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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Born at the Font—Nurtured at the Table: Sacramental Ministry in a Mission Congregation

Embracing Adult Inquirers

A mission congregation regularly ministers to adults from a variety of backgrounds who are re-connecting with the church for the first time since their childhood. They often come with a limited history of church involvement. For many, they had a bit of Sunday School as children, and occasionally went to a worship service. Some have no church background whatsoever.

When they come to church they are often looking for something which will help give them, and their families, a sense of groundedness of connection for their lives. As a result, an *adult inquirers' class* is an important tool, particularly in mission congregations, for helping people to grow in their faith, by lifting up the sacramental themes of belonging, covenant, inclusivity, and the action of God in the sacraments.

We Begin with Stories

I believe that an *adult inquirers' class* needs to begin with stories. The people in the class, including the pastor, need to hear each other's stories. I find that such stories are for my benefit just as much as it is for the others. I ask them the question, "What brings you here, to this place, at this time?" They give us a short biography of themselves, paying particular attention to their journey, and where they saw God in all of that, if at all.

We need to hear one another's stories—to be accepting of such stories, particularly when they are so different from our own experiences. Listening to one another's faith journeys brings us closer together as Christians, and begins to create friendships and points of contact for people in the group. This is particularly important, since many of those in the *adult inquirers' class* are new to the congregation. This course enables them to become acquainted with at least some people in the congregation. It is all part of helping them become *connected*, and to feel that they *belong*.

Born at the Font

I know that Luther has arranged his *Catechism* to start with the Ten Commandments. But I still feel that beginning with a study of Baptism is the more appropriate route to follow today. For people returning to church for the first time in years, they need to hear about God's unconditional grace; they need to hear about God's action in the sacrament, which frees them from the burden of feeling that this faith journey is somehow all left up to them.

What better place to begin a study of Lutheran theology, than *at the font*. For it is there, at the font, that "God's gracious, forgiving, and nurturing love is freely given to God's people" (SP 2.4). And for those who were not baptized as children, they come to a greater realization of what this covenant can mean for their lives when they do receive Baptism—that "In Baptism we die and rise with Christ" and are "pardoned, cleansed and sanctified in Christ" (SP 3.2).

Who was it who said, "I'm not here to tell you what you should do, but to tell you who you are?" That is what a study on Baptism should be all about. How freeing that is for inquirers that their faith in God is based on what *God* does, not on what *they* do.

Nurtured at the Table

Session 3 of our *adult inquirers' class* is a time to focus on being nurtured. Having been baptized into Christ, we need to see how God continues to nurture us (SP 6.1). For adult inquirers, this theme is particularly timely. This is often where they perceive their greatest need to be nurtured in their blossoming faith. And so we talk of how the Lord's Supper is like our daily meals, that through the bread and wine Christ nurtures us. Again, the emphasis in the meal is on the action of God that Christ comes to us in this sacrament, and does something to us and for us.

Thus we read in the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* that "Holy Communion is a means of grace through which the crucified and risen Christ awakens faith, saves, forgives, unites, gives life, comforts and strengthens God's people for the work to which they are called in the world." (SP 5.3) Its reception is not dependent upon one's level of understanding, on how strong one's faith is, or on how old a person is (SP 6.11). We need to trust that God is doing something to and for us in this special meal.

If we take seriously our theology of Holy Communion, we would, first of all, not want a Sunday to go by without being able to receive the Lord's supper (SP 6.8). And secondly, we would trust that it does do something to us that it nourishes us, without our knowing, without imposing some cognitive, rational requirements simply because God says that it will.

Over the years, the response to "communion of the baptized" (SP 5.8) has been overwhelming. Inquirers see how important nurturing is to a person's faith, and so they want this gift of nurture for their children as well. It is important to them that their children are also welcomed at the Lord's table

Early Focus on the Sacraments

By focusing the opening sessions of an *adult inquirers' class* on Baptism and Communion, it makes the two sacraments come alive for the people. No longer are they simply *rituals*. No longer are they something to watch others do. The sacraments now become a way of life for the inquirer (SP 5.7). People know that something greater than they is at work here: "This presence is a mystery." (SP 5.2). They come to the table trusting that God is at work in their lives, doing something, shaping them and nurturing them. They see how God has called them, and awakened faith within them. They have come back to church (or come to church for the first time) for a reason. And they want to be fed, led and nourished

An *adult inquirers' class*, with an immediate emphasis on Baptism and the Eucharist, gives inquirers the foundation they need as they become more involved in the life of a congregation.

Heralding an Unbroken Covenant

Most of those who come to our *adult inquirers' classes* have been baptized as children. Our emphasis on the sacraments reclaims for them the covenant God made with them in their Baptism. How freeing and wonderfully gracious it is to be affirmed in that truth; to hear that God's promises were safe and secure after all; to know that while they may have drifted away from God, or been wandering along some quite varied paths, that God was with them nonetheless. Baptism takes on new meaning for them. They see that God was indeed with them throughout all those years. And Communion becomes something that is desired, anticipated, and relied upon.

Rounding-Out the Classes

We do other things in the *adult inquirers' class* as well. Session 4 is spent primarily discussing worship and liturgy. Session 5 focuses on Luther and the Reformation history. Session 6 covers many topics: discipleship, stewardship of one's life and resources, the national and synodical church structures, and the upcoming "Membership Sunday"

Suggested Resources

I use three books for the course. The primary textbook is Daniel Erlander's *Baptized We Live*. It is still one of the better books around, although it needs a bit of "Canadianizing." James Nestingen's *Roots of Our Faith* is interwoven throughout the sessions. I highlight certain passages of his during the appropriate class, but basically his book is used to provide supplemental readings. The third book used is, of course, *Luther's Small Catechism*. Two videos are also used during the course. In Session 5 we use *Where Luther Walked* and in Session 6 we use the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's video *Share in the Joy*.