



Making Apprentices in Discipleship: The Baptism of Adults

DENNIS L. BUSHKOFISKY

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Whitehall, Pennsylvania

I. THE NEED FOR A NEW MODEL OF TRAINING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES

Most people understand that growth in faith is a gradual process. Indeed it is an activity that can last a lifetime. This is recognized most in the case of children. While infants or young children may be baptized, it will take several years for children to grow into that baptism. Learning the Scriptures and the traditions of the church happens gradually over a long time. Congregations have even set up rather elaborate rituals and educational structures to recognize this maturation of faith.

The church has nearly always understood that adult converts to Christianity needed a time of instruction and faith development before they were formally received through baptism. Yet in the case of an older youth or an adult newcomer to the church these days, most of our faith communities seem to expect that conversion and faith development will happen rather suddenly and automatically. This assumption cannot remain unchallenged. Growth in faith takes place over time (for example, see James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*¹). While not everyone may agree about the precise stages that Fowler describes, it is obvious people express

¹James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

their faith in different ways. They change in their understanding of faith issues. The church needs to understand this process and work with people in developing a faith which is mature. Some indications of faith maturity will be the degree to which people are involved in a local Christian community, and the extent to which they act out of their faith commitments within their community and among the world's oppressed.²

Our culture has not generally supported people who make a bold public display of faith. Whereas some type of religious involvement may have been assumed in years past, most people (in western societies at least) have noticed a decreasing sphere of influence for the church. Religious teachings and values are no longer taught by the culture at large. Religious people may feel more self-conscious about their faith than they once did. Prayer and regular church attendance are not expected in the wider culture. This suggests that the church has sole responsibility for raising people in the faith.

Whether or not one thinks the church's change in stature within the greater society is a good thing, let it be acknowledged that the wider culture no longer undergirds the church as it once did. Add to this the growing unfamiliarity with the Bible (even among active members of the church), and there seems to be a growing need for people to receive a significant amount of

attention upon entry and assimilation into the church. Baptism cannot simply be as automatic as an American citizen acquiring a social security number. The theological and spiritual dimensions of baptism must be made clear for it to be viewed as the momentous occasion that it is.

At a minimum, adult candidates for baptism and new member prospects who have never before been members of a church need to learn (1) some of the major stories of the Bible, (2) something about prayer, (3) the church's traditions and practice of worship, and (4) forms of Christian service and stewardship through life in the community, on the job, and as a member of a congregation. Part of the learning for an adult inquirer may take place in something resembling a class; but this should not be the only vehicle for assimilation of an adult inquirer into the Christian community. Many things that the young in faith need to know may best be learned by experience and through a relationship with a mentor. Rather than looking only to a classroom model for learning about the faith, it might be better to explore the model of apprenticeship, which employs a more holistic way of learning.

II. LEARNING BY APPRENTICESHIP

While not as common in the United States as in other countries, apprenticeship is currently being evaluated in many quarters as a more workable alternative for young people to be educated and prepared to enter the work force. Corpora-

²Faith maturity is addressed in Peter Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations—A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990).

tions and public policymakers have experimented with forms of apprenticeships and have attested to their effectiveness for vocational training.

A recent book on apprenticeship by Stephen Hamilton presents the German apprenticeship system that, in his view, could be part of a process in shaping the development of young people in this country. This system includes: "(1) developing workplace learning; (2) linking work experience to academic learning; (3) giving youth constructive roles; and (4) mentoring."³ The book presents a broad-based view of apprenticeships that involve the school, mentoring, entrepreneurial programs, and community service.

In an apprenticeship program in the telecommunications industry people spend 20 hours a week at a training center and 20 hours a week attending classes at a community college. The training center is operated by a corporation that routinely hires graduates of the two-and-one-half-year program. During the program, students receive a monthly stipend and all their educational costs are defrayed. An associate's degree in science and engineering technology is earned.⁴

Most employers who have participated in programs like these have done so primarily to increase the quality of work performed by their workers. Germany is increasingly cited as a model for apprenticeship programs, since nearly two-thirds of German youth participate in supervised work experiences alongside their formal education. After completion of a three-year apprenticeship, German trainees are able to take an exam and earn certificates of mastery. Young workers often are hired full-time by the companies for which they have served apprenticeships.

The U.S. Congress has considered apprenticeship bills, and President Clinton is a strong

advocate of such programs. To the growing number of apprenticeships, one can add professional internships or residencies. In one way or another, many workers receive some kind of on-the-job training in preparation for a career. This training involves an extended period of supervision and opportunities for the “master” to serve as a model for the learner.

When a young person chooses the career of a parent or someone else who is well-known, some of the training for that career may have happened quite naturally—almost by osmosis. People who choose the career of someone they have watched closely for years have a distinct advantage over those who have not been in a similar position. Some families have become well known for their contributions to certain professions. They have provided a type of background that is important in the training process.

An apprenticeship can benefit more than just the apprentice. Apprentices can reinvigorate older workers. Apprentices, by the very nature of their inexperience, tend to ask many questions. The “master” can be challenged to explain why certain routines are followed rather than others. The effect of such eager learning may be a productive change for experienced workers who have not re-examined the many aspects of their jobs and who have grown stale in appreciation of their own work.

³Amy Heebner and Robert L. Crain, review of *Apprenticeship for Adulthood: Preparing Youth for the Future*, by Stephen F. Hamilton, *The American Journal of Sociology* 96 (January 1991) 1024.

⁴“Learning from Germany's Model,” *Nation's Business* (March 1993) 30-32.

Apprenticeship concepts are also being applied to the field of education in general.⁵ In such a system the teacher helps students ask questions, plan their own research, and state their own conclusions. Such a model does not place the teacher above the learner, but rather in more of a partnership. Far from robbing the teacher of an important position, this model actually heightens the teacher’s role. Rather than relying on a preconceived curriculum, the teacher must make decisions on her own in response to specific needs of students. This places an even greater measure of responsibility on the teacher for the entire breadth of the learning process.⁶

III. THE CATECHUMENATE—AN APPRENTICESHIP IN FAITH

Why talk about apprenticeship in relationship to faith development? First, it is an accessible image, and second, the movement towards apprenticeship models of learning understands some things about human growth and development that are necessary for the church to understand as well. It should be obvious that learning methods based primarily upon lecture or classroom settings do not offer the benefits of a more engaging form of study.

Like learning a new trade, becoming a faithful disciple takes time. While the act of baptizing is quickly accomplished, not everything occurs in this moment alone. God’s saving grace is undeniably received through the reception of the sacrament, yet this is not the only place where God’s grace will be communicated. The Holy Spirit has been active a long time before a person steps forward to be baptized or to affirm his or her faith. Grace is not localized only to that one event—it exists both before and after a person has been received into the faith. This could be termed “growth in grace,” a long-used phrase in confirmation rites.⁷ As people of faith journey through life, there are several grace-filled moments.

When baptism takes place in infancy or young childhood, the church expects that the

family and sponsors will be the primary teachers of the faith. The role that parents play in the religious nurture of their children was highlighted especially by Martin Luther, who wrote the Small Catechism to assist parents in providing instruction to their children. When baptism or introduction to the church does not take place with the support of a person's family, it is especially crucial that another kind of support be provided. Development will not have been complete if someone is merely provided with factual or "book" knowledge. The faith is taught more by example than it is through strictly educational moments. A parent's actions will likely teach more about God's forgiveness or love to a young child than will any lectures or lessons from a book.

⁵Ann Shea Bayer, *Collaborative-Apprenticeship Learning: Language and Thinking across the Curriculum, K-12* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1990).

⁶Kathleen Dudden Andrasick, review of *Collaborative-Apprenticeship Learning: Language and Thinking across the Curriculum*, by Ann Shea Bayer, *English Journal* 80 (September 1991) 89-90.

⁷"The Father in Heaven, for Jesus' sake, renew and increase in thee the gift of the Holy Ghost, to thy strengthening in faith, to thy growth in grace, to thy patience in suffering, and to the blessed hope of everlasting life." *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) 246.

Many newer approaches to confirmation ministry have used some of the same components found in apprenticeship programs, whether knowingly or not. Service projects and "hands-on" experiences often are related to classroom learning. Youth are also expected to participate more actively in the whole life of the congregation, rather than always being segregated into youth events. Many congregations have also assigned youth to mentors, so their faith can be developed in more personal ways than are possible through traditional classroom settings.⁸ Certainly these developments in confirmation ministry are partly due to changes in educational theory and practice. They are also the beneficiaries of a modern renewal of the catechumenate—an ancient way of bringing people into faith.

The catechumenate in its ancient form was a type of apprenticeship in faith. Certainly the church did not expect that anyone else in society was going to shape people in the Christian faith, so it took this role quite seriously. What happened during this time? Customarily the young in faith received instruction from a catechist, was guided by a sponsor, and was expected to demonstrate faithful action in some form of Christian service. Also important during this time was regular participation (as a hearer) in public worship each week and training in a life of prayer. The church's liturgy of the word (including the sermon) provided much of the instruction. Certain Scripture passages customarily heard during the church year (especially in Lent, Holy Week, and Easter) were particularly meaningful for the development of the catechumen.

During the last twenty years this ancient form of the catechumenate has seen a renaissance in the life of the Christian church. It is viewed as a useful resource for many of the challenges that the church is facing these days. Given our post-Constantinian era, the catechumenate, which flourished in the days before the church achieved hegemony in western society, has received a great deal of attention.

Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America alone, 24,520 adult baptisms occurred between 1988 and 1990. Some areas of the country (notably the west coast) averaged more than one adult candidate for baptism in each congregation per year.⁹ This is all happening without much emphasis being placed on adult conversion in the church. Imagine what potential

there is if church leaders expected to encounter adult candidates for baptism more regularly!

It is not hard to imagine that the number of adults being baptized could soon outgrow the number of infants. Many adults in the generation now having children were not automatically “churched” when they were younger. Many young adults have also left the church. Vast numbers of children have grown up or are growing up with little or no exposure to the church. Many in this number have never been baptized. What happens when an adult without any previous exposure to the church becomes interested in the Christian faith? Most congregations do not have structures in place to support adult candidates for baptism, nor do they

⁸Ken Smith, *Six Models of Confirmation Ministry* (Chicago: Division for Congregational Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1992).

⁹Based on data provided by the Department for Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as printed in *Voices of Congregational Life* (July-August-September 1992) 20.

page 56

provide support for a person who may have been baptized previously, but is nevertheless unchurched. Most congregations are still set up to deal primarily with the baptism of infants born to active members of the church, and perhaps to receive members who transfer from another congregation within the same denomination.

So how do pastors and lay leaders go about performing the task of making new disciples of Christ? One source of guidance is the Roman Catholic Church’s *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA).¹⁰ Although a liturgical text, it really lays out a process for making disciples that goes into every aspect of what it means to be the church. There is a whole publishing industry and conference operation built around the needs of parishes who wish to do a better job of making Christian disciples.¹¹ Many church-related schools provide theological, pastoral, and practical training for people who are interested in becoming more knowledgeable about Christian initiation. Whole graduate level courses describe a process that can only be summarized quite briefly below.

A. Evangelization and Inquiry. A modern approach to forming newcomers into the Christian church recognizes four “stages” or “periods” in a person’s faith journey. The first of these quite naturally takes the individual’s life experiences and questions seriously. Persons who arrive at the door of the church (sometimes quite literally) are seeking life in Christ. What they need to know at this point is that the church takes them seriously. The inquirer should feel that his or her quest of faith is one of the priorities of the Christian community. Leaders of the church should demonstrate that they are eager to get to know the inquirer as a person, rather than just a warm body in a new members class. A sponsor or companion will be necessary on the inquirer’s journey into full-fledged membership in the church. The companion needs to resonate with the inquirer’s doubts and misgivings about faith, while at the same time celebrating the growing signs of faith within the other person.

B. The Catechumenate. After someone has entered the door of the church seeking faith in Christ, it is important that this journey be recognized before the congregation and that prayers of the Christian community for this newcomer be voiced. The church sets aside a period of time for catechumens to hear God’s word and to engage it as they reflect upon their lives. During this time of study, it is imperative for the catechumen to take on some form of service to those in need within the greater community (a congregation that is not doing this already will

¹⁰*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1988). See also the Episcopal Church's *Book of Occasional Services*, 2nd Edition (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1988), for liturgies marking the "Preparation of Adults for Holy Baptism" (112-126). Also see the Lutheran order for "Enrollment of Candidates for Baptism," in *Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 13-15.

¹¹See the journal *Catechumenate*, published six times per year by Liturgy Training Publications, 1800 North Hermitage Avenue, Chicago, IL 60622-1101. LTP is also the publisher for numerous resources for Christian initiation, including an effective videotape, *This is the Night*, showing one parish's experience with the RCIA process. Other sources of information about the catechumenate include the North American Forum on the Catechumenate, 5510 Columbia Pike, Suite 310, Arlington, VA 22204. The Office for Evangelism of the Episcopal Church offers training events each year on the catechumenate, coordinated with the Division for Congregational Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

find that it has some work to do here). Someone who is going to be asked to be faithful to the baptismal covenant (which includes service to all people in the manner of Christ, proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, and striving for peace and justice) will assume that these things are also expected of the entire Christian community as well.¹² One benefit that catechumens bring with them is questions—questions that make longtime church members re-examine their faith more seriously. No wonder that the church has viewed catechumens as an order of ministry: their frank honesty can be a useful gift.

C. Intense Preparation. Once the catechumen has demonstrated a seriousness and a depth of commitment in this journey (typically after several months or even a few years), he or she will be selected as a candidate for baptism. Historically this has happened at the beginning of Lent, so that the entire 40-day period is seen as a preparation for baptism. People who are already baptized have also been invited to perform the Lenten disciplines and to prepare themselves for an affirmation of baptismal vows at Easter.

The final weeks leading up to baptism are especially intense, for in them the person who is anticipating baptism receives the creeds and the prayer of the church (namely, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer). The journey is intensified even more as the candidate for baptism is blessed and prayers on behalf of that person are made publicly by the congregation. The role of the sponsor is heightened during a time when catechumens (along with the whole church) are asked to prune away many things in their lives to focus on a struggle with life and death concerns, such as the implications of the cross for daily living. This stripping away of unnecessary baggage can be incredibly frightening. The sponsor stands ready to comfort, to guide, and to support.

D. Baptism and Mystagogy. The adult convert who arrives at the baptismal font does so with the complete support of the Christian community. By this time the candidate for baptism knows what she is "getting into." The convert knows the saving news of Jesus Christ and has witnessed how people who take Christ seriously put that faith into action. Enough time has elapsed for the baptismal candidate to question the beliefs and teachings of the church and to learn that faith is a constant struggle—for young and old alike.

Of course baptism is not an end but a beginning. The baptized person is joined to the death and resurrection of Christ, becoming a full-fledged member of the body of Christ. Right away after baptism, the neophyte receives the Lord's Supper, and is bidden to join the entire Christian community in service to Christ until the next weekly gathering. As with any person

who has gone through such a momentous passage, the newly baptized person needs continued support. The neophyte meets each week during the fifty days of Easter with the sponsors and others who have shared the same experience. This time is especially crucial in order for the newly baptized to take the pattern of the crucified and risen Christ

¹²See the order of “Affirmation of Baptism,” *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 201.

page 58

upon themselves for ministry in the world. This is also a time to reflect upon the paschal mystery as it was unfolded during the liturgies and Scripture readings of Holy Week and the Easter Vigil (hence the use of the word “mystagogy” for this period).

After months of preparation to be initiated fully into the life of the Christian community, the actual experience of being baptized and of communing for the first time will have quite a dramatic impact. It is important for the new Christian to be given the time and the space to “come down” from such a climactic experience.

IV. CONCLUSION

One temptation when working with the faith formation of adults is to collapse into a span of just a few weeks what might take place in several years of a child’s growing up in the faith. While adults may have a greater capacity for abstract thinking about doctrinal issues, they do not typically arrive at a mature faith in a short time. At the very least, faith development cannot be programmed.

While the tendency for many Christian educators may be to try using published curricula to train adults as well as children about the faith, there are limitations to what a set program can do. In the end it cannot discern a person’s actual faith. Of course it is absurd to think that anyone can fully assess faith in someone else. Still, materials that only employ cognitive learning skills are no match for a holistic approach to catechesis which takes into account a person’s life experiences and readiness for ministry. Making disciples does not take place overnight. There are no shortcuts, gimmicks, or easy guides.

People who are most experienced in the ways of the catechumenate understand that no individual ever experiences coming to faith in the same way as another. Flexibility is essential. Very little can be predicted, even though the stories told about God can be very similar from one time to the next. It is arduous work assisting others in establishing a relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet it is an exciting process nurturing others, as many excellent educators and trainers of apprentices know quite well.

The guide and the disciple both have an opportunity to grow and to enrich one another. Apprenticeship is a particularly good model for someone’s introduction to the faith, because every Christian is on the way to becoming more closely united with God—the source and end of all things. What is held in common between the catechumen and the sponsor is this: a desire to know Christ more fully, to meet him on the journey, to have him burn within their hearts, and to see him in bread and wine.¹³ That is substance enough for a lifetime adventure.

¹³Luke 24:28-35.

DENNIS L. BUSHKOFSKY is an associate member of the North American Academy of Liturgy, and he has served as a convener and a liturgist for national training institutes on the catechumenal process, sponsored jointly by the Episcopal Church's Office of Evangelism and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Division for Congregational Ministries.