



Follow-up report with regard to opportunities for catechetical teaching

A Summary

General Synod
November 10, 2011
MDO 11-02

Translation: E. Overeem

Table of contents

1	Introduction: decisions of Synod in 2007	5
2	Report concerning the proceedings of the consultation group	6
2.1	Report in 2008	6
2.2	Composition and method of the consultation group	6
3	Sketching the environment	7
3.1	Introduction	7
3.2	The world lived in and experienced by young people	7
3.3	Relevant trends	7
3.4	Outline of the state of affairs in the church youth	7
4	Aim and view on Catechetical Teaching	9
4.1	Aim: affirmation of baptism	9
4.2	View	9
5	Models and shapes of catechetical teaching	10
5.1	The well-tried traditional model	10
5.2	Evaluating the well-tried model	10
5.3	The course of life model	10
5.4	Evaluating the course of life model	11
6	Towards a framework of quality standards	12
6.1	Competences	12
6.2	Specification of learning objectives for catechumens	13
6.3	The learning congregation	13

1 Introduction: decisions of Synod in 2007

A Summary¹.

In November 2007 a report "Opportunities for Catechetical Teaching" was presented to Synod. The report concluded:

- in many congregations the interest of young people in catechetical teaching is decreasing;
- it takes a lot of effort for congregations to find people willing to teach faith instruction;
- knowledge of the Christian faith across the church is decreasing.

Synod decided to appoint a consultation group on catechetical teaching with a mandate:

- to be a platform for a diversity of organizations carrying out the actual work;
- to reflect upon the involvement of parents in the catechetical teaching of their children;
- to consult with theological and educational institutes in order to achieve a high training standard for ministers and ecclesial workers;
- to set up a Catechetical Teaching Fund in order to enable the development of new initiatives and to support local congregations, and
- to explore with the Protestant Theological University the feasibility of a scholarly research program.

¹ The translation only covers the first part of this report. The second half of this report outlines specifics of the Dutch ministries in their diversity, and of learning tools, methods, research and funding; it seems to be less relevant for an international forum.

2 Report concerning the proceedings of the consultation group

2.1 Report in 2008

In an initial progress report to Synod in 2008 the consultation group stated as its intentions:

- to further explore two models of catechetical teaching: the well-tried traditional model and the course of life model;
- to phrase standards for a basic knowledge of the Christian faith;
- to explore the criteria for multimedia practices in catechetical teaching;
- to develop a vision on equipping church councils and congregation members;
- to explore the role of parents in catechetical teaching, and
- to study the required competencies in catechetical teaching.

2.2 Composition and method of the consultation group

In order to function as a broad platform many stakeholders were invited to participate: representatives of church ministries, publishing companies and institutes for education. The relationship of the various stakeholders with the general synod however was different. It was therefore decided to subdivide the consultation group into the actual consultation group consisting exclusively of representatives of the church ministries and an advisory group as a platform for all stakeholders. The consultation group meets four times a year. The advisory group meets twice a year. The recommendations of the advisory group have been incorporated in this report.

3 Sketching the environment

3.1 Introduction

The context of catechetical teaching is the congregation. The proper dimension of catechetical teaching is the inauguration in the Christian community. The wider area should be taken into account as well: the environment which young people experience, their specific world with its elements and trends.

3.2 The world lived in and experienced by young people

A 2011 survey by Forum: *Jongeren en hun geloof (Young people and their faith)* showed as outcome:

- young believers experience that they are a minority; however it is a large and widely accepted minority.
- there is more space for personal faith, and less space for expressing faith with its consequences for society. Faith is by society perceived to be a private matter.
- young people feel supported by peer groups.
- orthodox young believers in particular feel in need of support by religious leaders and sharing with fellow believers.
- young believers need a religious supply of support that fits their world and that indicates how to live as believer in the Netherlands.
- young people value and respect institutions, traditions and expertise of grown-ups. Young people consider the senior generation to be an important part of the faith community.

A 2010 Handbook *Jongeren en religie (Young people and religion)* indicated three trends:

- a stagnation of secularization among young people; rather a reorganizing of religious involvement than a disappearing of this involvement;
- subjectivism and authenticity are important points of departure; social contexts for shaping religion become more vague;
- popular culture serves as a religious repertoire for young people in expressing their religion: a new intermediation of the sacred issues by youth culture.

3.3 Relevant trends

Joining the research with our own observations we indicate the following trends:

- the institutions have now to be facilitators and catalysts in a networking environment;
- young people need authenticity in conviction and in practice by role models they can identify with, rather than traditional cognitive instruction in institutions.
- internalized secularization is the stubborn reality in quite a few Christian congregations. This however is no final word. In many shapes and contents there appears to be a need for religion and spirituality. The interaction between the rich church tradition and new forms of being religious can be fruitful for the passing on of Christian faith.
- A new balance between individualization and the anchoring of Christian faith in communities is preeminent in the current dynamic context.

3.4 Outline of the state of affairs in the church youth

- In addition to the official supply of catechetical teaching and youth activities young people organize activities themselves;
- there is a free internet market of equipping tools, outside of the church/congregation people belong to;

- the age of “pillars” and of denominationalism has passed; young people make their own choices;
- the distinction between youth work and catechetical teaching becomes blurred, sometimes by accident, sometimes by intentional policy;
- young people pick and choose their own faith. An official curriculum for inauguration by a set of convictions, practices and rituals seems to be at odds with this trend;
- parents and leaders face difficulty in expressing their own faith in an authentic and appealing way.

4 Aim and view on Catechetical Teaching

4.1 Aim: affirmation of baptism

Baptism is about dying with Christ and living with Him. Catechetical teaching means counseling and equipping young people to live like baptized believers. In the Church Order the entire congregation is called to be and to remain a learning community. The spiritual education is about building up attitude and behavior, and not just shaping the intellect. This change in human life has cognitive, affective and attitudinal dimensions.

4.2 View

We would like to reaffirm and to update the vision expressed in the 2007 report. We want to do justice to the traditional and still current intention of the church to teach old and young people to live by God's promises and according to his commandments. However we intend to pay attention as well to the actual world we live in with our experiences: the dynamic context of self-confident congregation members. This can be done by emphasizing that the entire congregation is a learning environment, and by expressing the need for authentic role models. Further exploring this view we want to develop a framework of quality standards by:

- defining the learning objectives;
- setting standards which a congregation as learning environment has to meet;
- developing a profile of competences for the catechetical teacher enabling the teacher to be-come a key figure in joining the content of the curriculum and the dynamic environment of the congregation.

5 Models and shapes of catechetical teaching

5.1 The well-trying traditional model

This model can be described as a route with a point of departure (baptism) and a terminal end (affirmation of baptism, a lifelong attitude expressing itself in public profession of faith and partaking in the Holy Supper). The determining principles are: God takes the initiative; He expects his choice to be affirmed by the Holy Spirit in our choice. God involves people in this: in this covenant theology the role of the faith community is essential. The church is a family and young people are members becoming inaugurated in this family. A family is a network of relationships; catechetical teaching and youth work are integral parts of this network and should not be approached in an insular way. The faith community surrounds the parents and the children.

Starting point is God's revelation; point of departure is the actual context and experience of young people. Catechetical teaching requires resolve and flexibility; however the starting point takes precedence over the point of departure.

5.2 Evaluating the well-trying model

- This route has been practiced over centuries and has proven to be existential rather than only intellectual. There is a shift going on in thinking about profession of faith: can this be done in different phases, because affirmation of baptism is a lifelong process? And can admission to the Holy Supper become an encouraging and supporting station en route rather than a terminal? Those questions become more urgent by the trends identified in the previous paragraphs.
- This traditional route has been the responsibility of ministers, elders and ecclesial workers. Reducing the size of the groups requires more catechetical teachers, helping young people to express their personal faith. Young people prefer to share in small groups of contemporaries. The teacher is required to have expertise and to live in a personal relationship with God.
- The pick-and-choose mentality of young people is at odds with the traditional curriculum. There should be a variety of groups and a number of opportunities for influx in participation.
- Tools for catechetical learning need to have an open and flexible construction allowing users to adapt according to their different needs and contexts. Church ministries should operate in a networking context.
- Rather than being an insular process, the well-trying model should be integrated in the context of the entire faith community.

5.3 The course of life model

Human life is characterized by explicit or implicit moments of border crossing and transition: birthdays, graduations, the firstborn child, the loss of a loved person, becoming an elder or a team leader. The course of life model intends to connect these moments with God, the Bible and the faith tradition. Weren't biblical figures characterized by these moments as well? And can't we share these moments with our contemporaries? Our personal narrative and the God narrative can be connected as a gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24, 13-35). In this model the intention is to give meaning to small and big moments of transition. The teacher is instrumental in connecting the two narratives. This model is not only aimed at cognition, but at recognition and sharing. The congregation lives from the encounter between the narrative of God and the human narrative, which by God's grace are not mutually exclusive. In this model the pupil is central. However in the congregation there is an interacting process where all participants can become pupils and teachers at all

times. There is a learning process between the generations. In a teaching role an open attitude is required towards the course of life experienced by other people, and a willingness to express the connection of the own narrative with the narrative of God.

5.4 Evaluating the course of life model

- In some congregations this model has been introduced by intentional policy, in other congregations it has grown by itself;
- the content of catechetical teaching is brought at the level of the experiences and individual learning processes of young people;
- a planned curriculum and a spontaneous curriculum can be joined; the role of the faith community is rather facilitating than obliging;
- the distinction between catechetical teaching and youth work carries less weight;
- teachers must be authentic role models, being fully aware of and sensitive to the context of young people;
- the aim of catechetical teaching should be clearly identified as indicating that in every transition of human life by God's grace a passage is possible, even at the final border of death;
- the entire congregation is a learning environment; this should be expressed more strongly.

6 Towards a framework of quality standards

6.1 Competences

Catechetical teachers should be authentic role models. The developing of competences therefore is important. Competences are skills, knowledge and elements of attitude. What kind of competences does a teacher need for achieving this, either as professional or as volunteer? The following outline should not be interpreted as a set of required job qualifications; rather it is a bird's-eye view of specific skills, knowledge and attitudes fitting a catechetical teacher. It may assist catechetical teachers to analyze their current practice and support teachers in looking for tools that may improve their capacities.

- Educational and didactical competency: to arrange a safe and challenging learning environment inviting pupils to explore what is offered; to achieve relationships that offer space, security, connectedness and trust; being able to be a role model.
 - o Examples² of skills: to value the uniqueness of each individual pupil; to be able to handle different methods and ways of working; aimed at rewarding rather than maintaining order, etc.
 - o examples of knowledge: basic knowledge of developmental psychology; basic knowledge of the contents and experiences of faith in the Protestant-Christian tradition; awareness of being a role model with Christian values and norms, etc.
- Competency relating to content: encouraging pupils to gather knowledge and experience of the Protestant-Christian tradition; being aware of the normative character of the communication.
 - o Examples of skills: making accessible basic contents of the Christian faith and its Jewish background to children; connecting the meaning of the tradition with the own biography and making this instrumental in the learning situation and in the biography of the pupils, etc.
 - o examples of knowledge: next to a basic knowledge of the Protestant-Christian tradition and its Jewish background, a considered opinion and knowledge of the proper religious biography, etc.
- Hermeneutical-missionary competency: making a meaningful connection of the sources of Christian tradition with the context of the pupils in an open and inviting way.
 - o Examples of skills: being able to make the Bible instrumental as source for identity; being able to identify and to express the relationship between God and human beings; an easy handling of culture and society; being able to express religious deliberations and experiences in prayer, etc.
 - o examples of knowledge: basic knowledge of the outline of the Bible and of fundamental items in the Christian tradition; basic knowledge of (history of) modern culture; being aware of different ways to express the relationship between god and human beings, etc.
- Interpersonal-organizational competency: arranging an inviting, orderly, clear and output-oriented learning- and working climate.
 - o Examples of skills: being able to motivate and to encourage, being able to identify and handle group-dynamical processes, to have a sense of closeness and distance, etc.
 - o examples of knowledge: basic knowledge of coaching leadership, knowledge of protocols dealing with sexual harassment and unwarranted intimacies, etc.

² Note of translator: in the original report over sixty (!) required skills and knowledge requirements are identified. This seems to be distracting from the basic trust of the report. Translating all of this did not make sense to me; I therefore summarized some of the requirements in examples.

- Cooperation competency: maintaining good relationships with other teachers and volunteers and with representatives of the local congregation. Maintaining a relationship with the parents of the pupils.
 - o Examples of skills: being able to cooperate in a constructive way, being able to consult with co-workers and others, being able to express the religious development of pupils to their parents, etc.
 - o examples of knowledge: awareness of the catechetical policy of the local congregation, knowledge of ways of dealing with conflicts, etc.
- Contextual-reflective competency: maintaining a relationship with educational institutions that can contribute to innovation; developing the personal opinions and skills; equipping other people.
 - o Examples of skills: being able to reflect upon the personal view on religious issues and the relationship with the general opinion on catechetical teaching and the view of the local congregation; being able to communicate, etc.
 - o Examples of knowledge: having knowledge of resource persons or institutions; being aware of different methods for reflection, etc.

6.2 Specification of learning objectives for catechumens³

Catechetical teaching is an organized learning process. Internalizing the convictions and practices of the Protestant-Christian tradition (in cognition, affection and attitude) can be specified in learning objectives. The description of a diversity learning objectives might help congregations to set up a balanced curriculum for catechetical teaching.

- Theological objectives/objectives with regard to content: catechumens should be able to understand their lives in relationship to God and to the Christian tradition. They therefore should be aware of the basic contents and expressions of the Protestant-Christian tradition in a connecting with their own biographies. Catechumens should be respectful for the diverse opinions and experiences they encounter.
- Social-emotional objectives: the group of catechumens is instrumental in experiencing the Christian community. Positive experiences with God and with fellow Christians are specific intentions of the catechetical learning situation.
- Symbolical-hermeneutical objectives: catechumens should be able to see coherence between the sources of the Christian tradition and their own lives in the actual context, with sensitivity to words, images, and practices, such as prayer.
- Ritual objectives: catechumens should know the current ritual practices in the local faith community and is able to participate.
- Diaconal-ethical objectives: to serve God is to serve other people. Catechumens should be aware of this altruistic orientation of the Christian faith, and should be able to handle this basic value in their daily life practice.
- Missionary objectives: Christianity did grow in coherence with a non-Christian culture. Catechumens should be aware to identify important trends in current culture and to connect those with basic contents and values of the Christian tradition.
- Contextual objectives: catechumens should be able to connect the catechetical learning situation with the convictions and practices of their parents as important partners in the local faith community.

6.3 The learning congregation

The third important element in a catechetical competent learning environment is the local congregation. This congregation is a community of lifelong learning. The features of a learning congregation can be identified, rather in an outline than in an imperative list.

³ In the original report: par. 6.5

- Theological features/features with regard to content: the congregation is not a noncommittal gathering of people. All places where congregation members want to define themselves in relationship to God are sites where catechumens might find identity and content.
- Social/emotional features: living in relationship with God isn't an exclusively cognitive activity, but should be connected with positive experiences through the experience of faith. Wherever in a congregation respect, easy contact, pleasant cooperation and adequate support can be found we have sites for catechetical learning and experience.
- Symbolical-hermeneutical features: the symbols of Christian faith in the congregation can be shared expressions of the meaning of faith. A congregation using these symbols and connecting them with the basic concepts of faith becomes a site where catechumens can find deepening of their awareness of symbols.
- Ritual features: specific forms and practices in the congregations enable catechumens in participating and understanding these rituals as carriers of the meaning of Christian faith.
- Diaconal-ethical features: to serve God is to serve other people. The altruistic orientation of the Christian faith should time and again be connected in an explicit way to the basic concepts of this faith. The congregation in its ethical orientation can become a site of learning and experiencing for catechumens.
- Missionary features: catechumens should be enabled to meet congregation members able to give a confident testimony of their faith in connection with their biography. Sites have to be created where an explicit exchange can be found between the Christian faith and the contextual culture. It is important to pay attention to the cultures of young people in particular.
- Contextual features: contextual catechetical teaching pays attention to the upbringing in the families. This is a part of the congregational life as well and can be a site where faith can be "learned".