
Voyage to Belonging and Renewal through the Adult Catechumenate

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“Tell me about the adult catechumenal process at St. Mary’s,” I said to Pastor M.² As she recounted, it began with an invitation from a friend a few months into her first call as a newly ordained Lutheran pastor in the northeast. The friend, in charge of continuing education for the synod, invited her to a training event led by the Rev. Paul E. Hoffman on the adult catechumenate.³ Hoffman, who describes his book *Faith Forming Faith* as “the story of how, through the baptismal preparation of new Christians, *we as a congregation* are formed in faith and strengthened for mission in the world, over and over again,”⁴ has shared this story of faith formation at workshops throughout the ELCA.

My research work with Kent Bureson at this and three other congregations confirms Hoffman’s claim that a robust adult catechumenate both forms the faith of individuals and of the whole congregation by creating a missional ethos within the parish. As we have shared our findings through virtual conferences, we have

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stressed the contextual quality of this process—each of the four congregations, under the leadership of their pastors, has developed a process that is unique to the history and size of the congregation, to the gifts and skills of the pastor, and is shaped by the socio-economic and demographic make-up of each congregation and the community in which it is located.⁵ To develop a taxonomy for our research findings, we have drawn on the research and language of two scholars: Alan Kreider and Diana Butler Bass. Kreider describes conversion in the early church as “a process of multi-dimensional change” that “involved changes in *belonging, belief, and behavior*—in the context of an experience of God that...for some people must have been very powerful.”⁶ Butler Bass, a church historian who studies contemporary American culture, uses the Gospels to argue that just as *belonging* preceded *believing* in the lives of those whom Jesus encountered, so our current context calls Christians to follow the same missional pattern. “Christianity,” she writes, “began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.”⁷

1. I am honored to write this article on adult faith formation as part of this Festschrift for my deaconess sister, Norma Cook Everist. I first met Norma in 1977 at the annual meeting of the Lutheran Deaconess Conference, when I was a deaconess intern and she one of the shining academic stars of our community. Assigned to the same small group, I overcame my awe of Norma because of her warm hospitality and genuine interest in the thoughts and opinions of one so young and inexperienced.

2. My interviews with Pastor M (all names of people are pseudonyms) and members of St. Mary’s (also a pseudonym) were part of a research project made possible through a Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc. The congregation was one of four Lutheran parishes with robust adult catechumenates studied by my research partner, Kent Bureson (faculty member at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) and me. We selected the congregations by seeking names of congregations from church leaders; requesting an application form from the congregations; and considering various factors such as congregational size and geographic location.

3. Pastor M (pseudonym), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, August 7, 2018. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Pastor M are from this interview.

4. Paul E. Hoffman, *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), 5, emphasis in original.

5. For more information about our research, visit our website at <https://www.forminglutherans.org/>.

6. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), xv, emphasis added.

7. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of*

St. Mary's, located in a bedroom community in the northeast, was the smallest of the congregations we researched with an average Sunday attendance of seventy-two and baptized membership of 200 in 2018. The community is working class and multi-ethnic, drawing families to it because of affordable housing and good public schools. Founded in the early twentieth century, St. Mary's demographics are typical of many Lutheran parishes: older. The preschool, started by the congregation in the 1970s, has a good reputation in the community, is affordable, and serves over one hundred children.

Within months of attending the training, Pastor M implemented one of Hoffman's ideas to introduce this adult faith formation process to her congregation, offering several weeks of Scripture study for the whole congregation using the method Hoffman advocated. In the fall of her first year at the parish, she and a lay catechist of the congregation, Pearl, launched Voyage, as they called the process,⁸ with two small groups of members. When I visited and conducted the first set of interviews in August 2018, the congregation was preparing for a third year of the Voyage process. I will present a case study in which a strong inter-generational clergy-laity partnership led to a faith formation process that drew disparate individuals into the process and ignited a missional spirit in this small aging congregation.

Leadership team: Doubting Thomas and Zealous Paul

In her first three and a half years, Pastor M infused the congregation with new energy; in addition to introducing the Voyage process, the congregation developed a new mission statement, restructured the congregation council (around key aspects of the mission statement), and implemented new worship times. Yet Pastor M described herself as the "Doubting Thomas" of the Voyage leadership team and alluded to her doubts and concerns at several points in our interview. The identification of Pearl, retired long-time member of St. Mary's, as "zealous Paul" is implicit in many of Pearl's comments, especially this one: "I want to share my faith as much as I can while I am on this earth."⁹ The mutual respect they have for each other, combination of skillsets necessary to implement Hoffman's process, and genuine love for others coalesced into a team that developed a "successful" adult faith formation process during Pastor M's tenure at St. Mary's.

The mutual respect Pastor M and Pearl have for one another came through in their separate interviews. Twice Pastor M referred

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to Pearl as her "co-minister" and spoke of her need to "let go of the reins" as pastor and allow Pearl to use her gifts in the small group discussions which were the core of the faith formation process; as Pearl noted, the presence of the pastor in these discussions was not always helpful, saying "people act differently with Pastor than with lay people." Yet Pearl valued Pastor M's leadership. When asked to name weaknesses in the congregation, Pearl replied, "People are not excited about their faith—Pastor has sure tried to change that." She spoke in warm and supportive ways of the many changes Pastor M had introduced to the congregation.

Pastor M's comment to "let go of the reins" indicates a high level of maturity and self-assurance for a pastor in her first call. She seemed to have earned the respect of members and seekers through strong preaching, good pastoral care, and a leadership style that empowered others (especially Pearl). Dayla, a cradle Lutheran who participated in the process, commented that Pastor M's "messages" were very inspiring and "hit home a lot of times."¹⁰ Stanley, a Millennial, described a theological conversation with Pastor M that transformed his understanding of the Eucharist.¹¹ Most revelatory of Pastor M's gifts was by Betty, who said, "She isn't what I expected a pastor to be like," and then continued, "She's a little non-conformist—like a regular, normal person, welcoming; she's one reason why I stay here."¹²

Two couples I interviewed commented on the warm welcome

10. Dayla (pseudonym), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, April 20, 2019, and by phone June 2019. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Dayla are from this interview.

11. Stanley (pseudonym), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, August 6, 2018. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Stanley are from this interview.

12. Betty (pseudonym), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, August 6, 2018. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Betty are from this interview.

Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 205.

8. Pastor M's husband, a Trekkie, suggested the name, which comes from the TV series *Star Trek: Voyager* (which aired from 1995 to 2001 on UPN). Kent Burreson and I prefer the term "process" rather than "program" to describe adult faith formation.

9. Pearl (pseudonym), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, August 6, 2018. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Pearl are from this interview.

they experienced from Pastor M and Pearl. Laura and Harry were actively seeking a new church home with a focus on the Gospel; Harry remembered details from the first email sent by Pastor M, describing it as “light-hearted,” and full of “peace and blessings” not “fire and brimstone.” They also spoke highly of Pearl, commenting on her ability to “verbalize well” and to “listen.”¹³ Nancy and Bob, also seeking a church home, said that Pastor M had “impressed the socks off us.” The welcome she gave them on their first visit made such an impact on them that “we didn’t go anywhere else.”¹⁴

That she is a master teacher is a major theme in Pearl’s interview. She’s flexible, shaping the material used to the needs of the group. She stressed the importance of the first stage, the period of inquiry, because, as she said, this is where you “learn their story and then you go from there, asking what does this group need?” Knowing each one’s story, recognizing the unique qualities in each, is the key to her teaching: “As you get to know people, all are at different places.” Elsewhere she commented, “You don’t feed a baby steak.” When I asked about resources that could reach Millennials and GenZ people, she replied, “It’s not age-related, it’s faith-related. It’s where they’re at” in their faith journey that shaped Pearl’s decisions about resources for instruction and formation. Interviewing Pastor M, I repeated a comment someone else had said to me: “Who wouldn’t want to talk to Pearl for hour?” To which Pastor M responded, “And she’s not really talking,” a comment on Pearl’s listening skills.

From the confluence of Pastor M’s youth and energy and Pearl’s wisdom and skilled teaching flowed a leadership team willing to experiment, adjust, and fashion a successful faith formation process. Pastor M’s “doubting Thomas” syndrome was tempered by Pearl’s missionary zeal and natural skills as a teacher and facilitator.¹⁵ Their shared compassion and genuine love for others gave birth to a faith formation process that first and foremost created a sense of belonging among the participants.

Engagement with the Word: Forming community and belonging among seekers

St. Mary’s adult catechumenate was modeled on that developed by Paul Hoffman. It, like other adult catechumenates, draws

13. Laura and Harry (pseudonyms), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, August 7, 2018. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Laura and Harry are from this interview.

14. Bob and Nancy (pseudonyms), in-person interview by Rhoda Schuler, April 19, 2019; and by phone June 11, 2019. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Bob and Nancy are from this interview.

15. Pearl has all the qualities described by Georganne Robertson, “What are the qualities of a catechist?” in *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 32-41.

These simple practices—reading and meditating on lectionary Gospel readings and praying for one another—touch on all three of the “BEs,” believing, belonging, and behaving, in the “conversion process” discussed by Butler Bass and Kreider.

inspiration from the early church and follows a fourfold pattern: periods of inquiry, catechesis, enlightenment (baptismal preparation), and mystagogy.¹⁶ By the third year, Pastor M and Pearl opted for a streamlined pattern for smaller congregations suggested by Hoffman, which combined the periods of catechesis and enlightenment and compressed the whole the process by several months.¹⁷ The “inquirers” or seekers—those who had visited and expressed interest in St. Mary’s—were invited to weekly gatherings of Scripture study led by Pearl, preceded by a meal or light refreshments together.¹⁸

Betty aptly described the Scripture study: “We didn’t ask questions; we answered them.” As Pearl explained, she would read the Gospel appointed for the Sunday three times. First, the participants were instructed to listen for a word or phrase that caught their attention. After sharing their thoughts with the group, they heard the reading a second time as they reflected on this question: How is God speaking to you in this story? Each would then share their thoughts in a phrase or sentence. For the third reading, the group was given a question specific to the text prepared by Pearl and Pastor M. *Faith Forming Faith* provides this example for John 9, story of the man born blind: “Out of what darkness and into what light is God calling you?”¹⁹ As Betty said, the group answered rather than asked questions, and through the sharing that occurred, a bond was formed within the group.

As recommended by the Hoffman-led workshop, the gatherings closed with the participants praying for one another, of which Pastor M said, “I’m again the chief doubter—even for Pearl this was a new practice.” As Pearl explained, the group stood in a circle, held hands, and were instructed to pray for the person on their right or left, as determined by Pearl, who began and ended the prayer time. Not everyone participated initially, and one person at first experienced it as “intimidating” while another expressed

16. Hoffman, *Faith Forming Faith*, 7. The term “enlightenment” is language used by in patristic sources and in Roman Catholic RICA documents.

17. Interview with Pastor M.

18. Serving a meal was one of the practices about which Pastor M, “doubting Thomas,” had initial reservations; but she later recognized its value for building community.

19. Hoffman, 13.

discomfort when others prayed on that one's behalf.²⁰ Yet Pearl reported that by the end of the period of catechesis/enlightenment, most did so willingly, with an occasional surprise: "And when [one person] prayed out loud, I nearly fell on the floor."

These simple practices—reading and meditating on lectionary Gospel readings and praying for one another—touch on all three of the "BEs," believing, belonging, and behaving, in the "conversion process" discussed by Butler Bass and Kreider. When asked what the most meaningful aspects of the Voyage process at St. Mary's were, nearly all named the small group discussion first. When asked why, the answers varied. Some commented on the connections they drew between the discussions and hearing the text in Sunday worship; as Harry said, the reflection and discussion "changed my take" on the Scripture reading—deepening his belief in Christ. Several named the prayer time as that which made the gathering meaningful, alluding to this practice as shaping their behavior by teaching them to pray for others.

Yet what stands out in their collective responses is the sense of community and belonging that was created over the weeks of their gatherings. Stanley's interview revealed how he gradually experienced a sense of acceptance, first from Pastor M and Pearl, then from others in the group. Victoria recalled the gatherings as a time to hear "what others thought and had been through."²¹ Betty's response was similar, saying that "you learned a lot about other people but also ... about yourself." And Laura commented that "at prayer time by the end we felt like St. Mary's was a family." As Paul Hoffman writes, the purpose is "faith formation, not faith *information*."²² At St. Mary's, as the Scripture study formed each Voyager's faith, the process itself also created a sense of belonging among the participants. Faith formation happens in community, not in isolation, and authentic faith formation also forms individuals into community.

Rituals: Drawing catechumens into the life of the church and creating space for a missional ethos

Pastor M and Pearl settled into a pattern for the adult catechumenate at St. Mary's that began in early January with weekly meetings of the Voyagers; during Lent the "coaches" (their word for sponsors) joined the weekly meeting of Scripture study and prayer, thus expanding the community of Voyagers to include members of the congregation. The whole congregation participated in the catechumenal process through the many rituals that marked the stages in the process. These included a rite of enrollment around Epiphany for those starting in the process;

20. Betty and Stanley.

21. Victoria, (pseudonym), Facetime interview by Rhoda Schuler, October 13, 2018. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld according to standard protocols for research on human subjects. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations and paraphrases of Victoria are from this interview.

22. Hoffman, 10, emphasis in original.

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a rite every Sunday in Lent (beginning with a rite of welcome), subsequent rites included a blessing and gift (Bible, hymnal, catechism, etc.), and the affirmation of baptism at the Easter Vigil. The rituals accomplished the dual purpose of drawing the catechumens into the life of the congregation and of creating space for a missional ethos to develop within the congregation.

Pastor M had confessed that the many rituals suggested in Hoffman's workshop brought out her Doubting Thomas syndrome; at first, she had said, "No one wants to stand up in front of a congregation ..." The experiences of the Voyagers showed her the power of ritual. Nancy said that weekly Lenten rituals "cemented our identity in the church." Dayla had vivid memories of the blessing with laying on of hands at the Vigil, saying "I got a warm, very good feeling ... in some respects [it was like] how Jesus would lay his hands on people, and they were healed." Bob remembered that at the enrollment rite "the congregation [was] going to pray for you in the next step of this voyage." These rituals profoundly drew Nancy, Dayla, and Bob into relationship with Christ and his Body, the Church.

Dayla also described "feeling at home" on the Sunday of the rite of enrollment ritual; from that point on, the way people of the congregation greeted her Sundays made a deep impression on her. Betty made a similar comment about the rite of enrollment: "I was taking a step forward and others were seeing that and welcoming me." Stanley felt affirmation when the whole congregation was "praying openly" at the Vigil for the Voyagers. One can conclude that the public rituals fostered a missional ethos in the congregation. From a practical perspective, active members of St. Mary's could be sure that these folks were in the Voyage process (and not some longtime member who would expect to be known), and thus they could approach them in the narthex and converse. From a ritual perspective, the practice of praying weekly for the Voyagers formed them as people of God who supported those preparing for baptismal affirmation and committing themselves to living out their baptism in this community of faith. Welcoming the Voyagers and praying for them created both physical and spiritual space for the people of St. Mary's to be missional in word and deed.

Mystagogy: Forming the beliefs of neophytes

The Voyage process concluded with a period of mystagogy (a word used in early church writings) during the Easter season. In the early church, this was time for instruction in the sacraments, or "mysteries," to use the Greek word, following the baptism and first reception of the Eucharist by the adult neophytes. The Voyagers

continued to meet weekly for similar instruction, including review of Luther's small catechism and history of the congregation. What they had seen, heard, and experienced ritually was now laid out for them in a systematic, instructional format. Many found it beneficial.

Betty, who initially joined the Voyage process "to know more," said of the period mystagogy, "that was what I was looking for." Nancy, for whom belief was paramount, had said, "To be honest, the process is backwards; first you should learn what a church believes—then go to Bible study to grow together." For Nancy, most beneficial at this stage was the resource on the catechism, which she described as a "booklet with easy language, good for discussion. For me, it was a refresher of confirmation."²³ Bob, her husband, agreed, saying she had "hit it on the head—confirmation refresher." Dayla, an octogenarian cradle Lutheran, expressed similar sentiments.

With the phrase, "the process is backwards," Nancy articulated the radical nature of this catechumenal model, especially for Lutherans, whose sixteenth-century origins are steeped in controversies about what Lutherans believed vis-à-vis Roman Catholics and other Protestants. Yet the experiences of Voyagers support Kreider and Butler Bass, who claim that for many on the path to conversion a sense of "belonging" precedes "believing." According to Butler Bass, "Belonging is an issue of identity" and "is intimately related to being."²⁴ Her research, rooted in the post-modern North American context, uncovers these core questions: Who I am? And where do I belong? As a Christian, she finds that the journeys narrated in Scripture have "one grounding point: God. And who is God? I AM (Exod 3:14)."²⁵ For Butler Bass, that grounding point, the I AM, transforms the existential questions of today into Whose am I?²⁶ This is the question addressed in the periods of inquiry and catechesis at St. Mary's, as Voyagers explored whose they are in relation to the Sunday Gospel readings. Once they had found their identity in God and this community of faith, the questions of believing were addressed in the period of mystagogy.

"Like here to here": A life-changing process

When I asked Pearl to "give me an example of one way you see your congregation living out its mission statement,"²⁷ she replied, using air quotes: "We're trying to 'make disciples.'" I replied, "Give me one story of making a disciple," to which Pearl responded as she gestured, "Like here [holding up the palm of her hand toward me] to here [turning her hand 180 degrees]." She then recounted the experience of a Voyager, whom she described as "very cautious,

23. Some may recognize this resource from the description: Daniel Erlander, *Baptized We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2020).

24. Butler Bass, 171.

25. Butler Bass, 180.

26. Butler Bass, 180-190.

27. This was one of the questions we asked of congregational leaders.

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thoughtful, and curious" but who rarely spoke through much of the process. By the end the person had become so fully engaged that, Pearl said, "we couldn't shut that one up." To illustrate successful faith formation across generations here are three "like-here-to-here" narratives from the perspective of the Voyagers:

Betty: From "needing to know" to being known

Betty, a middle-aged Boomer, visited St. Mary's during a personal crisis; despite a positive first experience worshipping there, Betty hesitated to plunge into membership at the parish. As she said, "I wanted to get to know more about the congregation and the people," and "needed to know more" about what they believed. When she signed up for Voyage, she "was hesitant; I didn't know what to expect." Because she "had so many questions," the period of inquiry, which requires no commitment to attend, drew her in. She admitted being initially "nervous" and "uncomfortable" in the small group. Although she had been assured there were no wrong answers, she worried, "Am I saying the wrong thing?" Because she is "shy," the prayer time at the end was "intimidating at first."

She came with her many questions, but much to her surprise, "We didn't ask questions; we answered them!" Her desire "to know more" was gradually supplanted by being known—to herself and by others—as the group formed a sense of community. About the small group format she said, "you learned a lot about other people but also how you learned about yourself." The small size of St. Mary's was "a plus" because it was easy to get to know people. At other parishes she had felt "isolated" and "intimidated."

One can chart Betty's move from ambivalence to assurance through her reactions to the rituals. At the rite of welcome, she felt "a nervous excitement," and the presence of her coach made her more comfortable. Reflecting on this ritual, she said, "I was becoming one of them." She saw that the series of "blessings" on the Sundays in Lent were "building up to the big event" of the Easter Vigil. When asked about the Vigil, she was short on the details but effusive about the overall experience, saying, "It was incredible, beyond my expectations! How can I tell you? The people were cheering at the end." Betty came seeking answers to questions with a "need to know more." Through the Voyage process, Betty discovered the joy of being fully known by God in a community of believers. One of her most poignant statements summarizes her experience: "I think St. Mary's found me. I don't think I found St. Mary's."

Stanley: From doubt to solidarity with others

Stanley's faith journey fits the "profile" of Millennials, a much-studied demographic by those concerned about the exodus of this

generation from the church.²⁸ One study identified these primary reasons many had left: They saw the church as “a creativity killer,” especially in reimagining what the church might be for their generation; as “shallow” and “boring,” with “easy platitudes”; as “repressive” and “exclusive” in a culture with the opposite values; as “antiscience” and a place which does not allow them “to express doubts” about their faith.²⁹

Stanley described how he felt leading up to the rite of enrollment: “impatient; bored and tired.” Although he found value in the small group format, he said early in our interview that “I feel like I made people angry.” He was acutely aware of generational differences, describing himself as one with “a gray view of the world” in contrast to others with a black/white view. The openness of Pastor M and Pearl, who were “very understanding” of his different point of view, “even if they didn’t agree with me” kept him in the process.

The interview questions, following the sequence of the faith formation process, mirrored Stanley’s gradual shift in thinking about St. Mary’s, the Voyage process, and himself. Asked how he felt prior to the Easter Vigil, Stanley replied, “Pretty good. People seemed happier to have me as a part of community. My point of view changed a little bit. I felt more part of the community at that point, more able to express questions about the reality of God and what I was really feeling.”

Stanley’s struggles also reflect negative experiences growing up in the Catholic Church. He was taught that the Eucharist was “a privilege,” and “If you weren’t clean, you didn’t go.” It was “weird that anyone could go without feeling bad and guilt.” He felt unworthy during the group prayer time when Voyagers prayed for one another, saying, “What did I do that was so special that God should do something for me?” A pivotal point for him was a conversation with Pastor M that reoriented his theological understanding of Holy Communion; from that point on he received the sacrament at St. Mary’s.

Stanley’s journey not only highlights ways in which this pattern of faith formation can “work” for Millennials; it also underscores a challenge for the congregations: any successful efforts to draw this demographic into the church will result in change. Although Stanley completed the Voyage process, he is likely to continue carrying with him doubts about his faith and the existence of God; his faith community will need to see the value of “solidarity in not having solidarity” about such core matters of the Christian faith.

Dayla: Drawn deeper into the faith

One might question whether Dayla, a life-long Lutheran and member of the “greatest generation,” needed to attend a lengthy

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catechumenal process. To quote Dayla, “I feel super blessed to go through this.... I’ve never experienced anything like this.” The most striking theme in Dayla’s interview was that the holistic nature of the process—the various stages and the rituals—all deepened her faith life. The interview questions, specific to the different stages and rituals, seemed to prompt Dayla to speak in broad, general terms about the entire process.

For Dayla, believing, rooted in Word and sacrament, was central. She discussed in very specific detail the small group discussions on the Gospel readings, commenting on the multiple readings of the text and times of meditation, and articulating what she found meaningful: “Being able to open up, share what the text meant to me.” When asked about Pastor M, she replied, “She’s fantastic; very inspiring. Her messages hit home a lot of times.” Responding to prompts about the weekly blessings during Lent, she named the laying on of hands by her sponsors, recalling “how Jesus would lay his hands on people, and they were healed.” Such a response demonstrates the power of ritual action to evoke biblical narratives and deepen faith. One question led her to ruminate on the Eucharist, saying, “I do feel that I’m a little closer to God in my heart and my soul. It [the Voyage process] opened up everything for me.”

Dayla’s experience mirrors that of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The Scriptures were opened to her through the weekly text study group and Pastor M’s preaching, and in the Eucharist she encountered the risen Christ in a deeper way. As Dayla put it, “I would recommend [Voyage] to other people—even if you are a long-time confirmed and baptized member.” “Why?” I asked. Because, she replied, “It gave me a whole different and deeper understanding and reaffirmed everything.” The process was both personal and communal for her. Commenting on the congregational responses at the Easter Vigil, she said, “They kind of took the road with me.”

28. According to a recent Gallup poll (2021), membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque dipped below 50% in 2020. Only 36% of Millennials claim membership in a religion body; <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

29. David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2011), 91-93.

Missional ethos and life passages: Opportunities for a ministry of presence

That the Voyage process fostered a missional ethos at St. Mary's was expressed consistently by interviewees, who universally spoke of the welcome and sense of belonging they experienced from the congregation, primarily through interactions during and following worship. Pastor M and Pearl acted as the welcoming gateway for many. The coaches, carefully chosen by Pastor M and Pearl, were the bridge between those two leaders and congregational members. The regular rituals not only help the members identify the Voyagers but also ritually link them to the whole catechumenal process in a way that a pastor's "new member class," conducted in isolation from the worshipping community, could never do.

Although Voyagers mentioned interactions with Pastor M and Pearl during life transitions, members also connected with them. Recall that Stanley reached out to his coach when he was experiencing a major life crisis; Laura and Harry's coaches gave advice when they were buying a house. Betty, whose mother had died shortly before our interview, said her coach came to the visitation and other members attended the funeral, a gesture she "wasn't expecting." Laura and Harry noted that members of St. Mary's had attended their wedding, making them feel that St. Mary's was "family." Voyagers' sense of belonging was intensified when congregational members showed up for these major rituals associated with life transitions. Such ways of connecting with new disciples can be encouraged and fostered by the leadership until it becomes a habitus of the people of God.

Conclusion/Afterwards

To this idyllic picture of a successful catechumenal process, I conclude with some caveats. A major finding of our research is the importance of a long pastorate for the process to be developed contextually and to take root in the whole congregation. Shortly after I concluded my research, Pastor M left St. Mary's. Then the pandemic hit, and St. Mary's was unable to continue the Voyage process. In fall 2021, needing some information for this article, I spoke by phone with the current pastor of St. Mary's, who seemed not inclined to resume the Voyage process. Each pastor brings a specific set of gifts and priorities to a parish, and I sensed that this pastor had her own plans for outreach.

Whether St. Mary's could have maintained this adult faith formation over the long haul had Pastor M stayed is an open question. Both she and Pearl articulated a primary weakness of the model, namely, that it was solely dependent on the leadership of four people: Pastor M, Pearl, and their spouses, who prepared and served the meals for the Voyagers from early January through Lent. Pearl commented on the difficulty they had cajoling members to bring food for the meals, and Pastor M spoke of the sheer exhaustion the four of them felt after Easter Sunday. Without doubt, introducing and implementing this kind of labor-intensive process in a small congregation is risky because it requires significant resources of time, talent, and treasure in the

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short and long term.

Nevertheless, as I pieced together many interviews into this single narrative, the transformative power of this faith formation process for the individuals and the congregation was unmistakable. The church is called to preach, teach, and baptize, making disciples of all peoples. St. Mary's did so effectively through a welcoming spirit that created a sense of belonging, through rituals that supported Voyagers and connected them to the worshipping community, and by communicating the teaching of the church in a way that created and deepened the faith of participants.