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*SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices*

## Making Disciples: Preparing Adults for Baptism

### A Changing Context for Faith

We have reached a point in history when there are now more people in Canada who have *no* Christian upbringing than who *do*. On the West Coast, only four percent of the population are connected to the Christian church. The majority of people have grown up with no Christian memory.

All of the institutions which used to pass on an understanding of the church are gone. This includes religious training in public schools and learning prayers in community organizations. Apart from the parish and the home, there is only the religion page of local newspapers, an occasional religious scandal, and religious television, left to instruct. It is of little wonder that people studying English literature today fail to grasp all the religious images that have filled Western literature. It is of little wonder that the majority of people are biblically illiterate.

We are also facing a culture with many religions active in our midst. We don't need to send missionaries to convert the people of Islam. They have come to live among us and they too will struggle to preserve faith in the midst of rampant secularism.

Finally, we have to declare loudly that the values which are promoted within our nation are not Christian. Covetousness, egotism, violence, salvation through technology, and the ancient god of mammon are upheld as worthy of our attention. All one has to do is read the Beatitudes after watching most television programs to discover how foreign the biblical tradition is to our culture.

We, as Christians, need to ask "how do we bring people out of this pagan culture to bask in the truth of the dominion of God?" "How do adults come to *faith* when they have been surrounded by foreign values all of their lives?" Answering these questions may help us to consider our adult Baptism ministry.

God's Spirit is at work in the world. This Spirit will continue to call and gather. Many will be touched by Christ: like Joan, and Bill, and George.

### Three People: A Common Story

Joan has grown up with no connections to the church. Her family was totally indifferent to any church life. When she was 16, she went to a Bible camp for a weekend with a friend. Something had stirred within her, but was easily put aside. Since that time she has gone to church occasionally. Encouraged by a friend, she has decided to ask about *Baptism*. If she came to ask your parish, how would you respond?

Bill used to go to Sunday School. His parents sent him. The church was close at hand and they thought some religion would be good for him. He liked to go, but stopped when he was twelve. He has not been back. Recently he has discovered that he is *HIV positive*. As he has sought support and help, he has thought again of the church. He knows he is not baptized; he would like to be baptized. How will a parish respond?

George has just been converted to Christ. At a meeting he came forward and was led to give his heart to Jesus. He knows little about the faith except for the deeply moving experience. He has begun to pray and read the Bible. He wants to be baptized.

## The Experience of the Early Church

Many of our traditional ways of teaching and preparing people have assumed some knowledge and understanding of the faith. Today we are unable to take this knowledge for granted. Recognizing this new situation, many have looked back at the early church in the years in which that church was a minority in a heathen culture. Even though we cannot duplicate those actions, because our situation is different, there is a rich tradition in the early church of preparing adults for Baptism. There is much for us to learn here.

The early church brought people into the fold as a *process*. There was no strict time agenda. Many parishes used *up to three years* for this process of preparing people to enter the church through Baptism.

We know that the whole of the community became involved in helping faith to grow and mature. Candidates—the *catechuminate*—often spent time in peoples' homes, learning from the experience of daily life what was meant by discipleship. Candidates were brought into contact with the scriptures in the worship of their community and in its reflection in home life. Some, whom we call *sponsors*, played a special role on behalf of the community. All the parish was involved in prayer for those who were led by the Spirit in this journey.

As candidates grew in faith and understanding, they also determined if they were ready for Baptism. In announcing this intent to the community of faith, a more rigorous preparation phase was adopted. Teaching, prayer, doing Christ's will, and exorcism marked the final preparation. The Creed, and the Commandments were studied. Each candidate was called to a life of prayer and service in the cause of mercy, justice and peace. Old habits—such as revenge, inability to forgive, reliance on material things, reliance on status—were to be cast aside so that Christ might enter and bring the life of the Gospel.

This transformation was not easy. Each candidate was also encouraged to use all the gifts God has given for the sake of God and others, and to discover ways to serve through these gifts. When all of this was faced, and the direction of life in Christ made visible, the candidate was invited to the waters of Baptism.

That was then. What about us, today?

## Some Suggestions

Our parishes in Canada presently have many different ways of preparing people for Baptism. Some people are baptized after one session. Many parishes still use a ten-week course as the basis for preparation. Some of this has served the church well. For the most part, clergy teach church *doctrine* to the candidate.

Is it not possible for us to consider and adopt something of the style of the early church for ourselves?

Here is what this would mean:

1. Preparation for Baptism would be the responsibility of the whole parish and not just the clergy (SP 3.3 and 4.9).
2. Preparation would shift from a mode of teaching doctrine to one of reflection and prayer so that the word of God would reach all aspects of our lives (SP 4.4).
3. Seeing preparation as a process would invite all to proceed as they are led by God, rather than as they finish a course (SP 4.3).
4. If transformation were emphasized as a part of Baptism, this would result in the whole parish being renewed in faith as candidates present themselves. If we dare to pray for the transformation of each candidate, do we not have to include ourselves in this process? The catechuminate could bring about the renewal of the parish each year (SP 3.6 and 4.10).
5. If the process for each candidate were noted and celebrated within the worship life of the parish, it would call all members to reflect on the candidate's as well as their own journey in faith (SP 4.6 and 4.9).
6. This process would be affirmed as life-long. What happens to us as we prepare for Baptism is what will continue to happen as we place ourselves in the life of the community (SP 3.6 and 4.10).

What do you think? What do your people think?

Many denominations have begun to incorporate these things into a preparation period. Our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is also inviting congregations to look carefully at how adults are brought to Baptism. The response of your parish to these would be appreciated.