

JBL CASE STUDY FOR ADAPTATION OF THE CATECHUMENAL PROCESS

IN: *The University of the South, which has a college of about 1800 students, as well as an Episcopal seminary located in Sewanee, Tennessee.*

Background

1. What four characteristics best describe your church community, especially what makes you unique? Our chapel serves not just undergraduates, but also seminarians, faculty, staff, and community members. We are working on increasing diversity, but the majority of our campus is white, upper middle to upper class. We are unique in being an Episcopal institution.

2. What is the biggest challenge facing your community?

One is that we are on an academic calendar, which sometimes conflicts with the church calendar in unhelpful ways. Also, since our students are only here for four years, every year we start fresh. This is a pro and a con: pro – it keeps things new and con – not a lot of institutional memory for those going through the process.

Pattern of the catechumenal process

3. How does an inquirer connect with your community? How is initial contact made?

We advertise with emails, posters, social media, personal contact, especially at the start of a new school year.

4. How do you figure out what their background is? And what they are seeking?

Our process is open to anyone. Many come all four years of college. Some have never been to church and are exploring, some are seeking baptism, some want to reaffirm baptismal vows, some want to be confirmed or received. We begin to bring up these options late in the fall as we plan for the rite of admission on Advent 1. They are encouraged to talk with us if they are interested in going through any of the rites.



5. How do they get to know other inquirers? When do you have gatherings with them?

We meet every Wednesday evening that classes are in session. We meet as a large group and then break into small groups that stay the same the whole year.

6. What is a typical format for a gathering?? How long does it usually last?

We gather for an hour each week. About 40 minutes of that is small group time with discussion questions on the theme for the week.

7. Who serve as their catechists and mentors through the process? Lay people?
Clergy?

We have four small groups, each with two catechists and one student catechist, for a total of eight catechists and four student catechists. Mentors are assigned, but we ask the catechumen if they have someone in mind to be their mentor. These can be catechists but do not have to be. The catechists and mentors are a mix of clergy and lay people.

8. When do you provide them with sponsors as companions and support?

Sponsors come on board at the Rite of Admission on Advent 1 and begin to meet weekly with their catechumen when we return in January for Easter semester.

Stages of the growth in the catechumenal process

9. When are they ready to be recognized by the congregation as seekers/hearers/catechumens?

We have Rite of Admission on Advent 1 and Rite of Enrollment on Lent 1. These are both done at our main service as a public rite.

10. How do your gatherings help them to encounter the Word of God, especially as it is found in the lectionary?

Our first semester is heavily focused on scripture. We also do some lectio divina second semester as we explore various ways of prayer.



11. What additional topics from Christian tradition and practice do you try to share with them in your gatherings?

We do look at the Creeds and the Lord's Prayer. We also look at sacraments and ways of prayer, in addition to parts of the Book of Common Prayer.

12. When are they ready to be recognized by the congregation as candidates for Baptism? They become candidates on Lent 1, if they feel ready.

How do your gatherings use the Word to open their minds and hearts to a deeper sense both of repentance and of Jesus's love? After the Rite of Enrollment when they become candidates, their meetings with their sponsors are more frequent and focused. Many of these types of discussions happen during the one-on-one meetings with sponsors as they can be more personal.

13. How does the period of intense preparation prepare them to make the Baptismal Covenant/Promises?

Time with sponsors is crucial during this preparation time. They have an opportunity to share their faith journey with each other and to create a safe space for this type of discernment.

The meetings

14. How have you best managed to involve the participants in the life of your community, especially in service to the world?

Many of our catechumens are already active in the life of our chapel in service roles during worship. We also have a very engaged outreach ministry/community engagement office where a large number of students participate in outreach ministries. One of our catechumenate sessions is focused on "faith in action."

15. How have the various rituals of the catechumenate affected your participants?

I have had participants say they became surprisingly emotional during the rituals, especially with its public nature. Many felt overwhelmed by the support of the community.



16. How have the various rituals of the catechumenate affected the congregation?

Sewanee has been doing the catechumenate since 1995, so it has been part of “what we do” for 25 years now. The congregation is very invested in the process.

Advice

17. What is the most important bit of advice that you have for another practitioner in your situation?

I think a steady presence is very important for the catechumenate. Just the consistency of being there every week and offering a safe space for faith formation is huge.

