



# THREE STEPS TOWARD CATECHIST FORMATION

*A DRE shares the impact of Sherry Weddell's Forming Intentional Disciples on his approach to catechist formation*

BY JAMES BLANKENSHIP

*"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations."* (MATTHEW 28:19)

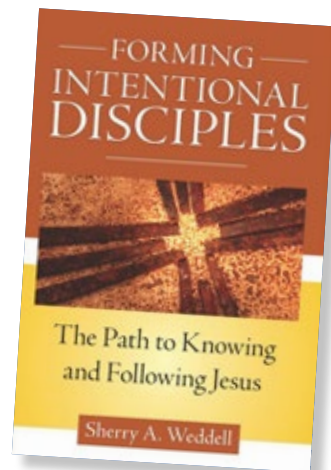
Conversations at the annual religious education kick-off meeting often revolve around "teacher training," with the perennial question being: "What is the best way to train our catechists?" Let me share how I answer that question today.

In 2012, the diocesan Office of Catechetics gave the DREs of my diocese an inspirational book, *Forming Intentional Disciples* by Sherry Weddell (Our Sunday Visitor). This book changed

my view of religious education. I began to question how to *form disciples* in the way Sherry Weddell describes. Do I try to target a certain audience, such as the parents, or do I work on making everyone a disciple? Obviously everyone needs to be a disciple, but I decided to focus my attention on my catechists.

In *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell outlines five thresholds for conversion: initial trust, spiritual curiosity, spiritual openness, spiritual seeking, and intentional discipleship. In recent

years I have developed a three-step catechist formation plan, based on the thresholds Weddell describes.



## HERE ARE THREE STEPS:

### STEP 1:

#### Build initial trust

*"A person is able to trust or has a positive association with Jesus Christ, the Church, a Christian believer, or something identifiably Christian. Without some kind of bridge of trust in place, people will not move closer to God."*

(FORMING INTENTIONAL DISCIPLES, P. 129)

Building trust with our catechists is easier said than done. Years back I taught at a parish where I barely knew the DRE. I would often wonder whether or not she would even know if I showed up to teach. Our catechists must trust us not only as DREs, but as a faithful Christians and followers of Jesus Christ. The joy of the Gospel must



radiate from our lives. We must strive to be faithful to all that the Church asks. So the first step to building trust is that we must be trustworthy.

Secondly, to build trust we must strive to get to know our catechists in a personal way by initiating the conversation. When Christ called the apostles to be followers, he approached them, not the other

way around. Be the first to arrive for religious education classes so you can greet your catechists as they arrive for class. Spend the time before and after class talking

with your catechists. Find out the basics: How many kids do your catechists have? What are their hobbies and interests? Trust and rapport is built when both people

are involved. We ought to be willing to share the same type of information about ourselves.

## STEP 2:

### Build spiritual curiosity and openness

*“A person finds himself intrigued by or desiring to know more about Jesus, his life, and his teachings or some aspect of the Christian faith ... [then] a person acknowledges to himself and to God that he is open to the possibility of personal and spiritual change.”* (FORMING INTENTIONAL DISCIPLES, PP. 129–130)

My first philosophy class in college started with the professor asking the question, “Why?” It was a puzzling question that sparked everyone’s curiosity. We had an hour-long discussion asking “why”

about all of life’s big questions. That question kept twenty immature college freshmen coming back to an early morning philosophy class.

Curiosity inflames a desire to know why. In relationships, knowledge begets love, and love begets a desire to know more deeply. The more catechists know about the Lord, the more they love him. The more they love him, the more open they are to living a life in friendship with Jesus Christ. The Christian life is radically different from what the world has to offer; it teaches us to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, be merciful, and love God with our whole heart, mind, and being.



At my parish, we start each catechetical session gathered together in the gym for a group prayer.

I also use that opportunity to teach my catechists. I usually say a brief word about the saint whose feast day we are celebrating or the readings we heard at Mass on Sunday. I might even give a brief explanation about the current liturgical season and some related pious traditions. Occasionally I bring in a few first-class relics of saints. The relics always spark questions and discussions. By teaching my catechists, and by the grace of God, I try to set my catechists on a path of spiritual curiosity and openness to the Lord.

## STEP 3:

### Spiritual seeking

*“The person moves from being essentially passive to actively seeking to know the God who is calling him or her.”* (FORMING INTENTIONAL DISCIPLES, P. 130)

When we set out to form catechists into disciples, admittedly we start with a stacked deck and the cards in our favor. Catechists are already very generous people who desire to know the Lord and serve him. They wouldn’t be catechists if they weren’t already seeking to serve



the Lord. So what is the point of step three? Growth and maturity.

“You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Spiritual seeking and ultimately perfection is the habitual aim of every soul, both sinner and saint, on the path of devotion and holiness. Catechists are no exception. They also need to seek the Lord in order to be perfect. Our job as DREs is to help them grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus.

Therefore, the program of the third step looks like a more traditional approach to catechist

training. The DRE must provide opportunities for catechists to learn about the faith. At my parish, I have developed a robust adult education program to draw the catechists deeper.

### Here are some ideas I’ve used with the catechists in my parish:

- \* *Adult catechism class.* I taught a 24-week class where we studied the four parts of the *Catechism* in depth, starting with prayer.
- \* *Bible studies.* We have multiple Bible study options that catechists may choose from.

- \* *Men's and women's groups.* We started a Walking with Purpose group for the women (*WalkingWithPurpose.com*), and a That Man Is You! group for the men (*ParadisusDei.org*).
- \* *Summer lecture series.* I organized a program called "Saints & Suds" that offered spiritual talks for men at a local brewery.
- \* *Lectures and retreats provided by the Institute of Catholic Culture.* The ICC has hundreds of hours of free lectures online that are available for the catechists to listen to at their convenience (*InstituteOfCatholicCulture.org*).
- \* *Monthly newsletter.* I send the catechists a monthly newsletter that includes a short article on some spiritual topic. Last year my focus was explaining the seven petitions of the Our Father.

I'm convinced that the model we employ for helping catechists in their mission must first include this vital call to form them as disciples. More than teaching them to develop good lesson plans, we need to call them to deeper prayer—and pray right alongside them. Beyond teaching them how to manage their classrooms, we need to help strengthen them in virtue to be stronger witnesses for Christ.



James Blankenship is the Director of Religious Education at St. Francis De Sales Church in Purcellville, VA. He is founder of the St. Isidore Project, dedicated to the poor by growing food and offering education and community.

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