

# Custom Designing the Catechumenate for your Parish

by David Montgomery

## 1. The Problem

*By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered you, O Zion.*

Let's admit it — we've had a problem with baptism for as long as any of us can recall. While some would argue that we could trace the source of this problem to the legalisation of Christianity after Constantine's conversion, it was at some point in the late-20th century we began to notice it, and actually do something about it. At that point we'd been baptizing large numbers of babies whose parents, while they wanted the best for their child, clearly had no intention of ever belonging to the Church. We tried everything. Private baptisms — popular as family celebration — were obviously not incorporating people into the Church, and they were (in some dioceses anyway) officially forbidden sometime in the mid-1980's. Little change occurred with clergy home visits over tea, nor (when it was clear that wasn't adequate) with several sessions of clerical lectures (about baptism, the Bible, the Prayer Book, etc). Congregations developed baptism fatigue, tiring of long ceremonies where the church was full of visitors unfamiliar and bored with the liturgy, and babies who howled throughout. Cynical clergy began to talk derisively of those who only wanted to have their babies "done." And we were totally unprepared for the rare occasion when an adult inquired about being baptised.

When I was baptized, inexplicably at age six, it seemed to me even at that young age to be a rather perfunctory event. During the 11 o'clock service, I walked (alone!) to the font at the back of the church, stood on my tiptoes to have a bit of water dribbled on my head, and then went back to our pew, rigid with embarrassment. My father whispered to me, "You were as white as a ghost — the Holy Ghost!" And that was that. No godparents. No fuss at all. My parents didn't even go to the font with me, and I don't recall them ever receiving any kind of preparation for the sacrament; I know that I certainly didn't.

Several years later, my father took me to visit the rector to prepare me to receive my Boy Scout Religion-and-Life badge. The priest very earnestly asked me to recite the Apostles' Creed for him. Having always been relegated to the Sunday School basement during worship, I had no idea what he was even talking about, so he patiently asked me to repeat it after him line-by-line. Then he asked me to recite the Lord's Prayer. For some reason, even *that* evoked a total blank, surprisingly, since we still said it first thing every morning in our elementary school. Again, I repeated it after the patient rector. I left the church feeling singularly ashamed and inadequate, so it was with complete astonishment that I was actually presented with my Religion-and-Life badge at the next Sunday's service. Even then I realized the hypocrisy.

I'm a cradle Anglican. So I grew up in a Church which apparently had excellent worship (though, except for the music, it frankly bored me to tears), and heartfelt professional pastoral care, but had very little time for real education. After 13 years in Sunday School, the only things I can remember are singing rousing evangelical hymns ("When Mothers of Salem" and "When He Cometh" were my favourites), and colouring a drawing of the Tower of Babel. I was also expelled for stabbing my best

friend with my Scout lapel pin after he kicked me under the table. Other than that, it's a complete blank. Who knew that we were supposed to be able to recite the Apostles' Creed, to say nothing of knowing what it was about?

Given a history like that, it doesn't surprise me that we've gotten ourselves into a baptismal muddle. Our current situation is a natural response to several generations of mistaken assumptions about what people in-the-pew know and believe, and how people of any age best learn. You can bet all the friendly and informative sermons in the world won't change a thing — well, they haven't so far. In fact, some clergy seem to prefer *not* to talk about baptism. Baptismal preaching seems to be in the same homiletic category as sex, money and politics: too dangerous for most to pursue in the public venue of the pulpit. Some clergy may embrace baptism as a primary focus of their ministry, but still find preaching an ineffective way to truly engage and teach people about it.

Few of us are very happy about what we're doing with baptism, one way or the other. Our older members are eager to have their grandchildren baptized, just as their children were. *They* didn't receive much preparation—why should their kids? Don't we understand that modern parents tend to be rather too busy with work and babies and mortgages to attend church at this point, though there is expectation that they might settle into it eventually? There are many who, on the grounds that any preparation or requirement might scare people away, would baptize anyone, evidenced by the fact that several dioceses in the Anglican Church of Canada have guidelines for baptismal discipline, but very few congregations seem to actually follow them. On the other hand, the more rigorous clergy would impose attendance limits before even allowing inquiries about baptism. I've heard several clergy say that they won't *talk* to anyone about baptism until they've attended church at least six times!

For as long as I can remember, there has been grumbling about baptism. People in the pew are divided — either resenting any kind of preparation for something which is seen as a birthright, or resenting those who are “using” the church for baptism with no intention of active membership. Either the clergy impose requirements, with strict adherence to “the rules” (which usually means repeated attendance at both worship and well-intentioned preparatory lectures, and written “permission” from the clergy of the geographical parish in which the family lives) — or they baptize pretty well anything that moves.

## 2. A Solution?

When the idea of renewing the ancient catechumenate was first introduced to the Anglican Church of Canada, with John Hill's *Making Disciples* in 1991, I remember it being greeted with enthusiasm. Finally, a solution to our baptismal problem! Parish sponsors quickly became *de rigueur*.

It didn't take long, however, for the fervour to subside, once folks realized the immensity of what was actually being suggested. Unfortunately, most people believed that the model of the catechumenate in *Making Disciples* needed to be embraced in a thorough-going, completely developed way. Developing a parish catechumenate felt like a Herculean task, with changes in worship, education and, most importantly, attitude, all being introduced at the same time. New rites were to be added, during a period when the introduction of liturgical changes was already taxing the patience of many congregations. The catechumenate was designed to affect not only those preparing for baptism, but

also (and especially) the congregation. And, most significantly, it would mean less control by the clergy who, to this point, had exclusive responsibility for baptismal preparation.

The Anglican Church was already carrying the weight of several immense changes — with the ordination of women, the introduction of the *Book of Alternative Services*, and children receiving communion. For most parishes, the introduction of a full-blown catechumenate, with several additional threshold liturgies, months of classes, training of sponsors and catechists, and the difficult task of selling all this to the congregation, was simply too much. Like a lot of other ecclesiastical trends, the catechumenate was relegated to history by those clergy who saw it as nothing more than an ivory-tower, impractical “good idea.”

More significantly, some are concerned that the catechumenate is actually a hindrance to those seeking faith. In their view, requiring preparation for baptism puts up roadblocks to experiencing Jesus’ limitless love; making people “jump through hoops” feels like a negation of God’s free gift of grace in Christ. As a matter of fact, most of those inquiring about faith truly believe that they need to *do* the right thing to be loved (by God or anyone else). Not preparing them for that radical re-thinking before they’re baptised would be dishonest. Sharing the good news of God’s limitless love will, in our culture at least, necessitate conversion. cursory preparation, that barely gives inquirers the time of day, and certainly does not listen to their deepest hopes and fears, is itself a negation of grace. The catechumenate is one way to help inquirers and parishioners discover that Christian faith is about trust and relationship.

Still, some worry that requiring preparation for baptism will scare people off, and they may be right. We are in a period of ecclesiastical and cultural transition. Our understanding of the Church is rapidly moving from what some call a Christendom model to something unknown, but undoubtedly less institutionalized. If folks come to us simply to have their babies “done,” it is because that’s what we’ve taught them to expect. The transition from an individualized pattern of private baptisms to the more ancient, communal model will most certainly create tension. And some people will not abide that change (especially when other churches still perform private or unprepared baptisms). But there is a deep spiritual hunger in our society to which we must respond authentically. You don’t need to scratch very far below the surface to discover that many of the people seeking baptism are looking for a genuine response to a serious spiritual quest, though they may not be able to articulate that very clearly. The question is, shall we attempt to keep people happy, or shall we seek to respond faithfully to the spiritual hunger of those who venture back into church?

Over the years we’ve discovered that there are no “bad” reasons for seeking baptism; God can use everything from nagging grandparents to a desire for some divine insurance policy to woo folks into the Priestly People. Offering parish baptismal sponsors (one integral element of the catechumenate), who accompany inquirers on their journey, wherever they may begin, honours the questions and experience of those seeking baptism.

In the catechumenate, it’s the relationship between those inquirers and their sponsors where the rubber hits the road. Preparation for discipleship thus has less to do with information (though that, as in any relationship is important) than developing trust. If we truly want to create faithful, committed Christians, we must give them *ourselves* — our hearts and minds, attentive ears and, most importantly, our time. It is that relationship, and a growing trust in the community of the faithful,

where grace will be discovered. And it is where we in the Church will, in the words of St Augustine, become what we are.

### 3. Creating a Custom Design

The catechumenate will be practical and useful precisely insofar as you are able to custom-design it to your congregation's culture. And while this is not a program to tell you exactly what to do, there are ways to make baptismal preparation work in any setting. I have ministered in rural and urban congregations, small and large, which discovered a freshness in the catechumenate, each in their own way. I know of many other congregations in various denominations that have followed a catechumenal model and are glad of it.

There are certain common elements to baptismal preparation in each of these parishes, but their implementation of the catechumenate was uniquely theirs. Remember, there is no one way to do this. That's the key: discerning what will work in your setting, what your gifts are, figuring where to start and in what order to let the process evolve.

Here are some suggestions about what has worked for us at St Timothy's:

**Identify readiness.** What do you personally find most difficult about doing baptism preparation and baptisms? How does your congregation feel about baptism? Where are the cracks in the system? When I arrived at St. Timothy's, there was a discernable "baptism fatigue." Tired of services with a large number of (often bored and somewhat unruly) visitors, and of attending long ceremonies after which we never saw the families again, many members of the congregation would stay away on baptism Sundays. They were ready to try something different. Be attentive to those inquiring about baptism — there will be some who have deeper questions than can be answered by the kinds of cursory preparation provided by most congregations. How can you truly engage those people in a way that honours their questions and experience?

**Discontinue private baptisms.** Celebrating baptism at the principal Sunday service is increasingly the discipline of the Anglican Church, though some churches *do* still perform private baptisms. Having baptism at a time other than when the congregation is gathered is akin to initiating someone into the Kiwanis Club when the members aren't together; it simply doesn't make sense. This will, appropriately, put the emphasis on the congregation, and make this less of a distinctly family celebration. And this will be another opportunity to help the baptismal families and members of the parish rediscover the corporate nature of baptism as initiation into the Church.

**Celebrate the great baptismal festivals.** There are four feast days whose readings and prayers focus on the meaning of baptism: Easter (especially the Great Vigil), Pentecost, All Saints' and The Baptism of the Lord. A visit of the bishop is another special occasion when baptism is particularly appropriate. Surprisingly, it was not difficult at St Timothy's to change to baptising on these days. This reduced considerably the number of baptism Sundays per year (they were being held almost once a month previously). This meant that there were more candidates for each baptism, which is not an altogether bad thing! But there are two likely issues that this change will challenge: a visit from grandma who lives in another country, and doing the ceremony before the family baptismal gown is too small. We have found that as long as family members know far enough in advance when the baptism is to be,

they can plan their trip around that. But if they are not able to attend the baptism, they are usually able to be present at one of the threshold rites (Welcoming or Naming). The baptismal gown, which if it has a long history of being passed from one generation to another was probably created at a time when babies were baptized very soon after birth, is very unlikely to fit under any circumstances. We have encouraged parents to consider that the most important thing being passed on was Christian faith, of which the gown is a symbol. It may be possible to alter the gown so that it can fit, or not do it up.

**Take small steps.** The catechumenate cannot simply be implemented *holus bolus*, as if it were a pre-set program. Its implementation in measured steps, responding to the evolving maturity of the congregation, reflects how it actually works. The way that it is introduced, adapting to what is possible at the time, honours the congregation in the same way that it honours those who are seeking baptism. Its implementation will be successful only insofar as it is allowed to naturally evolve.

**Expect and plan for conflict.** Joe Fricker, when he was one of Toronto's area bishops, once told a group of deanery clergy exploring new directions in Confirmation that we need to be sensitive, but we also need to be courageous. Too often, unfortunately, clergy choose ways that seem pastorally sensitive because they are safer and make the least waves. Expect some conflict when introducing the catechumenate; you are challenging long and deeply-held views of the Church which need to change. But do not lose heart. Allow the catechumenate the time it needs to develop and grow. We've been working at it for almost 10 years at St Timothy's, and the Way to Baptism is still developing and changing.

**Consider trying something then discussing it (rather than the other way around).** The usual practice of most congregations I know is to introduce new practices at committees and Advisory Boards, followed by many hours of discussion, as if that was the only responsible way to implement change. Another route, which can be very creative, if sensitively handled and judiciously applied, is to implement a change and then discuss how people experienced it afterward. Of course, a good level of trust between clergy and congregation is necessary for this kind of process to be fruitful. At St Mary's, Lifford, I introduced immersion baptism in this way (using a beautiful horse trough borrowed from the local farm supply store). To my surprise, the congregation was so moved by the baptisms of two early adolescents that they burst into spontaneous applause.

**Use every opportunity to teach.** There are many ways to introduce changing baptismal preparation practices to your congregation. Sermons are an obvious possibility, particularly focussing on the many New Testament lectionary passages about discipleship. But home visits may also be appropriate times to discuss people's experience of baptism. Bible studies, articles in parish newsletters, or exploring hymn texts at choir practices may be fruitful especially if the topic seems fresh and unexpected.

**Introduce the threshold rites, without any extensive process of formation.** Create a hunger for developing an understanding about baptism. The threshold rites were first introduced at St. Timothy's with very little other preparation for baptism. The congregation was eager to hear the answer to "What do you seek?" And the questions asked of the congregation will demand a deeper response (eg, "Will you care for N and support her by prayer and example?" and "Will you share with N, as God gives you opportunity, your own experience of God in Christ"?). Good liturgy challenges us to grow into ourselves, "to become what we are."

**Think about how you will introduce formation.** Create a small group which will think about how baptismal formation can happen in your parish. At St. Timothy's there were three young mothers who recognized the need for a better way to prepare parents for the baptism of their children since so few of the baptismal families ever became active members of the parish. These three women attended a weekend workshop on the catechumenate, and then formed a group to oversee its development in the parish (we called ourselves the Baptism Leadership Team, BLT for short). Their insights were indispensable. I have found the practical questions they have asked, and the ability to discern the congregation's willingness to change, have been particularly useful. Indeed, the catechumenate *assumes* a shared ministry of baptismal preparation between members of the parish and the clergy. At St. Timothy's our preparation process is now almost completely lay led, freeing the clergy to further develop the process, and take on a catechist's role.

**Plan introducing your baptismal preparation process to inquirers carefully.** In fact, we have discovered at St. Timothy's that this is probably the most critical moment in the whole process. By setting up expectations, the success of the process to truly engage people can hinge on how it is introduced. I never ask the typical question "Why do you want your baby baptised?" because that almost certainly will elicit an attempt to tell me what people think I want to hear, rather than be honest with themselves about what has brought them to this point. Often folks are not exactly sure *why* they want their child baptism. Frequently it is in response to grand-parental expectations, or a desire to recapture something good from their own childhood. Whatever the reason, God has inspired these people to seek baptism, and our job is to help them discern — over time — what those reasons are.

After several years of experimenting with several approaches, and in response to conversations with those who have been through the process, I have discovered that my obvious *enthusiasm* for the catechumenate draws people in. I am not apologetic that this process will take time (at St Timothy's usually about six months) because I am convinced that baptismal preparation is more than information sharing, but is truly about developing relationships between inquirers, their sponsors, the members of the congregation, and God. Relationships need time to develop. When I introduce the Way to Baptism, I am upfront about recognizing that most of those who ask about baptism are not church-goers, but that we expect they will be active members of the congregation before their child is baptised. Taking people's questions and challenges seriously, and honouring their experiences of God and the Church, are integral parts of the process.

**Discern who would make good parish sponsors.** Don't ask for volunteers! As I always say, if you stand at the chancel steps and ask who would like to become baptismal sponsors, all the wing-nuts in the congregation will be at your door the next day. Who in your congregation do you think best exemplify what it means to be a Christian? Make a list of skills that you think are important to mentor new disciples. At St Timothy's we periodically go through the parish list, looking for folks who are active members of the congregation, and who are nonjudgmental, accepting and understanding. We are trying to avoid foisting the Church Lady from Saturday Night Live on unsuspecting young parents.

One thing you should expect when you ask someone if they'd like to become a baptismal sponsor: they are likely to feel unworthy and unskilled for the task. But, of course, that is the biblical pattern (think of Samuel, Moses and Isaiah), and it is the normative pattern for most clergy who respond to God's call with "Who *me?*" A humble response from a potential parish sponsor may just be the sign that they are truly called to this ministry.

**Develop training & resources for your sponsors.** Probably the weakest link in St Timothy's catechumenate is the ongoing support of our sponsors. Still, we have developed annual training workshops, a sponsor newsletter, and even provided mentors for the sponsors themselves, but there is always more that can be done. Giving sponsors chances to share their experiences with each other, opportunities to talk about what has worked well and where they have fallen short, will model the kind of peer support that is at the heart of the catechumenate. While they do not need to become theological experts, it will be helpful for parish sponsors to have their own questions and concerns taken seriously, to give them some tools for developing the relationship with their candidates, and some basic understanding of the meaning of baptism.

**Develop resources for parents.** Of course, nurturing discipleship is a bigger task than could ever be expected of any parents, and that is why godparents, parish sponsors and the congregation should expect to provide ongoing support. In the threshold rites and in the baptismal ceremony, the Church make promises to support those being baptized, but few parishes provide any kind of resources for the ongoing ministry of forming disciples at home. There are commercially available resources for celebrating the seasons at home, developing home prayers, and learning Christian parenting. Providing occasional parenting workshops, or using special events like an Advent potluck dinner to introduce home prayers, are easy enough for any parish to create, using their own home-grown resources. Give opportunities for congregational members to share their faith together, so that new members and old have a chance to get to know each other.

**Experiment.** Try new things and see how they fly. Down times like the summer (or ski season at St. Timothy's), special events or parish retreats, are all times when people may be more open to new ideas, and you can see how they fly. At St. Timothy's, we introduced the multiple-crossings of the Welcoming Rite during July, when most members are away at the cottage, and discovered that one relatively conservative members was moved to tears by it, and another thought it was "over the top." Both responses seemed to confirm that the crossings should become a permanent part of our catechumenal repertoire.