

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

EVERY CATECHIST
MUST ASK OF SEEKERS

By Nick Wagner



A SIMPLE TECHNIQUE TO IMPROVE FAITH FORMATION

There is one thing that every catechist should start doing immediately to dramatically improve your parish's formation processes. This technique is so simple that it doesn't require extra team members, additional time, or extensive training. You can use this technique with unbaptized, uncatechized, barely evangelized seekers as well as baptized, catechized Christians who have a deep relationship with Jesus. You can use this technique with children and their families, teens, and young adults.

Yet, as flexible and simple as this technique is, it is the one thing that will radically improve the way your parish formation happens.

It is just this: ask five questions. I know, that sounds way too easy to have such an outsized impact. But these are not just any questions. These are questions that are based on the research of educator and author Malcom S. Knowles. Knowles pioneered many groundbreaking adult learning techniques, and this one is his most powerful. He said:

In my fifty years as an adult education practitioner I have begged, borrowed, and stolen many ideas and techniques from other educators, and most of them have improved my practice. But the one that has made the most difference in what I do and has solved the most problems that have plagued me as an educator is the process of contract learning. (*Using Learning Contracts*, xi)

Knowles hit upon the practice of creating individualized learning contracts with every student he taught. I've taken his underlying principles and applied that to the faith formation process so catechists can develop individualized faith formation plans with every seeker we encounter.

The process of developing a faith formation plan starts with these five basic questions:

1. Where have you been? (History)
2. Where are you now? (Diagnosis)
3. Where do you want to get to? (Objectives)
4. How are you going to get there? (Strategies and resources)
5. How will you know that you have arrived? (Evaluation)

HOW TO ASK THE QUESTIONS

The questions that we ask are important and the *way* that we ask them is also important. Even so, there is no one correct way to ask the questions. But there are some principles that are important.

THIS ISN'T A TEST

Unlike Knowles, we are not interviewing students who have to meet a set of academic requirements to obtain a class credit or a degree. We are building relationships with fellow seekers of Jesus. Therefore, I think it is important that these questions feel more like a faith-sharing process and not at all like an entrance exam.

IT TAKES AS LONG AS IT TAKES

When I talk with a seeker for the first time, I suggest that we have a few meetings (I usually leave the number unspecified) to get to know each other. Usually, I can go through the questions in three meetings with a seeker. But I had one seeker whom I met with about six or seven times before he and I felt like we had covered everything.

THE GOAL OF THE QUESTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE WORDING

In the sample sessions below, I've added in multiple ways to ask each of the questions. The goal of the questioning process is to discover the history, diagnosis, objectives, strategies, and evaluation process for each seeker. These are things they come with already, not things we supply. However, most seekers don't know that these elements of their faith formation plan are already in their hearts. The goal of this process is to help them (and us) discover the gifts the Holy Spirit has already given them. We may have to try different ways of asking each of the questions in order to discover those gifts.

RECORDING THE ANSWERS

Almost always, I wait until the end of the session, and then I ask the seeker to go home and write down his or her answers that have already been shared. I ask for at least one hand-written page of answers for each of the core questions we dealt with in that session. Then I ask them to return that page to me at our next meeting. However, for seekers who have difficulty writing or lack the commitment to sit down and write, I will record their answers for them and then ask them to make corrections or additions. Those pages, then, become the basis for developing a faith formation plan.

CREATING THE PLAN

Once I have all of the written pages, I will take them home with me and prayerfully read over them. I then take out a blank page and divide it down the middle. On the left side, I title the column: "Joe's (or whoever) faith goals." On the right side, I title the column "How the church can help." Then I write down everything Joe said he wanted and what he needs to get there. On the right, I write down the things our parish does, the doctrines the church teaches, and the gifts the Holy Spirit can give that will help Joe accomplish his faith plan. (I actually do this on an Excel spreadsheet, but you can do it by hand if you would rather.) I have one more meeting with the seeker to go over the plan and make sure the objectives I wrote down are indeed his or her actual objectives.

SAMPLE SESSIONS

Below, you will find three sample sessions with timed outlines. The sessions are designed for unbaptized, uncatechized seekers. For baptized, catechized seekers, you might want to rephrase the questions. And you might be able to get through all five questions in fewer than three sessions.

You can also adapt these questions to use with yourself and your team. With your personal goals as team members in mind, ask yourself each of the five questions. The questions might serve as an initial structure for a team retreat or day of reflection.

Blessings on your work in this amazing ministry.

Nick Wagner

FIRST INQUIRY SESSION

10 min. Prayer and introductions

20 min. Storytelling

In regards to your habits, knowledge, and attitudes about faith:

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

When did you first become aware of God or spirituality?

Do you remember times in your life when you felt especially spiritual or when you felt God was really close to you?

What was your family experience of faith?

Did you go to church as a child? As a teenager? As a young adult? How often? What was it like?

Describe your formal or informal religious education background.

Describe your background and knowledge of the Bible. Do you own a Bible?

What was your image of God or Jesus as a child? How has that image changed over the course of your life?

What has happened in your life that has led you to this moment?

10 min.

Where has our parish been?

(Handout Sunday bulletin)

Who is our patron saint or feast? [Describe a little about who or what your parish is named after]

How long has the parish been here?

Who is the pastor? How long?

How does the parish work? Staff, committees, website, special events, etc.

Describe the liturgies. Time slots, languages, character

Offer to meet inquirers for Mass if they like

10 min. Faith action

During the coming week, write a page or two about where you have been. Turn it in next at our next meeting. [Handout the participant's question sheet; do this at the end, not at the beginning]

Fill out the parish information form. Turn it in at our next meeting. [Explain the form; this is your parish's "new parishioner" form, plus any added information you might need for RCIA]

Try to pray at least once a day [provide a simple Catholic prayer that is not the Lord's Prayer (the Lord's Prayer will be "presented" later in the catechumenate)]

5 min. Close

Questions and prayer

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

1. WHERE HAVE I BEEN?

Please write one or two pages that describe your spiritual history, and turn it in at our next meeting. This reflection will help us build a faith plan together. Use some of the following questions as a guide, but don't feel you have to answer all of them. Write your story as you remember it.

IN REGARDS TO MY HABITS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT FAITH:

When did I first become aware of God or spirituality?

Do I remember times in my life when I felt especially spiritual or when I felt God was really close to me?

What was my family experience of faith?

Did I go to church as a child? As a teenager? As a young adult? How often? What was it like?

Describe my formal or informal religious education background.

Describe my background and knowledge of the Bible. Do I own a Bible?

What was my image of God or Jesus as a child? How has that image changed over the course of my life?

What has happened in my life that has led me to this moment?

SECOND INQUIRY SESSION

5 min. Gathering and prayer

20 min. Storytelling

In regards to your habits, knowledge, and attitudes about faith:

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

What is your image of God? What do you believe about God?

How often are you aware of God in your life? Constantly? Occasionally? Not too much?

How often do you pray? What is your prayer like?

How often do you go to church?

Do you ever talk about God with anyone? Describe what that is like.

What is your relationship with God like right now? Strong or weak? Like a parent and child?
Like a good friend? Distant? Close?

20 min. Storytelling

In regards to your habits, knowledge, and attitudes about faith:

WHERE DO I WANT TO GET TO?

What do you most hope for in your relationship with God?

Is there someone (or was there someone) in your life you want to be like with regard to faith? Describe what it is about that person that makes you want to be like them.

Describe how you hope to relate to the faith community at our parish.

Are there any attitudes or behaviors you hope to change?

Do you have any hopes for your family with regard to faith?

Is there an area of knowledge you want to strengthen with regard to faith?

10 min. Faith action

During the coming week, write a page or two about where you are now.

Write another page or two about where you want to get to. Turn those in at our next meeting.

Pray at least once a day.

5 min Close

Questions and prayer

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

2. WHERE AM I NOW?

Please write one or two pages that describe your current reality, and turn it in at our next meeting. This reflection will help us build a faith plan together. Use some of the following questions as a guide, but don't feel you have to answer all of them. Write your story as you see it.

IN REGARDS TO MY HABITS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT FAITH:

What is my image of God? What do I believe about God?

How often am I aware of God in my life? Constantly? Occasionally? Not too much?

How often do I pray? What is my prayer like?

How often do I go to church?

Do I ever talk about God with anyone? Describe what that is like.

What is my relationship with God like right now? Strong or weak? Like a parent and child? Like a good friend? Distant? Close?

3. WHERE DO I WANT TO GET TO?

Please write one or two pages that describe your spiritual goals, and turn it in at our next meeting. This reflection will help us build a faith plan together. Use some of the following questions as a guide, but don't feel you have to answer all of them. Write your vision as you see it.

IN REGARDS TO MY HABITS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT FAITH:

What do I most hope for in my relationship with God?

Is there someone (or was there someone) in my life I want to be like with regard to faith? Describe what it is about that person that makes me want to be like them.

How do I hope to relate to the faith community at St. Julie parish?

Are there any attitudes or behaviors I hope to change?

Do I have any hopes for my family with regard to faith?

Is there an area of knowledge I want to strengthen with regard to faith?

THIRD INQUIRY SESSION

5 min. Gathering and prayer

20 min. Storytelling

In regards to your habits, knowledge, and attitudes about faith:

HOW ARE YOU GOING TO GET TO WHERE YOU WANT TO GET TO?

In what ways do you need to develop your faith practices to get to where you want to get to?

In what ways do you need to develop what your relationship with God is or how God interacts with you to get to where you want to get to?

In what ways do you need to develop your relationship with the prayer life church (Mass and the sacraments) to get to where you want to get to?

In what way do you need support from your family?

In what ways do you need support from our parish faith community?

How will you determine if your plan will get you to where you want to get to?

20 min. Storytelling

In regards to your habits, knowledge, and attitudes about faith:

HOW WILL YOU KNOW THAT YOU HAVE ARRIVED?

How will you know if you have reached your goal?

How will your family know you have reached your goal?

How will others you interact with know you have reached my goal?

How will the faith community at St. Julie parish know if you have reached your goal?

10 min. Faith action

During the coming week, write a page or two about where you want to get to.

Write another page or two about how you will you know you have arrived. Turn it in at our next meeting.

Pray once a day.

5 min. Close Questions and prayer.

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

4. HOW AM I GOING TO GET TO WHERE I WANT TO GET TO?

Please write one or two pages that describe your plan as you think of it now, and turn it in at our next meeting. This reflection will help us build a faith plan together. Use some of the following questions as a guide, but don't feel you have to answer all of them. Write your plan as you see it.

IN REGARDS TO MY HABITS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT FAITH:

In what ways do I need to develop my faith practices to get to where I want to get to?

In what ways do I need to develop what my relationship with God is or how God interacts with me to get to where I want to get to?

In what ways do I need to develop my relationship with the prayer life church (Mass and the sacraments) to get to where I want to get to?

In what way do I need support from my family?

In what ways do I need support from the parish faith community?

How will I determine if my plan will get me to where I want to get to?

5. HOW WILL I KNOW THAT I HAVE ARRIVED?

Please write one or two pages that describe how you will evaluate your goal, and turn it in at our next meeting. This reflection will help us build a faith plan together. Use some of the following questions as a guide, but don't feel you have to answer all of them. Write your summary as you see it.

IN REGARDS TO MY HABITS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT FAITH:

How will I know if I have reached my goal?

How will my family know I have reached my goal?

How will others I interact with know I have reached my goal?

How will the parish faith community know if I have reached my goal?

SAMPLE FAITH FORMATION PLAN

Joe Seeker's Formation Plan		[Parish name]	[Date]
Joe's expectations		The Church's expectations	
Goals			
With God's help, become a better person	Understand the church's teaching on right behavior		
Become more patient with my daughters	Daily examination		
As a family, become more involved in church	Regular participation in parish activities		
Learn more about the Bible	Weekly reflection on the readings for Sunday		
Learn the prayers of the church	Develop a daily prayer practice, including examination of conscience		
Not get lost during the Mass	Participate in Mass every Sunday; Participate in catechetical sessions		
Strengthen my relationship with God	Understand the mission of Jesus; Daily "God sightings"		
Plan			
Develop a prayer routine	Develop a daily prayer practice, including examination of conscience		
Schedule time to be involved in the parish	Regular participation in parish activities		
Get parents and friends to come to Mass with me	Develop a practice of evangelization		
Continue coming to Mass every Sunday	Participate in Mass every Sunday		
Continue praying	Daily prayer		

Evaluation

- Feeling more of God in my heart
- My family and friends will see a different Joe
- Parishioners will see more of me

