

Growing Christians: A four-stage catechism

by [Frank G. Honeycutt](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue



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I did my clinical pastoral education at the Central Correctional Institution on the banks of the Congaree River, which flows through the city of Columbia, South Carolina. The old dungeonlike facility has since been torn down and an upscale housing development is emerging in its place. At CCI, I met a guy named Pee Wee Gaskins. Great guy on the surface; also a notorious serial killer. Pee Wee asked for communion just before I left the prison that summer to return to seminary. A couple of months later he was linked to (and eventually executed for) an in-house radio bomb that killed a fellow inmate. I've often wondered whether Pee Wee asked for communion as some sort of precrime absolution for what he was hatching. Sometimes Christians think conversion is only for flamboyant and notorious sinners like Pee Wee.

Conversion is always a lifelong process. It is never finished for any of us. "For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up in life" (2 Cor. 5:4). Six weeks of instruction in an inquirers' class and a handshake into church membership isn't going to foil the Father of Lies. It never has. "The number

of people who claim to have been Christians for years but who lack spiritual depth and maturity is reason for alarm," writes Gordon T. Smith. "Consider the possibility that at least part of the root of this problem is a weak understanding of Christian conversion."

In his excellent book *Beginning Well*, Smith suggests that renewal will not occur in churches until pastors and parishioners embrace three specific things: 1) a "clear goal" that moves the justified sinner from acceptance and forgiveness in Christ to growth in holiness (sanctification); 2) a "good beginning" in which a local congregation expects and looks out for people who are turning to Jesus, assisting new converts in this turning and helping them become conversant in the vocabulary of conversion; and 3) an "intentional program of spiritual formation" in which newcomers are invited to grow in faith alongside other converts and seasoned church members.

"Many Christians," says Smith, "have anemic spiritual lives with little freedom, little growth in grace and little commitment to obedience and service. I propose that an appropriate response to this predicament includes facing up to the fact that the church has a weak notion of conversion."

I don't know about your denomination, but this describes the current Lutheran predicament in spades. In the name of grace, we justify just about any behavior or lack of spiritual discipline. Many Lutheran clergy, seeking to avoid the horrid sin of seeming judgmental, slowly begin to resemble Pastor Misty Naylor in Garrison Keillor's novel *Pontoon*: "She used to be Presbyterian but she had a near-death experience during breast enhancement surgery and a door opened onto a garden full of golden light and beautiful plants and every different sort of person, Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist and Jew, all rejoicing and living in harmony, and when Misty returned to life, she dedicated herself to world peace and to Momentism—you know, the idea that all of time takes place in one moment, there is no eternity."

Bending over backward to avoid judgment in the name of grace, Lutherans sometimes fall into the world's great religious salad bar and form "theology amalgamated"—a little of this, a little of that, and nothing really in particular. Because they want to avoid legalism, it's hard for many Lutherans to get theologically specific anymore: "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of

God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:3-5).

I can see it in their eyes. It's orientation night for those who are considering our church's catechumenal process. *You want me to do all that?*

Five people eventually sign on for the eight-month process. Those who don't have the time or inclination are invited back the following year, and I encourage them to experience the many short-term opportunities we have on Sunday mornings and throughout the week.

On a Monday evening the five recruits gather with me in my office for the first of our weekly 90-minute meetings which will occur over the church year. We're quite a varied bunch, and as the catechist I always wonder at this point whether we'll ever gel and make it through the first month. It's also apparent that we bring our histories and hurts with us. James reminds the early church, "Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). From the first meeting, it's clear that we've all endured a lot. However, I'm not sure that the group considers it all joy at this point. Let's look at them one by one.

Emerson grew up in a strict religious tradition that required a nightly recitation of each and every sin for that day. He left the church after discovering that what he'd been taught did not square with the facts of the church's origins. "I was so angry that I'd been bamboozled, and I was determined to never, ever be fooled again when it comes to religious belief." After getting married and having children of his own, Emerson recently found his way back to church but admits that "distrust of religious authority sometimes gets in the way."

Cleo, daughter of a pastor, is a lesbian and a longtime Christian. "About seventh grade, I started to resent the church because, despite our differences and his propensity for angry discipline, I really missed my father. He worked all the time. The church had stolen my daddy." Cleo is recovering from a breakup with her longtime partner and is seeking new employment.

Mary, a health professional, tentatively plans to be baptized at the Easter Vigil but wants to take time to learn more. She grew up with no church tradition at all. "I can

remember my friends asking me what religion I was and being mortified that we were 'nothing.' When I asked my parents why we didn't go to church, my mom would blame it on the fact that we moved around so much, and at the time that seemed like a good answer. I remember our first cross-country meet when our coach led us in the Lord's Prayer before the race. Thank goodness that people look down when they pray because I knew only a few of the words."

Race manages his own business and has been a member of our congregation for about ten years. "As long as I can remember I have sensed the presence of God. At church I often felt this presence. But I have felt most spiritual in nature. At an early age I became fascinated with plants. I actually did not mind doing yard work and gardening." Race seeks a deeper discipleship through this group.

Sally has taught special education in public schools for many years; she's been a Lutheran since her marriage. "During my worst depressions I had one friend who called me often and would not let me push her away. She showed me a theology of love and never used dogma or absolutes." Naturally inquisitive and skeptical, Sally comes to group life with "lots of questions" about God and the Bible. She is particularly interested in learning more about how to share her faith with others without sounding judgmental.

After an opening prayer, we begin.

You go out into deep waters to save, and you do so because you love. But the assumption that you are perched above the water and that the person you're addressing is drowning prevents real empathy. You will never understand that person's mystery until you abandon the need to move her where you are, to leave her where you yourself don't want to be. Because every evangelical knows, in the end, that the act of conversion is a mystery. (Todd Shy)

The catechumenal process harkens back to the early centuries of the church. Partly acknowledging the difficulty in converting from a pagan culture to a Christian community and partly recognizing the need (from fear of infiltration and exposure to Roman oppression) to look over converts closely before welcoming them fully, conversion to Jesus in the first few centuries of the church was usually a long and protracted process lasting up to three years. It culminated with baptism at the Great Easter Vigil.

The conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century generally lessened the rigors that a catechumen might face in preparing for baptism. The catechumenal process was recovered in the United States in the 1960s when Roman Catholics began using the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. Liturgical traditions (particularly Lutherans and Episcopalians) soon followed with their own rites and processes.

Many books describe what some call "liturgical evangelism." Processes differ from place to place. Some include only true catechumens (adults preparing for baptism), and others also include people who have been away from church life for some time and are now returning as adults. Whatever the local practice, the catechumenate generally includes four stages that lead participants to conclude, "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13) and "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

In my 15 years of trial and error, about 75 people have gone through the process under my, or a lay catechist's, leadership. That may not seem like a lot, but one must remember that these 75 have a clear sense of their call over unhurried, percolated time. Alternately, many graduates of the new member class (the six-week course that surely has a place in church life) who have "joined" the church subsequently vanish.

The four stages of the catechumenal process go by different names, but most versions of the process roughly coincide with the stages of the church year.

Stage 1 begins with a signed agreement to meet at a particular time and place on a weekly basis. Confidentiality is stressed and revisited many times. All members of the group receive a copy of what we've agreed upon. A built-in exit possibility is included at the end of the first stage. One young man in a group I led was three months into the process before deciding that he did not want to be baptized. It was an agonizing part of group life that year to pray with Alex and say good-bye. He continued to worship with us for a while and then disappeared entirely. This is an important part of any conversion process that seeks to speak the truth in love: there can be no coercion or arm-twisting. A disciple of Jesus must feel called and not pushed. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Part of the challenge of member inactivity is that we do not engage new people on this very point—call and commitment. Commitment will not seem like a burden if the call is authentic.

The curriculum for this first stage consists of the questions brought by the members of the group. *Who created God? Why is there so much suffering in the world if God is good? How do I read the Bible and take even the strange stories seriously? Why should I be a Christian and not a Buddhist? What do Christians believe about hell and heaven?* One goal of the inquiry stage is to honor the truth that God has been at work in the lives of participants well before their entrance into congregational life. So it's important to honor their questions as signs of the living God at work before church became a consideration. All questions are arranged by topic, typed and distributed to group members early in this first stage.

It is very important to take all questions seriously. One of the catechist's primary requirements early on is transparency. No question is out of bounds. I like to recall that the first words out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel of John come in the form of a question: "What are you looking for?" (1:38). Reading assignments (short articles dealing with specific questions) may be part of this first stage, but conversation, testimony and honest exchange color most of our time together between early October and the beginning of Advent.

Inquiry, of course, never really ends for any of us. But toward the end of this first stage, participants engage in a weeklong period of discernment to decide whether they want to move on to the next stage. By this time, most decide to continue. Others who may not have the time or theological inclination are blessed by the group without judgment. Church staff should always follow up with those who decide not to continue and invite them into other areas of involvement in church life. Those who choose to continue mark this decision with a public rite at a Sunday morning service. The central question posed in that rite is the same question posed by Jesus in John 1:38: "What are you looking for?" or "What do you seek?" Participants may answer, "Life in Christ," or they may answer with words of their own.

Stage 2 roughly coincides with the period from the beginning of Advent through the end of Epiphany. In this time the group wrestles collectively (and individually) with important questions shaped by the church year: *What is waiting to be born in me? What gifts (with the magi) might I be able to offer Jesus?*

Two central activities take up the lion's share of this stage—sharing spiritual autobiographies and studying one of the lectionary lessons for the coming Sunday. All five of the participants named above chose to continue in the process. I (or the lay catechist) always go first in sharing an autobiography that describes God's

presence (or seeming absence) in childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and current experience. At this point, the importance of confidentiality must be stressed once again. In their writing, many are revisiting old wounds for the first time in years. It is especially important to remind the group that all of us are serving not as therapists but rather as colleagues on a theological quest for meaning and truth.

Bible study in this stage is characterized by the simple yet profound method of *lectio divina*—a slow rereading of one of the lectionary texts for the coming Sunday. This serves as excellent preparation for worship and helps participants begin to see their stories in the overarching metanarrative that is the Bible. Stage 2 concludes with another public rite, so that other parishioners continue to be aware of the group's existence, support it with prayer and consider their own participation in a future year.

Stage 3 coincides with Lent and the services of Holy Week. The central questions of this stage are: *What is dying within me to make room for something else? What am I leaving behind?* We talk candidly about and experiment with the central Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, almsgiving and service in the community. Weekly Bible study on the lectionary texts continues.

By this point in our life together, the group participants are helping me formulate sermons. Holy Week is an especially rich and meaningful time. We prepare for Mary's baptism (with her young daughter) at the Easter Vigil with anticipation and joy. Cleo twitters that the idea of washing feet on Maundy Thursday at the noon service gives her "the heebie-jeebies." I try to explain some of the drama of the Triduum, but not too much. The stripping of the altar as the shadows lengthen, the reading of John's passion narrative on that famous Friday, and the mystery of fire, water and Word at the Vigil all carry powerful metaphors that cannot be described fully beforehand. Experiencing the fullness of Lent and Holy Week together is always powerful and moving: "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:22-23).

Stage 4 (coinciding with the 50 days of Easter) is also called mystagogy in many catechumenal process variations. During this stage, we reflect on the sacramental mysteries of Holy Communion and baptism. We also use a gift-discernment process and focus on a final question: *How is Christ alive inside me after I have died with him*

in baptism? "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

By this time, after months of weekly meetings, the members of the group know one another quite well and can take some risks, stating the unique spiritual gifts that each participant brings to the body. Race has a gift and love for yard work and plans to use his time sacrificially to beautify the church grounds. Mary senses that her gift as a newly baptized person is in the ministry of accompaniment for other unbaptized adults who are joining us for worship on Sundays. We all sense a great need for retreat ministry, and Sally shares her history of experiencing the Spirit's power in settings away from an urban pace. She expresses a desire to start a regular retreat ministry in our congregation. Emerson thinks hard theologically, and we all agree that he's being called by God to teach adults and maybe serve as a lay catechist. Cleo feels a tug to reach out in Christ's name to other gay and lesbian people who feel estranged from Christ's church.

On the day of Pentecost, the group stands before the congregation and announces a specific call to ministry. Others in the congregation are invited to gather around this call and begin a new (or support an existing) ministry. The Holy Spirit descends anew. Scales fall from our eyes. The church is renewed and strengthened through the gift of call and conversion.

This article is adapted from Frank G. Honeycutt's book The Truth Shall Make You Odd, just published by Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. © 2011 by Brazos. Used by permission.