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Deliberate Disestablishment

Annie's Story

On summer vacations when Annie was a young girl, she attended her grandmother's nondenominational church.[1] *During one visit, Annie remembered being invited to come to the altar rail with her whole family so the pastor could pray and lay hands on her cousin with cerebral palsy. Soon after, the pastor turned to Annie and asked her how she felt at the altar. Annie recalls saying to the pastor, with gratitude, "I feel like someone has poured warm maple syrup all over me." The experiences at her grandmother's church varied dramatically from Annie's home church. Baptized Russian Orthodox, Annie and her family left their home church when they found out their priest was having an affair. At age nine, Annie not only left that church but also stopped going to church altogether, except for weddings and funerals and the occasional visit to her grandmother's church.*

Annie arrived fifteen minutes early for our interview, assuming she was late. She and the pastor had scheduled the interview early so that she would arrive on time. Annie beamed with a huge youthful smile when she realized their plan had worked. A baker at a local grocery store, Annie was an eager conversation partner, speaking openly about her life and, in particular, her experiences with Seekers, a group that is part of the newcomer welcome ministry of a small Lutheran congregation in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Annie describes her life of twenty-seven years as filled with bad luck. The man she had been dating for quite some time lapsed into a drug problem. She wanted to talk to her family but couldn't bring herself to tell them what was going on in her life. Annie went to her boyfriend's mother, and for a time, his mother tried to be unbiased and concerned for both of them. But recently, Annie felt as though what she thought and what she did weren't good enough in his mother's eyes. One Saturday evening, Annie was driving home from work. "I couldn't take it anymore," she said. "I was driving by

this church on the way home, and I saw 'Saturday services.' I work every Sunday, so I said, 'I gotta do it, I gotta do it. I need something.' I was at my wit's end, and I needed something, so I stopped in because I was thinking there would be a lot of people and it started at 6:15."

Annie was wrong. The Saturday-evening service at this church averages anywhere from five to fifteen people. When Annie arrived that evening, two people in addition to the pastor welcomed her to worship. Annie was awed by their welcome and by the sermon, which she felt spoke directly to her that evening. She said, "I just basically came here because I needed peace." Peace and a friendly welcome were what she found.

Within a few weeks, Annie was asking how she could become a member. Her pastor responded, "We have a way." Annie's enthusiasm for peace and a sense of belonging drew her into the newcomer-welcoming process immediately. She talks about her arrival as perfect timing. A new six-week course on Lutheranism was beginning, the Seekers group was meeting regularly, and Confirmation[2] was scheduled within a few months at the Easter Vigil.[3] Describing her interest in faith as going "full force," Annie actively attended the Lutheran Course and biweekly meetings with the Seekers group of three or four members led by a facilitator called a catechist. "My Tuesdays are booked through May," Annie said.

In our interview, Annie explained, "I'm excited to do this. I said to my family and my friends . . . , 'This is the first thing in my life that I'm actually doing on my own that I'm excited about.' Sure, I married and I divorced, but everything else was for everyone else. This is the first thing I'm doing actually for myself. School, you have to do. It's not for you unless you go to college. Marriage you do because you want to do . . . but . . . I knew it was the wrong thing to do. Everyone was all . . . 'You're getting married—you are going to be responsible—you're going to have stability' [laughter]*—so wrong about that. That's the biggest . . . I wish I could go back in time and change that one."*

Annie has one friend who has attended this church with her. Her friend encouraged her to slow down and look at other churches before she joined this Lutheran congregation, a small union church that shares its building with a United Church of Christ congregation[4] and worships an average of seventy-five every weekend. Even under pressure from her friend, Annie emphasized that she is happy. She recalled, "I feel very warm here—similar to my grandmother's church. I love her church, but it's not like here. This is 'my church.'"

That Sunday evening when Annie arrived, a typical worship service was about to begin with three people gathered. This small, rural, Lutheran church is not the kind of congregation we might think would attract a twenty-seven-year-old. Annie, however, recalls that she was drawn into this particular church

on her way home from work on a specific day in her life, and the three other people gathered around word and sacrament were exactly the kind of Christian community she needed. They extended to her the promise of presence: "We are here, waiting for you to arrive." Annie's congregation did not ignore the questions that brought her there. They welcomed her that night and asked her directly, "Who are you?" They entertained Annie's questions. The Seekers group within their newcomer-welcoming process invited her to explore her faith in light of her current crisis, helped her to go on as a disciple of Jesus Christ in the midst of her struggles, and courageously stayed present to Annie's suffering.

When I visited with the Seekers group as a researcher, one characteristic of the group caught my attention. When the Seekers get together, they laugh. Joanne, the catechist, shared with me just how intensely she prepares for the meeting. She consults curriculum resources, visits websites, and seeks advice from the pastor. However, once she arrives for the Seekers' scheduled time together, she invites the group to pay attention to the person who wants or needs to share an experience or story. No one, not Annie or other members of Seekers, could tell me exactly what happens when they meet, but they all feel deeply satisfied from the encounter—and laughter was a common theme.

During a meal I shared with a few members of this group, I was able to glimpse what Annie must have felt in her encounter. We shared a lot of laughter. And although the group members answered my research questions, I was keenly aware that what they wanted to learn about was *me*—the newcomer in their midst. In their focus on the newcomer, the dynamics of "inside the group" and "outside the group" disappeared. I didn't feel like a newcomer, and the group members didn't feel like longtime established members of a church I was researching. I was drawn into their center even as they were drawn to my periphery. I could sense an overwhelming identification with them while also recognizing my distinctiveness. I maintained their identity as research subjects. They maintained my identity as a researcher with questions to ask. In the coming months and years as I reflected on Annie's experience and my own, I tried to make sense of it and to put a name to the complex components that made up interactions between the Seekers and newcomers.

I had interviewed participants in newcomer-welcoming processes before encountering Annie and the Seekers, and I interviewed others after. The seamless interaction between Annie as a newcomer and the established members of her congregation was not a universal experience. I sensed deep frustration in one pastor's voice when he told me that older members of the congregation were upset that he was spending time with newcomers. An impromptu

interview with a longtime volunteer in the church office confirmed this tension, as newcomers were described as the "inside group" greatly favored by the pastor. In another congregation, separate newcomer gatherings became cliques that excluded other members of the congregation. Members began asking questions such as "Why are they so special?" and "What makes them better than the rest of us?" During my conversations with members of congregations, I heard conflicting statements. Established members had the desire to welcome newcomers and even perceived themselves as very welcoming, but as efforts to design intentional newcomer-welcoming processes proceeded, some established members could not help but feel neglected and even abandoned. The process I hope to introduce is one that takes seriously this sense of feeling neglected among established members, while also insisting on the necessity of deliberately designing processes to welcome newcomers.

Why was Annie's experience so different? The difference, it seems to me, lies in the congregation's relationship to *establishment*. An established congregation is intentionally equipped to care for established members. An established congregation seeks to reduce the tension between established members and newcomers by rushing to make newcomers members. In contrast, a disestablished congregation is intentionally equipped to care for the interactions between newcomers and established members. Soon I will say more about what this disestablished congregation looks like. First, however, I turn to the nature of established congregations.

Defining Establishment

What does it mean for congregations to be established? Christendom arose in the fourth century and has remained the most influential and integral force in the history of Christianity. The radical shift from persecuted church to public church, from familial and intimate gatherings to established institutions lasted through the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the periods of global transformation in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries (also known as colonialization) to the organization of congregations in the United States. It might seem strange to talk about the establishment of churches in the United States, because this country was largely instituted in opposition to any federal establishment of religion—that is, supporting churches with taxes or expecting citizens to be church members without necessarily joining. The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of

the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."[5]

However, there is a distinction between a church established by the government and a culturally established church. Although the Christian church and religions in the United States were legally disestablished from the federal government and over time from the state governments as well, theologian Douglas John Hall notes that culturally, ideationally, and socially, Christian congregations were heavily established. Hall insists that our casual sneer at Europe's state church system causes us to be blind to the deep cultural establishment of the church in North America:

> In reality, what is with us is, from one point of view, (de jure) nonestablishment; but, from another point of view, it is (de facto) the most deeply entrenched kind of establishment. Relatively speaking, Christian churches in North America are independent of the state. However, in the depth of their social relationships and cultural assumptions, they are bound to the dominant culture. Establishment here is not a matter of taxes, official appointments, and ceremony (though, to a certain extent, it is also that) so much as it is of a fundamental unity with the established culture, a unity at the level of decisive values and goals. It is real establishment that is in so many ways more effective than the merely legal ones that somehow persist in Europe.[6]

The cultural establishment of the church of which Hall writes is clearly recognizable in a brief review of the history of church and culture in the mid- and late-twentieth-century United States. The widely accepted civic uses of religious imagery dramatically increased in the early 1950s as an ideological weapon in the Cold War against "godless" communism. The National Day of Prayer and the National Prayer Breakfast were instituted in the early 1950s, around the same time as "under God" was inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance. Religious language and practice came to be part of what it meant to be a patriotic American. From the 1950s through the early 1980s, Sunday mornings were a sacrosanct time set aside for rest, worship, and family. Restaurants, stores, youth athletic leagues, employers, and television programmers largely did not compete with church for the Sunday-morning attention of Americans. So-called blue laws in some states forbade (and continue to forbid) the sale of alcohol on Sundays. Prayer in public schools—even sectarian prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer and prayer in Jesus' name—was

widespread. The church's needs, from issues of morality to issues of scheduling, were largely supported by the broader culture and at times the legal structures of our nation. In sum, North American congregations in the middle and latter part of the twentieth century had a far different experience than the church's situation as often portrayed in the Bible and early church history. Rather than conduct their ministry in settings hostile to their message, these congregations ministered in settings that supported and welcomed their presence. And though there was surely *some* reduction in the cultural support of religious practice in the late twentieth century (look at the rise of Sunday-morning youth athletic leagues, for example), Hall's words written in 1976 describe the undeniably privileged place the Christian church continues to occupy in American culture today. Hall purports further in his book written twenty years later, "In short, our New World variety of Christian establishment has the enormous staying power that it has because it is part and parcel of our whole inherited system of meaning, a system combining Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, Romantic-idealist, and more recent nationalistic elements so intermingled that even learned persons have difficulty distinguishing them."[7]

Far too often, mainline congregations have carried the banner of optimism, what Hall calls "accentuating the positive":[8] "The more chaotic and threatening public life becomes, the more these churches are called upon to exemplify the conventional verities, or what are perceived as such; above all, they are looked to for order and decency, some sense of form, ritual, calm, communality."[9] Our idyllic mainline Protestant "faith communities" are safe havens for the upper- to middle-class and in many cases white membership within their walls. This posture has informed and shaped the theological perspective of the Triune God as one who keeps us safe from the chaos of the world, protecting us with power and strength. It is this posture that adapts itself to established members. It is from this posture that an inadequate relationship has emerged between congregations and "culture." Our congregations have turned in upon themselves, becoming static, protective enclaves.

The Power of Cultural Establishment

So it is from a position of cultural establishment (or one of attempting to regain a 1950s-era cultural establishment) that many of our churches today conduct their ministry. Having been formed by their mid-twentieth-century experiences of establishment, of cultural support for their presence and work, congregations and denominations largely lack the tools or practices necessary to minister without the culture's supporting role. Hence, we should not be

surprised to see battles in the culture war being waged by church leaders who seek to position culture into a posture favorable to the church on the one hand or unfavorable on the other. The symbiotic nature between mainline Protestant churches in North America and their cultural surroundings rendered any focus on evangelism or educating newcomers unnecessary for most of the twentieth century.

Establishment Evangelism

Evangelism within the established church is not really necessary. With cultural support of Protestant congregations and their symbiotic nature, it appears as though Christianity is everywhere. Thus, evangelism committees of mainline Protestant congregations often limit their work to publishing advertisements and managing new-member classes, rarely engaging in more direct witnessing, person-to-person evangelism, or catechetical instruction efforts for newcomers. The assumption is that the people whom mainline Protestant churches are seeking to reach are already baptized Christians. These congregations do not need to evangelize newcomers as much as they need to market the organization to them. At most, we need to Christianize Christendom as the Reformers wanted, by encouraging individuals like Annie to find their way back to the fold.[10] Such a methodology leads toward a goal of numbers accumulation and membership rolls expansion, with much less consideration given to the transformative nature of the *ecclesia crucis* gathering around word and sacrament or to the convicting and compelling power of God's word. Organizational growth is a hallmark concern of establishment congregations.

Lutheran and other mainline Protestant congregations usually have an evangelism committee made up of members. Existing under many names, depending on the congregation's relationship to "evangelism," this committee and more specifically the people who serve on this committee are charged with the dual task of encouraging the congregation to "share their faith" and reaching out to and receiving newcomers. In most cases, the task of encouraging evangelizing among the members is neglected in light of the very specific tasks of coordinating publicity outside the congregation, organizing greeters and strategies for identifying visitors, conducting new-member classes for prospective members, following up with new-member assimilation and spiritual-gifts inventories after the class, and finally, in some congregations, also looking out for inactive members. In response to the reduction of evangelism to a committee, Craig Nessan, Professor of Contextual Theology at Wartburg Seminary, has proclaimed "the death of evangelism":

> By this we mean that the prevailing opinion about evangelism as one program in the church, among many other programs, must die. Evangelism has been reduced to one function of ecclesial existence and to the work of a committee alongside many other committees. In the worst-case scenario, evangelism has been reduced to an activity used to prop up the survival of the institutional church. Only when we begin to worry about church attendance or finances do we begin to consider the need for evangelism. The deeply rooted conviction that evangelism is an optional program of the church must die.[11]

What Nessan is naming, along with others who have been reinvestigating the call to mission and evangelizing, is the breakdown of cultural establishment.

Establishment Christian Education

In the same way that evangelizing methodologies often focus on the Reformation principles of Christianizing Christendom, in an establishment congregation, Christian educators give sole focus to educating Christians. In fact, it is rare to find a mainline Protestant congregation in which newcomer welcome is situated as a task of the Christian education committee. In Christian education's least dynamic form, congregations teach (children mainly) the biblical principles of being kind to others through deeds by living a good Christian moral life as witness to the world, hoping that if the children are caught, Christianity will be re-rooted in North America. Often relegated to a committee in establishment congregations, Christian education might also be led by a director of Christian education or volunteer Sunday school superintendent. Sunday school (for children), confirmation instruction (particularly for adolescents), Bible study and perhaps a forum (for adults) usually take place within a classroom setting. Largely curriculum-oriented or expert-driven Christian education programs teach the Bible, catechism, worship life of the church, and perhaps some church history.

For the younger age levels in particular, education serves in part to prepare one for full membership into the organization/congregation. For instance, it was common for early- and mid-twentieth-century Lutheran churches to examine each confirmand publicly before the whole congregation, prior to the rite of confirmation (and, thus, prior to acceptance as a full member). However important, well, and good this type of education for children and adolescents is—and today, "traditional" classroom education is too often dismissed, much to the church's detriment—it is overwhelmingly bent toward the goal of full

membership in the local congregation and (to some extent) the wider denomination. That is, education too often resembles a program of information-saturation transmission and is treated as a check box toward fulfilling adolescent rites of passage. Too often, the quality of education programs drops off after confirmation, that is, after one has become an "official" or "established" member of the congregation.

The ministry programs of establishment congregations do not expect actually to minister to non-Christians. These ministries are often ill equipped to articulate the Christian faith in an apologetic fashion, or speak to the truth claims of the faith with any conviction or certitude, perhaps because the leaders and members themselves have rarely had to do so. More often than not, mainline churches are equipped to describe themselves in terms of what they are *not*: how they are not like the Roman Catholics or the Evangelicals, or even how Lutherans are not quite like the Methodists or the Presbyterians (for example). But rarely are our churches able to speak affirmatively with clarity about who and what they *are* as the *ecclesia crucis*.

Again, they can hardly be blamed in one sense, because for several generations, leaders have guided the church in an era of cultural establishment, of assuming to operate in a Christian culture. When the church operates in a Christian culture (or under the assumption of a Christian culture), the art of articulating Christian identity and meaning becomes unnecessary and unpracticed. Mainline churches have operated as low-threshold membership organizations for several generations now, failing to be unique places of faith-based meaning making and discipleship formation. Because of this cultural positioning, church leaders and members are rarely in a position to speak of their faith or Christian vocation in terms meaningful to a nonbeliever. Assuming a Christian cultural context in which to conduct Christian ministry, mainline Christians are largely not practiced in the art of speaking of faith in ways that make sense to the nonbeliever—or to the newcomer whose prior experience of church may have been sporadic attendance at Sunday school twenty years earlier (see Annie).

Educating Newcomers

Only nine percent of mainline Protestant congregations educate their newcomers,[12] let alone welcome or encourage their participation. When these congregations do practice newcomer education, it is often a few meetings with the pastor, oriented around the local congregation's traditions, customs, and

structure. The pastor may also discuss the congregation's life together, describe why certain worship practices are done in the way they are, outline his or her theological perspective, introduce the staff or congregational leaders, and finally, give a tour of the physical plant. Once they have completed this process, the baptized newcomers are welcomed to join the congregation as full members through an Affirmation of Baptism rite. If any newcomers are unbaptized, they would be baptized during a worship service. Protestant congregations accept newcomers "straight off the street into full membership."[13] This happens because there is no distinction between the cultural practices of Christianity established in North America per se and Christianity practiced within a particular congregation.

This is not the case for all congregations. Nancy Ammerman explains that, while many Protestant congregations accept an inquirer "straight off the street," sectarian groups (e.g., Jehovah's Witness, Latter-Day Saints) have intense periods of membership education prior to initiation, and conservative congregations (e.g., American Baptists, Brethren, Assemblies of God) initially accept the newcomer and follow up immediately with a process of "discipleship."[14] The discipleship process in Evangelical churches often includes a period in which new converts are shepherded by experienced members. Sectarian groups and conservative congregations tend to highlight differences in their relationship with culture, demanding transformation within the newcomer. Within Ammerman's research, Roman Catholic congregations and Orthodox communities are the most likely to host membership education (44 percent do so), followed by African American Protestant congregations, at 30 percent.[15] The point does not need to be belabored; the existence of these more elaborate or more intensive initiation practices indicates that Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and African American Protestant congregations clearly do not see themselves as part of the established culture.

How might established mainline Protestant congregations respond to their waning cultural establishment? A congregation might simply ignore it. Or a congregation might, like the sectarian religious groups noted in the previous paragraph, highlight differences in relationship to culture. Is there another way? From 2005 to 2006, I engaged in a qualitative research study exploring the newcomer-welcoming process of eight churches in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Annie's congregation was one of these eight. All eight congregations choose to recover the ancient practice of the catechumenate as their process for welcoming newcomers. These congregations were opting to respond constructively to the waning cultural

establishment, instead of ignoring it. I was intrigued and sought to find out what was going on.[16]

Briefly, the catechumenate process in the ELCA is modeled after the Roman Catholic initiation process called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In ELCA congregations, the catechumenate is a newcomer-welcoming process that consists of four distinct periods: inquiry, catechumenate, baptism, and baptismal living.[17] A liturgical rite that takes place during the congregation's worship service marks each period. These rites include welcome, enrollment, baptism, and sometimes a rite of affirmation of Christian vocation. A similar process to prepare newcomers who have been baptized and are seeking affirmation of baptism for reception into a membership, restoration to membership, or reaffirmation at a life transition involves four periods: inquiry, affirmation, candidacy, and baptismal living.[18] The rite of baptism would be adapted to a rite of affirmation of baptism for this process. This second process, adapted directly from the catechumenate, is more commonly practiced in ELCA congregations, since adult baptisms are not very common.[19]

During the initial period, called inquiry, the newcomer (inquirer) is matched with a sponsor—a baptized Christian who walks alongside the inquirer as mentor and model of the faith, encouraging the inquirer to ask questions about faith, religion, and spiritual experience. A catechist, generally also a layperson, walks alongside the inquirer and the sponsor, serving as a teacher and model of the faith. During this first period, the inquirer meets with his or her sponsor as often as possible and participates in worship, small-group Bible studies that include prayer, and other fellowship and service events of the faith community.

When inquirers begin to ask deeper questions related to faith and specific questions related to the story of Jesus Christ, they become catechumens. This second period is also open-ended and is called specifically the catechumenate or affirmation. The deeper, more specific questions of the individual are addressed in small groups with other newcomers and/or together with pastors, sponsors, and catechists. The catechumen continues to participate in worship, Bible studies with prayer, and other fellowship and service events of the congregation. The third period within the process is an intense period of baptismal preparation or candidacy that engages some of the documents of the Christian Faith, including the creeds, catechisms, and confessions. This third period often occurs (although not necessarily) during the weeks of Lent leading up to the Easter Vigil, at which the newcomer is baptized or affirmed.[20] The final period, historically called *mystagogy*,[21] occurs throughout the fifty days

of Pentecost. The Lutheran catechumenate resources emphasize this period as baptismal living: "a life-long period during which the newly baptized grow more deeply into the practice of faith and Christian life."[22] During this period, the newly baptized and newly affirmed are encouraged to reflect upon their experience and their vocational identity as shaped by the Christian faith, Christian practices, and daily dying and rising. Following this ancient pattern of the catechumenate, congregations have a basic structure to help established members focus on and orient around welcoming the newcomer to Christ and Christian faith, encouraging newcomer catechesis and participation, and supporting the newcomer's ongoing life of faith lived out daily in the world.

As I learned about this process, I imagined its potential as a deliberate and structured newcomer-welcoming process for the ELCA. The more time I spent with catechumenate congregations and practitioners, the more I became fascinated with the language developing around its adaptation, particularly in regard to the theological discourse. For example, catechumenate practitioners consistently encourage congregations to be *countercultural*. Practitioners describe the catechumenate of the early church as a lengthy process of Christian initiation developed during the period of Christian persecution when Christian conversion was thoroughly countercultural. So, too, catechumenate practitioners make direct analogies between the early church and the situation of today's church, noting the need for the membership's distinct identity as disciples of Jesus who are equipped for life and ministry in the face of growing secularism[23] (or, more accurately, the reduction of Christian cultural establishment). For catechumenate practitioners, the catechumenate provides a distinguishing mark in an otherwise indistinguishable posture of Christianity within Christendom. The catechumenate, no longer responding to martyrdom in the face of persecution, gives attention to the supreme countercultural practice of reading the Bible as a story of death and resurrection with ultimate meaning for our lives in the face of a death-denying culture.[24] The catechumenate offers "a way" to break down false ideologies that the prevailing culture tries "to sell" and instill the possibility of life abundant under the cross.[25] This way provides a countercultural Christian community's experience of God.

While I do like the language of "recognizing false ideologies and idolatries," I do not like the language of counterculture or alternative. To be countercultural is not the ideal posture of the Christian congregation—quite the contrary. The posture of the people under the cross is to be a movement that engages the world with suffering love. Furthermore, the rhetoric of counterculture has unintentionally (or perhaps intentionally) led some catechumenate congregations to an "insiders versus outsiders" posture with

regard to newcomer versus established members and the church versus the world's culture. Established members are protected from a chaotic outside culture and thus represent something counter to all that is outside, including the newcomer. Or at the very least, the newcomer is held in suspicion until the tension between promise and question is reduced. To define Christianity as alternative or counter to everything else is an oversimplification.[26]

The Task of Welcoming Newcomers

It should be considered also that most established members on the inside of congregations do not stay there throughout the week. Congregations are not ascetic monasteries. Rather, established members move in and out of the congregation, participating in the world *and* in the church. The *ecclesia crucis* is a movement. The movement of the *ecclesia crucis* is relational—it needs the world—and only gains its identity in the task of relating to the world. But this movement is not away from the world; it is engagement with the world. The countercultural approach often leads to the church's disengagement from the world without the possibility for reengaging as a movement turned toward the world in suffering love. What is needed is an approach that urges congregations not to be countercultural in a way that creates insiders and outsiders. Congregations cannot oppose established members and newcomers or the church and the world, but must articulate the need for both.

Welcoming newcomer questions within the *ecclesia crucis* occurs at the boundary of the church and the world. A Christian identity is not static, just as the *ecclesia crucis* is not static. A Christian identity is fluid and negotiated in relation to the promise of God and what is going on in the here and now. Together with theologian Katherine Tanner, I recommend that to steer clear of the poles of asceticism (withdrawal/countercultural) on the one hand and indistinguishability (symbiotic relationship/Christendom) on the other, discipleship in the twenty-first century needs to be a task in and of itself.[27] The task is to learn how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ through Christian practices. A cruciform catechesis is learning that arises from newcomers and established members participating together in Christian discipleship practices.

In her book *Theories of Culture*, Tanner maps the influence of modern anthropology on theology, believing that theology should take into account the new directions in the postmodern study of culture in anthropology.[28] Cultures are less and less self-contained and clearly bounded units, internally consistent, and unified wholes of beliefs and values simply transmitted to all members of their respective groups as principles of social order. Rather, cultures are

more and more interactive processes, fragmented, negotiated, indeterminate, conflictual, and porous. When modern anthropology sees culture as bounded, fixed, integrated, united, and holistic in meaning and identity, it is easy to embody a countercultural approach that pulls the outsider to the inside to reduce any tension. A postmodern anthropology stresses much of the opposite, highlighting the porous nature of culture and the negotiation of meaning within conflict that erupts within relationships.

Tanner sees the distinction between modern and postmodern conceptions of culture most clearly when Christians gather around discipleship practices. She argues convincingly that if Christians all have to agree on the theological essentials of practice before participating in a practice, we will never get to practicing what it means to be Christian or have anything concrete to teach our children. Rather, what is important is that we share the sense of figuring out what discipleship is. Christians are unified "by the effort Christians make to proclaim and be the disciples of God's Word—a unity of task and not necessarily of accomplishment."[29] As with building sand castles, we find joy in the task of building the castle, not in its completion. Discipleship is not a goal in and of itself; rather, discipleship occurs in the ongoing task within Christian practices of faith meeting doubt, hope meeting despair, and love meeting the suffering world. Christianity as a task neither resists being defined as countercultural nor seeks Christendom establishment. "Instead Christianity has its identity as a task. Christianity has its identity in the form of a task of looking for one."[30]

Noting the way subaltern groups adopt and change the ideals and practices of dominant groups Tanner suggests, "Differences between ways of life are often therefore established by differences of use and not by the distribution of entirely discrete cultural forms to one side or the other of a cultural boundary. Cultural difference is more a matter of how than of what; it is not so much what cultural materials you use as what you do with them that establishes identity."[31] When newcomers and established members practice discipleship, they are not creating discrete cultural forms, but using cultural materials in a certain way that matters for Christian discipleship. For instance, the practice of contemplative prayer shifts when situated in a Christian community, even though it might appear to be similar to the meditation practice within a Buddhist community. Or a moment of silence situated in a public forum is significantly different from silent prayer situated before Bible study in the congregation, even though it might be perceived as the same. Christians and non-Christians alike might share the cultural materials within these practices, but Christians situate and frame cultural materials in relation to the source and norm of faith, and different Christians bring to these practices local and distinct narratives. To participate in

Christian discipleship practices, newcomers need to learn the local elements of a practice, its resources (materials), frameworks, and perceptions.

But lest we imagine there is no distinguishing factor between Christian and non-Christian practices, it is important to clarify what a boundary looks like in a postmodern understanding of culture. The "distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed by the boundary as *at it*."[32] When established members recognize their Christian way of life is distinct from other cultural, religious, and congregational ways of life, newcomers' questions are inevitably expected and anticipated. The Seekers recognized the boundary and anticipated Annie's questions. At the boundary, the Seekers and Annie constructed a distinctive Christian identity with one another through the task of looking for one.

Defining Disestablishment

In his book *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Hall proposes that congregations take an active role in the reduction of Christian cultural establishment, rather than passively letting this reduction occur at the expense of a more precipitous decline in membership. Congregations need to disestablish themselves through active disengagement from dominant culture:[33]

> Concretely speaking, Christians must learn how to distinguish the Christian message from the operative assumptions, values, and pursuits of our host society, and more particularly those segments of our society with which, as so-called mainstream churches, we have been identified. Because most of the denominations in question are bound up with middle-class Caucasian, and broadly liberal elements of our society, what we have to learn is that the Christian message is not just a stained-glass version of the worldview of that same social stratum.[34]

I appreciate Hall's use of the word *distinguish*, which is a recognition of the boundary. But I am not comfortable with Hall's proposal for congregations to disengage in order to reengage in order to become "the cruciform body of Jesus Christ, a priestly and prophetic community of 'the Way.'"[35] Disengagement is too close to "countercultural." Taking a cue from Tanner and recognizing that Hall's proposal to disengage uses a modern approach to culture as a boundaried whole, which is not realistic, I'd like to reverse Hall's proposal: Christian

congregations need only engage, and that engagement happens through the welcome of newcomer questions.

Notice that engagement is not simply engagement of the newcomer who walks through the door, but engagement with the newcomer's questions. These questions represent more than questions, as they include the newcomer's life story, desires, hopes, and pain. Engagement is also welcoming the questions of the very newcomer who shows up, not the newcomer the congregation anticipates will show up once the leaders get their brochure, tour, and welcome committee in place. (I contend that most congregations miss opportunities to meet all the ones who actually show up while evangelism committees are perpetually getting ready.)

Tanner speaks of engagement as disarticulation. This disarticulation begins within the newcomer's questions that expose differences of interpretation among Christians themselves, not to mention between Christians and non-Christians: "Christian practices cannot take up the elements of another way of life as they form a whole; a different use of them requires a form of selective attention by which they are wrested out of their usual contexts in another way of life. They must be disarticulated, so to speak, taken apart in order to be put together again in a new way, to form a new pool of associations or a new organization of elements with weightings different from what they had elsewhere."[36] Tanner insists that the identity of Christianity should be summed up as an *unanswerable question*. And, I would add, the unanswerable question is embodied in the ever-present presence of the newcomer's question. Christian discipleship practices ought to be

> a genuine community of argument, one marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift, in keeping with the shared hope of good discipleship, proper faithfulness, and purity of witness. This is the sort of unity of mutual admonition and concern that one finds in the letters of Paul. It is something like what Augustine talked about as the new Christian virtue of sociability: a solidarity of love and common hope, which eschews compulsion by allowing all decisions to be free, a community ruled by humility and not by way of the advantage of superior power.[37]

Following this line of thought, Christian discipleship practices are not established productions; rather, "they are always prone to dissolution, to be taken apart, reorganized, and their elements reinterpreted in the process."[38]

With joy the ecclesia crucis entertains the unanswerable question, eagerly taking up the task of figuring out what a Christian identity looks like through discipleship practices.

The Power of Disestablishment

Now we can identify the difference between congregations that, like Annie's, welcome newcomers and their disarticulations around Christian practices and congregations that are struggling with the awkward relationship between established members and newcomers. The latter congregations are using the catechumenate as a deliberate newcomer-welcoming process in established ways to preserve the static nature of the church, reducing the tension that exists when newcomers are present. In the worst case, established members take sides for or against newcomers. In Annie's congregation, the catechumenate was a ministry of welcoming newcomers that facilitated Annie's participation in discipleship practices and where established members were drawn toward Annie through her questions.

Newcomer disarticulation around Christian practices together with established members becomes the site of creative theological judgment. Active and deliberative disestablishment is engagement, welcoming newcomers (and their questions) to participation in the practices of discipleship within the congregation. Disestablishment is welcoming disarticulations within the *ecclesia crucis.* The *ecclesia crucis* is church when it is practicing the confession of faith, hope, and love, welcoming newcomers into discipleship practices where faith meets doubt, hope meets despair, and love meets the suffering world. A cruciform catechesis occurs in the tension between question and promise, ultimately reengaging the congregation in the world.

The Seekers in their identification with Annie engaged their own doubts, came face-to-face with their own despair, and saw incarnate before them the suffering world. Week after week, with Joanne's careful preparation, they came together to discuss the Bible, pray with one another, share in Christian conversation, worship weekly on Sundays with the larger congregation, and together discern their Christian identity in relation to Annie and indeed to one another. Around the deliberate practice of welcoming newcomers, the established members and even the wider community that professed faith in Jesus Christ stepped into Annie's doubt. They engaged the despair and suffering of Annie and the world by engaging her questions with faith, hope, and love.

Notes

1. All the names of research participants have been changed. Annie's story comes from my research for the Faithful Practices Project at Princeton Theological Seminary between 2002 and 2004. More details about my research design can be found in the appendix.

2. The pastor told me later that what Annie described as "confirmation" was going to be the Affirmation of Baptism rite within the Lutheran Church. Two high school boys were going to be "confirmed" with the Affirmation of Baptism rite at the Easter Vigil. It was easier for Annie to describe the rite as confirmation rather than "affirmation of baptism," particularly since Annie had never been confirmed in the Russian Orthodox Church. This rite and opportunity meant a great deal to her.

3. The Easter Vigil is dramatic worship with three movements: light and readings, baptism and the remembrance of baptism, and a Holy Communion Mass. The vigil is kept on the eve of Easter. Worship begins with the congregation gathered outside in darkness of the night. A bonfire is lit to represent Christ's light coming in the midst of darkness into the world. The congregation moves from the bonfire to a worship space in which twelve pericopes from the Hebrew and New Testaments are read. After the readings, the congregation moves to the font to celebrate the baptism of a catechumenal candidate and/or remember the baptism of all who are gathered. The baptism is followed by the Easter acclamation that Christ has risen, and the worship space is fully lit and decorated with Easter lilies as the congregation proceeds with the readings for Easter Day, a sermon, and celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In some congregations, these movements occur in a different order.

4. While the union has been active for nearly a hundred years, the churches are becoming increasingly independent of one another.

5. Constitution of the United States, Amendment I.

6. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 48.

7. Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture, ed. Alan Neely, H. Wayne Pipkin and Wilbert R. Shenk (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 31–32.

8. Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 464.

9. Ibid.

10. See Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville, KY: Westminister John Knox, 2004).

11. Craig L. Nessan, "After the Death of Evangelism: The Resurrection of an Evangelizing Church," in *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*, ed. Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 114.

12. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 33–35. I have no reason to believe that the membership education practice of ELCA congregations varies significantly from the figure representative of mainline congregations.

13. Ibid., 33.

14. Ibid., 33.

15. Ibid., 35.

16. I developed the framework for my research with a dual focus, attending to the catechumenate's role in the life of the congregation and the catechumenate's role in the life of the individual, whether a newcomer or an established member. Within the congregational perspective, I explored the catechumenate as an intentional process of congregational renewal fostering individual and corporate faith through catechesis and worship with the intent of strengthening an evangelizing culture and outreach beyond the church walls. In each congregation, I was eager to see how leaders welcome newcomers, how they integrated the

catechumenate into the congregation's other ministries such as Christian education and service in the world, how the role of sponsors encouraged the growth and maturity of established members in the congregation, and how the catechumenate spurred a missional or evangelizing spirit within the congregation.The second focus of my research explored the catechumenate as a newcomer-welcoming process for addressing the faith questions of newcomers as they become a part of a congregation (through baptism or affirmation of baptism) and nurturing the faith of individuals already members of a congregation (worshippers, sponsors, and catechists). To address this focus, I developed a research question with specific attention to catechetical process and development of spiritual practices within the catechumenate in congregations. My research at each congregation consisted of a semistructured interview with church leaders (pastors and associates) and catechumenate leaders (catechists), a focus group with newcomers who joined after participating in the catechumenate process, a focus group with those newcomers who decided to join without participating in the catechumenate process, and a focus group with members who participated in the catechumenate as sponsors. More details about my research design and the questions that guided the semistructured interviews and the focus groups can be found in the appendix.

17. Samuel Torvend and Lani Willis, eds., *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 8. See also *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012).

18. Dennis Bushkofsky, *What Do You Seek? Welcoming the Adult Inquirer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

19. I am aware that liturgical historian Maxwell Johnson and others are deeply unhappy with the adaptation of the practice of the catechumenate with individuals who are already baptized. Johnson has a grave concern that there is too much confusion and not enough distinction between new converts and affirmers: "Such has led some to suggest that the real intent of the restored catechumenate in today's churches is but a new way to make 'converts' out of already baptized Christians, who seek to be received or transferred into another church." Johnson continues in a strong fashion, calling this practice lamentable. In addition, Johnson lifts up the concern of theologian Aiden Kavanagh, who said regarding this issue in 1987, "In all candor, I must confess that I give [the catechumenate] less than a fifty percent chance of success, and you will recall that I have been one of its most consistent public advocates for the past fifteen years." As much as I value the arguments made by these scholars, I do not agree with their conclusion. I believe the catechumenate is a helpful ministry for welcoming all newcomers—both the unbaptized and those affirming their faith. A modified version of RCIA is also practiced for newcomers who are already baptized. See Thomas H. Morris, *The RCIA: Transforming the Church; A Resource for Pastoral Implementation*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Paulist, 1997).

20. If the newcomer is already baptized, this period would explore the meaning of baptism and prepare the newcomer for an Affirmation of Baptism rite at the Easter Vigil. Whether the catechumenate should be reserved for the unbaptized only is an ongoing conversation among catechumenate practitioners. See note 19.

21. *Mystagogy* was the period during which the newly baptized explored the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion and their vocational callings in daily life.

22. Torvend and Willis, *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, 8.

23. Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer offer a helpful description of secularization: "Secularization theory postulates that religious worldviews, which base their authority on tradition, have given way to purely rational and experiential types of knowing which are part and parcel of modernity." Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization*, Studies in Practical Theology, ed. James W. Fowler, Don S. Browning, Friedrich Schweitzer, and Johannes A. van der Ven (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 57. Osmer and Schweitzer have also explored the recent critiques of secularization theory. "Scholars in various fields have recently called attention to three social phenomena that challenge secularization theory's analysis of what is happening to religion worldwide: (1) the continuing significance of what has been termed 'invisible religion,' (2) the continuing significance of

religiously motivated social movements, and (3) non-Western critiques of 'godless Western secular materialism." (57)

24. Bushkofsky, *What Do You Seek?*, 18, 20.

25. Torvend and Willis, *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, 36–46.

26. I recognize that the countercultural posture is reminiscent of Richard Niebuhr's Christ against culture typology. Niebuhr recognized that this might have been the posture of the first Christians toward the world, but he also delineates this posture's inadequacies. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 66. See also Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 42.

27. "Christianity has its identity as a task." Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 155.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 136.

30. Ibid., 155.

31. Ibid., 112.

32. Ibid., 115.

33. Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, 43.

34. Ibid., 44–45.

35. Ibid., 49.

36. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 117–18.

37. Ibid., 123–24.

38. Ibid., 164.