

Mentoring in the Pews: Fostering a Missional Habitus

Kent Burreson

Pastor Tim Droege Mueller describes Living Faith Lutheran Church's faith formation process/catechumenate¹ as it shapes their mission as a congregation:

Our mission is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). Salvation to humanity entails the people of God in this place understanding their vocation. We facilitate their understanding of their vocations by breaking down, analyzing, and assessing the variegated moments in the lives of the members of Living Faith in relationship to and in submission to the Word of God. We try to create awareness for them in their daily life so that they can perceive when they stumble over the epiphanies of the gospel. We want to bear witness to and practice the freeing reality and experience of the gospel in our daily vocations and relationships.²

This is the vision of “mentoring in the pews”³—the transformation of a congregation toward a missional identity through the faith formation process oriented toward and grounded in baptism. Dr. Rhoda Schuler⁴ and I became convinced five years ago that the faith formation practices of the adult catechumenate still had the potential to invigorate Lutheran congregations. We were awarded a Vital Worshiping Communities Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, to study, facilitate, and foster catechumenal practices in Lutheran congregations.⁵ We researched the shape of faith formation practices in three congregations in the LCMS and one in the ELCA. Our methodology included interviews with pastoral and lay catechists and with current and recent adult catechumens and in-person observation of catechetical instruction and ritual practices at these congregations. In this essay I will demonstrate how the adult catechumenate fosters a missional habitus and identity in the congregations we researched.



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Forming Missional Identity

The formation of a missional identity like those reflected in the congregations we researched begins with the candidates for baptism and for the renewal of baptism (confirmation, reaffirmation of faith, and transfer of membership) of others.⁶ The process leading to and from baptism creates a new identity for them, including a missional identity. As one candidate said: “I truly feel a member of the church. There is a commitment I have undertaken. I have an understanding of the mission of the church, of the mission of God. I integrate it all into my life. I pray all the time. I am a Christian *all the time*.”⁷ The congregation’s investment in the formation of these candidates for baptism, and the congregation’s public awareness of the reformation of their identities, reshapes the congregation’s own self-understanding, and through these candidates places God’s mission at the center of the congregation’s spirit and life.

The ritual practices of Redeemer Lutheran Church in The Bronx, New York, illustrate this formation of individuals and the reshaping of the congregation’s missional identity, as they witness the candidates’ entrance into the catechumenate, crossing the threshold, and joining the movement toward baptism or its affirmation. The rites of Acceptance into the Catechumenate, Election to Intensive Preparation for Baptism, and Baptismal Initiation at Redeemer function as rites of passage and shape the catechumenal journey. They are liminal because they allow the inquirer, catechumen, and eventual neophyte to make the transition gradually through the various stages of faith formation.

These rites and rituals of faith formation, with the worship and liturgy of the church, teach in a participatory way. As the catechumens participate in these rituals, they come to understand the triune God in whom they are professing faith and their relationship to that God. The rituals draw inquirers, catechumens, and all the baptized present in the assembly into the liturgy of life that confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the heavenly Father, through whom the Spirit of God is poured out on the world. God’s work of transforming the catechumens through the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ re-orient both the candidates and the congregation toward the in-breaking of the rule and reign of God in His church.

At the center of the mission of the faith formation process is the baptismal paradigm of dying and rising (Romans 6). Larry at Living Faith said of their faith formation, “We make a big deal out of remembering at the Easter Vigil that we are buried into Christ’s death in Baptism, and raised into His resurrection in Holy Baptism.”⁸ Placing newcomers at the center of congregational life⁹ embeds the dying and rising pattern as the central way of understanding the shape of a congregation’s life and its missional habitus.

This process is about congregational transformation, not some program for welcoming new members. Sylvia, actively involved in the catechumenate at Redeemer, affirms, “It transforms our way of life and impacts our daily living,”¹⁰ and Stewart, a catechumen at Redeemer said, “It changed my very life.”¹¹ This transformation simply flows from the watershed baptismal event because the people of God in Christ are never *not* in formation until Baptism is completed in death. In the congregations we followed, through their rituals

and formation, the catechumens and the congregations are constantly dying and rising, which means that they are in the mission of God at all times.¹²

The source of this missional habitus is the justification of the sinner in Christ (baptismal identity), but the modeling of the transformation comes through the sanctified life of the congregation. Roman Catholic expert on the catechumenate, Diana Macalintal, argues that in the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), “the curriculum is the parish.”¹³

Within such a construct, faith formation conceives of God’s mission in the congregation through the lens of an apprenticeship model rather than an information download model. It engages an apprenticeship into the *way* of faith and life in Christ. Sponsors at Redeemer and Living Faith serve as mentors toward this apprenticeship. As Pastor Droegemueller at Living Faith says of their sponsors, “They provide Christian friendship, giving the catechumens someone to talk to. It provides the catechumens with accountability and lets them know that they are not alone in this journey.”¹⁴

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Fostering a Common Missional Life

In order to assess how faith formation fostered this common missional life in the congregations we researched, I will use Alan Hirsch’s foundational study of the missional church, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*.¹⁵ Hirsch describes the missional church as possessing at its core missional DNA (mDNA). He describes mDNA as a “simple, intrinsic, reproducible, central guiding mechanism necessary for the reproduction of genuine missional movements.”¹⁶

It is instructive how Hirsch’s definition fits the catechumenate. The catechumenate, as such a guiding mechanism, is inherently oriented toward making disciples and therefore participates in the mission of God in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Its public nature and centrality in congregational life aims to embed mDNA in a congregation’s corporate life and identity and forge a missional habitus in the assembly’s members.

The catechumenate shapes a community that reflects Hirsch’s definition of a missional church: “A community of God’s people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God’s mission to the world.”¹⁷ In a missional church the intent is that mDNA flows through every believer and the entire community of faith.

Redeemer Lutheran Church highlights that experience and encodes mDNA through the ritual act of repeating several times in their services their mission statement, “Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, by God’s grace, is a praying community of service that

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receives, teaches, celebrates and shares Christ Jesus.” Everyone says it together, with enthusiasm and energy. By doing this it defines and encourages Redeemer to be the very thing that they claim they are in their mission statement. And their mission statement exactly describes their catechumenate. Embedding mDNA in this way seeks to transform the life and identity of a congregation.

Elements of mDNA

Faith Formation shapes *Communitas*

Even more instructive are how Hirsch’s elements of missional DNA—the elements of apostolic genius—describe the formative power of the catechumenate. Those elements include the following, although this essay will only consider the first three:

- The formation of *Communitas*—not community (as an established institution). *Communitas* is a people living under missionally liminal situations¹⁸
- A *communitas* focused on disciple-making by baptizing and teaching
- Church life that is organic to faith itself (authentic)
- Missional-Incarnational Impulse: Baptizing and Teaching
- Apostolic Environment: Apostolic work of church planting and formation in doctrine¹⁹

These elements permeate the catechumenate to result in a mission mindset.

A primary indicator of a missional church is the formation of *Communitas* in a congregation. Hirsch distinguishes this from *community* which he identifies as an established institution seeking to sustain and maintain its life. *Communitas*, rather, is a people living under missionally-liminal situations.²⁰ Hirsch says, they

form themselves around a common mission that calls them into a dangerous journey to unknown places—a mission that calls the church to shake off its collective securities and to plunge into the world of action, where its members will experience disorientation and marginalization but also where they encounter God and one another in a new way. *Communitas* is therefore always linked with the experience of liminality. It involves adventure and movement, and it describes that unique experience of *togetherness*.²¹

We will consider how *Communitas* reflects ordeal, adventure, danger, and marginality.²² To that list I’d add imagination. All of those things are characteristic of living in a missional state.

A number of things in our research could be identified as indicative that these congregations possessed *Communitas*. The story of one catechumen at Redeemer Lutheran Church in the Bronx, New York—we’ll call him Bertrand—bears witness to *Communitas* reflecting ordeal, adventure, danger, and marginality. From Jamaica, Bertrand was vacationing in New York City. A friend told him they were going to church at Redeemer Lutheran. Bertrand examined the congregation with a very critical eye. Did they

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bear witness to what they professed? He came again, asking whether there was authenticity in their life together. He found that their life under Jesus was transparent and true. So, he decided he wanted to know more about this congregation, about the church, about Christ. Bertrand started participating in their weekly formation classes leading toward baptism. Through Skype he continued his instruction after returning to Jamaica. At last, Easter was approaching.

Bertrand decided he could not miss becoming a child of God at Redeemer. So, he flew from Jamaica in the days preceding Passion Sunday. Obstacles reared their ugly heads. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detained Bertrand for over eleven hours, refusing to believe he was returning to the United States to be baptized, even though he had a letter from the pastor. Through the intercessions of the pastor and the witness of members of the congregation, ICE released him in time for the Holy Week services. On Maundy Thursday he had his feet washed and at the Easter Vigil he was baptized and anointed, sealed as a child of God.

The obstacles and dangers notwithstanding, Bertrand called it a fabulous journey into a new family filled with love.²³ Bertrand's candidacy for baptism raised contemporary challenges to the church's life at Redeemer that required imagination to resolve. Through their formation process Bertrand's questions were answered by a hospitable assembly bearing witness to the unrelenting love of God in Jesus. Bertrand and Redeemer together were transformed through death and resurrection encountered in the catechumenate journey and in so doing experienced *Communitas*.

Another indicator of *Communitas* is the call for transformation that reverberates throughout the catechumenate. Living in the midst of a movement, living on the boundary between church and society, requires commitment.

One of the newly baptized at Redeemer reflected that commitment in the rite of election into the catechumenate when he said, "Signing the book was a form of confirmation. It made it official. I was a part of the church. I could participate in the church's life. At that point, the commitment became real."²⁴ His comment conveyed his commitment not to an institutional form of the church, but to the living experience of the Body of Christ, to the church in motion.

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Disciple-Making in Faith Formation

Another of the primary ways that a congregation manifests a missional identity is that disciple-making is central to the congregation's sense of *communitas*. The catechumenate forges the understanding in these congregations that making disciples is key to the mission of God and a core task of the church. Hirsch notes a number of characteristics of the disciple of the Lord Jesus²⁵ and many of these are in evidence in the congregations we studied.

One of these characteristics is that the disciple is formed through a transforming encounter with Christ through the Word and through initiation into the community.²⁶ One

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of the newly baptized at Redeemer, we'll call him Mark, reflected on his baptism and his language speaks to the experience as a transforming encounter with Christ:

The most striking part of the experience was while I was leaning over the font. I can't explain it or put it into words. In the midst of the abundant water—much more than I expected—pouring over me at the font, I felt cleansed and that a burden had been lifted.²⁷

Here in his experience of the Easter Vigil baptismal liturgy he had become a new person, a personal victory which he could share with all of the baptized at Redeemer.

That reflects another feature of a disciple-making congregation, one in which contagious relationships are built and nurtured. Commenting on the congregation's welcome after his baptism, both in the service and after it,

It was overwhelming. Before I came to the church I was fairly closed to strangers. I need to warm up. They are way too nice. I am overwhelmed. Coming from the font they are congratulating me. It is a personal victory I can share with all. I feel more connected.²⁸

There is an authentic character to faith formation. It not only expects a lifelong commitment as a disciple of Christ Jesus, it also creates the conditions for a commitment that constantly seeks to incorporate others into a community of authentic relationships. As Mark said, those contagious relationships hold “as long as I'm always in the faith.”²⁹

Organic Life through Faith Formation

Another of the primary elements of mDNA in a missional church is that it functions as an organic system rather than as an institution. The church's life should be organic to living faith. It should flow from faith and feed the community's life together. Of this element Hirsch contends,

The church, in its most phenomenal form (when it genuinely manifests Apostolic Genius) organizes itself as a living organism that reflects more how God has structured life itself, as opposed to a machine, which is the artificial, inorganic alternative to a living system.³⁰

The church as a living organism, permeating the world in mission was manifested in all four congregations we studied. They functioned as living networks where Christ was unabashedly at the center and shared beliefs, principles, interests, and goals permeated all the strands of the network. The catechumenates mirror the dynamic networks of congregational life as a hub of activity with various groups of people and individuals as nodes in the network.

How the members of the various communities serve as nodes in this network of catechumenal life is exemplified in this story from Redeemer. The “grandmothers” [read: wise and seasoned established members] of the congregation readily took upon themselves the task of assisting parents with and then mentoring and guiding the young children into

participating in worship. Then, during the pandemic, those same children, as youth and young adults, cared for the “grandmothers” in their needs and as they became homebound.

Like the various parts of the human body, many are involved in advancing the movement of the church in society through the birthing and nurturing of new Christians by means of the catechumenate. Members of all the congregations knew they had a role to play and would readily engage the formation process at the points where they could and desired to do so. At St. John Lutheran in Wheaton, Illinois, the pastor is quoted by members as often saying, “find your spot to work in the congregation.”³¹ Or, be the node in the catechumenal network.

Mentoring in the pews ultimately is all about forming a missional community who is for the world in Jesus’ name. As Alan Hirsch observes at the end of his book,

We need to hit the road again. We are the people of the Way, and our path lies before us, inviting us into a new future in which we are permitted to shape and participate. In trying to rearticulate the nature of authentic Christian community, that of a *communitas* formed around a mission . . . we evoke that yearning and that willingness to undertake an adventurous journey of rediscovery of that ancient force called Apostolic Genius.³²

In faith formation the church hits the road as a community in missional movement. As one catechumen put it, “This is a forever walk.”³³

Endnotes

¹ We use the terms “faith formation” and “catechumenate” interchangeably. Faith formation is inherently a broad title, encompassing a variety of adult formation practices. *Catechumenate* refers in the early church to the sets of rites designated in the fourth century for facilitating the conversion of adults. In the 20th century and following it refers to the Roman Catholic Church’s *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* and all of the Protestant rites that developed as a result of the RCIA.

² Pastor Tim Droegemueller, interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, August 15, 2018. Living Faith Lutheran Church is in Cumming, Georgia. This is a summary of his description.

³ Sandy [pseud.], member at Redeemer Lutheran Church, The Bronx, New York, NY, interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, October 3, 2018, used this phrase.

⁴ Professor emerita at Concordia University, St. Paul, MN.

⁵ See Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, “Grants Page,” December 24, 2019, <https://worship.calvin.edu/grants/>. This program is made possible through a Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

⁶ Renewal of Baptism would encompass traditional confirmation, reaffirmation of faith, and transfer of membership.

⁷ Maura [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, October 3, 2018.

⁸ Larry [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, August 15, 2018.

⁹ Placing the catechumens at the center of congregational life is done in a variety of ways. First, all of the rituals of the catechumenate are conducted publicly at primary worship services. For these rites the catechumens are in front of the assembly and identified personally, along with their sponsors. In addition, the catechumens are in the Sunday prayers of the church on a weekly basis. Finally, the congregation is encouraged to interact with the catechumens and incorporate them into congregational life.

¹⁰ Sylvia [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, October 3, 2018.

¹¹ Stewart [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, October 3, 2018.

¹² Often in congregations this reality is true theologically, but not practically. The catechumenate helps congregations to be aware of this disconnect by holding up publicly the catechumens as central to the congregation's identity. If there are no catechumens in front of the congregation at all times, the congregation should become readily aware that they are not engaged in the mission of God.

¹³ Macalintal, Diana, *Your Parish is the Curriculum: RCIA in the Midst of the Community* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Pastor Tim Droegemueller, interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, August 15, 2018.

¹⁵ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 76.

¹⁷ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 82.

¹⁸ Hirsch describes a missionally-liminal situation as "Liminality applies to that situation where people find themselves in an in-between, marginal state in relation to the surrounding society, a place that could involve significant danger and disorientation, but not necessarily so" (Hirsch, 220).

¹⁹ Hirsch, 24–25. There is not space to consider Hirsch's final two elements in this essay. We plan to do so in future publications regarding our research.

²⁰ See fn 18 above for the description of missionally-liminal situations.

²¹ Hirsch, 221.

²² Hirsch, 221.

²³ Bertrand [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, April 21, 2019.

²⁴ Preston, [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, October 3, 2018.

²⁵ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 105.

²⁶ Hirsch, 105.

²⁷ Mark [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, April 21, 2019.

²⁸ Mark [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, April 21, 2019.

²⁹ Mark [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, April 21, 2019.

³⁰ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 180.

³¹ Ken and Phyllis [pseud.], interviewed in person by Rhoda Schuler, August 8, 2018; Lucille and Curt [pseud.], interviewed in person by Rhoda Schuler, August 8, 2018.

³² Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 241.

³³ Denise, [pseud.], interviewed in person by Kent Burreson, October 3, 2018.