

Summary of St. John, Wheaton, IL

Pastor Scott Bruzek, senior pastor at St. John since 1998, describes the community of Wheaton in suburban Chicago as “a very church community [when he first came], but less so now; a very Republican community, but less so now; a very white community, but less so now.” Pastor Buchs said of the community, “Wheaton is suburbia.” In this affluent community where “people feel a need to keep up appearances,” the pastoral staff works intentionally to create and maintain a Christian community in which “love is the primary virtue” and people can be free to voice their vulnerabilities to any of the three spiritual shepherds of this flock. In the words of one person interviewed, in the catechumenal process “everything is seen through the lens that God loves you. God touches you and chooses you. You are his child.” This emphasis, she went on to say, is “balm for my naturally striving person.” The road to health and a congregational ethos centered in love has not come quickly nor easily. Twenty years ago the church's finances were precarious and its day school ultimately closed for financial reasons. But the things learned during the Catechumenate—orbiting Christ by embracing Scripture, Prayer, Liturgy and Eucharist, Tithing and Alms, through Mercy and a winsome Witness—have built a community of about 950 active members, with an average weekly attendance of 750.

During his two decades at St. John Pastor Bruzek has developed an intensive catechetical process required of people interested in congregational membership. “The Catechumenate: Welcome to St. John!” meets on Saturdays from 8:30 to 10:00 am, from mid/late September through Lent. The vicar lays out the donuts, bagels, fruit, coffee and tea by 8:30, fellowship over food happens organically, and the teaching hour begins at 9:00 am. Pastor Bruzek describes the classes as the “dating period”—so neophytes can get to know St. John and vice versa; although the expectation for attendance is high, there is no pressure for a commitment at the end. The various “periods” of the catechumenate (inquiry, catechesis, enlightenment) are not defined with public rituals; rather, these markers along the way are reflected in the pattern of pastoral care that is at the heart of St. John’s catechetical process. St. John uses a database to track regular visitors, intentionally inviting them to participate in the Saturday classes (via personal emails, weekly announcements, etc.) a few weeks before the fall start date. As Lent draws near, the pastor will have a conversation with each of the neophytes; those ready to become members will be welcomed at the Vigil through the LBS Rite of Confirmation or Reception of Members. Those not ready are assured that they will continue to receive pastoral care from the staff. Some people will attend the Saturday classes a second time before they are ready.

The invitation to the Eucharistic table is also done on an individual, pastoral basis. A lifelong LCMS couple interviewed recalled being welcomed to the table from their first visit; a woman coming from an evangelical background waited several months and had individual instruction with a pastor before communing; for the one neophyte interviewed who was baptized at the Vigil, that service was his full initiation into the church.

The one ritual during Lent in which the neophytes play a major role is the stripping of the altar at the Holy Thursday service. All neophytes are invited to participate and attend a training session led by the preschool director earlier in the week. When asked about the most meaningful ritual in the process, St. John neophytes consistently had more to say about the spiritual meaning of the Holy Thursday service and their participation in the altar stripping than the ritual of confirmation at the Easter Vigil, at which they made public declaration of their faith. As one neophyte said of the Holy Thursday service, “For me, [it communicated] a sense of spirituality—this brings you closer to the Lord. It’s the death he went through that makes you reflect on your life, life hereafter.” Most interviewees also recalled more about the post-Vigil party than the Vigil service; a ritual in own right, the post-Vigil party sounds absolutely fabulous. The woman raised in the evangelical tradition was shocked—shocked!—when they rolled out the kegs of beer! Members all bring a bottle of their favorite wine, and there is a feast of fat things.

Pastor Bruzek's giftedness as a teacher was a recurring theme in nearly every interview. The 8:30 am Saturday catechetical classes were never described as an onerous task one had to complete to earn the right of membership. On the contrary, one person interviewed had become a member after his first time through and had returned the next year and the next. Another person, working as a substitute teacher, told of missing a Saturday class and then using her *one free period* of the workday at school to view the recording of the missed session. To watch it then, she said, "was such a gift." That Pastor Bruzek is a very effective teacher was evident from the detailed content of his lessons reported by those interviewed and by their descriptions of his teaching methods. More than one couple recalled a cartoon with road kill and the caption "Get well soon," used to drive home the point that we are dead in our trespasses. The curriculum, developed by Pastor Bruzek over two decades, is based on the Divine Service, incorporating a rich amount of Scripture and covering the six chief parts of Luther's catechism as well.

Sunday worship at St. John is very atypical for a Midwestern, LCMS congregation. Highly liturgical, literally with "smells and bells" as a normal part of Divine Service, it is not surprising that many people I interviewed came from a Roman Catholic or Episcopal background and immediately felt comfortable with the formality and strong liturgical structure of the services. Yet those who came from non-liturgical backgrounds also expressed ways in which the worship of St. John fed them spiritually, a sign of the strength of the catechetical process based on the Divine Service.

Pastor Bruzek would say that St. John does not have a formal process of recruiting sponsors for the catechumens, but in truth the pastors are very intentional about linking catechumens to like-minded faithful members of St. John. More than one of the Millennial couples interviewed noted that Pastor Buchs, himself a Millennial, had invited their family to dinner in his home along with other families of their generation with children of similar ages. The ethos of love extends beyond the pastoral staff to the members, who eagerly invite their neighbors to visit St. John. One such couple described St. John as "a good fit" because of their disabled son. The neighbor who had encouraged them to visit St. John even removed the barrier that could have been a reason for not attending the catechumenal classes by providing the child care for their special-needs son.

In this community of "people [who] feel a need to keep up appearances," I was struck by the number of people interviewed who did not meet the standards of the intact nuclear family with perfect children. The family with the disabled son is but one example; another couple interviewed have three children—one his, one hers, and one theirs. And a third interviewee with a young son but not married to his father described St. John as "very welcoming" and said, "I don't feel like an outcast." St. John and its pastors are clear about the doctrinal beliefs of the LCMS, yet the Gospel message of forgiveness and grace offered to all people is the predominant message heard by all, seekers or long-time members. Through the liturgy and through the preaching and teaching of the pastors, the whole congregation has been formed into the Body of Christ, a body whose words and deeds are "a winsome witness" to the world.