

# Stories of Implementing the Catechumenate

## The Way to Baptism at St. Timothy's, North Toronto.

*By David Montgomery and Gillian Faulkner*

I will admit that I wasn't quite sure how to begin to introduce the catechumenate to the uptown parish where I arrived as Associate Priest (later Associate Rector) in the late 1990's. There was a discernable "baptism fatigue" at St. Timothy's. Tired of services with a large number of often bored and somewhat unruly visitors, and of long initiation ceremonies after which they never saw the families again, many members of the congregation would stay away on baptism Sundays. My guess was that they were ready to try something different.

But, frankly, introducing the catechumenate seemed like an insurmountable task. I had been involved with the North American Association for the Catechumenate (NAAC), and had some experience of catechumenal ministry in a very small rural parish. So I had a vision of where I'd like baptism preparation to go when I arrived at St. Timothy's. At that point, however, preparation for baptism at St. Timothy's consisted of several evening clergy lectures on topics like prayer, the bible and the baptism ceremony. Even though this included question and answer sessions at the end of each evening, I recognized that this could not adequately engage the important questions and experiences of those involved.

So I took the plunge. With some trepidation, I phoned a parishioner who seemed like an open-minded, friendly and committed Christian, and asked if he would spend some time with a couple who were preparing for the baptism of their infant. To my surprise, he agreed. And so did others over the next several months. These first parish sponsors were given no training, and were told simply to befriend the families they were assigned. They met a few times before the baptism, and, for the most part, developed real relationships.

These brave sponsors did what Christians do best—something that is rare in clergy-driven baptismal preparation—they not only got to know their candidates' families, they also introduced them to others in the congregation, and helped integrate them into the life of the parish. All of a sudden, with a few exceptions, new families were beginning to be known by the parish, and were starting to become involved. Almost overnight, preparation for baptism had been transformed from an imparting of information to the development of relationships.

When it became clear to inquirers that the baptismal process would take more time than they expected, group introductory sessions often became very strained. To address this tension, the group introductory sessions were replaced by family visits.

It didn't take long for the parish sponsors to want some suggestions and resources to help them (and their families). All developing relationships require information to grow, and a relationship with God and the Church is no exception. At first I gathered our few sponsors together over a couple of nights to teach them about the various biblical meanings of baptism. Like most Anglicans, they were surprised to hear Paul's descriptions of baptism as dying and rising with Christ, even though that is the predominant New Testament image. We read through copies of William Willimon's *Remember Who You Are*, a short, easy-to-read book that challenges as it excites interest in a renewed baptismal discipline.

We began to baptise only on the four great baptismal festivals (actually, we cheated a bit, celebrating baptism both at the Easter Vigil and the Sunday after Easter). While there was some initial balking at the infrequency, mostly from candidate's parents, the parish seemed relieved to reduce the large number of baptism ceremonies per year.

At the same time, the first steps were taken to introduce the catechumenal threshold rites to the Sunday liturgy, using adaptations of the rites in John Hill's *Making Disciples*. With no congregational preparation, "The Welcoming Rite" was included at the beginning of one of our main Sunday services.

On that occasion, a parish sponsor introduced a family whose child was to be baptised. They were asked, "What do you seek?" and given a microphone. The congregation listened with rapt attention each time a family responded to that question. It was the first time they'd ever publicly heard what was drawing people to have their young ones baptised. I was surprised at how pleased members of the congregation were by this, and how easily it was introduced in a parish that did not always respond positively to liturgical change. I remember that the rector and I were concerned about marking the babies with the sign of the cross (an element of John Hill's rite which we feared might be confused with the baptismal crossing), so we gave each family a small "Cross in My Pocket." Eventually, after we experienced several Welcoming Rites together, this was replaced by physical crossings, which we felt was a stronger, more authentic symbol that added more meaning.

We gave each family a copy of the bible at the end of this short rite. Without exception, this engendered great surprise—that the Church would actually give something, rather than ask. The churchwardens, however, did not want these bibles to be paid for out of the operating funds, so I had to find parishioners who would make donations. (But it didn't take long for some of our parish sponsors to become wardens, and the bibles were soon added to the budget!)

It was about this time that I identified three respected members of the congregation who I thought might be excited by the catechumenal vision. I spoke to each of them separately, and was delighted that they shared my enthusiasm and were willing to attend a weekend event sponsored by the North American Association for the Catechumenate. The weekend

itself was patterned after the catechumenate, working to develop increased commitment through several stages, each with a liturgical threshold rite. As it turned out, that weekend was pivotal in the development of what had come to be called The Way to Baptism at St. Timothy's. We came back to the parish with high energy for further developing the new way of baptism preparation.

We formalized our small group as the Baptism Leadership Team (BLT, for short), whose task it was to discuss how we might grow the catechumenate at St. Timothy's. One person took on the task of setting dates for the growing number of threshold rites. Another, who is an expert on volunteer management, helped develop support for parish sponsors. The third was so well-connected in the neighbourhood that she was instrumental in helping us understand each of our families, and help find appropriate sponsors. The insight of the BLT became indispensable, especially in the beginning stages of catechumenal development. I found that their practical questions and their ability to discern the congregation's willingness to change, were particularly useful.

Since our version of the catechumenate was, at this point, completely undertaken by parish sponsors, I developed written resources for them. An overview of the catechumenate was printed, as well as ideas about how to practically respond to the questions and concerns families raised. Some of these were published in our parish newsletter.

A small binder of *Resources for Baptism* was created, with activities parish sponsors could do with their families. Many of the pages consisted of quotations from various authors with questions, as discussion starters. The idea, at first, was that this would be given solely to the sponsors. Soon enough, copies were given to those who had been formally welcomed. One of our newer members, who was interested in The Way to Baptism, helped me to develop a larger version of the binder with more diverse resources. We did this over the summer, which, we discovered, as a fallow time, was perfect for developing the process further.

A course was created for parish sponsors, in which they had a chance to talk about their experience over several sessions. It gave them an opportunity to reflect on where they were with their current families, and to think about some catechumenal ideas. Reflecting on the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, for example, we had a lively discussion about what people in our culture are thirsty for, and what "living water" might mean. These conversations were the seeds that eventually grew into Third Stage workshops for candidates.

As parish sponsors grew in skill and confidence, more of our baptismal families became truly integrated into the parish family. When the mother of a recently baptised child took on a leadership role at the annual Pancake Supper, it became obvious that our baptismal process was serving to draw people into community life. At this point we started getting more buy-in from the parish, from participants in the process, and from the rector.

Several times, school-aged children became candidates for baptism, and one of our BLT members developed some print resources for them specifically. These were based on the popular Harry Potter books. We assigned same-age sponsors, who would stand with those being baptised, as well as sponsors for the parents.

One of the biggest surprises for us was the enthusiasm with which the people with no church background responded to our process. We have had a number of adult candidates, and on several occasions fathers preparing for the baptism of their babies decided to become a baptised Christian as well!

Over eleven years during which The Way to Baptism developed at St. Timothy's, there was also a gradual liturgical evolution. The Naming Rite was introduced as a formal way of beginning the most intensive stage of baptismal preparation. Later, we began to use multiple-crossings in the Welcoming Rite (during the summer when most members were away at the cottage), and discovered that one relatively conservative member was moved to tears by it, and another thought it was "over the top." Both responses underscored that this involved a higher level of commitment, and this seemed to confirm that the crossings should become a permanent part of our catechumenal repertoire.

When it became obvious that the clergy had become disconnected from those on The Way to Baptism, and that we needed more teaching content, we added two "workshops" in the third candidacy stage. Over dinner, as couples met others going through the process, we talked about two traditional catechumenal stories from the gospel of John. As we considered the Samaritan woman Jesus engages at the well, we discussed alienation and radical inclusivity, as well as the renunciations and affirmations from the baptism ceremony. As we considered the raising of Lazarus, we think about what it means to be a community that embodies resurrection and we looked at the baptismal covenant. Some of the participants have reported that these dinners have been extraordinarily significant parts of the process.

When I was preparing to leave the parish for a four-month sabbatical, I realized that the Way to Baptism would need to be completely managed by our lay leaders. I asked one of the members of the Baptism Leadership Team to take on the role of co-ordinator. She had been to several NAAC events, and had been instrumental in developing the process at St. Timothy's, and certainly understood the catechumenate as well as anyone I know. This turned out to be a crucial change which enabled me to work on developing the process without having to worry about all the details of its day-to-day operation. As it turns out, this same person also headed our Welcoming Committee, and her skills at hospitality and inclusiveness have a significant impact on baptism preparation. She was often the first lay person that newcomers encountered at St. Timothy's, and that contact enabled greater trust in the baptism process.

We later added a new workshop near the very beginning of the process, before the Welcoming Rite. After meeting with their parish sponsors, families meet with me to celebrate this new beginning over wine and cheese (and juice, for nursing moms). After introductions and some informal conversation, I ask "If you were Jesus, what would you do for a first miracle?" Usually, people talk about healings or bringing world peace. Then we read together the story of Jesus' first miracle in Cana. It is truly surprising for most families to hear about Jesus making 180 gallons of fine wine for folks who are already drunk! I tell a bit more about the story of Jesus' ministry of creating an inclusive and healing community—of which St. Timothy's is an ongoing part—and invite them to be open to surprises similar to that generosity of wine during their baptismal journey.

Most significantly, the process has been allowed to evolve by itself, often in response to the people who inquire about baptism. The catechumenate, if it is working properly, will slowly transform the parish, and in our case it certainly has. St. Timothy's has become a more deliberately welcoming parish. People take pride and interest in those who are on the Way to Baptism. But it has not always been an easy development for the clergy, who have had to let go of controlling most of the actual preparation for baptism (except for the workshops). The ongoing work of our Way to Baptism Co-ordinator, the support of the BLT, and the inspiring dedication of our parish sponsors, has made the long development more than worthwhile.

Inevitably, some of those who had been through the baptismal process eventually became sponsors themselves. But we hope that, as the years go on, regular people in the pew will be more comfortable talking about faith issues to their friends, neighbours and co-workers. We are not looking for aggressive evangelists, but rather, we seek good, nonjudgmental listeners who, after ongoing conversation, just might invite someone to formalize their inquiry in the parish catechumenate. The ultimate goal of the Way of Baptism is for all St. Timothy's parishioners to be sponsors, informally at least.

Sometimes catechumenal growth occurs in surprising ways. For instance, taking part in Natural Church Development (in which St Timothy's—typically for an Anglican church—scored very low on “passionate spirituality”) prompted many people to begin reading the bible and talking about their own spiritual growth.

The Way to Baptism at St Timothy's continues to evolve as the parish enters at time of interim ministry, while a new incumbent is being selected. Thanks to well-placed lay leadership, especially the understanding and expertise of the WTB Co-ordinator, the catechumenate continues to flourish.

# Introducing Catechumenal Ministry at St Augustine's

*by John Hill*

The Church of St Augustine was conceived as a place for Sunday morning worship and Sunday afternoon baptisms. The space included a side chapel designed exclusively for baptism. The font gave birth to a large volume of new Christians, many of whom appear to have been still-born.

When I became the incumbent, I decided that this arrangement had to change. We began to incorporate baptisms into the Sunday eucharist, and removed the pews in the baptismal chapel to provide more space for baptismal parties to stand around the font. Baptisms began to intrude upon the life of the congregation!

I also began to recruit members of the congregation to serve as parish sponsors for baptismal candidates (or for their families if they were very young). A young woman, who was herself baptized after experiencing this process, became the coordinator of the process for others.

We replaced the tiny baptismal bowl with a larger basin (fitted into the font) in which an infant candidate could be sat for baptismal affusion, and we replaced the font with a horse-trough for immersion for adult candidates, whenever they were agreeable.

Initially, persuading people to take on a ministry of sponsorship was a tough sell. Faithful worshippers who had never attempted to articulate their faith or name their experience of God could not believe they had anything to offer a newcomer. And they were reluctant to intrude on what had always been the private family business of having the baby done! But they were more than willing to provide hospitality to newcomers, and their involvement in the baptismal preparation generally proved rewarding. Many a sponsor wistfully commented that it would have been wonderful to have had such an opportunity when their own children were being baptized. (More than a few also commented on the frustration of getting to know a family who disappeared soon after.)

At first, we provided three baptismal preparation sessions in the weeks leading up to each scheduled occasion of baptism; and a fourth session would be scheduled to follow the baptism. However, this meant asking inquirers to wait till the next series of sessions began; and once begun, it created a sense of inevitability that left little room for discernment. So we learned that it was better to spread out the sessions, providing time between for shared reflection with parish sponsors. In addition, this meant that we could respond immediately to inquirers, drawing them into the process, even though

the baptism itself might be some months away. Parish sponsors were always asked to participate in these sessions.

The first session was always a 'getting-to-know-you' time, and an opportunity to introduce people to the reflective process necessary for genuine participation in the life of the church. The question we used to define for ourselves the point of this session was, "You say they want baptism; what do you *really* want?" Helping people address this issue meant getting to know them, honouring their stories, and encouraging them to identify the experience of God in their lives and recognize what is attractive about the gospel story. We tried to help them identify the desire which the gospel was awakening within them and urged them to become 'hearers' by joining the Sunday gathering around God's word.

The second session was always some sort of encounter with the gospel story as a whole, culminating in reflection on the baptismal creed as the summary of this story and our historic response to it. The question we used to define for ourselves the point of this session was, "Are you now convinced that this is the covenant by which you must be bound for the rest of your life?" We wanted people to recognize that the baptismal creed is not a list of things they were supposed to believe but a symbol of the gospel to which they were invited to entrust their lives; we wanted them to be clear about the ways in which the Gospel was becoming good news for them, and how it was beginning to lay claim on their lives. We wanted them to be satisfied that the questions they would be asked in baptism — questions about responding to God's call in Christ — were questions they were ready to answer.

The third session evolved into a reflection on our entrapment in the delusions of our culture from which we seek liberation through following the way of Jesus. The question we used to define for ourselves the point of this session was, "What, specifically, must you renounce to follow the way of Jesus?" We wanted people to recognize how Jesus exposes our (usually unconscious) entrapment in the ways of death, in the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil, and hear Christ's call to freedom from these entrapments and deceits, a freedom to do God's will. We wanted to give them spiritual encouragement in discerning these illusions, and feel the support of the community in seeking that freedom.

The session after baptism has always been a reflection on the baptism itself, asking, "What have we gotten ourselves into?" Because baptism and eucharist are a kind of symbolic 'language' for naming the new reality of being members of God's people — sacramental beings, signs in the present world of God's coming kingdom — new Christians need to learn this new 'language' by testing their understanding of its meaning in dialogue with other Christians; and they need to become acquainted with

the rich heritage of the Church's teaching which will continue to enrich their own understanding. We also wanted to provide parents of newly baptized children with resources and patterns for sustaining the life and witness of the 'domestic church'.

It was in this context that other threshold rites could be introduced (in addition to the basic threshold of baptism). The 'Presentation' from the rite of Holy Baptism (page 153) was moved to a Sunday morning prior to the baptism, providing the congregation a 'heads-up', and inviting members to see themselves as essential actors in each baptism. This later became the basis for introducing a fuller rite of Calling to Baptism and a public period of candidacy. Baptisms, which had at first been seen as an unwelcome intrusion into the sacred hour, became celebrations which the congregation looked forward to with some excitement.

Later still, we began welcoming any individual or new family inquiring about baptism as soon as they were willing during the Gathering of the Community. They were asked, "What do you seek (for your child)?" — and encouraged to answer with more than just "we seek baptism"! This rite of welcome usually provided the immediate ritual response they were seeking without rushing them into baptism.

On one occasion, shortly after such a welcoming ceremony, a young couple cautiously approached me asking if their newborn child could be baptized in the old-fashioned way — with water. So little have people understood baptism that any ceremony with a baby in it was assumed to be a baptism!

In another instance, the most valuable outcome of this welcome and the baptismal preparation that followed was a new level of trust within which the young mother dared to share her discomfort about proceeding with the baptism. As a result, we celebrated a Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child, and kept in touch pastorally with the family as the real source of this ambivalence finally became clear.

Building a catechumenal team has always been a challenge, even when recruiting sponsors became commonplace. The experience of baptism in the past always seemed to outweigh the vision of what baptism could be in the future. For better or worse, I have continued to play a major role in the process to keep it 'on track'. Nevertheless, parish sponsors have sometimes doubled as catechists, working with a candidate (or the family) on an assigned task which provided opportunities for relationships not dependant on clergy.

Few of the candidates have been adults, but in some of those cases it proved helpful to dismiss a hearer after the readings and sermon for continuing reflection on the gospel. This entailed recruiting a roster of 'catechists' (generally, people with experience as

parish sponsors) who could take turns accompanying a catechumen and leading a period of shared reflection on the readings.

A significant obstacle to developing such catechumenal relationships has been the uneasiness felt by so many of the church's members in reflecting on scripture. This was the signal that we needed to practice catechesis more effectively amongst ourselves if we were going to offer it to newcomers. It has become the default agenda for small groups to spend some time studying the gospel of the week, using an 'aural' method of reflection (the gospel is read aloud repeatedly, and after each reading all are asked to share what caught their attention and why, and what they believe they are being called to do about it). Dialogue sermons that begin with a question to hearers, "What did you hear in the readings?" have also helped to rebuild our confidence in talking about our faith.

## **Another Perspective**

*by Susanne McKim*

### **Confessions of a Curious Catechist**

*It all started:* I made my own journey back to faith and back to the church through a catechumenal process called "Welcoming a Returning Member"<sup>1</sup>. Having been angry with the church for some years, I found that the philosophy of the catechumenate worked for me in a particularly effective way, in meeting me exactly where I was, and allowing me to express my difficulties in returning. Meeting the presenting needs of the seeker, I learned, was a primary example of the essence of the catechumenate — a way of being that welcomed, accepted and listened first. Relationships of trust were formed in which I could see that my issues were taken seriously; then, content was gradually introduced as my catechist discerned my readiness.

After some months of preparation through many encounters with my catechist, I wished to experience the rites for a returning member. This involved a Lenten process which began with a rite on Ash Wednesday, carried on throughout Lent, and culminated at the Easter Vigil (see footnote 1 for details) and it helped me to turn a corner. I moved from lurking on the fringes, to full membership and participation in the life of the parish.

*Becoming a catechist:* Having been so warmly welcomed and cared for in my own return, I had a deep desire to show others the same kind of generosity. I recognized God as the source of the gracious love that I had encountered in the process of return.

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<sup>1</sup>John W. B. Hill, *Making Disciples*, Toronto: The Hoskin Group/ABC, 1991, p.13, 42, 74

As I soon discovered, the qualities sought in a sponsor and a catechist had less to do with theological skill and more to do with an open heart, an ability to listen, and a desire to walk patiently with seekers and discover God's grace together.

*Training:* After a great deal of reading and several months of being mentored by my parish priest, I attended a weekend sponsored by a tri-diocesan "Catechumenate Network", which invited people into leadership of the catechumenal process by bringing them through a shortened version of the same type of stages that an inquirer would encounter. By the end of the second day, I made a ritual commitment to participate more fully in the process at my parish.

*First perceptions of how it works at St Augustine's:* Since St. Augustine's is a pastoral-sized parish, we were able to meet with people seeking baptism on an individual basis. This allowed us the luxury of custom designing a preparation process for every individual or family that asked for baptism or for some form of reconciliation with Christ and the church. Our whole process was based on relationship and hospitality. Content could wait until the presenting needs of the seeker were met.

We did everything we could to de-institutionalize the process. We met in parishioners' homes whenever possible, sharing meals, or wine and cheese, and we noticed that the more casual setting helped people to relax. It also helped inquirers and sponsors to bond, and to build lasting relationships. This worked particularly well for one couple, whose church background was very formal, and who were rather intimidated by clergy. Every time we tried to open up a discussion, they were clearly in pain, searching desperately for the 'right' answers. Inviting them to lunch after a Sunday service helped them to ease up a little, and once they got over their initial shyness, they seemed to develop a real affection for the people around the table, and they kept in touch with us long after they'd moved away from the neighbourhood.

**Trial and Error:** In my own experience, I soon discovered that "less" is "more". In my first months as a catechist, I struggled with program vs. process. In one situation, I worked hard on a complicated agenda that was very clever in my own estimation, only to find that it wasn't working well with the couple for whom it was designed. All my questions and comments were hanging dormant in the air. I realized that I was not hearing their answers, because they were not giving me the kind of answers that would have gone with the flow of my plan. What I learned was that, while it was a good thing to do my homework and to be well-prepared, I also needed to be able to suspend my agenda on the spot in order to respond to the presenting issues of the inquirers. Imparting prescribed amounts of information was not important, but meeting them at the unique place where their own experience intersected with the Christ-story was crucial.

*Telling the Truth:* Another great discovery for me was the importance of articulating my own struggles and questions with some degree of transparency. I found that when inquirers heard me and other leaders owning up to our doubts, frustrations and concerns, they suddenly realized that they were free to be honest about their own difficulties. In one such encounter around dessert and coffee, a woman said, “Wow, I didn’t know that we get to be honest. So, are we telling the truth here?” I found that inquirers opened up much more quickly when they saw that authenticity in their catechists and sponsors.

*Training by Doing — Conversion for Everyone:* I was struck by the way in which the catechumenal process brought *everyone* deeper into faith — catechists, sponsors, inquirers and the members of the congregation. We were taught to learn by doing. We, the leaders, would try things among ourselves (such as gospel reflection exercises, praying together, learning to share our personal experience of God) and then we would gather sponsors together to do the same, and thus the sponsors had more courage to do the same with the inquirers. One modelled language and approach for the other, and it continued to spread throughout the parish. After some years, I marvelled that even our teenagers were able to articulate their faith, questions and concerns, and that they seemed quite comfortable exploring and interpreting scriptures, even in the presence of adults.

*A Community that Attracts:* The philosophy of the catechumenate gradually changed the nature of the parish, so that many of the community “lived” the process without even thinking about it. The warm but unassuming love with which visitors were met attracted a new crowd. Over the past year and a half or so, over 20 newcomers came to the parish. Many of these people were lapsed Christians who desired to return to a ritual life. No baptisms were required, but we used a catechumenal approach to engage them and draw them into community. We hosted a dinner party which was very successful in relationship building and making connections between people. We invited seasoned, hospitable spiritually developed parishioners to come and intentionally seek out the stories and gifts of these new members, and we encouraged them to think of new ways in which we could act out our faith together. The result was new life and energy, attractive new programs designed by them, and an opportunity to meet the spiritual needs that arise as time goes on.