

## Summary of Redeemer, The Bronx (Wakefield), New York City

“Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, by God’s grace, is a praying community of service that receives, teaches, celebrates and shares Christ Jesus.” This is not just a mission statement for Redeemer, but the DNA of its identity, as seen in their speaking their mission statement as a congregation at every service at least once. And their mission statement highlights the formative nature of a catechumenate that is the spring of living water for this diverse community of Christ Jesus.

Founded in 1928, Redeemer has been a very stable community in a constantly changing Bronx. Having had only 5 pastors in their history, Pastor Dien Ashley Taylor has been pastor since 2000. Deaconess Raquel Rojas has been serving with him in ministry since 2010. Lay Director of Religious Education, Carol Sandblom, has been a member for over 61 years and has been educating children and youth for many years. They serve a growing congregation, one of the few remaining LCMS congregations in NYC, with a baptized membership numbering over 500. It is a congregation whose membership represents numerous cultural and racial backgrounds: Caucasian, Latino, African-American, African, Caribbean, Central American, South American, Asian, and others. While this ethnic diversity reflects the neighborhoods surrounding Redeemer, the catechumenate has enabled the formation of a community in which all are one since Christ is himself their peace (Ephesians 2:14).

Receiving disciples into this praying community is central to the congregation’s identity, forged through the catechumenate. The entire congregation owns the catechumenate and understands that the catechumenate is the means by which Redeemer births new Christians, whether youth or adult (the catechumenate also is the model for youth instruction and confirmation). This ownership is seen at both enrollment and confirmation when, not only the chosen sponsors, but numerous other members come forward to lay hands on the newly elect/confirmed. Members provide food and transportation, serve as accountability partners for those in the catechumenate, pray for catechumens—both on their own and in their presence—and regularly encourage the catechumens. As one catechumen said, “I knew I could reach out to my sponsor and those in the congregation I knew or had come to know and they would have my back.”

Redeemer is a teaching community. Both Pastor Taylor and Deaconess Rojas are 150% invested in teaching the catechumens. They teach the congregation as they lead them in gathering for worship, eating together, and serving one another and others. Deaconess Rojas instructs the adult catechumens on Sunday mornings during the Bible class hour with Pastor Taylor instructing through his preaching and liturgical leadership (He is the primary instructor for the youth catechumenate). Instruction is lead through a socratic method style involving lecture, question and answer, guided discovery, memorization, prayer, and worship. Each catechumenal season brings different emphases and instructional styles inculturated to that year’s cohort of catechumens.

The catechumenate is filled with celebration at Redeemer. The four traditional periods of the catechumenate mark the journey: Inquiry, Catechumenate, Enlightenment, and Mystagogy. Entrance into the catechumenate is marked ritually with the anointing of the forehead, ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands, and feet in the liturgy on the First Sunday in Advent. Enrollment into the period of Enlightenment is marked on the First Sunday in Lent with the laying on of hands during the signing of the Book of the Elect and prayer. The Scrutinies of Lent involve the sponsors and congregation gathering around the Elect as the Elect receive the Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, and the Our Father while the sponsors and congregation members gather around them, touch them, and pray for them during Lent III, IV, and V. The Elect attend the Chrism Mass on Holy Tuesday and see the oils that are used for exorcisms, baptisms, confirmations, ordinations, and healing being blessed. The District President signs the Book of the Elect that the Elect had signed on Lent I during the Chrism Mass so that all appreciate the connection with the wider Church. The catechumens’ feet

are washed on Maundy Thursday and they are named in the Bidding Prayer on Good Friday. The ritual celebration of the catechumenal journey culminates in baptism and confirmation with the oil of chrism, the vesting in a white garment, and the laying on of hands at the Easter Vigil. The assembly sings a verse of a hymn/song celebrating *each* catechumen/neophyte as a gift of God to the congregation. As one neophyte said, "Pastor put us at the center of the church." Food follows nearly every divine service and ritual celebration (food is usually present at each catechumenal class). Redeemer celebrates together by eating. As one catechumen said of the teaching and the ritual journey, "I didn't want it to end!"

At Redeemer, life in the catechumenate doesn't end because it continues in the life of the community. Pastor Taylor and Deaconess Rojas choose sponsors who already have connections with the catechumens, often more than one person and in consultation with the catechumens. But others voluntarily step forward and serve in a mentoring role as well. The official sponsors journey with the catechumens from the entrance into the catechumenate forward, especially during the period of Enlightenment. They attend the classes with the catechumens and offer encouragement, prayer and support. And they eat with the catechumens, forming a baptismal bond that gives shape to their life together as the family of God. Joy is evident in the liturgy as the many sponsors, and the whole congregation, pray for and celebrate these new children of God. As one neophyte said, "They welcomed me because they knew it took a lot to go through this journey" (nearly all the sponsors have made the catechumenal journey themselves).

Going through the catechumenal journey requires prayer. This is the reason Redeemer is the church "where God's people pray." The liturgies of Redeemer are one great prayer offered by the community, in eucharist to God and in intercession for Redeemer, for the community around it, and for the world. The catechumens are formed into this praying community. Their journey is a eucharistic journey. And through that experience of prayer in the community's liturgies and in the catechumenate itself they learn that Redeemer takes very seriously its vocation. They learn that they should as well. As one neophyte put it, "I see that being a Christian, there are expectations." And another said as a result of the culmination of their journey, "I feel like I have purpose, to walk the way Jesus walked." In this way Redeemer births Christians into its life together as a "praying community of service that receives, teaches, celebrates and shares Christ Jesus."