new language our own is to use it. Trades know this. Language of a particular profession is employed by those “in house” and used. Catechists should not

be ashamed to make generous use of the “language of Zion” as its richness is learned and discovered by the catechumen.

15. Do not “do your theology out the extreme”

This is an adage used by my Worship Professor, Dr. Bob Hawkins at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. It has served me well in my ministry thus far. We often try to contemplate the most outlandish situations imaginable and ask what a faithful disciple would do in such and such a situation. This can especially be difficult for the middle school catechumen who is still developing a sense of logical skills. Consider instead before posing such extreme hypotheticals, what our normative beliefs are. Christians believe it is important, for instance, to obey the fifth commandment “You shall not murder.” And Jesus in the Beatitudes said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Yet one can find in the history of the Church a broad range of interpretation of these. Have some of those discussions before launching into considerations of whether there is justifiable war, or is euthanasia ethical? The latter questions are extremes which may be informed out of the normative discussions of what we believe.

16. “First Order” and “Second Order” beliefs

Howard Gardner discusses what he describes as “first order” and “second order” beliefs in his book “first order” beliefs are those things that we think about the world and things around us. In our early years we begin to realize that not all beliefs are held in common. Our perceptions, our opinions, our sense of what has occurred in a given event, are often not held in common by any two given people. Once we come to the reality of this truth we enter into “second order” beliefs. In second order beliefs we form certain beliefs about what others think about what we believe. At the middle school age, the development of second order beliefs is emerging as never before. Recognizing this is important for catechists if not for sponsors, when working with middle school aged kids. Encouragement needs to be given to young people as they express their beliefs, to respect the beliefs of others in the group and to recognize the potential that many Christians may hold divergent views. In addition, it is important in an increasingly pluralistic culture for catechumens to develop a sense that their emerging “first order beliefs” may diverge greatly with others in our own society.

17. Use of Music

Howard Gardner like many educators recognizes the importance of music with respect to learning. The catechumenate by the nature of the process employs music in the rites and provides opportunities for the catechumens to experience music in worship. As has already been mentioned the process should reflect upon these experiences and employ other musical opportunities within the discussion time.

18. Conversation about worship space and the way the space is used

The catechumenal process is as much about reflection as it is in the doing and exploring beliefs and engaging in conversation with those preparing for baptism and discipleship. This is as much true for middle schoolers as adults.

19. Who am I?

At the Middle school age, young people are just beginning to develop a sense of who they are. What is hard for them at that age as it is for adults is to see their self identity apart from their doing. Demands on their time begin for many of these kids well before this age. By the sixth grade many are so involved in activities that they see their identity as soccer player, dancer, gymnast, swimmer, math whiz, computer geek, etc. A well planned catechumenate for this age youngster will employ varieties of opportunities for new methods of learning and self expression, but will also help them reflect on who they are as gifted children of God, preparing to be received into the waters of life. They also need to be offered the opportunity to recognize what are real gifts and what is imposed by society and cultural expectations.

20. Whose am I?

As with all of Howard Gardner work integration is the key. For the catechumenate developing a sense of whose we are is important. But integrating all facets of discipleship here is important. We need to help young people see the connection with who they are as well as whose they are. How does whose we are affect our discipleship, our worship, and our learnings as a Christian. We must find constant ways of making connections between what we discuss with what we do.

Gardner, Howard. *The Unschooled Mind; How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*. New York, New York; BasicBooks, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1991.

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