

Preparing Catechists

Directors of religious education have varying responsibilities: sacramental preparation, small faith communities, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and family programming, to name only a few. Each fall, however, when school is about to begin, a director's attention is usually focused on gathering supplies, drawing up class lists and, most importantly, training catechists. Although working with catechists is a year-round endeavor, if one takes extra time at the beginning of the year to get things off to a good start, more than likely the whole year will run more smoothly.

Since Jesus was responsible for preparing the first catechists, he is a great model for those of us who are parish DREs. While we certainly have the responsibility to share the Good News ourselves, we have an even greater responsibility to prepare others to do it. Like Jesus who never left Palestine, we get to stay at home base while we invite, prepare and commission others to go out and share the word. It seems appropriate to spend a little time reflecting on why Jesus was so successful.

1. Jesus personally invited his disciples to follow him.

Broadly based requests for catechists, such as bulletin or pulpit announcements, often give the impression that any warm body will do. Experience has proven that when people are personally approached, they are more likely to consider the request seriously.

One way of recruiting new catechists is by asking a group of parents and parishioners to help you discern people for this ministry. Make sure the parish knows when and why you are

meeting. Ask the parish for their prayers. Once you have gathered the group and spent time in prayer yourselves, discuss what qualities are needed in a catechist. Pray again, and then ask the group to go through the parish list, looking for names that “call out” to them. Take good notes on why they think certain people would make good catechists. If possible, invite those people yourself. Let them know what qualities the group is looking for and why members thought selected persons would make good catechists. Ask the invitees to pray about it. Tell them someone will be calling them back to receive their answer. Finally, ask the people in the discerning group to make the follow-up calls.

2. Jesus knew the people he gathered.

He knew who they were and where they worked. He knew their life stories. Get to know your parish catechists. Take time before or after classes to stop in and visit a few minutes. Plan in-service or retreat days and other opportunities to spend time together. If possible, start the year with a daylong orientation session. Begin on a Saturday morning, inviting new catechists for the day and asking returning catechists to join you for lunch and the afternoon. Spend time in large groups and small groups getting to know each other. A daylong orientation affords time for you to help the catechists feel comfortable and capable in their new role.

3. Jesus answered his disciples’ questions and anticipated their needs.

Volunteer catechists usually feel more comfortable when they know exactly what is expected of them. Providing written job descriptions is one way of making sure catechists know their responsibilities. While religious education programs vary from parish to parish the list below gives an idea of what might be included.

Responsibilities of the catechist:

- Contact parents and children at the beginning of the year to introduce yourself.
- Prepare lessons and maintain discipline in the classroom.
- Arrive in the building fifteen minutes prior to class time.
- Take attendance.
- Fill out progress reports to parents at the appropriate time.
- Keep parents informed of what is being covered in class.
- Arrange for a substitute if unable to attend a class.
- Let the director know if your group will be meeting outside of your designated space.
- Keep the classroom in reasonably good order. Turn out lights, close windows when leaving.
- Attend catechists' meetings, unit grade level meetings and in-service days.
- Follow diocesan policies, and if at all possible, work toward diocesan certification.

First-time catechists also have questions concerning practical needs and basic housekeeping. What supplies does the parish provide? Where can they be found? If additional supplies are purchased, will the volunteer be reimbursed? What resources, such as televisions and VCRs, does the parish have available? How are these resources requested? What latitude do catechists have in setting up their classrooms? What about classroom snacks and parties? The list can go on indefinitely. One way of anticipating the needs of next year's catechists is by keeping track of the questions this year's catechists ask throughout the year. During the initial orientation meeting, make sure you present the job description and address all anticipated questions. Also build in time for the catechists to make other inquiries, in formal and informal settings.

Some DREs put together a parish handbook for catechists.

A simple folder with both loose-leaf binding and pockets serves well. Pages can be added throughout the year, and the pockets hold the booklets and brochures given out by the parish and diocese. Go through the handbook contents at the orientation meeting.

Suggested contents for catechist's handbook:

Calendar for the year

Written job description

List of important phone numbers

Substitute teacher list

Copy of student evaluation form

List of parish resource material (games, videos, maps, etc.)

Information on how to request and obtain diocesan resources

Copy of parish policies, (discipline, attendance, snow days, etc.)

Copy of diocesan policies

Reprints of relevant articles, (i.e., class management, designing prayer services, etc.)

4. Jesus taught with authority.

Let people know that you believe in what you are doing and stay abreast of what is happening in the world of theology and catechesis. Know your resources and share that information with the catechists. During orientation, allot a period for first-timers to review the materials. Spend time with catechists going through the books they will be using. Look at the basic format of each unit and point out how the catechetical process is incorporated into each lesson. Also, go through the catechists' guides, noting the sections before and after the lessons that offer valuable background on the subject matter as well as the age group with whom they are working. Go over the scope and sequence chart that most publishers provide. This will help the catechist see how the lessons they cover fit into the larger picture. Call their attention to parent pages or any other suggested means of involving parents the publishers offer. Explain any supplementary materials provided in the series and encourage browsing.

5. Jesus built community.

On orientation day, structure time, both morning and afternoon, for catechists to get to know each other and to network. Spending time together benefits both first-time and experienced catechists. Newcomers can receive useful, practical advice and link with valuable resource persons. Returning catechists find that their experience is valued. Ask returning catechists to share any successes from the previous year(s). Encourage newcomers to ask questions.

Larger parishes have the advantage of gathering catechists according to grade levels. You might give people a few questions or statements on which to reflect privately. Allow a few minutes for them to jot down their thoughts. Then open the period for group discussion. Below are some discussion starters that might help with grade-level gatherings.

Discussion starters:

Describe your age group of students.

What do you find challenging about this age group?

What do you most enjoy about this age group?

Discuss one lesson that worked really well.

Share a favorite prayer service.

What has been effective in helping your young people get to know you?

What has been effective in helping you to get to know your young people?

What outside resources (including people) have proved valuable?

What are you looking forward to most this year?

6. Jesus knew the importance of table fellowship.

Gather volunteers for formal Christmas dinners and casual family picnics. Send invitations and, once in a while, host a meal to which catechists need not bring anything. I learned this lesson early on as a volunteer catechist. Each year, the DRE at my home parish hosted an elaborate Christmas dinner for volunteers and their spouses. People continued to teach years

longer than they had anticipated, in part because they hated the thought of missing out on this annual event.

Provide coffee and cookies at in-services. The occasional evening meeting is somehow much more tolerable when fancy snacks are provided. Begin meetings with a question to encourage conversation: What is the best thing that has happened to you since our last meeting? What have you learned from your students lately? Where did you last see God?

7. Jesus prayed and taught others to pray.

Take time to pray. Take time to read Scripture. Take time for quiet. Incorporate all three into any occasion for gathering your catechists. If possible, gather the catechists before class time for a short prayer. During in-services, and especially at the year's orientation, carefully plan prayer services. You might ask different catechists to prepare the prayer for a meeting or parent session. Send a note to catechists on their birthdays or at other appropriate times, letting them know they are in your prayers. Provide plenty of resources for them to plan prayer services with their own classes.

8. Jesus lived his message.

If you want catechists to be present to their young people, then you need to be present to your catechists. If you want volunteers to be witnesses of their faith, you must share your faith with them. If you want catechists to follow catechetical process in their classrooms, make sure you model that same process when you work with them or with any adults. If you want catechists to believe what they are doing is worthwhile, take every opportunity to show them how much they are valued. If you want people to understand that faith formation/religious education is a lifelong endeavor, keep working at it yourself. If you want people to believe that God is good and just and loving, then live that message so it is visible to those you encounter.

9. Jesus patiently trusted the Holy Spirit.

Just think about it. The apostles walked with Jesus for three years, and yet even after he rose from the dead, they still did not immediately understand him or his message. Fortunately, Jesus was patient. He never gave up, even when discouraged. Jesus believed in his calling and did all he could do, but he knew it was not up to him alone. Jesus was able to let go. He trusted in the Holy Spirit to take over.



Follow Jesus

This same Spirit is in each of us, a gift of our Baptism. The same Spirit is in each catechist. If we hope to give our best to those with whom we work, then we need to follow Jesus. We need to believe in our calling, realizing all is not up to us alone. We need to do all we can, then let go and trust the Spirit.