

"Church Together" A gift from your Synod storytellers/mission interpreters



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## Church Together

### **PARTNERSHIP STORIES**

Here is a story about some productive and delight-full partnerships. It is a good story, as partnership stories usually are. And your congregation is or could be part of the story.

In the summer of 2009 the Word and Sacrament Discipling Team (part of our synod's volunteer structure) invited congregations to a training workshop on the catechumenate at the San Damiano Retreat Center in Alamo, CA. An ancient process for preparing candidates for baptism and integrating new converts into the congregation, the catechumenate process has been in recent years adopted by many Lutheran congregations, perhaps because it is an appropriately Lutheran way of doing effective evangelism.

Leadership and resources for the 3 day event came from several congregations already utilizing this process: St. Timothy, Monterey (Pr. Clark Brown was the event coordinator); St. Mark's, San Francisco; and Bethlehem, Auburn. Former Bishop David Mullen, a

key proponent of the catechumenate process, also participated. "Learner" congregations paid a fee to participate, but other costs were covered by the Discipling Team which, in turn, was funded by the mission support gifts congregations share with the synod. So there's a good chance your congregation is part of this partnership story!

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, one of the "learner" congregations, sent a pastor and three lay leaders to the event. They learned much, and returned home eager to develop this ministry in their congregation. First came a year of preparation. The catechumenate is a thorough process, involving almost weekly gatherings for 4-6 months, meals (usually) each time, four distinct "stages," a sponsor for each candidate, and several public liturgies to celebrate the candidates and mark their progress on the journey. A year of preparation is, therefore, necessary. Each congregation adapts and modifies the process to fit its own culture and context. Good Shepherd calls its process "Journey with Christ," initially meeting Sunday mornings but later moving to Sunday evenings for 2 hour sessions that included a light dinner. Each session also includes a brief large group teaching time, more time in small groups for personal reflection on a Bible reading assigned for the week, and one-on-one time for candidate and sponsor to share and pray together.

The best part of Good Shepherd's story is the impact this process has had on candidates, sponsors, and leaders. Listen to this sampling of testimonials.

*Most important to me was the sense of community, being close to everyone and knowing that we all were sharing a part of ourselves on our journey to find our place with Christ. We have created bonds with each other that have brought deep friendship and love for one another. (Former candidate, current leader)*

*I was delighted to discover that someone, and actually many people, cared about my faith and were willing to help it grow. Together we studied the Bible. They listened as I shared my doubts and joys, helped me meet others from the congregation, prayed with me and for me, and helped me learn. That all mattered so much more to me than just going to church on Sunday and having people say, "It's so nice to see you here." (Candidate)*

*The Bible study is the key to the spiritual part of the process. It is amazing to see the text in a new light, as other journeyers may have completely different interpretations of the passage. If you have an open mind it is very enlightening. (Former candidate, current leader.)*

*The process builds a strong foundation in faith for people new or returning to the church. It makes you feel connected to the congregation; if you make a 6-8 month commitment to the process, you are going to be invested in the community. (Former candidate, current leader.)*

*After going through the process I care so much more about my church. I participate more and serve as a leader, and I love doing it! (Former candidate, current leader)*

*I want to say how incredibly grateful I am to have been a part of this process. It truly changed my life. (Former leader, on original team)*

This process is an appropriately Lutheran way of doing evangelism: not knocking on doors, but worshiping, learning, and serving together. Over time congregation members learn that they are inviting a friend not just to a worship service, but also to the possibility of participating in this process.

Too many well-intentioned congregations try to attract new people, "seekers," by tinkering with worship music, but have no plan for what to do with those people if they do show up. How will we help them learn faith basics? Grow in faith? Be integrated into the congregation? No idea! The catechumenate process facilitates a productive and delight-full partnership between congregation and those new to the church, creating many new, good partnership stories.

"If you build it, they will come," for this is also a partnership with God the Holy Spirit, who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the church.

For more information about the catechumenate, or for assistance in bringing this ministry into your congregation, consider the following resources:

- [North American Association for the Catechumenate](#)
- Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV
- St. John's Lutheran Church, Sacramento, CA
- Christ the King Lutheran Church, Orangevale, CA
- Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Auburn, CA
- St. Mark's Lutheran Church, San Francisco, CA
- Pr. Clark Brown, St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Monterey, CA
- Your nearest Roman Catholic parish

***Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to [mic@spselca.org](mailto:mic@spselca.org).***

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