

evangelism

Building Missionary Congregations

Yes, but how?

Number 4

Recovering the Work of Initiation

Practical Ideas for Action

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**Published by the Anglican
Diocese of Southwark**

*Church
Society*

This article first appeared in 'Good News' produced by Decade Office, Board of Mission, Church House, Westminster, and is reproduced with permission.

'The final result of the whole initiatory process: a Spirit-filled life in a Spirit-filled community consecrated to God's purposes'.

Encounter with God, Forrester/McDonald/Tellini, p.95

'Few Christians are ever fully evangelised, all our lives we need the power of the gospel to transform us'. RCIA

There has been a major failure of nerve in the Western church in the Twentieth Century. We have expressed the faith in terms of 'going to church' and 'believing in God', and have lost sight of discipleship - following in the way of Christ, living by his, not the world's, values.

What is happening is that people are experiencing 'bolt-on spirituality'. By this is meant that some initial encounter with God, the church or the Christian tradition, is being bolted on to a secular worldview, privatised spirituality, consumer lifestyle, and defective personal identity. Not surprisingly, when testing comes, people respond out of those values rather than from the new values which their encounter with God should have introduced to them.

We need to learn from the church of the first four centuries. Their 'catechumenate' (teaching process) took three years, in which they sought to evangelise the whole person.

What is it?

Initiation is the process whereby people are enabled to enter the Kingdom of God, the sphere of God's grace and purposes, and be drawn into His mission of transforming them and the world around them. It involves a thorough conversion (metanoia = change of mindset) of our worldview, value system, lifestyle, ethical framework, personal identity, and life focus.

Historically the catechumenate had four stages. The enquiry 'pre-catechumenate' stage at which people began to engage with the Christian faith and the process of repentance and true conversion. The second and longest stage is the catechumenate itself, through which the enquirer explores the faith more fully, specifically as it relates to their life. Then comes a period of specific preparation for receiving Baptism/Confirmation. The Final stage ('mystagogia', exploring 'the mysteries' of the faith) is one of reflection after experiencing the rites of initiation.

How does it work?

This whole process was done using a considerable range of teaching forms - scripture teaching, liturgical rites, story telling, group work, pastoral care, mission projects, etc. The whole church was involved in the process in a considerable number of ways, such as:

Sponsors: church members went to the course with people, shared their own faith, and stood as guarantors of the faith of the newcomers. Initiation was primarily a lay ministry.

Accompanied journey: enquirers were being initiated into the Way of Life preached and practised by Christ.

The Sponsors were accompanying enquirers as they began that journey. The whole life of the church was thus built around this journey of faith, living out its baptism.

Liturgical rites: simple 'rites' (often three, one at each stage of the process), incorporated the newcomers into the worship life of the church, reminding the whole church of their baptismal identity, and related the newcomers to the worshipping life of the whole church.

The church's year: every element in the Church's year was seen as having an objective Christ-focused aspect, and a subjective believer-connecting aspect. Was Christ baptised? So are we. Was Christ sent into the wilderness? So are we. Was Christ filled with the Spirit? So are we. Was Christ transfigured? So are we. The church year renewed the church's faith.

It is interesting to note that John Wesley was consciously seeking to renew the Catechumenate in his development of Methodist class meetings.

Where can we get help?

The Alpha Course: (which is just the first stage of initiation) - materials are obtainable from bookshops.

The Catechumenate Network: a network linking people working in the area of adult initiation, providing support material, advice and encouragement. They have published their *Journey into Faith Starter Pack* for parish use (£5 + £1 p&p) and have other resource material available or in preparation. For further details and/or a copy of the Starter Pack, please write to Andrew Harter, Catechumenate Network, Tithings New Barn, Swalcliffe, Banbury, OX15 5DR.

They also publish articles and book reviews in the magazine *Ministry* available from Edward King Institute, Church House, Churchyard, Hitchin, Herts SG5 1HP.

Emmaus: is a three stage initiation resource (contact, nurture and growth) published by Church House Publishing and Bible Society in September '96. It originated in the Wakefield diocese but is very much a national resource. It includes optional rites.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is one of the most important practical outcomes of Vatican II. It is a conscious 'renewal of the catechumenate' and has been widely used by the Catholic church throughout the world. There are a number of books which introduce this. Catechumenate materials produced in conjunction with it, including the recently published *God for Grown-Ups* (Redemptionist Press) available from the Catholic Diocese of Nottingham (£15).

+Plus: formerly *Alpha Plus*. It began life as a catholic re-working of Alpha, is now described as 'an ecumenical evangelistic teaching course for parishes'. Obtainable from Jubilee Publications, The Vicarage, Church Street, St. Neots, PE19 2BU. (£3 + p&p).

Content v Process

There is a major debate amongst practitioners about the right balance between content (what truths we want people to grasp) and process (how people actually learn, and experience transformation). At its extreme some pay little or no attention to one or the other. Finding ways of balancing these two aspects would seem to be important for a healthy practice.

Church or Kingdom

One of the issues that practitioners of a thorough initiation work are aware of is the danger of it ending up as a sophisticated way of socialising people into church membership. The real task is to equip people for the transformative experience of and living encounter with God resulting in the seeking first of His kingdom. It is a test that needs to measure the worth of all such work.

Further reading and resources

The Logic of Evangelism (Hodder and Stoughton, '89) William Abraham. Good theological basis.

Adult Way to Faith (Mowbray, '92) Peter Ball. A very good, practical introduction.

Evangelisation Through the Adult Catechumenate (Grove Books: Evangelism No. 15) Malcolm Grundy.

On the Way (GS Misc 444: Church House Publishing). General Synod's Initiation Report.

Sacrament, Wholeness and Evangelism (Grove Evangelism series 33) Stephen Cottrell.

For advice or assistance in the area of Evangelism please contact:

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Revised January 2001.

Further resources @ Diocese of Southwark Website: www.dswark.org/bcs